

"Latino/a USA: Redefining Race & Nation in a Post-Industrial America"

As we mark the fortieth-anniversary of The March on Washington of 1963 and the iconic "I Have A Dream" speech delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, we continue to reflect on American society and its ongoing and troubled history of race relations. For example, as the US shifted from a subsistence to an industrialized economy after the close of the Civil War, the migration of black and white populations from rural to urban areas provided the working force required for emerging industrialization. Meanwhile, the social and economic upheavals of the late nineteenth-century throughout Eastern and Southern Europe, and the consequent immigration to the US added to the cheap labor needed here. However, Black labor was routinely displaced by the steady stream of new "white" immigrants from Europe as race continued to determine access to jobs, education, equal opportunity, and any sense of a shared American nationalism. More recently, globalization and massive waves of immigration have challenged our understanding of social formations and ethnic identity with the historical divide that separated whites and Blacks for over four-centuries shifting to include "Latinos" and migrant groups from Latin America as the new "majority-minority" in cities and towns across the US. Interestingly, W.E.B. Du Bois in the Souls of Black Folk (1903) argued that the US would be preoccupied with "the problem of the color-line" well into the twentieth century. I doubt that Du Bois would have imagined that race would similarly preoccupy us in the twenty-first.

Contemporary Americans are largely unaware that somewhere between 75,000 to 100,000 Mexicans were already living in the southwest by the mid-1840's. With the ending of the Mexican-American War in 1848 and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which guaranteed language, property, and citizenship rights to Spanish-speaking residents in the territory, the new border

drawn between the US and Mexico was by and large an arbitrary line imposed on the still fluid movement of people between north and south. Industrialization and growing commercial interests demanded the expansion of rail lines running north and south from the US into Mexico. By 1884, rail lines into Mexico became the primary vehicle for transporting laborers and goods into the US. Later, the Mexican Revolution of 1914 would insure the steady flow of migrants to “El Norte” for many future generations.

With the Great Depression and the reviving militarism in the US, over five hundred thousand Mexicans, including many born in the now-United States territories, were repatriated to Mexico. However, World War II created an unmet economic boom in the US. In response, the U.S. American and the Mexican governments formed the Bracero Program in 1942, placing well over 4.6 million temporary workers from Mexico into the US during its tenure and effectively inviting back the Mexicans it had repatriated ten years earlier. Despite the Bracero Program’s formal end in 1964, rates of migration into the US from Mexico continued to swell with documented and increasingly undocumented entry.

With the US ever reliant on migrant labor, the passage of the Immigration and Reform Control Act of 1986, and signed by President Ronald Reagan, granted amnesty to long-term undocumented workers, and legalized undocumented agricultural workers. This would stabilize the legal status of millions of Mexicans, allowing them more permanent settlement and in many cases access to higher wages. In the 1990’s, NAFTA joined the United States and Mexico into an unprecedented economic union, creating a trade corridor along the US-Mexico border, where US factories in Mexico could import unfinished products across the border and re-export them back to the US, paying only a tax on the added value. Industries located throughout Mexico relocated to the border, as did migrants from rural communities throughout Mexico to meet emerging

border labor demands. Cities and communities in the interior of Mexico disproportionately suffered, and were left with high levels of unemployment and poverty due to industry relocation. Compounded by the economic crisis of the mid-1990's and the devaluation of the Mexican peso, these families were left with little alternative but to migrate northward into the US. A growing climate of hostility towards "Latinos" in the 1990's strained race relations further in towns across the South, including race relations in Siler City, subject of ROJA Productions' *Matters of Race*, "*The Divide*."

Siler City, North Carolina is just one example of many southern towns confronting its future and past. Since the mid-nineteenth century a never-ending debate over issues of citizenship and access to equal opportunity based on falsely constructed notions of racial inferiority has plagued American society. Institutionalized racial oppression has been drawn along a black-white binary pole which has only further marginalized, and often erased, the geopolitical experiences of Latinos in the US. "*The Divide*," draws our attention to the changing demographics and economic impact globalization has had on post-industrial America, focusing on the influx of Mexican immigrants into rural North Carolina. Transnational global markets create a permanent need for both unskilled laborers willing to work for low paying jobs and for highly skilled well-paid professionals. Blacks, once occupying the lowest rungs of working labor, are gaining access to and are upwardly mobilizing into the American middle-class. The long-held dominant social order of Anglo-American hegemony over a steadily growing, largely disenfranchised, African American population in the New South is now being represented as a thing of the past. The racial divide among whites and Blacks has splintered to include a diversity of migrant laborers from Mexico, Central and South America, and Southeast Asia. Siler City, North Carolina provides a microcosm of those changes facing many rural southern towns today as poor whites and blacks continue to gain marginal access to the "American dream." The example of Siler City begs the

question: how does a nation like the US, built by successive waves of immigration, deal with race when “the color line” is no longer so easily drawn?

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