

# The Assault on Communities of Color

## *Exploring the Realities of Race-Based Violence*

Kenneth Fasching-Varner and  
Nicholas Daniel Hartlep (Eds.)

Contributing Editors:  
Lori Martin, Cleveland Hayes,  
Roland Mitchell, and Chaunda Allen-Mitchell

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## *Chapter One*

# **Complicating Black and Brown Solidarity**

### *Racial Positioning and Repositioning in “Post-Racial America”*

Jason G. Irizarry and Jonathan Rosa

In the wake of the rash of violence against Black males in the United States, there have been multiple calls for Latin@ solidarity with the African American community. These calls are often rooted in uncritical assumptions about the nature of solidarity between these groups. Such assumptions obscure differences within and across groups and suggest that because of shared experiences with racism, we are either natural allies or unwitting enemies. While strategic essentialism can be helpful, we find aspects of this discourse problematic, as the current dominant narrative of Black-Brown unity fails to acknowledge the deep and profound history of solidarity across lines of racial difference among racially minoritized groups. It also assumes that African Americans and Latin@s occupy distinct racialized positions, when in fact the borders between Black and Brown are far more porous and overlapping.

While reaching a flashpoint today, violence against young men of color at the hands of law enforcement officials dates back centuries. Law enforcement was routinely complicit in the lynchings and violent deaths of Black and Brown folks in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Movements arising to combat structural, as well as direct, violence against these communities have been framed as dichotomous struggles when, in fact, Black and Brown solidarity is rooted in the historical fabric of our society. For example, although the prominent route of the underground railroad led from the South to freedom up north in Canada, there were also pathways south to Latin America. In fact, in 1855, Mexicans in Texas assisted more

than four thousand enslaved persons to escape to freedom in Mexico. These alliances continued deep into the Civil Rights Movement and are perhaps most evident in both groups' efforts toward desegregation (e.g., the *Mendez v. Westminster* decision in 1947 served as an important precedent for the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954).

More recently, the murder of Eric Garner, an African American man from Staten Island, New York, at the hands of police officer Daniel Pantaleo was videorecorded and shared with the world by Ramsey Orta, a Puerto Rican man who was close friends with Garner. The details of state-sanctioned violence against communities of color are often rendered opaque, with differing accounts coming from officers and witnesses, conflicting interpretations of evidence, and the demonization of the victims. With this singular act, Mr. Orta provided the world with a clear picture of the systematic violence people of color endure. Despite videotaped evidence of Officer Pantaleo applying a choke hold banned by the New York City Police Department while Eric Garner informed the officers of his inability to breathe more than ten times, the grand jury chose not to indict the officer. Several weeks later, Mr. Orta was indicted for weapons possession, a charge he believes to be an unjust form of retaliation for him filming the murder of Garner.

We use these narratives as a point of departure for a critical examination of narratives of allyship and solidarity and the ways that those narratives can serve to reinscribe institutional racism. In this chapter, we pay particular attention to the fluidity that exists between these racial categories, complicating the ways that people of color are positioned and repositioned within the Black-white binary that often dictates racial politics in the United States. Locating this narrative within a socio-historic context and present efforts to "divide and conquer," we center race in our examination of calls for Black and Brown solidarity; however, we also pay particular attention to how race intersects with other variables and identity categories such as gender, class, language, and lived experience. As we join our fellow academics in this volume to speak out against injustice and, more specifically, respond to lack of value placed on the lives of people of color, it is imperative that we do so in ways that strengthen communities of color and create the discursive space necessary for authentic and robust conversations that aim to challenge and ultimately dismantle racism in the United States. In no way are we trying to diminish the significance of the #Blacklivesmatter movement to impose a Latin@ perspective or redirect the gaze. Rather, we aim to bolster the movement by critiquing oversimplified understandings of allyship across racialized groups, forwarding a framework rooted in shared histories and experiences whereby Latin@s and other minoritized people can continue to participate in the struggle against institutional racism in ways that honor our past, acknowledge our shared experiences in the present, affirm our differences, and increase the magnitude of our collective efforts. In this chapter, we seek



to complicate and destabilize racial categories, underscoring the fluid, multi-dimensional, and at times hybrid, aspects of racial identities. We also point to the limits of this fluidity and hybridity for individuals whose racialized bodies become less susceptible to repositioning across contexts. The chapter ends with a call to move from decontextualized narratives of allyship and solidarity to an effort to build from longstanding histories of linked fate and political contestation within and among racialized groups.

Concepts such as racial solidarity and allyship are often rooted in misleading ideas about distinctions and allegiances between racial groups. Each of these concepts begins from the notion that members of racial groups have a default position in support of, or opposition to, one another. This dangerous thinking participates in the reproduction of the very forms of animosity that it purports to challenge. By labeling particular individuals as allies and particular acts as examples of solidarity across rigid lines of racial difference, we ignore the systems through which racial distinctions are created and reproduced. If these distinctions are most pronounced in institutional settings and through social processes that are widely denounced, such as prisons and residential segregation, respectively, then we must continually interrogate their construction and reproduction.

This interrogation can be applied to widespread calls for Black and Brown solidarity in the aftermath of the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, which characteristically presume upon monolithic, discrete racial categories. That is, “Blackness” and “Brownness” are frequently associated with objectively separate and homogeneous racial identities. Upon closer consideration, Blackness and Brownness can be viewed as infinitely heterogeneous, on the one hand, and intimately intertwined, on the other. In terms of heterogeneity, we can observe disparate forms of Blackness and Brownness, which are inflected by gender, class, nationality, and sexuality, among other factors. In this sense, it should come as no surprise that Blackness cannot be reduced to a single perspective on the contemporary debate surrounding state-sanctioned violence against racialized populations. For example, many Black feminist and/or queer commentators have noted that the contemporary public outcry regarding racialized state-sanctioned violence arose primarily in response to the victimization of cisgender Black males rather than the countless queer and/or women of color who have faced similar forms of violence. These commentators have made crucial contributions to the #Blacklivesmatter campaign; specifically, they have pointed to the processes through which some Black lives are made to matter more than others. This analysis highlights the importance of intersectional views of race and racialization, which reject homogenizing portrayals of a singular Black experience. While African American leaders at local and national levels have powerfully spearheaded the #Blacklivesmatter campaign, other prominent African American figures have been critical of protesters and openly suppor-

tive of the grand jury's decision not to indict the police officer who killed Michael Brown. Conversely, while some Latin@ leaders have been noticeably silent in this campaign, many others have been key contributors to efforts toward holding the state accountable for racial injustices perpetrated against African Americans.

In fact, the notion that Blackness should be equated exclusively with African Americans and Brownness with Latinidad erases forms of Blackness throughout Latin America and among United States-based Latin@s. Latin American and Latin@ Blacknesses are often experienced in relation to racial logics other than United States-based "one-drop" imaginaries. Thus, the promotion of Black and Brown solidarity contradicts the everyday realities of millions of people for whom notions of Black and Brown correspond neither to distinct racial identities nor distinctive racialized experiences. Latin American and U.S. Latin@ populations that identify with Blackness in ways other than African Americans are at times thought to suffer from denial or self-hate. Yet these populations' views of race and experiences of racialization are linked to particular histories in which race has been structured in ways that differ from the prevailing U.S. Black-White racial binary.

It is from this perspective that Ramsey Orta's position vis-à-vis Eric Garner should be apprehended. To frame Ramsey Orta's video documentation of Eric Garner's killing as a straightforward act of Black and Brown solidarity is to presume that these two men occupied distinct racial positions from the vantage point of the state or disparate experiences of spatial, racial, and class exclusion. In fact, Orta's arrest shortly after Garner's killing demonstrates the fallacy of this thinking. In this context, Black-Brown solidarity is not the emergent product of a contemporary advocacy campaign, but instead a fundamental way of life that has been in existence across generations. If Black and Brown are made to appear as distinct racial categories in particular contexts, then this should be analyzed as a product of contingent historical processes rather than naturally occurring, distinctive racial essences. Therefore, we must be wary of accounts that sensationalize Black-Brown rifts as well as those that romanticize interracial unity. Intraracial diversity and interracial solidarity are not coincidental. Since racial differences are social, historical, and ideological constructs, we should expect that they would be contested both within and between groups. Rather than superficial political strategies, these contestations emerge from longstanding stratifications within groups and shared positioning between groups.

These considerations of the multiple ways in which race and racialization are articulated in particular contexts notwithstanding, we must also attend to the signs that make particular bodies more and less susceptible to racial repositioning. The emblematic status of certain embodied signs of race, such as skin, hair, eyes, and noses shapes the range of racial categories in relation to which a given individual is recognized. While some people might undergo



constant racial repositioning, others experience their racial position as a fixed entity. Thus, the effort toward destabilizing racial categories is not an end in itself. Instead, we must track the processes through which some bodies are racially overdetermined regardless of the accompanying signs they display—from clothing to language use to gestures. Rather than placing the onus of racialization on individuals and their presentations of self, this perspective focuses on modes of perception and the systems that produce them as the targets of decolonizing and anti-racist intervention.

The future of all racially minoritized communities is intertwined and has been for centuries. Police brutality, racial profiling, deportation, and limited access to resources such as education are but some of the examples of a shared racialized positioning within a white supremacist society. Current narratives of racial solidarity make it seem as if the struggles experienced by some are completely foreign or distinct from those of other racialized minorities. Latin@s' experiences with racism, albeit nuanced and distinct, share commonality and find resonance in the African American experience and vice versa. Moving forward, we would like to see the discourse evolve to reflect a more complicated and nuanced understanding of the shared struggles of communities of color, with respect to the individualized experiences of particular groups. By not taking alliances or animosities for granted as starting points for analysis, we can not only imagine alternative realities in which racialized group identities are constructed differently but also locate the ways in which people have always contested and reconfigured these differences. This approach leaves us not with the challenge of constructing new bridges between Blackness and Brownness but rather of conceptualizing the co-constitutive nature of the categories and identifying the frictive, intimate ways in which they have been (re)produced and (trans)formed in particular cultural contexts.