

“WHITE LATINO” LEADERS: A FOREGONE CONCLUSION OR A MISCHARACTERIZATION OF LATINO SOCIETY

By Eric M. Gutiérrez*

Am I white? My personal inquiry into race begins with a school picture of a six-year-old boy. My dark brown hair, parted to one side, falls impishly over half-cocked eyebrows. My eyes, more almond-shaped than oval, are a murky blue with green speckles. My nose, a thicker version of the traditional aquiline Roman contour, fades into a tiny bulbous tip. My smile, close-mouthed and askance. My skin, white, even with a faded summer tan.

If I am white, whether I have claimed it or not, has it afforded me the privileges of a racial hierarchy skewed towards the dominant white culture? Moreover, has my apparent skin color placed me in a leadership role in the Latino community based merely on society’s perception of what that race is? Will that perception imply that I will turn my back on the Latino community that raised me, opting instead for the spoils of an influential white power structure?

In this article I consider the arguments presented by Ian Haney López in his essay entitled “White Latinos”¹ and analyze the validity of his statements on white Latino community leaders. I examine and challenge López’s assertions regarding the characterization of Latino leaders, generally; and his description of an emerging Latino culture identified as “Mexican Americans,” the “Brown Race,” and the “New Whites,” specifically.

The most crucial assertion by López is that white Latino leaders are the most prevalent and influential in Latino society and that by emphasizing their whiteness as a key component of their identity, they facilitate the mistreatment of Latinos and buttress social inequality. Although I agree with many of López’s assertions about white Latino leaders, I believe the aforementioned assertion is a mischaracterization of Latino leadership and neglects to consider the cultural values from which these leaders arise.

WHITE LATINO LEADERS

López initiates his argument by sidestepping the contentious issues of what constitutes a leader and what Latino identity entails. By way of hyperbole, he states that “most of those who see themselves as leaders of Latino communities accept or assert whiteness as a key component of their identity.”² Further, he argues that this assertion of whiteness “facilitates the mistreatment of Latinos and buttresses social inequality.”³

Conceding that race is not easily fixed or ascertained, López contends, “Latino leaders are often white in terms of how they see themselves and how they are regarded by others within and outside of their community.”⁴ Because the concept of race is a

social construct, López outlines the key criteria for determining “whiteness,” including: 1) class; 2) education; 3) physical features; 4) accent; 5) acculturation; 6) self-conception; and 7) social consensus.⁵ The amalgam of racial criteria that equates a Latino leader with “whiteness” is made more insidious because the existence of such criteria is not dispositive: many Latino leaders are considered white because they believe themselves to be or are understood

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The Spaniards reinforced their cultural ideals by applying a “white veneer” to the ancient Aztec goddess, Tonantzin, and the legend of the Virgin of Guadalupe.⁷ The fact that the Spaniards historically were using skin color or the minutia of sanguinity analysis to keep themselves at the top of the “racial food chain” years before the advent of slavery in America does not discredit López’s theory of society’s premium on “whiteness.” It does, however, raise the question of whether current Latino leaders identify their whiteness on the majority template that López posits or whether they are merely acting on internal cultural mandates cast centuries ago.

Some scholars point to the plight of the multi-cultural Moors as the touchstone for Spain’s denigration of all non-white peoples:

The fact is, racism grew out of a system that was established in England and parts of Europe during the Middle Ages, when Africans/Black Moors began to fall out of favor from being a highly respected and accomplished people, to being reduced to slavery after Ferdinand and Isabella retook Spain from the Black Moors and Arabs.⁸

López never dissects the patchwork of racial criteria that he claims most Latino leaders emerge from, as a means of claiming

whiteness and privilege. He offers no analysis, for example, of the effects of wealth or social status in conjunction with racial identity (a key element of Spanish-American culture) or of the cultural stratification of indigenous groups that may have mirrored that of the Spanish or white Americans. In short, López arrives at a sense of “whiteness” born out of almost no connection to our past and no attempt to correlate its prominence to the evolution of our culture.

MEXICAN AMERICANS

After addressing the “white dilemma,” López pursues a deconstruction of the Mexican-American polity that historically attempted to integrate itself into the white mainstream and legitimize its place in American society. López’s argument focuses on several points: 1) Mexican immigrants, after resisting assimilation into white American society, forge a new social identity (Mexican-American), galvanizing their ranks by claiming “quintessential” American membership; 2) Mexican Americans employ the “other white strategy,” and insist that they are racially white; 3) Mexican Americans are polarized by their claims of whiteness into two distinct groups; “white” Mexican Americans reap the benefits of the dominant class while “darker” Mexican Americans are relegated to the lowest rung on the racial ladder; 4) Mexican-American community leaders tend to be white; and 5) Mexican-American leaders that claim a white identity also hold a corollary belief that non-citizens and non-whites are beyond the realm of social concern or responsibility.⁹

The real evil, according to López, is not that a few Mexican-American leaders, regardless of their loyalty to the culture, claimed a white identity and exploited themselves at the detriment of other Mexican Americans, but that in principle, “the assertion of white identity is at root an attempt to locate oneself at or near the top of the racial hierarchy that forms an intrinsic part of U.S. society.”¹⁰ López asserts that “selling out” adds legitimacy to the doctrine of white superiority and turns Mexican Americans on each other.¹¹

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ideas regarding black inferiority, as the invidious fallout of Mexican-American leaders’ continual claims of whiteness as a means of belonging to society’s dominant class.¹² López categorizes this kind of behavior as a “Faustian bargain.”¹³

A modern example of López’s observation of Mexican-American leaders claiming whiteness to exploit their social

dominance and avoid discrimination is the emergence of “white Latino” organizations, like the National Association for the Advancement of Caucasian Latinos (NAACL). NAACL identifies itself as an organization “dedicated to reversing the harmful effects of governmental and media stereotyping of Latinos.”¹⁴ According to their website, they “especially represent the interests of the at least 16,907,850 Caucasian Hispanics in America as measured by the 2000 Census.”¹⁵ NAACL’s website outlines the organization’s rationale:

Hispanics are not a racial group. The word Hispanic refers to national origin. Hispanics can be of any race. Many millions of Hispanic Americans are descended from Spain and other European countries. Like their ancestors, these Hispanics are white.

The common surnames and language of Hispanics do not make them “all the same” any more than the Anglo last names of Bill Clinton and Jesse Jackson, make them members of the same race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic class.¹⁶

The NAACL website further delineates the group’s political agenda and voices its dissatisfaction with Latino community leaders:

The NAACL fills a void left empty by other “Hispanic” organizations and leadership who, despite their pretenses, do not and never have represented our interest. Our rights have not been advanced by our journey from the white-majority to the “Hispanic-minority.” To the contrary, the polarization created by the “black, white, or Hispanic” myth has sabotaged our assimilation into mainstream socioeconomic prosperity.¹⁷

López’s point regarding the ineffectual legal strategy Mexican Americans employed to have themselves declared legally white is well-taken, but its true effect on the Latino experience or Latino leadership is never explored.¹⁸ In fact, some scholars suggest that although Mexican Americans were considered legally white, they were socially non-white; thus, the law made little difference because it established only empty formal categories filled in by discriminatory practice.¹⁹

THE BROWN RACE

After López’s next argument focuses on the rise and fall of the Chicano Movement and its emphasis on challenging the notion of a white Latino identity and replacing it with a new “brown identity.”²⁰ As López observes, during the Chicano movement, broad sectors of the Mexican community came to accept and assert the idea that they were proud members of a brown race. In the intervening years, this [movement] waned, [and] today members of the [Latino] community in the United States are evenly split, with roughly half claiming they are white, and the other half insisting otherwise.²¹

The downfall of the Chicano Movement, according to López, was the tendency to define brown identity in terms of nineteenth-century ideas that tied race to ancestry, culture, group destiny, and patriarchal gender roles.²² In addition, Chicano Movement leaders struggled with how to reconcile its Marxist ideological undercurrents at a time when socialism was seen as an aberration.

Some scholars even argue that characterizing the Chicano Movement as problematic, as López implies, does nothing but denigrate its cultural and social importance to the Latino struggle:

By misrepresenting the multiple ideologies that informed the Chicano movement as a single current of reactionary cultural nationalism or “identity politics” riddled by sexism, internal dissension, “anti-Americanism,” and even “reverse racism,” revisionist historians (some of Mexican-American descent) have deprived future generations of a complete portrayal of Chicano/a activism in one of the more revolutionary periods in American history. The reality of the *movimiento* between the crucial years of 1965 and 1975 was one of great intellectual ferment in which competing political agendas vied for the attention of ethnic Mexican youth.²³

Contrary to López’s characterization of the Chicano Movement’s defining brown identity in terms of anachronistic “patriarchal gender roles,” some scholars have viewed the ideology as carving the way for a new form of women’s liberation: Chicana feminism.²⁴ Faced with the difficult task of negotiating these various ideological currents and challenging traditional patriarchal structures, an emergent Chicana feminism incorporated analysis of political economy, imperialism, and class relations as they related to issues of gender and race.²⁵ Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, Chicana feminists developed sophisticated critiques of sexism and patriarchy, often linking their agendas to those of women in other countries.²⁶

One criticism of López’s “brown race” analysis is that it relies too heavily on his reading of assimilationist strategies used by middle-class associations from the 1940s and 1950s. López’s analysis also ignores the impact of labor history from the 1880s through the 1950s, fueled by Mexico’s national imagery of the indigenous/mestizo identity, and not the white Spaniard.²⁷ López assumes that Latino claims to whiteness were some sort of cruel Hobson’s choice or worse, a form of cultural ennui; when in fact they may have been a sign of the group’s coming to terms with the American legal landscape:

The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) has been the primary organization employed by historians, Mario García (1989) in particular, to portray the acceptance of assimilationist and integrationist agendas within the Mexican-American community. However, as a middle-class organization, LULAC has represented the political and economic interests of a

very thin slice of the Mexican-American population.... [f]aced with two racial choices (and all the legal, political, and economic consequences attached to each), to interpret the claim of being “white” rather than “black” in a courtroom is not evidence that a local community of Mexican Americans thought of themselves as white but rather that they understood how the system worked.²⁸

THE NEW WHITES

In López’s final section, “The New Whites,” he echoes the sentiments of popular, African-American comedian Chris Rock’s musing on the premium society places on being white:

There ain’t no white man in this room that will change places with me – and I’m rich. That’s how good it is to be white. There’s a one-legged bus-boy in here right now that’s going: “I don’t want to change. I’m gonna ride this white thing out and see where it takes me.”²⁹

López paints an idyllic picture for the “growing numbers of minority individuals – those with fair skin, wealth, political connections, or high athletic, artistic, or professional accomplishments – [that] can virtually achieve a white identity”; while whole populations of people categorized as non-white “remain beyond the care of the rest, impoverished and incarcerated, disdained and despised, feared and forsaken.”³⁰

According to López, “the closer one comes to being white, the less susceptible one is to the gross mistreatment and disregard accorded minorities, and the more access one has to the material rewards and positive presumptions reserved for our nation’s racial elite.”³¹ “As a result,” he writes, “two-thirds of all recent immigrants – the vast majority of them from Asia and Latin America – identify themselves as white.”³² Half of the Latino population does the same.³³ Claiming to be white achieves measurable advantages for some individuals and communities, but these advantages come at a steep price for others.³⁴

López’s answer to this cultural polemic is for Latinos to claim a “non-white identity as a means of fostering political opposition to racial status inequality.... [and] not pine for the privileges of whiteness, but [] embrace a political commitment to end racial hierarchy.”³⁵

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The difficulty with López’s normative statement is not that it lacks vision, but that it lacks concrete instructions on how to achieve it. For example, how can a Latino, light or dark skinned, subvert the majority’s premium placed on white identity? How feasible is it to assume that by eschewing a white identity, Latinos will necessarily embrace a political commitment to end racial hierarchy? Finally, how reasonable is it to think that by simply cutting out race considerations

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altogether, Latinos will be able to forge a new identity as “non-whites” in a racially polarized society?

CONCLUSION

It is no secret that the Latino culture, like most cultures born out of a mixture of races, ethnicities, classes, and social identities, has struggled with the predominance of a “white” hierarchy and the degradation of an oppressed indigenous heritage. This scenario has played itself multiple times in nearly every Latin-American country and still resonates in the modern struggles of indigenous peoples around the world.

The attempt by certain Latino leaders to use this cultural paradigm to their advantage is not a new phenomenon nor is it particularly American. Many of the ruling families of Mexico are descendants from white Spaniards, and their lineage is not happenstance; it is the result of strict adherence to intermarriage with other whites, and the promulgation of a “white superiority” complex etched out centuries ago when the Spaniards conquered the Aztecs.

López’s assertion, that the preeminence of white Latino leaders facilitates the mistreatment of Latinos and buttresses social inequality, may be the consequence of social rigging, but it overlooks a key cultural mandate handed down from generation to generation: the primary importance of family loyalty and the welfare of the collective community. I maintain that it is this value, the foundation of Latino society in the United States, which takes precedence over any individual gain that might be had at the expense of the community. Whether future Latino leaders can make that cultural connection or assert their leadership without necessarily oppressing other community members as “white Latinos” is yet to be seen.

We are a product of our past — but our future is still at hand. As the Latino community increases in numbers and political power, its leaders will continue to face difficult struggles such as the temptation to use that power for self-aggrandizement. Perhaps the demise of the white Latino leader can come only at the restructuring of a social power base that makes room for all Latinos, white or otherwise.

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ENDNOTES

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¹ Ian Haney López, *White Latinos*, 6 HARV. LATINO L. REV. 1 (2003).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ López, *supra* note 1, at 5.

⁷ See generally Terry Rey, *The Virgin’s Slip Is Full of Fireflies: The Multiform Struggle over the Virgin Mary’s Legitimierende Macht in Latin America and Its U.S. Diasporic Communities*, 33 U.C. DAVIS L. REV. 955 (2000).

⁸ Paul Barton, *A Response: PBS’s Race: A History Of Racism* (May 4, 2003), available at <http://www.raceandhistory.com/historicalviews/2003/race.html> (last visited Oct. 12, 2007).

⁹ López, *supra* note 1, at 2-3.

¹⁰ López, *supra* note 1, at 3.

¹¹ López, *supra* note 1, at 3.

¹² López, *supra* note 1, at 3.

¹³ López, *supra* note 1, at 3.

¹⁴ The National Association for the Advancement of Caucasian Latinos, available at <http://whitehispanics.com> (last visited Aug. 14, 2007).

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ See, e.g., *In re Rodriguez*, 81 F. 337 (D.C. Tex. 1897); *Hernandez v. Texas*, 347 U.S. 475 (1954).

¹⁹ See generally Ariela Gross, *Texas Mexicans and the Politics of Whiteness*, 21 LAW & HIST. REV. 195 (2003).

²⁰ López, *supra* note 1, at 4.

²¹ López, *supra* note 1, at 4.

²² López, *supra* note 1, at 4.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ See Jorge Mariscal, *Left Turns in the Chicano Movement, 1965-1975*, MONTHLY REV., July-August 2002, available at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1132/is_3_54/ai_89830891 (last visited Oct. 15, 2007).

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ Mary Romero, *Brown is Beautiful*, 39 LAW & SOC’Y REV. 211, 228 (2005).

²⁸ *Id.* at 228-229.

²⁹ MICHAEL K. BROWN, ET. AL., *WHITEWASHING RACE: THE MYTH OF A COLOR BLIND SOCIETY* 34 (Univ. of Cal. Press 2003).

³⁰ López, *supra* note 1, at 5.

³¹ López, *supra* note 1, at 5.

³² López, *supra* note 1, at 5.

³³ López, *supra* note 1, at 5.

³⁴ López, *supra* note 1, at 5.

³⁵ Ian Haney López, *White Latinos*, 6 HARV. LATINO L. REV. 1 (2003).