

# White Latinos

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Who are the leaders in Latino communities? This question does not admit simple answers, for who counts as a leader and what Latino identity entails are both contentious issues. Having said that, I contend that often Latino leaders are white. I employ this hyperbole to emphasize my point that most of those who see themselves as leaders of Latino communities accept or assert whiteness as a key component of their identity. This assertion of whiteness, I argue here, facilitates the mistreatment of Latinos and buttresses social inequality. In this Essay I use the experience of Mexican Americans and the Chicano movement to illustrate this dynamic, and also comment on the aspiration to be white in the context of contemporary racial politics.

## I. WHITE LATINO LEADERS

The majority of those who consider themselves leaders in Latino communities are white. I do not contend by this that race is fixed or easily ascertained.<sup>1</sup> Nor do I mean that the Latino community is led by Anglos—that is, by persons from the group historically understood as white in this country. Rather, Latino leaders are often white in terms of how they see themselves and how they are regarded by others within and outside of their community. Race's socially constructed nature ensures that racial identity is formed on multiple, sometimes contradictory levels. Self-identification, group perception, and external classification all constitute axes of racial construction. In turn, these axes encompass myriad criteria for determining racial identity. In this context, many Latino leaders believe they are—and are understood to be—white by virtue of class privilege, education, physical features, accent, acculturation, self-conception, and social consensus. True, these Latinos are rarely white in the sense that they are accorded the full range of racial privileges and pre-

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<sup>1</sup> See generally Ian Haney López, *The Social Construction of Race: Some Observations on Illusion, Fabrication, and Choice*, 29 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 1 (1994). For a discussion of Latino identity in racial versus ethnic terms, see Ian Haney López, *Race, Ethnicity, Erasure: The Saliency of Race to LatCrit Theory*, 85 CAL. L. REV. 1143 (1997). See also MARTHA MENCHACA, *RECOVERING HISTORY, CONSTRUCTING RACE: THE INDIAN, BLACK, AND WHITE ROOTS OF MEXICAN AMERICANS* (2002).

sumptions Anglos reserve for themselves. But then, as with all racial categories, there are various shades of white, and many Latino leaders are arrayed along this continuum.

## II. MEXICAN AMERICANS

The claim by Latinos to be white is not a new one, as the history of Mexican American identity attests. Prior to the Great Depression, the Mexican community in the United States was composed primarily of immigrants whose political and social imagination was attuned to Mexico and eventual return.<sup>2</sup> During the economic catastrophe of the Depression, however, Anglos scapegoated Mexicans and clamored for their expulsion. National, state, and local governments responded with deportation campaigns that expelled over half a million persons, including many U.S. citizens, amid tremendous hardship.<sup>3</sup> The result was not the eradication of the Mexican community, but rather the solidification of a Mexican American identity. Those most likely to remain in the United States through the calamitous 1930s included persons with the most developed employment, property, family, social, and cultural ties to the United States. The Mexican community that remained developed a new identity as “Mexican Americans,” asserting through that label a political and social philosophy centered on the claim to be quintessential members of the U.S. polity.

Mexican American leaders demanded equality for their community and launched political and legal campaigns to secure better treatment at the same time that they attempted to foster pride in their distinct origins. They also asserted that Mexicans were racially white.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the most prominent Mexican American civil rights organizations, including the League of United Latin American Citizens and the GI Forum, attacked segregation not on the ground that this racial practice was morally wrong, but because Mexicans were ostensibly white. Employing what they termed the “other white” strategy, these groups insisted that Mexican Americans were members of the white race and that, consequently, no basis existed for subjecting Mexicans to racial segregation of the sort imposed on blacks.<sup>5</sup>

The Mexican assertion of a white identity reflected the cultural premium American society placed on being white. In this context, Mexican

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<sup>2</sup> This discussion draws on MARIO T. GARCÍA, *MEXICAN AMERICANS: LEADERSHIP, IDEOLOGY, AND IDENTITY, 1930–1960* (1989) and GEORGE J. SÁNCHEZ, *BECOMING MEXICAN AMERICAN: ETHNICITY, CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN CHICANO LOS ANGELES, 1900–1945* (1993).

<sup>3</sup> See RICARDO ROMO, *EAST LOS ANGELES: HISTORY OF A BARRIO 162* (1983).

<sup>4</sup> See generally Neil Foley, *Becoming Hispanic: Mexican Americans and the Faustian Pact with Whiteness*, in *REFLEXIONES 1997: NEW DIRECTIONS IN MEXICAN AMERICAN STUDIES* 53 (Neil Foley ed., 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Strikingly, this was the argument advanced by LULAC in *Hernandez v. Texas*, 347 U.S. 475 (1954), the first case to extend Equal Protection doctrine to a Latino group. See Haney López, *Race, Ethnicity, Erasure*, *supra* note 1, at 1164–66.

claims of whiteness were more prevalent in those places where racial hierarchy was most deeply entrenched—Texas, for instance, more than California, and rural towns more than cities. In addition, the ideology of white identity better suited the middle class—teachers, business owners, and skilled craftspeople. In both Mexico and the United States, fair features enabled upward mobility. As a result, middle-class Mexicans in the United States were not only more acculturated, educated, and wealthy than other community members, but also more likely to bear European features. In contrast, laborers and more recent immigrants from Mexico were often darker and in other ways more distant from white ideals (for instance, by virtue of menial occupation, limited English ability, or poor education), and thus less able and less likely to avail themselves of a white identity. Having said that, it remains the case that Mexican Americans throughout the Southwest, in particular those who fashioned themselves as community leaders, typically claimed for themselves a white identity.

Why does it matter that Mexican American leaders insisted that they were white? After all, they took pride in their origins, were politically active, and sought to improve their communities' social, economic, and political standing. We should acknowledge the politically progressive efforts of many Mexican Americans and eschew judgments that do not take into account changed historical circumstances. Nevertheless, we must also be clear that those who claimed a white identity also held a corollary belief that certain categories of persons lived beyond the realm of social concern or responsibility. Those beyond care included non-citizens and non-whites, in particular blacks, but also many Mexicans.

The assertion of a white identity is at root an attempt to locate oneself at or near the top of the racial hierarchy that forms an intrinsic part of U.S. society. To this extent, claiming a white identity does not disrupt but rather further entrenches racial hierarchy. It adds legitimacy to the perception that whites fundamentally differ from non-whites, that whites are superior and deserve the best, that non-whites remain inferior and deserve less, and that these divisions reflect nature and not social norms. These concomitants of whiteness skewed Mexican American politics.

The Mexican American generation saw citizenship as a key attribute of whiteness and belonging, and feared that the continued influx of Mexican immigrants—whom they perceived as poor, uneducated, and dark—undercut the ability of Mexican Americans to assimilate as white persons. As a result, Mexican American civil rights organizations insisted on citizenship as a prerequisite to membership and actively campaigned against “wetbacks.” The emphasis on white identity also manifested as racial antipathy toward blacks, ranging from a widespread unwillingness to find common cause with African Americans to the expression of white supremacist ideas regarding black inferiority. Finally, the celebration of whiteness caused many Mexican American leaders to accept the Horatio Alger ideology that pictured social and economic progress as a function

of individual effort. This led them to condemn those members of the Mexican community who were forced by racism and structural injustice to the margins of U.S. society. Whiteness was a Faustian bargain.

### III. THE BROWN RACE

The Chicano movement challenged the notion of a white Mexican identity. Exasperated by a community politics that stressed assimilation on the basis of white identity and yet failed to produce meaningful equality with Anglos, and inspired by the racial pride of the Black Power movement, many Mexicans came to embrace a politics of cultural distinctiveness and to view themselves as members of a brown race.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, the leaders of the Chicano movement did not initially emerge from the same community segments that most forcefully asserted a white identity. Instead, members of the working class predominated among Chicano activists, who also included *vatos locos* and *pintos*—persons formed, respectively, by their participation in street culture or by their status as former prisoners. Nevertheless, during the Chicano movement, broad sectors of the Mexican community came to accept and assert the idea that they were proud members of a brown race. In the intervening years, this legacy waned, so that today members of the Mexican community in the United States are evenly split, with roughly half claiming they are white, and the other half insisting otherwise.<sup>7</sup> Still, the move to an explicitly brown racial identity among Mexicans has had important political ramifications.

The Chicano movement had many failings, including the tendency to define brown identity in terms of nineteenth-century ideas that tied race to ancestry, culture, and group destiny, as well as to patriarchal gender roles. Chicano militants tended to believe that race was fixed by blood, and in turn that race—that is, nature—determined aspects of culture, group history, and gender relations. Nevertheless, in adopting a non-white identity, the Chicano movement worked against some of the more pernicious aspects of Mexican American racial politics. The movement saw the community as united by oppression and so rejected the notion that citizenship formed a pertinent divide. The rejection of citizenship as a dividing line continues, as few Latino leaders today support a politics of hostility toward recent immigrants. With slightly less enduring success, the Chicano movement supplanted the aspirations of the middle-class with the con-

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<sup>6</sup> Some argue that this shift from a white to a non-white identity should be traced to the *pachuco* culture that emerged among Mexican Americans during the 1940s. To be sure, the hip, alienated style of the *pachucos* rejected assimilation as well as whiteness. Nevertheless, *pachuquismo* never included the positive articulation of a non-white or brown racial identity. This task was left to the Chicano movement.

<sup>7</sup> RODOLFO F. ACUÑA, ANYTHING BUT MEXICAN: CHICANOS IN CONTEMPORARY LOS ANGELES 9 (1996) (stating that in 1992 46.9% of foreign-born and 55.4% of U.S.-born persons of Mexican descent classified themselves as white).

cerns of the poor in the center of Latino political consciousness. Today's leaders are more likely than their Mexican American antecedents to believe that structural inequalities distort the life chances of their constituents and to work to undo such embedded disadvantages. With regard to the anti-black stance of the previous generation, Chicano militants initially marched shoulder-to-shoulder with African Americans, though this solidarity has long since evaporated. Now division and suspicion often characterize Latino and black relations. Despite its varying successes, the Chicano movement provides important lessons, for once again the lure of a white identity calls out to many Latinos, including community leaders.

#### IV. THE NEW WHITES

Racial dynamics continue to change. Historically, Anglo society constructed Mexicans and other Latino groups as non-white. But now various Latino and Asian communities, for instance the Cubans and the Japanese, increasingly hold nearly white status. Growing numbers of minority individuals—those with fair skin, wealth, political connections, or high athletic, artistic, or professional accomplishments—can virtually achieve a white identity. This is not to say that these groups and individuals are fully white, for that racial designation, like all others, operates on a sliding scale. Nevertheless, the boundaries of whiteness are expanding to incorporate communities and individuals who would have been construed as non-white just a few decades ago. In turn, this expansion fuels the growing sense among many, particularly among those who regard themselves as white, that not only racism but race are now artifacts of the past. The fair treatment and high status accorded some minorities ostensibly proves that our society has transcended race and racism.

But race and racism continue to distort almost every social encounter and warp almost every facet of our social structure. While whites have preserved their superior status, in part by extending privileges to some, many in our society remain victimized by the brutal politics of race. Our society still constructs whole populations as non-white. Large numbers of us remain beyond the care of the rest, impoverished and incarcerated, disdained and despised, feared and forsaken. Our prison populations testify to the persistently destructive power of race. The statistics, although familiar, remain chilling. In 1972, at the end of the Chicano movement, 200,000 persons were incarcerated in state and federal prisons. In 1997, that number stood at 1.2 million, with another 500,000 persons in local jails awaiting trial or serving short sentences and a further 100,000 juveniles locked up in youth detention facilities across the country.<sup>8</sup> The United States now incarcerates people—mainly minorities—at six to ten

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<sup>8</sup> MARC MAUER, RACE TO INCARCERATE 9, 19 (1999).

times the rate of other industrialized nations.<sup>9</sup> Half of all inmates are black and probably one-quarter are Latino.<sup>10</sup>

However harrowing these numbers, the effort to criminalize and incarcerate minorities is only a small part of a larger process of deindustrialization and wealth transfer to the rich that has defined the decades since the civil rights era. This deepening immiseration relies on racial politics. Race explains why we see criminal justice responses to crises in public health, education, and job creation as well as sustained attacks by legislators on a broad array of social services and government wealth redistribution efforts. Race—now couched in the language of criminals, or of immigrants, or of terrorists—is the scare tactic that unifies a “white” majority behind a cohort of political leaders who primarily serve an emerging plutocracy. Crack addicts, welfare queens, gang bangers, illegal aliens, enemy combatants, and terrorists are the racial images thrown down repeatedly to justify a politics of inequality that continually favors middle- and upper-class whites.

In this context, individuals and communities continue to reap a premium by being white. The closer one comes to being white, the less susceptible one is to the gross mistreatment and disregard accorded minorities, and the more access one has to the material rewards and positive presumptions reserved for our nation’s racial elite. One would be crazy to want to be anything other than white. As a result, two-thirds of all recent immigrants—the vast majority of them from Asia and Latin America—identify themselves as white.<sup>11</sup> So does half of the Latino population.<sup>12</sup>

Claiming to be white achieves measurable advantages for some individuals and communities, but these advantages come at a steep price for others. The Latino community, to remain a community, must reject the lure of white identity and instead adopt a solidarity based on being non-white. I do not mean a solidarity rooted in claims of a putative biological connection, for this was the chief mistake of the Chicano movement. Rather, I mean cohesion founded on the basis of a political identity. Non-whites in the United States suffer a subordinate status. Asserting a white identity may provide one way to escape that inferior position, yet this solution solidifies the root structures of racial hierarchy and ensures the continued subordination of others. In contrast, claiming a non-white identity commits one to the political goal of ending racial oppression for all. We should assert a non-white identity as a means of fostering political opposition to racial status inequality.<sup>13</sup> Latinos and their leaders should not

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<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 119.

<sup>11</sup> Solomon Moore & Robin Fields, *The Great “White” Influx*, L.A. TIMES, July 31, 2002, at A1.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> Cf. LANI GUINIER & GERALD TORRES, *THE MINER’S CANARY: ENLISTING RACE, RESISTING POWER, TRANSFORMING DEMOCRACY* 15 (2002) (“The political race project is an

pine for the privileges of whiteness, but should embrace a political commitment to end racial hierarchy.

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effort to change the framework of the conversation about race by naming relationships to power within the context of our racial and political history. This approach reveals race as a political, not just a social, construction.”).