

REPORT: LATINO POLITICS

This discourse strategically recognizes them both whites and African Americans as U.S. citizens, defining them as a single category against the criminal, alien immigrant Other. Thus, what is significant about the protest at the meat-processing plant, for example, is not that a handful of African Americans attended an anti-immigrant rally; rather, it is that the Chicago Minuteman Project—listed by the Southern Poverty Law Center as a “nativist extremist” group—reached out to African Americans and recruited a few of them to serve as the public face of Chicago’s anti-immigrant sentiment.¹¹ Latinos were thus positioned to perceive African Americans, not the Minuteman Project, as their antagonists.

In a similar way, Arellano’s legal status as a non-citizen functioned to split Latinos and African Americans. Although she never explicitly compared herself to Rosa Parks—citing her only as an inspiration in her

act of civil disobedience—the perceived comparison touched a nerve among Chicago pundits, both white and African American, precisely because, as Thomas wrote in his letter to the *Sun-Times*, “Parks was a U.S. citizen.” These critics’ understanding of who in the United States belongs and does not—who is a citizen and who is not, and who is a criminal and who is not—functions here to define legitimate and illegitimate civil disobedience. Following the mainstream media’s framing of immigration, these critics participated in a discourse that alienates Latino immigrants, creating misunderstandings, tension, and potential conflict between blacks and Latinos.

The political scientist Mark Q. Sawyer has suggested that some African Americans have a hard time understanding or appreciating the plight of Latinos in the United States, and that in addition to racism within

Check Both! Afro-Latin@s and the Census

Earlier in 2010 a series of public service announcements circulated on the Internet in anticipation of the U.S. Census. The three short videos, produced and disseminated by the *afrolatin@* forum, a New York-based educational nonprofit, urged Latin@s to identify both racially and ethnically, to “Check Both” on the census form. Targeting Black Latin@s, the campaign sought to challenge the prevailing notion of Latin@s as uniquely exempt from standard racial categories. By claiming both national origins and Black identity, Afro-Latin@s assert the continuing significance of race, both within Latin@ communities and in the broader society. At the very least, being counted on the census as Black and Latin@ brings attention to a social group that has long been invisible and subject to ongoing social and political marginalization.

The PSAs were inspired by census campaigns launched throughout Central and South America during the past two decades, and especially since 2001, when the collection of official statistics was adopted as a principal goal at the first World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa. An estimated 150 million people, more than one third of Latin America’s population, are of visible African ancestry. The scant statistical data available suggests their poverty levels are disproportionately high and their opportunities minimal. Faced with the lack of quantifiable evidence of their very existence and unequal socio-economic conditions, and with support from international aid organizations, Black advocacy groups have successfully petitioned their governments

for the inclusion of racial and ethnic categories in what have traditionally been simple, undifferentiated population counts. The census campaign slogans assert racial pride and the historical presence and contributions of Africans and their descendants to the making of the nation: “Identificate” (Ecuador), “Orgullósamente Afrodescendiente” (Panama), “Somos Afro” (Chile), “Yo Soy” (Colombia). These efforts are fundamentally challenging the still commonly held belief that *mestizaje*, or race mixing, makes race irrelevant. But even as the myth of racial democracy is called into question in Latin America and the Caribbean, it continues to hold sway among Latin@s in the United States.

Latin@s may well be the only social group in the world who so emphatically insist on their ethnoracial mixture. But even as *mestizo*, or mixed identity—expressed variably as *raza*, “rainbow people,” or “mutts”—is a commonplace collective designation, Latin@s are also understood to be “of any race.” This apparent contradiction can be traced to the convergence of two seemingly distinct racial formations. On the one hand, the national ideologies of our countries of origin emphasize racial mixture and equate it with racial democracy—even as whiteness continues to be privileged, and indigenous and African ancestry are viewed as something to be overcome or ignored. On the other hand, in the United States Latin@s have been allocated an ambiguous racial middle ground that invisibilizes those too dark to conform to the *mestizo* ideal, while simultaneously distancing them from other communities of color, particularly African Americans.

Latino communities, African Americans' unwillingness "to recognize experiences of racial groups other than the US-born Black experience also contributes to problems in coalitions."¹² If this is true, it may be the case that the anti-immigrant discourse centered on citizenship taps into this unwillingness to understand the struggle of other U.S. minority groups. It is through this process that the negative framing of citizenship is able to reproduce a racial order that keeps whites on top and both groups marginalized, with no real gains for either blacks or Latinos.

Within this discourse, black individuals, regardless of their citizenship status, are viewed as African Americans and therefore, U.S. citizens, Latinos across all ethnic groups can be perceived as illegal immigrants and therefore non-Americans. Through this frame, African Americans have the advantage of symbolically

belonging to (white) U.S. society—"symbolically" because any actions that African Americans take on the immigration debate does not change the existing racial structure of white dominance, much less translate into substantive change for their own life chances. This black-white alignment can make right-wing white Americans' anti-immigrant arguments appear non-racist, while simultaneously exacerbating tensions between blacks and Latinos.

As an anti-immigrant sentiment gains ground in Chicago and throughout the United States, bringing the question of citizenship and belonging, and how xenophobia is used to divide communities of color, is of vital importance. This is a new discussion, not usually heard in discussions of race or race relations. But it is a discussion that must be had if multiracial alliances are to be had. ■

By Miriam Jiménez Román

Thus in both cases an ostensibly inclusive nationalism has functioned to maintain social order and obfuscate white supremacy. In both contexts and at a practical level, the emphasis on racial mixture, and by extension "racelessness," makes it extremely difficult if not impossible to even talk about race, much less to prove racially based inequities. And if any doubts remain as to the preference for whiteness, we've only to look at the results of countless studies and census tabulations. Indeed when it comes to racial self-identification, Latin@s are more likely to say they are White than "mixed"; in the 2000 census, as in previous tabulations, less than 3% of Latin@s self-identified as Black, even when their countries of origin are known to have significant African-descendant populations. Indeed at a practical level Latin@ insistence on White identity makes incomprehensible their subjection to racial profiling.

The census form itself also mitigates against Latin@s identifying in racial terms. Since the "race question" on the form includes an array of ethnic groups—including Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese—Latin@s are actually encouraged to perceive "Latino" as a racial category. Indeed, to be authentically Latin@ would seem to require racial non-specificity, that is, adherence to mestizo ideology. Disturbingly, this position supports the notion that the United States has entered a post-racial period that makes claims against racist treatment an individual rather than systemic issue.

Thus, the *afrolatin@* forum faced multiple levels of racial and ethnic understandings when developing the scripts for the

PSAs. The videos were modeled after similar short films but adapted to the particularities of the United States, addressing the ethnic diversity of Afro-Latin@s (representing just about every country in Latin America and the Caribbean), the reluctance to acknowledge Black identity, and generational differences in attitudes. All three videos are bilingual and each is intended to provoke a reconsideration of established ideas about Blackness and Latinidad as being mutually exclusive.

What is really at stake is not individual identity preference but rather the need to document disparities based on social perceptions. However complicated one's ethnic origins may be, what ultimately matters is how society views us; racial distinctions continue to define our place in the world. Latin America offers us a valuable lesson: After almost 200 years of insisting that race doesn't matter, African-descendant peoples are demanding that race talk no longer be silenced. By extension, the growing presence of Latin@s in this country does not, as some have argued, automatically challenge our racial views. Such a challenge requires an acknowledgement of the racial hierarchy that continues to deny those of visible African (and indigenous) ancestry full membership in the Latin@ family.

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