

## The Black/White Binary Paradigm of Race

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This chapter is about how we are taught to think about race. I believe that most such thinking is structured by a paradigm that is widely held but rarely recognized for what it is and does. It is crucial, therefore, to identify and describe this paradigm and to demonstrate how it binds and organizes racial discourse, limiting both the scope and the range of legitimate viewpoints in racial discourse.

### *The Power of Paradigms*

Thomas Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*,<sup>1</sup> describes the properties of paradigms and their power in structuring scientific research and knowledge. While Kuhn writes in connection with scientific knowledge, many of his insights are useful in understanding paradigms and their effects more generally. A paradigm is a shared set of understandings or premises which permits the definition, elaboration, and solution of a set of problems defined within the paradigm. It is an accepted model or pattern that, "like an accepted judicial decision in the common law[,] . . . is an object for further articulation and specification under new or more stringent conditions."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, a paradigm is the set of shared understandings that permits us to distinguish which facts matter in the solution of a problem and which facts don't. As Kuhn writes,

In the absence of a paradigm or some candidate for paradigm, all of the facts that could possibly pertain to the development of a given science are likely to seem equally relevant. As a result, early fact-gathering is a far more nearly random activity than the one that subsequent scientific development makes familiar.<sup>3</sup>

Paradigms thus define relevancy. In so doing, they control fact-gathering and investigation. Data-gathering efforts and research are focused on understanding the facts and circumstances that the relevant paradigm has taught us are important.

FROM "THE BLACK/WHITE BINARY PARADIGM OF RACE: EXPLORING THE 'NORMAL SCIENCE' OF AMERICAN RACIAL THOUGHT." Copyright © 1997 by Juan F. Perea. Used by permission of the author. Publication forthcoming in the *California Law Review*.

Paradigms are crucial in the development of science and knowledge because, by setting boundaries within which problems can be understood, they permit detailed inquiry into these problems. In Kuhn's words, a "paradigm forces scientists to investigate some part of nature in a detail and depth that would otherwise be unimaginable."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is this depth of research that eventually yields anomalies and discontinuities and, ultimately, the necessity to develop new paradigms. However, as a paradigm becomes the widely accepted way of thinking and of producing knowledge on a subject, it tends to exclude or ignore alternative facts or theories that do not fit the expectations produced by the paradigm.

Kuhn uses the concept of "normal science" to describe the elaboration and further articulation of the paradigm, and the solution of problems that are perceivable because of the paradigm. Scientists and researchers spend almost all of their time engaged in normal science, conducting their research under the rules prescribed by the paradigm and attempting to solve problems cognizable and derivable from the paradigm. However, normal science "often suppresses fundamental novelties because they are necessarily subversive of its basic commitments."<sup>5</sup> As Kuhn describes, normal science "seems an attempt to force nature into the performed and relatively inflexible box that the paradigm supplies. No part of the aim of normal science is to call forth new sorts of phenomena; indeed those that will not fit the box are often not seen at all."<sup>6</sup> As normal research progresses in depth and detail within a paradigm, unexpected discoveries come to light, yielding anomalies that are not adequately explained by the current paradigm. In time, scientists are forced to abandon the old paradigm and replace it with some new understanding that explains better the observed anomalies.

Literature and textbooks play an important role in producing and reproducing paradigms. Kuhn identifies textbooks and popularizations, conveying scientific knowledge in a language more accessible to the general public, as authoritative sources of established paradigms. Textbooks and literature derived from them intend to communicate the particular paradigm or set of paradigms that constitute the current tradition of a science. Although Kuhn suggests that science is more vulnerable to textbook distortions of history than other disciplines because of the assumed objectivity of scientific inquiry,<sup>7</sup> I believe his insights regarding paradigms, "normal science," and textbooks are extremely useful in explaining the persistent focus of race scholarship on Blacks and Whites, and the resulting omission of Latinas/as, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and other racialized groups from such scholarship. If science as a discipline is more vulnerable to textbook distortions of history, I believe this is only a matter of degree, because law, through its reliance on precedent, is also highly dependent on paradigms. Kuhn recognized as much when he used judicial precedent, and subsequent decisions based on precedent, as an example of paradigm elaboration.<sup>8</sup> Although Kuhn felt that the extent to which the social sciences had developed paradigms was an open question,<sup>9</sup> race scholarship both inside and outside of law is dominated by a binary paradigm of race.

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### *Describing the Binary Paradigm of Race*

Paradigms of race shape our understanding and definition of racial problems. The most pervasive and powerful paradigm of race in the United States is the Black/White binary. I define this paradigm as the conception that race in America consists, either exclusively or primarily, of only two constituent racial groups, the Black and the White. Many scholars of race reproduce this paradigm when they write and act as though only the Black and the White races matter for purposes of discussing race and social policy. The current fashion of mentioning "other people of color," without careful attention to their voices, their histories, and their real presence, is merely a reassertion of the Black/White paradigm. If one conceives of race as primarily of concern only to Blacks and Whites, and understands "other people of color" only through some unclear analogy to the "real" races, this just restates the binary paradigm with a slight concession to demographics.

In addition, the paradigm dictates that all other racial identities and groups in the United States are best understood through the Black/White binary paradigm. Only a few writers even recognize that they use a Black/White paradigm as the frame of reference through which to understand all racial relations. Most writers simply assume the importance and correctness of the paradigm, and leave the reader grasping for whatever significance descriptions of the Black/White relationship have for other people of color. As I shall discuss, because the Black/White binary paradigm is so widely accepted, other racialized groups like Latinos/as, Asian Americans, and Native Americans are often marginalized or ignored altogether. As Kuhn wrote, "those that will not fit the box are often not seen at all."<sup>10</sup>

#### Andrew Hacker and Two Nations

Andrew Hacker's famous book, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*, provides an excellent example.<sup>11</sup> Its title, proclaiming two nations, Black and White, boldly professes the Black/White binary paradigm. Although Hacker recognizes explicitly that a full perspective on race in America requires inclusion of Latinos/as and Asians, this recognition is, in the context of the entire book, insignificant and underdeveloped. His almost exclusive focus on Blacks and Whites is clearly intentional: "*Two Nations* will adhere to its title by giving central attention to black and white Americans."<sup>12</sup>

Hacker's justification is that "[i]n many respects, other groups find themselves sitting as spectators, while the two prominent players try to work out how or whether they can co-exist with one another."<sup>13</sup> This justifies marginalization with marginalization. What Hacker and so many other writers on race fail, or decline, to understand is that, by focusing only on Blacks and Whites, they both produce and replicate the belief that only "two prominent players," Black and White, count in debates about race. Other non-White groups, rendered invisible by these writers, can thus be characterized as passive, voluntary spectators.

Hacker describes in detail only conditions experienced by White or Black Americans. He first characterizes the White nature of the nation and its culture:

America is inherently a "white" country: in character, in structure, in culture. Needless to say, black Americans create lives of their own. Yet, as a people, they face boundaries and constrictions set by the white majority. America's version of *apartheid*, while lacking overt legal sanction, comes closest to the system even now being reformed in the land of its invention.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, Latinos/as, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Gypsies, and all non-White Americans face "boundaries and constrictions set by the white majority," but the vision Hacker advances counts only Blacks as significantly disadvantaged by White racism.

Similarly, Hacker describes Blackness as uniquely functional for Whites:

As James Baldwin has pointed out, white people need the presence of black people as a reminder of what providence has spared them from becoming. . . . In the eyes of white Americans, being black encapsulates your identity. No other racial or national origin is seen as having so pervasive a personality or character.<sup>15</sup>

According to Hacker, then, Blackness serves a crucial function in enabling Whites to define themselves as privileged and superior, and racial attributes of other minorities do not serve this function.

Hacker's chapter titles largely tell the story of the binary paradigm. Chapter 2, on "Race and Racism," discusses only White and Black perceptions of each other. Chapter 3, "Being Black in America," is followed by a chapter on "White Responses." Hacker's omission of non-Black minority groups in his discussion of specific topics similarly suggests these groups' experiences do not exist. Chapter 9, on segregated schooling, describes only the experience of segregation of Blacks, making no reference to the extensive history of segregation in education suffered by Latinos/as. Chapter 10 asks, "What's Best for Black Children?" with no commensurate concern for other children. Similarly, Chapter 11, on crime, discusses only perceptions of Black criminality and their interpretation. In discussing police brutality, Hacker describes only White police brutality against Blacks. One finds not a single word about the similar police brutality suffered by Latino/a people at the hands of White police officers. Nor are there any words in these chapters describing the experiences of Native Americans or Asian Americans.

The greatest danger in Hacker's vision is the implication that non-White groups other than Blacks are not really subject to racism. Hacker seems to adopt the deservedly criticized ethnicity theory, which posits that non-White immigrant ethnicities are essentially Whites-in-waiting who will be permitted to assimilate and become White. This is illustrated best in Chapter 8, "On Education: Ethnicity and Achievement," which offers the book's only significant discussion of non-White groups other than Blacks. Asians are described in "model minority" terms, because of high standardized test scores (on a group basis). Latinos/as are portrayed both as below standard, because of low test scores, and as aspiring immigrants. Describing Asian Americans, Latinos/as and other immigrant groups, Hacker writes:

Members of all these "intermediate groups" have been allowed to put a visible distance between themselves and black Americans. Put most simply, none of the presumptions of inferiority associated with Africa and slavery are imposed on these other ethnicities.<sup>16</sup>

While a full rebuttal of this quotation must wait for another time, its inaccuracy can be quickly demonstrated. Consider, for instance, the observations of historian David Weber, who described early Anglo perceptions of Mexican people: "American visitors to the Mexican frontier were nearly unanimous in commenting on the dark skin of Mexican mestizos who, it was generally agreed, had inherited the worst qualities of Spaniards and Indians to produce a 'race' still more despicable than that of either parent."<sup>17</sup> Rufus B. Sage expressed the common view of Mexicans in 1846:

"There are no people on the continent of America, whether civilized or uncivilized, with one or two exceptions, more miserable in condition or despicable in morals than the mongrel race inhabiting New Mexico. . . . To manage them successfully, they must needs be held in continual restraint, and kept in their place by force, if necessary—else they will become haughty and insolent. As servants, they are excellent, when properly trained, but are worse than useless if left to themselves."<sup>18</sup>

More briefly, the common perception of Mexican Americans was that "[t]hey are an inferior race, that is all."<sup>19</sup>

Incredibly, and without any supporting evidence, Hacker writes that "[m]ost Central and South Americans can claim a strong European heritage, which eases their absorption into the 'white' middle class."<sup>20</sup> He continues, "[w]hile immigrants from Colombia and Cyprus may have to work their way up the social ladder, they are still allowed as valid a claim to being 'white' as persons of Puritan or Pilgrim stock."<sup>21</sup> Hacker's comments are simply incredible. While some Latinos/as may look White and may act Anglo (the phenomenon of passing for White is not limited to Blacks), Hacker's statement is certainly false for millions of Latinos/as. Current anti-immigrant initiatives targeted at Latinos/as and Asians, such as California's Proposition 187 and similar federal legislation targeting legal and illegal immigrants, California's Proposition 209, and the unprecedented proposal to deny birthright citizenship to the U.S.-born children of undocumented persons, debunk any notion that the presence of Latino/a or Asian people will be accepted or tolerated easily by the White majority.

### *Cornel West and the Black/White Binary Paradigm*

Cornel West is one of the most well known and well regarded philosophers and commentators on race in the nation. While West writes with much more insight than Hacker, his recent book, *Race Matters*, is also limited by and reproduces the Black/White binary paradigm of race.<sup>22</sup> A collection of essays West wrote on race and race relations, its principal subject is the relationship of Blackness to Whiteness and the exploration of avenues to alter the unsatisfactory state of that relationship. And while this focus is of course worthy of his attention, he overlooks and ignores relevant subject matter that lies outside the paradigm. West describes the binary nature of our public discourse about race:

We confine discussions about race in America to the "problems" black people pose for whites rather than consider what this way of viewing black people reveals about us as

a nation. . . . Both [liberals and conservatives] fail to see that the presence and predicaments of black people are neither additions to nor defections from American life, but rather *constitutive elements of that life*.<sup>23</sup>

This statement is accurate, and I would only fault West for not recognizing that exactly the same statement is true of Latinos/as, Asians, and Native Americans as well as Blacks: we are all constitutive of American life and identity to a degree that has not been fully recognized, and which is in fact actively resisted.

West's near-exclusive focus on Blacks and Whites, and thus his reproduction of the Black/White binary paradigm, is apparent throughout the book. Chapter 2, entitled "The Pitfalls of Racial Reasoning," presents a powerful critique of racial reasoning within the Black community that immobilized Black leaders, who were generally unable to criticize Clarence Thomas when he was appointed to the Supreme Court. West's binary conception of the nation emerges when he describes the "deep cultural conservatism in white and black America. In white America, cultural conservatism takes the form of a chronic racism, sexism, and homophobia. . . . In black America, cultural conservatism takes the form of a [sic] inchoate xenophobia (e.g., against whites, Jews, and Asians), systemic sexism, and homophobia."<sup>24</sup> Like Hacker's conception of "two nations," West sees binary Americas, one White, one Black. In addition, West's reference to Black xenophobia, directed at Whites, Jews, and Asians, sets the stage for his later description of Black distrust of Latinos/as as well.

West also describes the binary paradigm from a Black point of view, referring to the "black bourgeois preoccupation with white peer approval and black nationalist obsession with white racism."<sup>25</sup> Blacks, in their way, are as preoccupied with Whites as Whites are with Blacks.

In his chapter "Malcolm X and Black Rage," West describes Malcolm X's fear of cultural hybridity, the blurring of racial boundaries that occurs because of racial mixture. Malcolm X saw such hybridity, exemplified by mulattos, as "symbols of weakness and confusion."<sup>26</sup> West's commentary on Malcolm X's views gives us another statement of the binary paradigm: "The very idea of not 'fitting in' the U.S. discourse of positively valued whiteness and negatively debased blackness meant one was subject to exclusion and marginalization by whites and blacks."<sup>27</sup> Although the context of this quotation is about Black/White mulattos, West's observation is crucial to an understanding of why Latinos/as, neither White nor Black, are perpetually excluded and marginalized. The reified binary structure of discourse on race leaves no room for people of color who do not fit the rigid Black and White boxes supplied by the paradigm. Furthermore most Latinos/as are mixed-race mestizos or mulattos, therefore embodying the kind of racial mixture that Malcolm X and, I would argue, society generally tend to reject. West's observation about mixed-race people who do not fit within traditional U.S. discourse about race applies in full measure to Latinos/as.

When West writes about the struggle for Black civil rights in shaping the future of equality in America, he recognizes the need for Blacks to repudiate anti-Semitism and other racisms in order to sustain the moral position garnered through the struggle for civil rights. However, he makes ambivalent comments about the possibilities for coalition with other groups:

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[A] prophetic framework encourages a coalition strategy that solicits genuine solidarity with those deeply committed to antiracist struggle. . . . [B]lack suspicions of whites, Latinos, Jews, and Asians runs deep for historical reasons. Yet there are slight though significant antiracist traditions among whites, Asians, and especially Latinos, Jews and indigenous people that must not be cast aside. Such coalitions are important precisely because they not only enhance the plight of black people but also because they enrich the quality of life in America.<sup>28</sup>

This paragraph warrants probing. Given America's history of racism, Black suspicions of every group may seem well-founded. For example, with respect to Latinos/as, during the nineteenth century as during the present, identification with Anglos by upper-class Mexicans meant becoming more racist and disparaging toward lower-class and darker-skinned Mexicans and Blacks. However, West's characterization of Latino/a, Asian, and Native American resistance to Anglo domination and racism as "slight though significant"<sup>29</sup> seems belittling, ill-informed, and marginalizing of Latino/a, Asian, and indigenous people. This comment can be understood as the kind of "inchoate xenophobia" West himself finds in the Black community.

Another possible reason for this distrust of Latinos/as may stem from a widespread sense that Blacks are being displaced by immigrant Latinos/as. Toni Morrison writes specifically about this distrust. In her essay "On the Backs of Blacks," Morrison describes the hatred of Blacks as the defining, final, necessary step in the Americanization of immigrants. "It is the act of racial contempt [banishing a competing black shoe-shiner] that transforms this charming Greek into an entitled white."<sup>30</sup> Morrison sees Blacks as persistently victimized by Americanizing processes, always forced to "the lowest level of the racial hierarchy."<sup>31</sup> The struggles of immigrants, according to Morrison,

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are persistently framed as struggles between recent arrivals and blacks. In race talk the move into mainstream America always means buying into the notion of American blacks as the real aliens. Whatever the ethnicity or nationality of the immigrant, his nemesis is understood to be African American.<sup>32</sup>

Morrison is right that American "Whiteness" is often achieved through distancing from Blacks. Latinos/as participate in the paradigm, by engaging in racism against Blacks or darker-skinned members of Latino/a communities. Current events, however, belie Morrison's notion of American blacks as "the real aliens." Mexican and other Latino/a and Asian aliens have become targets of state and federal legislation denying them medical and educational resources. The legal attack on entitlement programs and affirmative action programs is an attack on Blacks, Latinos/as, and Asians.

In Cornel West's writing, we see the influence of the Black/White binary paradigm from the point of view of a leading Black writer on race. His view shares points in common with Andrew Hacker. Both agree on the concepts of White and Black Americas (the "two nations"), and both focus exclusive attention on the relationship between Blacks and Whites, although they describe the nature of this relationship in very different terms. Both writers seem indifferent toward the history and conditions

experienced by other non-White, non-Black groups, while Hacker considers, unrealistically, all non-Blacks as aspiring immigrants on the path to assimilation with Whites. West, like Morrison, views non-Black groups with great suspicion. Morrison, in particular, seems to accept Hacker's view that all non-Blacks are (or will be) the enemies of Blacks as they Americanize and assimilate.

Taken together, these views pose serious problems for Latinos/as. Viewing Latinos/as as aspiring immigrants is, in most cases, a deeply flawed view, for two reasons. First, Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans, like all U.S.-born Latinos/as, are not immigrants. Mexicans occupied the Southwest long before the United States ever found them. Second, this utopian view of immigrant assimilation takes no account of the systemic racism that afflicts Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans. The utopian view serves White writers like Hacker because they can perpetuate the view that the United States has only a single race problem—the traditional binary problem of the White relationship with Blacks—rather than a more complex set of racisms that, if recognized, would demonstrate that racism is much more systemic and pervasive than is usually admitted.

One can thus discern how the binary paradigm interferes with liberation and equality. If Latinos/as and Asian Americans are presumed to be White by both White and Black writers (a presumption not borne out in the lived experience of most Latinos/as and Asians), then our claims to justice will not be heard or acknowledged. Our claims can be ignored by Whites, since we are not Black and therefore are not subject to real racism. And our claims can be ignored by Blacks, since we are presumed to be, not Black, but becoming White, and therefore not subject to real racism. Latinos/as do not fit the boxes supplied by the paradigm. . . .

[The author goes on to show how the same Black/White paradigmatic thinking operates in law and legal casebooks, then continues as follows—Eds.]

My review of important literature on race establishes the existence of the Black/White binary paradigm and its structuring of writing on race. The "normal science" of race scholarship specifies inquiry into the relationship between Blacks and Whites as the exclusive aspect of race relations that needs to be explored and elaborated. As a result, much relevant legal history and information concerning Latinos/as and other racialized groups end up omitted from books on race and constitutional law.

The omission of this history is extraordinarily damaging to Mexican Americans and other Latinos/as. When this history is omitted, students get no understanding that Mexican Americans have long struggled for equality. The absence of Latinos/as from histories of racism and the struggle against it enables people to maintain existing stereotypes of Mexican Americans. These stereotypes are perpetuated even by America's leading thinkers on race. Paradigmatic descriptions and study of White racism against Blacks, with only cursory mention of "other people of color," marginalizes all people of color by grouping them, without particularity, as somehow analogous to Blacks. "Other people of color" are deemed to exist only as unexplained analogies to Blacks. Uncritical readers are encouraged to continue assuming the paradigmatic importance of the Black/White relationship, while ignoring the experiences of other Americans who also are subject to racism in profound ways.

It is time to ask hard questions of our leading writers on race. It is also time to demand answers to these questions about inclusion, exclusion, and racial presence that go beyond perfunctory references to "other people of color." In the midst of profound demographic changes, it is time to question whether the Black/White binary paradigm of race fits our highly variegated current and future population. Our "normal science" of writing on race, at odds with both history and demographic reality, needs reworking.

NOTES

1. Thomas S. Kuhn, *THE STRUCTURE OF SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTIONS* (2d ed. 1970).
2. *Id.* at 23.
3. *Id.* at 15.
4. *Id.* at 24.
5. *Id.* at 5.
6. *Id.* at 24.
7. See, e.g., *id.* at 138.
8. See *id.* at 23.
9. See *id.* at 15.
10. *Id.* at 24; see also Juan F. Perea, *Los Olvidados: On the Making of Invisible People* 70 N.Y.U. L. REV. 965 (1995); Anne Sutherland, *GYPSIES: THE HIDDEN AMERICANS* (1986).
11. Andrew Hacker, *TWO NATIONS: BLACK AND WHITE, SEPARATE, HOSTILE, UNEQUAL* (1992).
12. *Id.* at xii.
13. *Id.*
14. *Id.* at 4.
15. *Id.* at 30, 32.
16. *Id.* at 16.
17. David J. Weber, *FOREIGNERS IN THEIR NATIVE LAND: HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE MEXICAN AMERICANS* 59 (1973).
18. *Id.* at 72, 74 (quoting 2 RUFUS B. SAGE: *HIS LETTERS AND PAPERS, 1836-1847* [LeRoy R. and Ann W. Hafen eds., 1956]).
19. This was the justification offered by Texas school officials for segregating Mexican Americans in 1929. See Jorge C. Rangel & Carlos M. Alcala, *Project Report: De Jure Segregation of Chicanos in Texas Schools*, 7 HARV. C.R.-C.L. LAW REV. 307, 307 (quoting Paul Schuster Taylor, *AN AMERICAN MEXICAN FRONTIER* 219 [1934]).
20. Hacker, at 10.
21. *Id.* at 12.
22. Cornel West, *RACE MATTERS* (1993).
23. *Id.* at 2-3.
24. *Id.* at 27.
25. *Id.* at 66.
26. *Id.* It is interesting to note the similarity between Malcolm X's sense that mixed-race people introduced "confusion" into the otherwise clear structures of Black and White, and Andrew Hacker's sense that Hispanics introduce "incoherence" into the otherwise "clear" vision of Black and White races that Hacker describes in such depth. These observations suggest one reason for the continued adherence to a Black/White paradigm despite its inadequacy: the paradigm does simplify and makes racial problems more readily understood than if we began to grapple with them in their full complexity.