

# Paradigms of Difference

*There are no races, in the sense of great, separate, pure breeds of men differing in attainment, development, and capacity. There are great groups, now with common history, now with common ancestry, more and more common experience and present interest drive back the common blood and the world today consists not of races, but the imperial commercial groups of master capitalists, international and predominantly white; the national middle classes of the several nations, white, yellow, and brown; with strong blood bonds, common languages, and common history; the international laboring class of all colors; the backward, oppressed groups of nature folk, predominantly, yellow, brown, and black.*

—W.E.B. Du Bois, “Of  
Work and Wealth,” in *Darkwater*

**W**.E.B. Du Bois accurately prophesied in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that the problem of the twentieth century would be that of the color line. In later writings, he elaborated on the color line metaphor and, as the above epigram attests, added a class analysis. Du Bois’s keen insights into the contours of divisions and tensions between the predominantly white imperial master capitalists and the international laboring groups of all colors

bequeathed to us, among other things, a powerful, indeed sobering, paradigm.

All conversations about race, racism, and race relations, require, if they are to be meaningful, a simultaneous class analysis and, I must add, sustained consideration of gender. But it is within the framework of race and class intersection that I offer these reflections on *One America in the Twenty-First Century: Forging a New Future*, the President’s Initiative on Race, the Advisory Board’s report to the president, chairman, John Hope Franklin (1998).

Before proceeding, I must first place the One America report in its appropriate historical context. Three post-World War II presidents created commissions to study and report on the status of race relations in the United States. In 1947, Harry S. Truman’s commission released *To Secure These Rights*, which provided him with the recommendations and rationale for the issuance of an executive order desegregating the armed forces.

Granted, it was not until the crisis of the Korean War that military desegregation became a reality. In 1957, Dwight D. Eisenhower, in response to increasing racial tension in the South, established the first U.S. Civil Rights Commission and appointed Michigan State University’s president John A. Hannah as its chairman. During the tumultuous 1960s, Lyndon B. Johnson’s Kerner

# *Race and Class in the Twenty-First Century*

**Darlene Clark Hine**

Commission report (1968) warned of the racial polarization of Americans that has since become an indisputable reality. Few of its recommendations were implemented, as the country became even more deeply embroiled in the Vietnam War and abandoned the War on Poverty.

On June 13, 1997, President William Jefferson Clinton issued Executive Order No. 13050, which created the Initiative on Race and authorized the appointment of an Advisory Board. Charged with the task of advising the president on issues of race and racism, the board launched a fifteen-month series of conversations and forums with private citizens and corporate, religious, and local leaders. The board's hearing and meetings concentrated on deciphering the role race plays in a wide array of institutions and cultural practices, and in public policy, including civil rights enforcement, education, poverty, employment, housing, stereotyping, and in the administration of justice, health care, and immigration. In the end, the board concluded that the use of dialogue as a tool for finding common ground helped to reinforce its belief that "we are a country whose citizens are more united than divided" (p. 2).

Any review of the One America report is likely to raise more troubling questions. The assertion that as a country we are "more

united than divided" obscures the deep historical and contemporary divisions that rend the basic fabric of American society.

Moreover, I am left to ponder whether the report, replete with its numerous recommendations, advances our understanding and ultimate goal of resolving the crisis of color and class. In other words, should the objective have been to break new ground rather than to find common ground? Did the conundrum of race and political expediency prevent the Advisory Board from calling outright for a transformation of American capitalism?

One of the greatest strengths of the One America report is its discussion of the changing nature of "race" in America. For too long, the terms of "race analyses" have focused on the easy dichotomy of white and black. The report offers five categories for race in contemporary America: American Indian or Alaska Native; black or African American; Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander; white or non-Hispanic white; Hispanic or Latino (p. 105). But there is yet another complication in our racially heterogeneous society. Today, the growing use of the term "biracial," referring to the offspring of racial crossings, or children of mixed marriages and parentage, signals an important lexical intervention. Biracial Americans illuminate the anachronistic nature of existing

racial categories and constructions. They underscore the nuanced complexity of racial taxonomy to a degree heretofore unmatched in the history of race relations in the United States. Thus, we desperately need new paradigms that honor, accept, and indeed reify difference, as well as grant adequate latitude for individual and communal growth and development. The One America report makes manifest this essential challenge of the twenty-first century.

A major reservation that I have with the One America report is what I call "the problem of the invisible hand." The report does not make explicit who or what is doing whatever to which group(s) and who will implement or enforce its recommendations should any of them become public policy. In an endnote in One America, the Advisory Board defines "racial disparity" as "a systematic difference between racial groups in defined measurable areas such as employment rates, high-school graduation rates, wage-earning differentials, and home ownership" (p. 111). Left unaddressed are the factors, institutions, policies, and individuals responsible for either creating or sustaining these disparities.

Advisory Board member Linda Chavez-Thompson declared that "one of the things we'd like to see is more and more companies investing in their workers . . . on training and education programs to provide them upward mobility" (p. 70). This seems like a reasonable request. If only these minorities could be made to mirror the larger white ideals, they could escape their problems growing out of "racial disparity." But what are we to do with the educational institutions, the businesses and employers, and the politicians who refuse to commit fully to this challenging goal?

I have one further caveat about the One America report. To reiterate, it is perhaps counterproductive to discuss race and "racial

disparity" without simultaneously addressing issues of class stratification, cultural differences, and the ways in which they intersect. First, I believe that minorities, while willing to embrace a core of shared "American values," are nonetheless loath to relinquish their distinct traditions, history, and cultural productions as payment for a fully assimilated American identity. Second, white middle-class Americans have yet fully to acknowledge the extent to which they have benefited from white-skin privileges across the centuries. Instead, significant numbers of affluent Americans have retreated into gated communities where they nurse feelings of isolation and reverse victimhood and support retrograde public policy against affirmative action, welfare, and immigration. Third, our inner cities are too often sites torn asunder or destabilized by civic strife, economic devastation, and the social plagues of dope, guns, AIDS, and violence. These American citizens are truly "outsiders within."

Thus, as America has become the world's preeminent postindustrial superpower, its myriad minorities continue to press for greater participation in a rational economy and equal access to the social and educational systems and make incessant demands for a more equitable share of political power.

Finally, racial discourse is now so convoluted that it must have been a welcome respite, as some board members implied, to listen to ordinary, everyday people talk about their perceptions and understandings of race. Anecdotal recollections and poignant testimony, however, while certainly cathartic for some, do little to extricate us from the difficulties and disparities of race, conjoined with class, sexuality, and gender. It bears repeating that racial discrimination does violence to human dignity and personality and devalues the culture and lifestyles of those marked "other."

Clearly, we must collectively inculcate in the next generation a deep appreciation for

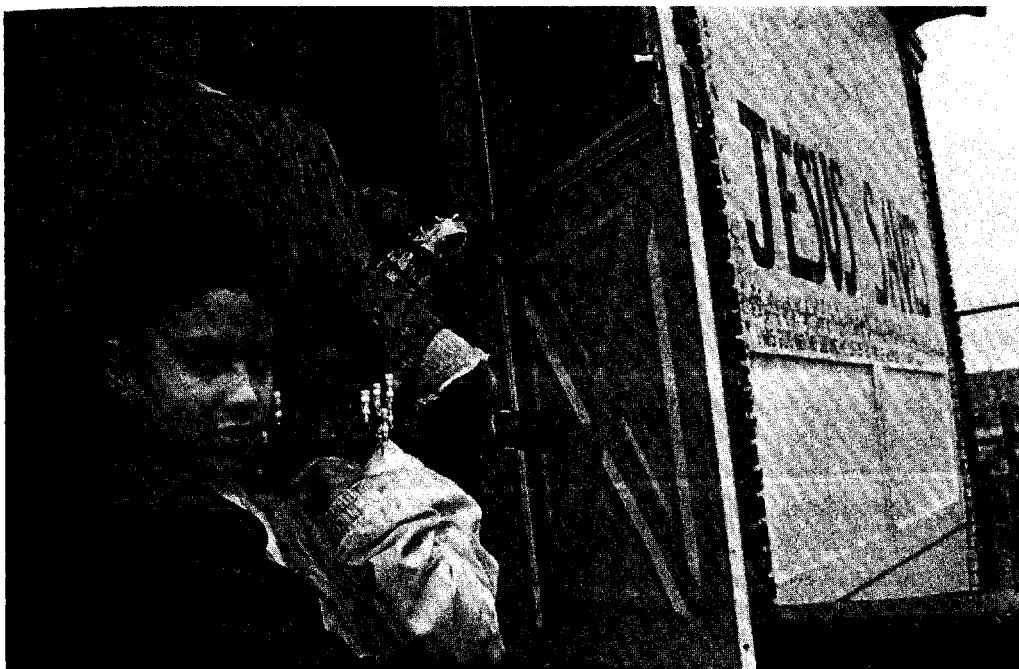


Photo by Philippe Cheng.

those moments and times when differences are irrelevant and even retrograde. As the Advisory Board correctly posits, all Americans share core values and beliefs in justice, dignity, respect, equality, and opportunity and inclusion. To this extent we are one America. Yet we are not a perfect union. The most pressing challenge before us is to identify the forces, make visible the underlying systemic factors, and mount a concerted relentless movement to traverse and eradicate the economic barriers that divide us.

As Martin Luther King Jr. so poignantly asked, "Where do we go from here?" The question is still germane. In the spirit of the Initiative on Race, a committee of professors and administrators at Michigan State University under the leadership of political science professor Curtis Stokes has organized a major national conference scheduled for April 7-10, 1999. The Advisory Board of One America cautioned: "We wish to make it

clear that this Report is not a definitive analysis of the state of race relations in America today. That task should be undertaken by the many scholars and experts on race relations, only a few of whom we had the opportunity to meet during the course of this past year" (p. 10).

The Race in the Twenty-First Century Conference at Michigan State University will bring together more than 125 of the country's preeminent experts, authors, and activists who have explored issues of race and race relations. In one sense, this conference can be considered a continuation of the conversations. The presenters represent all of the humanities and social science disciplines. Among some of the most insightful and visible scholars and commentators are Audrey Smedley, Richard Delgado, Sandra Harding, William Julius Wilson, Anne McClintock, Michele Wallace, Gerald Horne, Frank Wu, Mary Frances Berry, Nathan Glazer, Michael Eric Dyson, Charles

Murray, Melvin Oliver, Aldon Morris, Maxine Baca Zinn, George Fredrickson, Naomi Zack, Vanessa Northington Gamble, F. James Davis, Manning Marable, Abigail Thernstrom, Evelyn Hu-DeHart, Michael Omni, and Jacqueline Jones. Many of these scholars' books and studies were cited in the extensive endnotes in the One America report. A schedule conflict prevented John Hope Franklin from accepting our invitation to address the conference.

The titles of some of the twenty-six panels reflect the range of issues the Advisory Board of One America also identified as needing further consideration. They include: "The Origins of the Concept of Race," "Competition and Alliance Among Communities of Color," "Immigration and the Law," "The Evolution of Whiteness," "Cross-National Models of Race," "The Invention of the Mixed Race," "The Politics of Language in

the United States," "Representations of Race in Popular Culture," "Multiculturalism," "Race and Scientific Research," "Race and Health," and "Race and Class in America."

The panelists belong to every racial and ethnic grouping, espouse an array of political viewpoints, and represent diverse sexual identities. The conference planners believe that effective academic discourse on race requires, among other things, a firm grounding in culture studies, ethnic and gender studies, political science, sociology, and economic history, as well as philosophy. Race may now be too complex a construction. We need either to reconstruct or discard it in favor of other analytic tools, both to facilitate deeper understanding of our differences and to build bridges across the gulf of our diverse human experiences. Whatever the outcome of our scholarly deliberations, it is worthwhile to continue the conversation.