

The American Color Line and Black Exceptionalism¹

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Contention over racial issues has been one of the continuing hallmarks of American political history. Throughout most of this history, blacks have been the largest and most politically controversial minority group. The politics of race shaped the nation's foundational documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The debates surrounding their adoption indicate that tabling the issue of slavery was the price for bringing Southern elites to support first independence and then the Union. Conflict over proposed expansions of the slave system triggered the attempted secession of eleven states from the Union, and the Civil War, the most destructive conflict in American history. After a brief opening following Emancipation, and then during Reconstruction, the door closed once more as a new system of explicit second-class citizenship often known as "Jim Crow" institutionalized a wide variety of legal, formalized practices of racial discrimination, as well as many informal ones. Separation of the races was perpetuated, and the black population remained relegated to a generally invisible lower caste.

The South's "massive resistance" and the passive acquiescence of the rest of nation led to little open challenge of this two-caste racial system until 1963, when the civil rights movement finally convulsed U.S. society. In 1964, after overcoming the longest filibuster in Senate history, engaged in by all but one of the senators from the old Confederacy, the Civil Rights Act was finally passed, with its numerous guarantees of equality in the treatment of whites and blacks. Two pivotal changes then occurred during 1965. The Voting Rights Act guaranteed African Americans' voting rights, especially in the South. The Hart-Cellar immigration act received far less attention at the time, but it has had equally profound effects on American society. After 1965, the rate of immigration accelerated, radically changing the nation's ethnic composition. Approximately 96% of all Americans in 1965 were either non-Hispanic whites or African Americans. By 2010, that number had fallen to 76%, and Latinos outnumbered blacks. The

Asian population rose from 0.5 percent to 5 percent (Alba & Nee, 2003; Bean & Stevens, 2003; U. S. Census, 2011).

Both developments renewed questions about the integration of peoples with non-European ancestry into a society and nation that had always been overwhelmingly European in origins. Two common models existed at the time. The *immigration and assimilation* prototype described the past incorporation of European immigrants into the American mainstream. The vast majority of their descendants are now essentially indistinguishable from the descendants of the original English settlers (Alba & Nee, 2003). This assimilation prototype has been the dominant model of intergroup relations in the United States for almost 400 years, at least for those without discernible African heritage, and is consensually accepted as the primary basis of government immigration policy.

In contrast the *racial caste system* prototype primarily affects people of African descent. Most were originally forcibly imported to the Americas and placed in a system of human bondage imposed on few other Americans. Even after formal emancipation in 1863 they continued to be subjected to uniquely widespread and systematic lower caste treatment in the American context. As DuBois (1899/1999) noted, a largely impermeable black-white color line has always been central to the racial caste system, as manifested in prejudice, discrimination, and segregation of African Americans, and, in reaction, their strong racial group consciousness. Though numerous standards have been devised over the years to determine which specific individuals were assigned to this lower caste, most common was the “one drop of blood” rule, categorizing individuals with any known African ancestry as African Americans (Davis, 2001).

This paper focuses on how the color line may have changed over the half century since 1965, given America’s greatly broadened cultural diversity due to immigration. Immigration has

long been a central feature of American life, of course. But recent immigrants have consisted heavily of peoples historically regarded as “peoples of color” – browns from Latin America, and yellows from Asia. Given Americans’ historic color-consciousness, how have these new immigrant flows affected Americans’ intergroup relations? Have the “new immigrant” groups, especially Latinos and Asians, also become entrapped behind the traditional color line?

Many Peoples of Color or Black Exceptionalism?

The increasing ethnic diversification of American society requires us to reconsider the color line. One possibility might be called a *people of color* view. In the years since 1965, the black civil rights movement has begun to serve as the political model for countless other groups seeking to rectify longstanding grievances and disadvantages. They argue that a wide variety of peoples of color -- not just blacks -- have been oppressed and victimized by white racism. This view is well put by Sucheng Chan (1991): “Racial discrimination is what separates the historical experience of Asian immigrants from that of Europeans, on the one hand, and makes it resemble that of enslaved Africans and dispossessed Native Americans and Mexican Americans, on the other hand” (p. 42). Latinos and Asians in particular began to adopt the rhetorical and activist tactics of the civil rights movement, arguing for inclusion in the social and political reforms it had initiated. A biracial nation riddled with racial conflict had been replaced by a multiethnic nation with calls for multicultural solutions from multiple groups.

Black exceptionalism is an alternative (Citrin & Sears, 2013; Sears, Citrin, Cheleden, & van Laar, 1999; Sears & Savalei, 2006). Such a view argues that African Americans are fundamentally different from other non-European people of color. The embedded one-drop rule has long separated those with any discernible African ancestry from everyone else. People of African descent have an exceptional place in American political life because their history,

described by the racial caste prototype of intergroup relations, has been unique among American ethnic minorities. Almost all blacks in the United States are the descendants of ex-slaves with American ancestors dating back to the 17th or 18th centuries. Blacks have had the longest and most visible history of large numbers in the United States.

Although Latinos and Asians have certainly faced discrimination and exclusion throughout U.S. history, the majority of contemporary U.S. residents who identify as Latino and Asian are not descendants of the generations who were subjected to second-class citizenship in the 19th or 20th centuries. Instead, most are true immigrants, often not yet citizens, and often do not speak English at home. In contrast, the vast majority of blacks living in the United States are native-born citizens, speak only English in all contexts, and are descendants of generations who were subjected to enslavement. Nathan Glazer (1997) has put the black exceptionalism perspective well, concluding that “. . . .the separateness of blacks is real. . . . For this one group, assimilation, by some key measures, has certainly failed. . . . the difference that separates blacks from whites, and even from other groups ‘of color’ that have undergone a history of discrimination and prejudice in this country, is not to be denied” (pp. 120-121). Such differentiation among ethnic and racial groups fits well psychologically with a socialization-based symbolic politics theory that assigns powerful inertial power to the historical idiosyncracies of each (Sears, 1993).

The central question of this essay lies at the intersection of those two pivotal political decisions made in 1965. The issues raised by America’s historic racial divide have not gone away. Yet, America continues to receive very large numbers of immigrants and their children, especially those of Latino and Asian descent. Do these new immigrant groups see themselves, and are they treated as, “people of color” encircled by a rigid color line? Or are they pointed

toward the more absorptive patterns of accommodation and integration into the broader society like previous waves of European immigrants, once again leaving African Americans behind as a uniquely stigmatized and disadvantaged racial group?

In a globalizing world, population movement is increasing by leaps and bounds. As a result, the historical insularity of different ethnic, religious, cultural, national, and racial groups is being broken down. So the United States is far from unique in facing the dilemmas posed by heavy immigration of ethnic minorities. As a highly touted “nation of immigrants,” the United States has naturally often been cited as a model for the integration of new population flows into the broader society. The fate of the black-white color line therefore has some relevance for the integration of ethnic and racial minorities in many other countries.

The remainder of this essay reviews empirical evidence on the consequences of the color line today. First, we look at some demographic characteristics of America’s ethnic and racial groups. If the black exceptionalism thesis is correct, we should expect to find evidence of greater black physical and social isolation than is present in other “peoples of color.” Second, we examine the effects of the color line on minorities’ group consciousness. If the black exceptionalism thesis is correct, Americans with African ancestry should show the least tendency to use multiracial identities when biologically relevant, and be most likely to use conventional pan-ethnic identities. They should also show the strongest racial group consciousness. In both respects, as will be seen, I believe the evidence favors the black exceptionalism alternative.

Demographic Differences among Ethnic Groups

A starting point is to examine whether or not the historic relative disadvantages of blacks have been diminishing. The short answer is that the gaps between blacks and whites in valued resources and quality of life are not going away. Prior to World War II the differences were

enormous. They narrowed between Pearl Harbor and the civil rights decade of the 1960's. In the period since the 1970's, blacks in the aggregate blacks have showed absolute improvement in life expectancy, occupational status, income, wealth, educational level, middle class status, and number of elected officials, though the relative black-white gap did not narrow. In some other domains, blacks even showed little absolute improvement, such as in the proportions living below the poverty level, of children born out of wedlock, of female-headed households, and of those in the criminal justice system (Stoll, 2005). The exact reasons for these racial disparities vary across domains, but that is beyond the scope of this essay. My point is only that they continue to exist. This stagnation is consistent with the view that the color line remains a significant obstacle to blacks.

Residential segregation

One key indicator of a strong color line would be racial isolation, as in residential segregation. That is highly correlated with school segregation, helping transmit the effects of isolation to the next generation. Sociologists typically assess residential segregation with a "dissimilarity index," describing the relative proportion of a particular group that would have to move in order to have every neighborhood match the proportion of that group residing in the metropolitan area as a whole. In the 2010 Census (Logan & Stults, 2011), the segregation of blacks from whites remained extremely high, with a dissimilarity index of 59, though down from a high of 79 in 1970. Segregation remains particularly high in the metropolitan areas with the most blacks, such as Detroit, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia. The most progress has been made in metropolitan areas that are less than 5 percent black.

Latinos show considerably less isolation than do blacks, with a 2010 dissimilarity index of 48. Parenthetically, Puerto Ricans, usually classified as Latinos, illustrate the importance of

African heritage to the color line. Those with African origins show levels of segregation approaching those of African Americans, while those regarding themselves as white do not show that extreme segregation (Massey and Denton, 1991, p. 151). Blacks are somewhat more likely to live in poverty neighborhoods than Hispanics are. However blacks' exposure to poverty is better explained by their racial isolation, whereas Hispanics' exposure to poverty is more strongly associated with low income (Logan, 2011). Over the past three decades Latinos have considerably dispersed away from the most segregated metropolitan areas. In 2010 one-third lived in areas with dissimilarity indices well below those of the fifty most black-white segregated metropolitan areas. Finally, these analyses do not distinguish foreign-born (42% of all Hispanics), who presumably are considerably more likely to live in ethnic enclaves, from US-born individuals. The segregation of US-born Latinos would likely have dropped still further (Logan and Turner, 2013).

The 2010 dissimilarity index for Asians was considerably lower still, at 41. That too has not appreciably changed since 1980, but that has been a period of extraordinary Asian immigration and these analyses too do not single out the foreign-born. Asians have also begun to disperse to areas in which they are less segregated. In 1980, 61 percent lived in the most segregated metropolitan areas; by 2010, only 44 percent did.

Racial intermarriage.

Another key indicator of integration is racial intermarriage. In the 1960's, many states still had laws across black-white intermarriage, an extreme indicator of an impermeable color line. In 1967 the U. S. Supreme Court invalidated all such laws. But a majority of whites opposed racial intermarriage into the 1980's (Schuman et al., 1997). Again our first question is whether blacks show lower rates of intermarriage than do Hispanics and Asians. Lichter and

Quan (2005, p. 193) used the 2000 census to analyze intermarriage differences among ethnic groups, examining married individuals aged 20-34. Among the US-born, only 10 percent of blacks, compared to 33 percent of Hispanics and 54 percent of Asians, had married into another racial group (averaging men and women). Moreover, as the assimilation model would expect, US-born Latinos had out-married about three times as often as did the foreign-born, and US-born Asians had out-married twice as often as the foreign-born. Most startling to me is that 61 percent of the US-born married Asian woman aged 20-34 had married a non-Asian.

More recent data come from the authoritative 2010 American Community Survey. Only 17 percent of blacks, as against 26 percent of Latinos and 28 percent of Asians, married outside their ethnic groups. Again the assimilation model fits as well, with the US-born show rapidly decreasing isolation. Of newly-weds in 2010, 36 percent of US-born Latinos and 38 percent of US-born Asians out-married, as against 14 percent of foreign-born Latinos and 24 percent of foreign-born Asians (Wang, 2012).

Ethnic and Racial Group Consciousness

Minorities' group consciousness is likely to be heightened if they are locked behind a color line. Previous research has defined ethnic and racial group consciousness in terms of four components (Miller et al., 1981). The first is *self-categorization* as a member of an ethnic in-group. Individuals' preferred ethnic identities may or may not match the conventional American pan-ethnic categories of white, black, Latino, and Asian used by the U.S. Census, of course. *Strength of identification* with a group has a long historical pedigree in social psychology, being central to reference group theory (Kelley, 1952). *Sense of common fate* (AKA linked fate) reflects individuals' perceptions that their own outcomes are affected by how their ethnic group as a whole is faring (Dawson, 1994; Bobo & Johnson, 2000). *Perceived discrimination* against

one's own ethnic group and feeling it is not being treated fairly is a fourth.

The people of color view is psychologically undergirded by what Citrin and Sears (2013) describe as a "politicized group consciousness paradigm." Broadly, this assumes that intergroup relations revolve around the struggle among racially conscious groups competing to maximize their own interests. Attachment to an in-group, antagonism toward out-groups, and intergroup competition are viewed as central elements of human psychology. Social-structural theories of intergroup relations, such as realistic group conflict theory, sense of group position theory, and social dominance theory go further to assume relatively static pigment-based ethnic and racial hierarchies in the US (Bobo, 1999; Bonilla-Silva & Glover, 2004; Sidanius & Pratto, 1997).

The black exceptionalism model is built on different psychological assumptions. It emphasizes the importance of historical and cultural context, arguing that African Americans are fundamentally different from other non-European people of color. Blacks' uniquely harsh legacy of separation and inequality should have promoted especially strong group consciousness. The people of color perspective would lead us to expect other groups of color also to show high levels of group consciousness. To be sure, it would hardly be surprising if new immigrants generally have strong group consciousness, often living in ethnic enclaves, having alien customs, speaking little or heavily accented English, and experiencing discrimination and disadvantage.

But that may be transitional. The black exceptionalism perspective argues that the one-drop rule applied to blacks is considerably less permeable than is the color line applied to Latinos and Asians, particularly in later generations further removed in time from immigration. The turn-of-the-century European immigrants might therefore represent a better set of parallels for them. The subjective importance of ethnicity has declined across succeeding generations of their descendants, in terms of ethnic identity, use of languages other than English, preferences for

endogamous marriages, and ethnically homogeneous neighborhoods (Alba & Nee, 2003). Ethnic group consciousness may similarly weaken in later generations of today's Latinos and Asians.

This leads to two specific empirical comparisons. First, the people of color view, resting on the psychology of the politicized group consciousness paradigm, generally might expect substantial ethnic group consciousness among all ethnic minority groups because of their disadvantages in a racial group hierarchy that has whites ensconced at the top. Whites too might be expected to have strong racial group consciousness because less advantaged challengers of color threaten their privileges (Bobo, 1999). In contrast, black exceptionalism emphasizes African Americans' long, and unique, and continuing history of discrimination and disadvantage, and so would expect them to have substantially higher group consciousness than any other group. Since today's blacks are overwhelmingly American born, the appropriate comparison group in our data would be U.S.-born Latinos and Asians, as well as whites.²

Second, the people of color view would expect that the long and continuing history of discrimination against all peoples of color in America should continue to produce strong group consciousness among Latinos and Asians, and perhaps even more strongly among the US-born disillusioned with continuing discrimination and economic inequality. However, black exceptionalism assumes substantial assimilation of non-African immigrant groups over time. So it would distinguish between the especially ethnically conscious new immigrants, who for some period of time might feel like and be treated as part of an alien group, and their descendants, many of whom may have succeeded in becoming integrated into the broader society, weakening their sense of group consciousness.

Minority self-categorization

One consequence of an impermeable color line should be the tendency to self-categorize as a member of the excluded group irrespective of the realities of one's ancestry, a pattern exemplified by the one-drop (or hypodescent") rule (e.g., Davis, 2001; Ho et al., 2011). Historical records speak to the extraordinary amount of miscegenation that occurred between blacks and whites even under the tight legal restrictions on interracial sexual relations during the eras of slavery and Jim Crow, and the widespread illegality of interracial marriage. Recent studies of African Americans' DNA reveal large numbers with both African and European ancestors (Hochschild et al., 2012). Yet historically once an individual has become known as having any African blood, regardless of any other ancestry, that person is typically classified as "black." For example, Barack Obama is almost always categorized as "black" despite being widely known as having one white and one African parent.

If the color line is less permeable for blacks than for other peoples of color, those with some African blood should be more likely to identify as "black" than would predominantly Latino or Asian individuals of mixed blood identify as Latino or Asian. The 2000 and 2010 censuses provided the opportunity for individuals to give more than one racial identity. Indeed that consensual societal decision continues to be accepted by African Americans themselves.³ In the 2010 Census only 7.4 percent of blacks provided more than one racial identity. A surprisingly small percentage said they were equally black and white, like President Obama – only 4.6 percent. And only 0.8 percent of all those claiming to be at least partially "white" said they were equally white and black (U. S. Census, 2011). Nothing tells the tale of the persistence of the "one-drop" rule of racial identity than those numbers.

There might be reason to think that mixed-race Latinos and Asians would be as, or even more, likely to claim only those single racial identities. Many spent their formative years either

in another nation or in ethnically concentrated enclaves in this country, without the many opportunities for co-parenting with other races that whites and blacks have had in the many generations most have been in the United States. Yet in 2010 almost twice as many Latinos and Asians said they were multiracial than did blacks: 12 percent each. And they were far more likely to say they are partly white – more than twice as often for Latinos, and three times as often for Asians. This speaks to the greater impermeability of the *black* color line.

Another element of black exceptionalism is that being African American is perhaps more stigmatizing than other group identities. If so, other people of color may shy away from a social identity as black. Recent U. S. censuses have provided separate questions about race and Hispanic background. In 2010, of those with Hispanic background, 53 percent described themselves on the race question as white, only 2.5 percent as black, and 37 percent as “some other race” (another 6 percent chose two or more identities). The reluctance of Latinos to identify themselves as black is underlined by the fact that only 1.1 percent of the Latinos who had said they were of “some other race” also said they were black or African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

The people of color view also generally assumes that Americans self-categorize into the major American pan-ethnic categories (e.g., Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; for a nuanced exception, see Bonilla-Silva & Glover, 2004). The black exceptionalism model suggests that may arbitrarily lump together people who may not feel they share meaningful cultural roots. Instead it weighs individuals’ own historical experiences more heavily, suggesting that new immigrants may identify more with their own original nationality group (Portes & McLeod, 1996; Sears, Fu, Henry, & Bui, 2003).

Indeed the Pew Research Center’s (2005; 2012) national surveys find that both Hispanics

and Asian Americans overwhelmingly preferred to identify themselves with their country of origin rather than adopting the pan-ethnic labels conventionally used in the census. Similarly, respondents in the 2008 National Asian American Survey were twice as likely to check either their nationality group or a hyphenated nationality-American group than a pan-ethnic identity such as “Asian” or “Asian American” (Wong, et al., 2011). Asians were also four times as likely to choose either a pure nationality identity or a hyphenated nationality-American identity than the pan-ethnic “Asian American” in a 2001 national survey (Lien, Conway, & Wong, 2003).

In other words, the people of color model, by assuming that all such peoples fit the African-American model, oversimplifies the self-categorizations of ethnic minorities in three ways. Latinos and Asians are more likely to use mixed-race identities. Classifying all of them as people of color ignores the desires of many Latinos and Asians to distance themselves from the more stigmatized African Americans. And it ignores the greater psychological closeness of many Latinos and Asians to their national roots than to the conventional American pan-ethnic categories modeled after African Americans.

Group consciousness

Our measures of the strength of ethnic identity consist of items in several LACSS surveys on the strength of identification with fellow ethnics, the importance of the individual’s ethnicity to his/her sense of identity, and how often the person thought of him/herself in terms of ethnicity. The sense of common fate with other members of one’s own ethnic group asked whether “what happens generally to [ethnicity] people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life?” A sense of grievance about treatment of one’s own ethnic in-group was measured in terms of perceived discrimination against themselves or other members of their group because of their ethnicity, and the beliefs that American society owes their ethnic group a

better chance in life and that American society has not provided their ethnic group a fair opportunity to get ahead.

To conserve space, the exact wording and the marginal frequencies for each item by ethnic group are not presented here (see Citrin and Sears, 2013, for the details). But in a nutshell, on each of these three components, both pieces of the black exceptionalism hypothesis are supported: blacks are significantly higher on each dimension than are US-born Latinos, Asians, or whites. Moreover, US-born Latinos are significantly higher than are foreign-born Latinos, suggesting assimilation across generations in the United States.

Truly strong ethnic group consciousness would seem to depend on the confluence of all three of these last components: strong group identity, perceptions of common fate, and perceived discrimination. The people of color model, building on the psychology of politicized group consciousness, appears to suggest that having all these beliefs is quite common, while the black exceptionalism hypothesis suggests that they are likely to be common only among blacks and new immigrants.

To assess this, we created a typology based on all three components, using only the 2001 and 2002 LACSS surveys when all three were measured. The highest level of group consciousness (“strongly aggrieved ethnic consciousness”) included those who were high on all three dimensions: (1) above the full-sample median on a two-item scale of strength of ethnic identity; (2) felt that what happens to their fellow ethnics will have “a lot” to do with what happens in their own lives; and (3) were above the full-sample median on a two-item perceived discrimination scale, based on perceptions of how often other members of their ethnic group experience discrimination and the extent to which American society owes “people of my own ethnic group” a better chance in life. The percentages of people in each ethnic group who fell at

that high level of ethnic group consciousness are shown at the top of Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

The results show strong support for black exceptionalism. Blacks (25 percent) were almost four times as likely as U.S.-born Latinos (7 percent) or Asians (5 percent) to show the highest level of aggrieved group consciousness. Thinking these apparently low levels of strongly aggrieved ethnic consciousness might merely have been an artifact of setting too high a threshold, we tried setting a more relaxed standard by including a more moderate group, of those meeting the above criteria in strength of ethnic identity *or* sense of common fate *and* above the sample median in perceived discrimination. This also supports black exceptionalism: 55 percent of the blacks, as against 36 percent of the U.S.-born Latinos and 23 percent of the Asians, were at least moderately high in group consciousness.

There is also strong support for the assimilation piece of black exceptionalism. US-born Latinos (7 percent) were less than half as likely to be high in strongly aggrieved group consciousness as were foreign-born Latinos (16 percent). Applying the more relaxed standard still supports the assimilation hypothesis: 36 percent of the US-born Latinos, as against 65 percent of the foreign-born, showed at least moderately aggrieved group consciousness. If we extrapolate this finding into the future, when a decreasing proportion of Latino families are likely themselves to be immigrants, Latino ethnic consciousness should decline.

These two top categories of the typology together constitute the outer boundary of what we would consider strong ethnic group consciousness. All the respondents meeting these criteria perceive considerable unfair treatment of their own group and associate themselves personally with their ethnic group to some degree. Both seem to us to be essential elements in the politicized group consciousness paradigm. Even moderately aggrieved ethnic group

consciousness seems to be common only among blacks and foreign-born Latinos.

We describe the third level as “symbolic” group consciousness, following Gans (1979). These respondents see their group as being treated unfairly (above the sample median in perceived discrimination), but do not see much personal connection between themselves and their groups (both weak ethnic identity and little perceived common fate). They make political judgments about their group’s treatment, but such judgments have little personal relevance. There were generally low levels of symbolic ethnicity in all groups, and few ethnic differences. Of course the absence of a strong personal connection to the group would not prevent engagement in political action on its behalf.

The fourth level is labeled “contented” since it includes people who felt some personal connection to their group (above the full sample median in ethnic identity and/or common fate) but perceive little discrimination against it (below median). Consistent with the black exceptionalism hypothesis, only 13 percent of the blacks were contented, against 31 percent of the U.S.-born Latinos and 42 percent of the Asians. This also supports the assimilation hypothesis: 31 percent of the U.S.-born Latinos, and only 14 percent of the foreign-born Latinos, felt contented. This reinforces our central message: blacks’ racial consciousness remains a potentially powerful political force, while ethnic consciousness among the heavily immigrant peoples of color seems to wane with generations in the United States.

Finally, whites were most concentrated in the lowest level of ethnic political consciousness, defined as being below the sample median on all three dimensions. Perhaps more surprising is how pervasive this lack of white group consciousness is: 65 percent had no discernible racial group consciousness by this standard.

Summary and Conclusions

The black exceptionalism hypothesis is that the color line surrounding blacks is more stringent than that affecting other peoples of color. An assimilation corollary is that the people of color in the today's heavily immigrant groups, Latinos and Asians, face an increasingly permeable color line in the generations after immigration, and so tend to become more integrated into the broader society than are African Americans.

The empirical data support this hypothesis in several ways. Blacks indeed continue to be considerably more residentially segregated from whites than are Latinos, and far more than Asians. Blacks also intermarry with whites considerably less than is true for other peoples of color. Subjective identities also show evidence of that more impermeable color line. Those with mixed ancestry, but including some African heritage, are more likely to identify themselves solely as African American, and less likely to identify themselves as multiracial, than are those with some Asian or Latino ancestry. Finally, blacks generally show stronger racial group consciousness than do other US-born peoples of color, in terms of stronger ethnic identity, sense of common fate, and perceived discrimination, and therefore considerably higher levels of aggrieved racial consciousness. The growing diversification of American society seems primarily to have reinforced the enduring color line that restricts blacks from full integration into the broader society.

These findings also support the assimilation corollary of black exceptionalism. Intermarriage outside one's pan-ethnic ingroup is far higher among US-born Latinos and Asians than among their foreign-born counterparts. US-born Latinos are only half as likely to show aggrieved group consciousness as are the foreign-born. More broadly, over generations in the United States, Latinos lose much of the high level of ethnic consciousness present among immigrants (Citrin & Sears, 2013). By the third generation, Latinos' overall level of ethnic

consciousness is far below that shown by blacks. But even in the second generation, Latinos' sense of common fate and perceived discrimination are already below those of blacks. Treating Asians and Latinos as "peoples of color" like blacks can be misleading if the US-born are not considered separately from their immigrant brethren. Most similarities of Asians and Latinos to blacks are due primarily to the immigrant generation (Saenz, 2005; Xie & Goyette, 2005).

So the process of integration in terms of the Latinos' reduced ethnic group consciousness is gradual. But it seems inexorably to set them apart from African Americans. Latinos' and Asians' transitions across the color line over generations seem inconsistent with the idea of a rigid racial hierarchy in which whites are a jealously self-protective dominant group at the expense of all "subordinate" peoples of color. Instead blacks seem to continue to play out the racial caste system, whereas Latinos and Asians more closely fit the immigration-and-assimilation prototype.

In short, the people of color hypothesis suggests that the most significant color line is the one that separates whites from all peoples of color, not just African Americans. The black exceptionalism hypothesis suggests that the color line separating blacks and whites is more rigid and impermeable than the lines separating whites from other minority groups of color, capturing members of other groups only temporarily, especially in the immigrant generation itself. To be sure, the people of color and black exceptionalism models are not exhaustive, as Lee and Bean (2010) point out. But at present they are the most plausible. Bonilla-Silva (2004) has proposed a triracial divide, adding an intermediate "honorary white" category, such as light-skinned Latinos, and an expanded black category called "collective blacks," such as dark-skinned Puerto Ricans. So far there is less empirical evidence on this point. Then there is the "disappearance of color lines" possibility. In politics, a great deal of evidence indicates that has not happened, with the

most recent extensive evidence being the racialization of Barack Obama and his policies (e.g., Kinder & Dale-Ridder, 2011; Tesler & Sears, 2010; also see Sears & Henry, 2005).

This argument about the integration of the new immigrants across generations is contrary to Huntington's (2004) gloomy view of the future, envisaging increasing numbers of U.S.-born Latinos who are incompletely integrated into American society, continuing to speak Spanish, spending time in Mexico, having divided national loyalties, and so forth. He was extrapolating from his understanding of American society at the turn of the millennium, of course.

However, his vision may have been a bit myopic. It must be remembered that the surge in Asian and Latino immigration is quite recent. Recent immigrants and their children in the current era represent an unusually large portion of the overall Latino and Asian populations. The proportion of US-born is bound to increase substantially over time. If the differences described above between the US-born and foreign-born hold up over time, the gap between blacks, on the one hand, and Asians and Latinos on the other, is, *ceteris paribus*, likely to expand as non-immigrant generations of the latter two groups burgeon. Perhaps even today's common description of Latinos and Asians as "people of color" may be transitional. After all, the late 19th century European immigrants were often regarded as of different "races" when they arrived, and now their descendants are almost always simply regarded as "white." The current strong group consciousness of Latinos too may be somewhat transient, just as was the ethnic politics of earlier generations of European ethnics.

Whites showed far less racial group consciousness than did any of the ethnic and racial minority groups. Only 1 percent of the whites attained the highest level of aggrieved group consciousness, and about two-thirds were below the median in all three component measures. The politicized group consciousness paradigm, especially group position theory, would seem to

expect whites' racial consciousness to be fairly well-developed, given its postulate that whites' sense of group privilege is depicted as threatened by minorities' demands (Bobo, 1999). But that would seem to require that white individuals be self-conscious of his/her whiteness. The level of white group consciousness we find would seem to be too low to generate that kind of perceived threat from ethnic minority groups.

To be sure, racially based backlash has a substantial white constituency, as indicated variously by evidence of white opposition to black mayoral candidates, President Obama and his policies, school integration, and affirmative action (Hajnal, 2007; Kinder & Dale-Riddle, 2012; Tesler & Sears, 2010). But that seems not to be based very often on a shared aggrieved sense of white group consciousness. Substantial research has failed to find much evidence that white group consciousness is a powerful, widespread factor in American racial politics (for a review, based on a variety of measures and a number of national and local general population surveys, see Sears & Henry, 2005). Nor does such white backlash seem to reflect substantial defense of white privilege against racial threats very centrally. Neither whites' self-interests nor their group's interests generally have much effect on their racially- relevant political attitudes (Sears & Funk, 1991).

Rather, the psychological underpinning for racially based backlash among whites is less a distinctive in-group identification than anti-minority animus. To be sure, most historians would see white group consciousness in the old South as having had powerful political effects. But in the contemporary United States as a whole, its effects seem rather limited. This is contrary to race-hierarchy theories, to the extent that whites' efforts to dominate the hierarchy presuppose some group consciousness. This low political salience of whites' racial identity is perhaps not remarkable. Whites of European origin have been by far the dominant group in America for the

last three centuries, numerically and in almost every other way, so why would they generally feel very racially distinctive? Nevertheless, our data on whites come from the Los Angeles metropolitan area, a region that is among the most ethnically diverse in the world. Whites' once-vast numerical dominance has eroded swiftly in recent decades, and they are now not only in the minority in Los Angeles County but are outnumbered by Latinos. One might think that they would feel threatened by their rapid fall and highly attached to their privileged status. Yet ethnic identity seemed to be far less important to whites than to other groups.

How do these findings fit with social psychological research on intergroup relations more generally? In the formative years of social psychology the prototypical ingroup was whites, and the prototypical outgroup, blacks. Social-psychological theories of intergroup relations were generally built on a socio-cultural learning dynamic, and on that black-white binary as the premier example of it. Later the politicized group consciousness paradigm developed, drawing attention to the importance of ingroup identity, outgroup antagonism, group hierarchy, and the inevitability of intergroup conflict, as well as addressing other ethnic and racial groups.

That paradigm seems to fit many cases of conflictual intergroup relations, such as the violence outside of conventional politics in Iraq, Palestine, Kashmir, Kosovo, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Northern Ireland, as well as more standard political conflicts such as in Quebec and Belgium. They also seem to fit the political psychology of African Americans well, if our data are to be believed. However, its key variables may not be as central in the daily lives of whites, and post-immigration generations of Latinos and Asians, as might have been thought. That seems at least ironic. American social psychologists tend to take the black-white case as the paradigmatic instance of dysfunctional intergroup relations. But I that may be an extreme case rather than a paradigmatic one, embodying a long and stable relationship of radical inequality. It

has been nearly 400 years since the first African slaves landed in North America, in 1619. For almost all of that time the vast majority of African Americans were either enslaved or legally consigned to a lower caste. Perhaps that was not an extreme case by the standards of the 17th century, but by those of even mid-19th century, it was.

Blacks' contemporary situation reveals the force of their distinctive history. African Americans remain the least assimilated ethnic minority in America in the respects most governed by individual choice, such as intermarriage and residential (and therefore, school) integration. By the same criteria, Latinos and Asians are considerably more integrated into the broader society (e.g., Lichter & Qian, 2005; Saenz, 2005; Stoll, 2005; Xie & Goyette, 2005). The key psychological vehicle is America's nearly impermeable color line. Americans of all racial and ethnic groups alike think about and treat people of African descent as a particularly distinctive, exceptional group -- not as just another "people of color." So have social psychology's theoretical accounts of intergroup relations in America over-generalized from an historically unique, extreme case?

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ENDNOTES

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² Although potentially this could reflect our decision to compare all blacks with US-born Latinos, only 6 percent of the 1025 blacks interviewed in the Los Angeles surveys were foreign born, whereas 71 percent of the Latinos and 70 percent of the Asians were).

³ I make no distinction between race and ethnicity in this essay.

Table 1**Ethnic Group Consciousness Typology**

	Ethnicity of Respondent					
	Black	-----Latino-----		Asian	White	
		Total	Foreign-Born			
Aggrieved Ethnic Consciousness						
Strongly	25%	14%	16%	7%	5%	1%
Moderately	30 ^a	43	49	29 ^a	18	4
Symbolic Ethnicity Only						
Discrimination, Not Group Conscious	16 ^{a, b}	16 ^{a, c}	16 ^b	14 ^{b, d}	11 ^{a, b, c}	11 ^{c, d}
Contented						
Little Discrimination, Some Group Conscious	14 ^a	18 ^b	14 ^a	31	42	19 ^b
No Ethnic Group Consciousness	15 ^a	10	6	19 ^a	24 ^a	65
Column n	363	437	310	127	76	431

Source: 2001–2002 LACSS.

Notes: The composite group consciousness typology is based on three dimensions: (1) strength of ethnic identity (2-item scale: “how important is being [ethnicity] to your sense of identity” and “how often do you think of yourself as a [ethnicity] person?”); (2) sense of common fate with ethnicity (single item); (3) perceived discrimination against R’s ethnicity (2-item scale: “Other members of my ethnic group experience discrimination” and “American society owes people of my ethnic group a better chance in life than we currently have”).

“Aggrieved-strongly” respondents were higher than the full sample median response on all three dimensions; “aggrieved-moderately” respondents are higher than the full sample median on (3) and either (1) or (2); “symbolic ethnicity only” respondents are higher than full sample median only on (3); “contented” respondents are higher than full sample median on (1) or (2) but not (3); “no ethnic group consciousness” respondents are lower than the full sample median on all three dimensions.

Superscripts denote results of independent samples t-tests. All entries in a given row are significantly different ($p < .05$) unless they share the same superscript. The “Total Latino” column is not compared to the foreign or U.S.-born Latino categories.