

Citizenship and the Barriers to Black and Latino Coalitions in Chicago

By Claudia Sandoval

WHY IS IT THAT THERE IS NOT A STRONG coalition between Latinos and African Americans? Why haven't these two groups, which share so much in common—low socioeconomic status, unequal rates of incarceration, police brutality, among other inequalities—not be able to sustain long-term social and political alliances?¹ Some scholars conclude that competition over scarce economic resources contributes to animosity between the groups.² Others claim that it is in the interest of these two groups to form political alliances with whites, suggesting that the most benefits, for either African Americans or Latinos, can only be achieved when they align with whites, rather than each other.³

But the idea that black-and-Latino relations is a “winner takes all” game leaves little opportunity for these two groups to conceptualize affiliations that do not center on fighting over the few “crumbs” that are left behind, instead of coalitions that fight for the expansion of resources. Although the question of resources is important, the story does not end there. In order to understand the shape of African American and Latino relations, we must begin to discuss the role that citizenship status and notions of citizenship play in their relations.

Chicago is a particularly interesting place to approach these questions, since it is known as one of the most racially segregated cities in the United States.⁴ But it was also home one of the earliest examples of a political alliance between Latinos and African Americans. In 1983, black and Latino voters made Harold Washington the city's first African American mayor—more than two decades before a similar coalition helped Antonio Villaraigosa become the first Latino

mayor of Los Angeles since 1872. Washington won over Latino voters largely because he was willing to break away from the city's political machine and avoid running as a party loyalist, allowing him to form alliances with activists like labor organizer Rudy Lozano, who was a key player in mobilizing Latino voters. In the end, Washington won the race with very little support from white voters, capturing 75% of the votes among Latinos. Shortly after his death in 1987, however, the alliance between black and Latino leaders fell apart because of disagreements over the distribution of power.

Fast-forward to the present, and we find that black-Latino coalitions in Chicago are as fragile as ever in today's new context of changed demographics and rising anti-immigrant xenophobia. New Latino immigration to the Midwest sharply increased in the mid-1990s, as job opportunities diminished in traditional destinations like New York, Houston, and Los Angeles; as a result, newer destinations, including the Midwest and the South, saw a stark increase in the Latino population.⁵

In 2009, the U.S. population survey estimated that there are more than 1 million Latino residents in Cook County, or 23% of the population—a 10% increase over 1990, while the percentage of African Americans stayed relatively the same, at 24%. Meanwhile, the nationwide anti-immigrant discourse in the mainstream media and in politics has posed a powerful challenge to black-Latino coalition politics, since it groups Chicago's whites together with African Americans within the category of lawful, hard-working citizens—as defined against a criminal, alien Latino Other. Although everyday avoidance between African American and Latinos may be common in Chi-

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chicago, given the degree of residential segregation, the national discourse of citizenship threatens to bring animosity to neighborhoods that have not previously interacted.

In 2004, the new anti-immigrant xenophobia went mainstream with the election campaign of Jim Oberweis, a white state senate candidate, who ran a TV ad in which he flew in a helicopter over Chicago's Soldier Field stadium. "Illegal aliens are coming here to take American workers' jobs, drive down wages, and take advantage of government benefits such as free health care," Oberweis said into the camera. "You pay." He added that one week's worth of new "illegal immigrants" could fill the stadium. Echoing the now familiar refrain of such figures as Lou Dobbs, Glenn Beck, and Bill O'Reilly, Oberweis concluded: "Working families are getting a raw deal." Although addressed to all Chicagoans, this discourse aims to drive a wedge between "illegal aliens" and "working families" of whatever race—although the message may have been effective in appealing to Chicago's African Americans, who in 2007 had an unemployment rate double the national rate, according to one estimate.⁶

The effects of this nativist discourse were evident in 2006, the year when Latino activists across the country launched mass marches on May Day against a draconian immigration bill. The day after the marches in Chicago, a group of about 10 to 15 African American men held a demonstration outside a meat-processing plant, shouting "Illegal!" at Latino workers. One protester, quoted in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, said, "These people haven't served time for their crimes, and they're getting amnesty. We're being pushed aside. The [African American] ex-offenders should have got amnesty before any illegal alien."⁷ The rally was organized by Rick Bieseda, co-founder of the Chicago Minutemen Project, and Reverend Anthony Williams, a prominent pastor in Englewood, a predominantly black neighborhood.

The following August, some sectors of Chicago's black community lashed out at Elvira Arellano, an undocumented single mother who publicly defied the government's notice to present herself in court to face deportation to Mexico. She instead sought sanctuary at the Adalberto United Methodist Church in the Humboldt Park neighborhood, together with her then eight-year-old son, Saúl. Her story attracted national media coverage and provoked a heated debate in Chicago. Along the way, Arellano spoke to the media in an effort to garner sympathy and support, but in some cases this gained her more adversaries. One comment in particular angered some of Chicago's African American

critics: "I'm strong, I've learned from Rosa Parks—I'm not going to the back of the bus. The law is wrong."

Sun-Times columnist Mary Mitchell took strong exception to this. "As they say in the streets, Arellano is pimping the system," Mitchell wrote. "She is using Rosa Parks' name to buy herself more time [in the United States], and that disgusts me."⁸ In a letter to the *Sun-Times*, Timothy Thomas Jr., a local government official, wrote that he was "incensed" that Arellano, an "illegal immigrant activist," was "cloaking her unlawful behavior and comparing it to the stand Rosa Parks took during the Birmingham, Ala., bus boycott." Thomas went on to explain why he thought any comparison between the actions of Parks and Arellano was offensive: "The difference in the actions and backgrounds of the two women are glaring. Parks was a U.S citizen. . . .

The national discourse on "illegal immigration," which centers on citizenship and criminality, not only leads to anti-immigrant sentiments but also impedes the formation of useful multiracial alliances.

On the other hand, Arellano's entire history with our country has been under the shroud of illegality: illegal entry, illegal documents and now refusal to follow a court order to surrender herself and leave the country."⁹

On balance, Arellano did receive public support from African American leaders. Three days after Mitchell's column appeared, for example, Arellano was visited by members of Clergy Speaks Interdenominational, a group of African American religious leaders, who prayed with her and expressed their solidarity with her and the movement for Latino immigrant rights. "Injustice is injustice. Period," said Reverend Albert Tyson, according to the *Chicago Tribune*. "We have so much more in common than we do that separates us."¹⁰ Civil rights leader Jacqueline Jackson, the wife of the Reverend Jesse Jackson, appeared with Arellano in 2007 at a press conference, shortly before she was deported.

Yet the Minutemen-sponsored protest and the denunciations of Arellano by some African American pundits reveal how the national discourse on citizenship, criminality, and immigration not only leads to anti-immigrant sentiments, but can impede mutual understanding and coalition building between Latinos and African Americans. In both instances, some African Americans consciously or unconsciously aligned themselves with white Americans, creating a racial order in which they are positioned above Latinos by virtue of *de jure* citizenship—despite the fact that in the 21st century, African Americans with citizenship are still fighting to secure their *de facto* rights. Although residential segregation in Chicago plays a role in discouraging black and Latino unity, the xenophobic anti-immigrant discourse unleashed in recent years has been decisive.

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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. ■

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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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