

# Social Agency and White Supremacy in Immigration Studies

Sociology of Race and Ethnicity  
2015, Vol. 1(1) 153–165  
© American Sociological Association 2014  
DOI: 10.1177/2332649214560796  
sre.sagepub.com  


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## Abstract

Assimilation scholarship is rooted in the race relations framework that has been critiqued for providing legitimacy to the prevailing racial order, not least because it credits ethno-racial group agency as the mechanism that causes inequities among groups' socioeconomic outcomes and the degrees to which they are socially accepted. To explain socioeconomic inequities, alternative frames centering on racialization and structural racism look to white supremacy and the unequal ends it engenders, but the sociological theory developed in these alternatives is largely tangential to assimilation theory. That the assimilationist model still dominates leaves a key part of the discipline vulnerable to supporting white supremacist ideologies about societies falsely believed to be colorblindly meritocratic. For this reason I call upon sociologists to work together to dethrone assimilationism from its exalted status in the sociology of immigration and scholars of race knowledgeable in these alternative approaches to actively reenter the arena of immigration studies and take the ground that has been ceded to the assimilationist frame. I suggest these as next steps in a campaign to overturn the dominance of the race relations model in sociology as a whole.

## Keywords

racialization, assimilation, immigrant incorporation, white supremacy, social construction of race, race relations

## INTRODUCTION

Thomas Kuhn (1970:5, 77), in seeking to know why scholars in the natural sciences avoid the controversies that social scientists seemingly cannot, developed a theory of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, explaining that:

Normal science, the activity in which most scientists inevitably spend almost all their time, is predicated on the assumption that the scientific community knows what the world is like [and shows] willingness to defend that assumption, if necessary, at considerable cost. . . . [Crises are the precondition for the emergence of new theories, but scientists] do not renounce the paradigm that led them into crisis. . . . The decision to reject one paradigm is

always simultaneously the decision to accept another, and the judgment leading to that decision involves the comparison of both paradigms with nature *and* with each other.

In this article, I reflect on the assimilation model as a leading paradigm in the sociology of immigration and put up for examination alongside it an

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alternative paradigm, the social constructionist model of racialization. Space considerations prevent me from presenting both models in their entirety, so I make reference to key documents explaining these approaches and instead focus here on how social agency is framed in the two models. I conclude by finding that assimilationism supports a white supremacist understanding of society in two ways. First, the assimilation approach lodges the causal mechanisms explaining social inclusion and exclusion squarely and solely within the social agency of the groups under examination. Second, assimilation models suggest that focus on social agency either allows for a work-around of the problem of race or otherwise relegates racial inequality to a state exogenous and therefore largely extraneous to the model. Because the specifications of the assimilation model appear to be largely unaffected by theoretical developments in the interdisciplinary subfield of racialization, I suggest that racialization theory remains an alternative paradigm and therefore offer it for comparison. A related and parallel conclusion, then, is that because racialization theory has developed concepts explaining systemic racial inequalities that have remained durable for decades and even centuries throughout generations of immigrant incorporation, and because it allows a focus on racial justice that is seemingly unobtainable in a race relations model, it should be promoted as a scientific advancement in immigration studies. For clarity, I define white supremacy as the ideology and social/political/economic/other structures creating and supporting a racial hierarchy where whites are superior to nonwhites, a view once made explicit but that has conceptually written itself out of formal existence to enable and embolden a widespread failure to acknowledge it, so that the racially unequal status quo is largely unquestioned (Mills 1999).

### *Assimilationism in Its Original, Tarnished, and Revised Forms*

Assimilation is a theory of sociology that is used mainly in the sociology of immigration—but at one time was used more broadly in the discipline—to describe a trajectory presumed to lay between two states of being, one where ethnic or racial groups have marked social differences from one another and a final “assimilated” state where group differences have attenuated. Assimilationists (as I am calling sociologists who adhere to the assimilation studies frame) developed assimilation theory by honing the list and measure of markers that indicate movement along the trajectory.

Three iterations mark the progression of the assimilationist frame and its domination of the discipline. The first wave was fashioned by Robert Park and William Burgess and promulgated by their disciples in the Chicago School of sociology. The official lexicon is described in a series of papers gathered in a collection titled *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, written by Park and Burgess, published originally in 1921. The title of the tome and the fact that it was reissued in 1969 and 1972 marks the strength and durability of these ideas as prevailing thought in the discipline. It is here that one will find the outlines of the theory of race relations (that dominated the sociology of race) and the theory of assimilation and acculturation (that dominates the sociology of immigration). In this version, race relations were framed to take place in a model fashion: Two separate groups would have distinct identities, but living in close enough proximity causes the groups to share information such that over time the differences between them would dissipate. In this way, ethnic and racial distinctions could diminish in importance and groups would create a mutual identity that would prove ground fertile enough to grow a new commonly shared (national) identity. Note that in this statement of the problem of ethnic distinction there is no clear “mainstream” and adapting “ethnic group”—rather, both sides of the boundary separating the groups would be capable of adaptation. This first wave—“the race relations model”—governed the discipline at least until the Civil Rights Movement (Romero 2008; Steinberg 2007). Then, some sociologists of race abandoned the race relations frame (Romero 2008). Sociologists of immigration remained immersed in the assimilationist variant of the race relations frame, and many of these contributed to the next wave of assimilation theory.

A second wave of assimilationism took the non-hierarchical frame offered by Park and Burgess (1969) and added to it. A positivist spin was added when the idea of a “mainstream” was established: The distance to assimilation into the mainstream remaining to a group was presumed measurable according to markers on a progressive route to assimilation. It was presupposed that all ethnic (and racial) groups are on that route, but some move quickly toward acceptance into the mainstream and others inordinately slowly. Assimilation, the pinnacle of advancement into the mainstream, was reached when a group appears to have no evidence of ethnic difference from others already accepted into the mainstream. Notably, the mainstream was centered on Anglo North America, idealized as

ethnicity-free and colorless. (By contrast, as the lexicon indicates, only “people of color” are presumed to have color.)

Some argue that the advent of the Civil Rights Movement catalyzed a split between the sociology of immigration and the sociology of race (Romero 2008). Decades of adherence to the race relations model—which are said to have been the cause of discipline-wide failures to predict the Civil Rights Movement—gave rise to notable critiques (among them McKee 1993; Steinberg 1995, 2007). Many in the subfield of race scholarship collectively created a race science that documents the durability of racial inequalities supporting ideologies, even as they evolve from biological to cultural, institutional, and more recently, structural racism (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 1997; Feagin 2006; Omi and Winant 1994; Smedley 2007; Steinberg 2001; but there are others).

But the race relations model still reigns over the discipline at large and does not shake the domination of the assimilation model in immigration scholarship. Indeed, scholars who apply it to the overwhelmingly nonwhite post-1965 waves of immigrants to the United States (i.e., the “new ethnics”) reinforce its domination, believing it useful in predicting the circumstance of their entry into the mainstream. To keep coherence of the assimilationist model, some scholars choose to abandon the thorny problem of explaining the continued hypermarginalization of African Americans (Jung 2009). There are several other contortions assimilationists employ:

They variously engage in suspect comparisons to past migration from Europe; read out or misread the qualitatively different historical trajectories of European and non-European migrants; exclude native-born Blacks from the analysis; fail to conceptually account for the key changes that are purported to facilitate “assimilation”; import the dubious concept of the “underclass” to characterize poor urban Blacks and others; laud uncritically the “culture” of migrants; explicitly or implicitly advocate the “assimilation” of migrants; and discount the political potential of “oppositional culture.” (Jung 2009:375)

One notable variant indicated that some groups might assimilate “upward” and toward the Anglo ideal, while others could take missteps that would have them assimilate “downward”—this was presumed to be the case with African Americans, who, it was said, formed an “oppositional” culture that

was sometimes classified as irrational and other times defended as reasonable given obstacles to assimilation confronting the group; the choice between these depended on the scholar professing this brand of science.

The crest of a third wave of assimilationist thought can be marked by the publication of Richard Alba and Victor Nee’s “Rethinking Assimilation,” issued in both article (1997) and book (2003) form. Alba and Nee argued that after “rethinking assimilation,” a “new” assimilationism could emerge that would make the theory useful to immigration scholars of the future. This would remove from “old” assimilation theory the idea that (1) ethnic groups would *want* to shed their cultures and embrace Anglo-American culture and that (2) assimilation is inevitable. Alba and Nee also believe that (3) ethnocentrism can be excised from the model and (4) that contemporary society might actually have a positive role for the ethnic group, making it unnecessary to predict their disappearance from social life as a precondition or marker for assimilation. They believe that the Anglo-Saxon core can change and adapt, and that is already evident in “the riotous culture bloom of the United States” (Alba and Nee 2003:5). They believe that this is marked, too, by the fact that ethnic entrepreneurs reign over economic niches. Thus, they presume that a steady state ethnic pluralism might prevail, aided by transnational ties maintained by regular use of technological advances that keep immigrants of various generations engaged with “homelands.”

Alba and Nee (1997, 2003) suggest that assimilation theory may be salvaged by reviving the original Chicago School formulation that accommodates a more refined conception of the mainstream, and in fact makes room to conceive of it as multicultural rather than the purely Anglo-dominant formation proffered by the second wave. They redefine assimilation to be

the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences [such that] a distinction attenuates in salience, [and] that the occurrences for which it is relevant diminish in number and contract to fewer and fewer domains of social life

(Alba and Nee 2003:11). Further, they note that “the mainstream culture, which is highly variegated in any event—by social class and region, among other factors—changes as elements of the cultures of the newer groups are incorporated into it” (Alba and Nee 2003:13), meaning that the

former idea of a Anglo-centric mainstream is replaced by a variegated one but that there is an identifiable mainstream, nonetheless, that “encompasses structures of opportunity offering power incentives that make assimilation rewarding for many immigrants and their descendants” (Alba and Nee 2003:14).

### *Racialization and Its Development as a Social Theory*

Theories about racialization (the way persons are absorbed into a racial systems by racial assignment and categorization and taught the commonsense and sanctions accorded to the hierarchy of humans in the races in that system) are developed by scholars in a number of fields (some within and some outside of sociology), including race studies, ethnic studies, and the histories of social life and of science. These scholars develop race theory by interrogating formations of social life under local, subnational, national, supranational, regional, and global race systems. Social scientists interrogating race structures look for the causes of inequality among the migrant or ethnic groups being studied. Indeed, the structure of racial systems actually forms the ethnic and racial groups in the system; moreover, where ethnic attenuation occurs it results from racialization (Bashi Treitler 2013). Theodore Allen (1998: paragraphs 31, 35) describes racialization in this way:

[It works to destroy] the original forms of social identity among the subject population, and then [exclude] the members of that population from admittance into the forms of social identity normal to the colonizing power [and subsequently] to deny, disregard, delegitimate previous or potential social distinctions that may have existed among the oppressed group, or that might tend to emerge in the normal course of development of a class society.

Thus, scholars of racialization do not expect the character of the system to be neutral with regard to the ethnic and racial groups it forms; the purpose of race is to engender hierarchies that create inequality. Thus, it is not possible that a group’s own action is solely responsible for the political, social, and economic outcomes with which it has to live. Race theorists model in the knowledge that racial structures shape the outcomes for all.

Scholars of racialization who accept Allen’s (1998) definition understand that where ethnic differentiation deteriorates under racialization, it does

so forcibly. For these scholars, it is no great mystery why ethnicities attenuate and racial identification proliferates. Racialization is the organizing principle of racialized societies, whereby hierarchical ordering of human (racial) groups gives its members different experience associated with that ordering and causes them to develop different interests (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Bashi Treitler 2014). Thus, we err in believing (or framing our research project to suggest) that (1) the force between their outsider selves and the “mainstream” always pulls the ethnic group closer to the mainstream and (2) only the strength of (wildly poor) choices on the part of the marginalized group or massive economic dislocations beyond any group’s control could cause the group to remain marginalized.

Over the past two decades, prominent scholars have issued calls to researchers to rethink their approaches to understanding racism by giving more attention to structural racism (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Grant-Thomas and Powell 2006). They outlined several reasons why other approaches—like those that focus solely on interpersonal or institutional racism—would not get us very far in understanding race. Since many of these are applicable to the assimilationist approach, I recount them here. Among other failings, they note that these more traditional approaches to race: (1) tend to understand race as solely ideological, which promotes blindness to areas in time and space where race resides in social structures; (2) do not appreciate that racism is more than individualized wrong-headedness, or psychological failings on the part of “racist,” “prejudiced,” or “irrational” people, for it can persist where no avowed racists can be found; (3) fail to capture the systemic *inter-institutional* arrangements that produce inequitable distributions of privileges and demerits; (4) fail to recognize the force of history in propelling racially unequal outcomes even in the absence of racist intent; (5) falsely approach contemporary racial thinking as if it is merely a remnant of racial thinking from the past; (6) fail to capture the covert aspects of systematic racism; (7) structure scientific explorations of race as if discrimination and “race effects” are measurable and that “races,” while biologically meaningless are analogous to gender and class as demographic variables; and (8) fail to account for the dynamism in racial systems.

In sum, racism is a systematically unequal societal outcome, and racialized societies are those that exhibit conjoint racial discourses and hierarchies that make racially unequal outcomes appear “normal” (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Grant-Thomas and Powell 2006; Mills 1999).

### Social Agency and Immigration Studies

It has been more than 20 years since the publication of James McKee's (1993) *Sociology and the Race Problem: The Failure of a Perspective*, which ends with a call to sociologists to abandon the race relations approach. His book—an eight-chapter, 376-page critique—concludes with a damning of assimilationists' modernization-like presumption that ethnic/racial differences would disappear over time. Stephen Steinberg (2007) echoed this call in his *Race Relations: A Critique*, an even more scathing indictment of sociological scholarship done in the race relations tradition. That racial inequities over the course of the twentieth century proved to endure beyond even the institutional change that was one of the victories of the Civil Rights Movement and that new immigrants leapt over the color line that kept African Americans subjugated were two themes highlighting the conclusions to both McKee's (1993) and Steinberg's (2007) books. Steinberg (2007:72–73), in addition, argued that Park's original frame was not so benign as Alba and Nee (2003) postulate:

Robert Park's achievement, as the designated "father" of the Chicago school of race relations, was to relegate theories postulating the biological inferiority of Negroes to the proverbial trash bin, and instead to cast the races in a hierarchy of evolutionary development, from "higher" to "lower" races. If, as Kuhn argues, the acceptance of a new paradigm always involves the rejection of another, it was also the case that there was all along a rival paradigm, mostly championed by African American scholars with Marxist tendencies, that explained racial hierarchy in terms of political economy, thereby riveting attention on the historical and social factors that explained racial hierarchy. . . . Finally, if we look at the famed race relations paradigm from the point of view of the oppressed, we see a system of thought that provides erudite justification for oppression. Indeed, while pretending to be "neutral," the race relations model concocts such an inversion of the truth that the oppressed are made responsible for their own oppression.

It is here, then, that I return to an examination of the third wave of assimilationism, for the call to "rethink assimilation" centers on salvaging the best of Park's frame and employing it to examining causal mechanisms proclaimed to make assimilation to the mainstream happen.

Alba and Nee note that their model improves over the corrupted and original versions of assimilationism because they (1) do not predict a straight line assimilation applies to everyone (instead, progress is incremental over the generations, and even different parts of ethnic groups might assimilate at different rates); (2) different mechanisms operate for different groups. In this third wave assimilationist scenario, social agency of the ethnic actor is key to assimilation.

Agents act according to mental models shaped by cultural beliefs—customs, social norms, law, ideology, and religion—that mold perceptions of self-interest. They follow rule-of-thumb heuristics in solving problems that arise, and make decisions in the face of uncertainty stemming from incomplete information and the risk of opportunism in the institutional environment. (Alba and Nee 2003:37)

[There is a] repertoire of [causal] mechanisms operating at the individual, primary-group, and institutional levels that shape the trajectories of adaptations by immigrants and their descendants. (Alba and Nee 2003:38)

Alba and Nee (2003) outline four mechanisms where measurable social agency has causal effects with regard to assimilation. I list these here in brief summary (items a–d, below) in pursuit of two ends. First, I wish to be complete about what the new assimilationism professes and how it develops beyond the preceding models, having left that discourse unfinished from my first section of this article. But second, I also use this opportunity to interrogate where race plays a role in the new assimilationism. Oddly, as they outline the causal mechanisms in assimilation, authors Alba and Nee bring up race—and as they bring it up in their descriptions of these causal mechanisms, I comment upon it. I mention this, too, to show that Alba and Nee as they model the assimilation frame do not altogether ignore the existence of race, as some assimilationists before them may have done. However, mentioning and then discarding the importance of race to immigrant incorporation is not the same as accounting for its effects on the immigrant and subsequent generations. These four mechanisms are as follows:

- (a) Purposive action is required on the part of groups. Groups may assimilate without

intentionally seeking to do so if the cumulative effect of the group's actions lead to assimilation (Alba and Nee 2003:38). Ethnic group choices may be context-bound, or made on less than full information, but they are choices nonetheless.

Here, Alba and Nee focus on group agency, as do assimilationists as a scholarly class. They measure and study what ethnic groups do in the context of choice making. I give more thorough treatment to the discussion of social agency in a separate section that follows. However, I quickly note here that in assimilation modeling, where social agency is given primacy, race does not appear as a factor that allows or removes choices, or that indeed has the very purpose of creating unequal conditions. (By contrast, scholars of racialization instead show not only that race constrains groups' ability to take purposive action but that they can constrain a group's ability to even define themselves as a group (Bashi Treitler 2013)).

- (b) Network mechanisms are the social processes that monitor and enforce within-group social norms when they lead to joint action; norms enforce cooperation to maximize group welfare.

In the section of the book explaining network effects, Alba and Nee (2003:41) report that "increased interaction with families of other backgrounds . . . tend to encourage acculturation, especially for the children" but on page 45 correctly note (with no acknowledgement of the inherent contradiction) that in order to raise their own status, the Irish distanced themselves from African Americans and ostracized those who intermarried with African Americans. The Mississippi Chinese, who the authors discuss on that same page, also intermarried and also distanced themselves from African Americans, but neither is mention made of that historical artifact or its contradiction to the tenets of assimilationist theory. That creating distance from African Americans and abandoning intermarried families is merely presumed to be "a network effect." That assimilationists consider ethnics' creation of new modes of segregation to bar already occurring intermarriage neither (1) a reinforcement of structural racism that *produces* racially unequal outcomes nor (2) a set of actions that *change the racial composition of the ethnic group under examination* is indicative of assimilationists' inability to account for racism's role in reinforcing the inequality they presume to explain.

- (c) The availability and use of social, financial, and human capital differ among ethnic groups. But these mechanisms are useful because (1) they allow assimilationists a way around having to account for race by (2) "providing empirical means for understanding patterns of purposive adaptation" (2003:50).

Alba and Nee's model here again quite insufficiently engages with race as a social system. Strangely, in the section that explains capital use, they indicate that the efficacy of phenotype is negated by use of the capital approach. They predict that East Asians could never enter mainstream labor and housing markets if dark skin predicted race effects, for instance. This example proves to scholars aware of the socially constructed nature of race that the assimilationist model cannot account for it. Surely, in the U.S. racial paradigm, East Asians are differentially accounted for than they are in the United Kingdom, where East Asians are considered all too black. That East Asians are not understood to be black in the United States is not proof that assimilation theory gets around the thorny problem of color; rather, it proves that those who cite it indicate their own failure to see that nonblackness predicts possibilities of assimilation far more readily than any capital endowments. Here, Alba and Nee (2008) err the way Thomas Sowell (1978) did several decades ago; pointing to the success of someone with dark skin in no way indicates the unimportance of race—rather it shows only that sociologists are willing to make illogical comparisons to shore up their contention that racist socioeconomic strictures do not matter as much as ethnic group choices (Bashi and McDaniel 1997).

- (d) Institutional mechanisms embed incentives in the environment—these make "oppositional" choices rational in some subcultures or determine whether purposive action and network mechanisms advance the cause of blending or segregation instead.

In this section, Alba and Nee note that white North Americans now rarely profess racist attitudes, and they credit changes in law in the later decades of the twentieth century for this development. Thus, they perceive decreases in institutional racism and believe them to have led to decreases in racist attitudes. But scholarship on colorblind racism gives the lie to the idea that racist attitudes have

disappeared, for it shows not only that whites are reluctant to self-identify as racists but that they profess to hold no racial prejudices whatsoever even while chronicling their beliefs in a hierarchy of races and other racist ideas (Bonilla-Silva 2009). Alba and Nee (2003) further note in this section that a majority of whites now believe that black and white children should go to the same schools. Attitudes on integrated schooling may indeed have changed. But if Alba and Nee are aware of the fact that U.S. black and white school children are more segregated today than they were in 1954 when the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, KS* case making school segregation illegal was decided (Hannah-Jones 2014; Rothstein 2013), they do not comment on it. An alternative read on the absence of racial language in popular and public discourse—and in the sociology of immigration is this:

[It] assumes and legally creates the idea that racism is merely the product of random intentional actions by isolated, lunatic individuals or groups [while] at the same time it fails to address patterns of historical, structural, systemic, institutional and indirect racial discrimination generated by the peculiar European experiences of colonialism and (im)migration. (Grigolio, Hermanin, and Möschel 2011:1636)

Does a return to the fundamentals of assimilation theory as developed by Robert Park in his original race relations framework—even reframing in the ways that Alba and Nee (2003) suggest—rid assimilationism of its incapacity to engage with and explain racialization and the constraints racial inequities impose on social agency? I believe it does not. Rather, reliance on the fundamentals of the Chicago School lead to problems in theoretical and methodological modeling that cannot sufficiently account for the structural nature of race in racialized societies. Instead, assimilationist frames lead researchers toward conclusions that in the best case remain vulnerable to shoring up white supremacy and in the worst case actually do shore up white supremacist interpretations of social phenomena.

### *Applying Racialization Frames in Immigration Studies*

Steinberg (2007:10, emphasis his) queries:

What would an affirmative epistemology on race entail? . . . It would commit itself to

antiracism, whether in the realm of ideas or public policy. This is the starting point for *not* ignoring the ugly realities of race, for *not* trivializing racism as disembodied beliefs and attitudes, for *not* shifting the focus of analysis and blame away from structures of oppression and onto people who are the living legacy of slavery. A perspective that conceives of race as structure would expose the extent to which the United States and its major institutions are still stratified by race.

I would never go as far as to say that social agency does not matter. Of course social agency matters. But which social agency matters, and how does it matter? We need not employ a definition of agency so narrow that it confines us to only chronicling the retention or attenuation of ethnic group markers. There are other kinds of agency that determine incorporation—for example, agency employed in the service of reinforcing racial inequality very much matters. Said another way, racial inequality persists only because social agency is used every day to make it so. Therefore, if we as researchers are to focus on group social agency of the types with which assimilationists are concerned, we must also account for the ways choice and action are constrained by racialization and racial inequities.

In racial states, all participants—immigrant, ethnic, and native-born—are systematically racialized. Migration-receiving, economically more developed nations (called “core” countries in world-system analyses) are also highly racialized—meaning that racial dynamics are integral to the routinized socio-economic relations that rule over everyday life. While newcomers to a racialized society may not immediately or fully understand how race works in the new destination, learning their place in the local racial system is a normal part of immigrant incorporation. At the same time, immigrants are no more passive about their racial incorporation than any other racialized group in the system; they exercise their agency in response to acquired knowledge about their incorporation, specifically, and the new racial system itself, as a whole. People worldwide are surely racialized well before they have face-to-face and daily engagement with members of destination societies, but certainly post-migration newcomers engage with destination racial systems immediately, and this is when their incorporation into a new society begins. There in the new racial system they join the non-migrants and veteran migrants already acting in racialized and racializing ways themselves.

Further, we (migrants and sociologists alike) are all agents in the racially unjust order in which we live. Sociologists (and scholars of other disciplines) are hardly exempt from racializing/racialized behaviors. Said another way, social scientists have agency too. Their work may be used either in the service of shoring up or dismantling racial systems (and there is no third option). My position is that scholars make their most useful contributions to society by producing work that makes racial structures transparent, for this work may be of service to others who can labor to flout the normal operation of those racial structures.<sup>1</sup> This is my reason for this call to replace assimilation theory with migration scholarship that engages with race as a paradigmatic social system that endures with the support of powerful racial states.

Since race changes form—having evolved from biological pseudo-science to the overlapping conditions of cultural, interpersonal, institutional, and structural racism that all co-exist in our professed “colorblind”/“post-racial” era—it has become more difficult to identify it and the racism through which it operates. Targets of racism are not identified through specific racial language; racial language instead becomes coded and embedded. “Racially indexed structural inequality persists while the racially privileged do nothing to delimit or reverse it” (Goldberg 2008:1714). Racism(s) proliferate, but we have few ways to account for them, for the vocabulary for “identifying, articulating, and condemning them no longer fits” (Goldberg 2008:1715). But we can give a name to the ever-changing destruction that racial inequality fixes on the world’s population: “structural violence” (O’Neil 2009), which can produce racial inequality so severe that a man living in the late 1980s in Bangladesh (one of the world’s poorest countries) has a greater chance of reaching age 65 than a black man in Harlem or that the black man’s mortality rate is far greater than that of whites.<sup>2</sup> The leading model of ethnic incorporation—even if revised to eliminate the most overtly racist elements—resorts to the African American’s group social agency to explain why these horrific indices hold for him while other ethnic groups “succeed” or “make it” instead. This, to me, is reason enough to declare a crisis in sociology that requires the kind of scientific revolution that Kuhn (1970) described.

Systemic-, foundational-, and structural-racism approaches are variants of alternative approaches that put race at the center, and these have already been employed to examine interrelated causes of

persistent poverty, and point to targets for social/political/economic change to remedy racial injustices (Feagin 2006; Kubisch 2006). They have been applied recently to the study of a myriad of sociological phenomena, including environmental racism, colorblind racism and spatial segregation, racial differentials in medical practice and the racial distribution of adequate health care, the failures of the Supreme Court to redress workplace discrimination, and the school-to-prison pipeline (Cole and Farrell 2006; Feagin and Bennefield 2014; Rose 2013; Sabo et al. 2014; Wiecek and Hamilton 2014). And I believe that I am not alone in having successfully applied it to histories of immigrant integration in the United States and elsewhere (Bashi 2007; Bashi Treitler 2013).

We as a discipline must still develop a robust methodological frame for racialization research that can be easily conveyed to a new generation of sociologists, but I offer an incipient framework in the first chapters of *The Ethnic Project: Transforming Racial Fiction into Ethnic Factions* (Bashi Treitler 2013). There, I developed a theory of racial paradigms that have social structure marked by four components: racial categories (the racial divisions that classify humans into different types), racial hierarchies (that give unequal value to human classification), racial commonsense (that provide the logic of classification and hierarchy and hold the ideology about racial group character and capabilities), and racial sanction (that explain the behaviors that can and should be expected from the humans in each group and provide the punishment and reward for racial transgressions). This frame allows processes of racialization to be compared across time and space. Racialization can explain what the Irish were before they became white, and what actions made them white, and how their actions were similar to that of the Mississippi Chinese, Jews, and even Native Americans in their responses to the racial stigmas that were imposed on them (Bashi Treitler 2013). Similarly, racialization explains why Afro-Caribbeans who share immigrant social networks transnationally and comprise a single ethnic group are lauded in the United States and denigrated in the United Kingdom (Bashi 2007)—each group is categorized as “black,” yes, but their place in the hierarchy is different in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Moreover, I believe this frame may also be used to show why racial justice is so difficult to obtain. First, a political economy of race means that those interests that make money and gains power from

the way structural racism organizes and funnels economic and political resources toward the dominant races; those interests fight hard to keep the racial status quo. Second, racial justice requires fighting against the four kinds of racial structures at the same time—for fighting against hierarchy doesn't eliminate the categories or the ideology that seems to always be able to renew faith in racial difference (as subsequent crises in neo-Nazism around the globe indicate); fighting against the ideology of racial commonsense does not change the inequalities inherent in racial sanction that, for example, provides support for racially unequal incarceration and sentencing; and so on. Analyses of racial structures can show how difficult it is to demolish racial inequality, but at least it will provide us with a fighting chance to clearly understand the entirety of what we as a discipline, a nation, and a planet are up against.

### *Immigration and Ethnicity in the United States*

Park and Burgess define assimilation as “a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other person and groups and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life” (Alba and Nee 1997:828; see also Alba and Nee 2003). Adherents of the assimilationist school acknowledge scholarly roots in the Chicago School (Waters and Jiménez 2005) and in some cases do acknowledge that racialization (including the ways it shapes the discourse about which immigrants are desirable) may affect the way assimilation occurs, but their acknowledgement does not cause them to question assimilationism as a model useful to understanding immigration. Indeed, they wholeheartedly embrace the use of factors that “proved” assimilation of European whites (Waters and Jiménez 2005) or understand racialization to be the model that clearly marks the assessment of African American incorporation (Telles and Ortiz 2009). But these scholars still filter the post-1965 immigration experience through assimilationist lenses, even where they need not. For example, Telles and Ortiz (2009) produced the book *Generations of Exclusion*, a universally lauded masterwork where they re-interviewed a cohort of nearly 700 Mexicans first interviewed for *The Mexican American People: The Nation's Second Largest Minority* (1970) and over 750 of their children. The findings (like the book title) suggest that Mexicans have an exclusionary

experience similar to that of African Americans and that even if the first generation achieved some class mobility, this was not sustained in the third and fourth generations where education gaps increased. While engaging theories of racialization simultaneously with that of assimilation, Telles and Ortiz chose not to altogether reject the idea of assimilationism—which they could have done, finding as they do that Mexicans do not fit the European immigrant norm, that racialization marks the white supremacist orientation of immigration laws applied to Mexicans, and that racial stereotyping and discrimination lead to Mexican American disadvantage even in rural areas where immigrant Mexican newcomers are nowhere to be found (i.e., group proximity over long periods of time did little to unifying Mexicans and Anglos), among other empirical findings; regrettably, though, they also took the power of their massive research project and squeezed it into the assimilationist frame in order to conclude that “downward assimilation” is one apt summary for the Mexican experience in the United States. Similarly, other researchers studying the Mexican case failed to find that evidence of the importance of individual skin color (Ortiz and Telles 2012) or the possibilities of biculturalism (Vasquez, 2014) or the existence of flexible ethnicity (Vasquez 2010) were each reason enough to reject assimilation theory modeling altogether.<sup>3</sup> Further, Jiménez (2014) has shown that Asians now occupy the topmost rungs in key socioeconomic measures and that this achievement has brought them a backlash, especially in educational settings—this could presage the multicultural mainstream that Alba and Nee (2003) suggest is possible, except that the backlash brought on by Asian success suggests that Anglos are not as eager to welcome Asians into the mainstream as are Alba and Nee.

Against its own definitional roots, assimilationist ideology created the idea of a racially white mainstream and supports the idea that this mainstream—by practice, if not by letter of definition, a space where no blacks are present—can and should be joined and that there are readily available processes by which anyone and everyone can join it. That is, assimilation scholars have ignored a long and complex history of African America “miscegenation” with other ethnic groups throughout the history of the United States. By failing to acknowledge that the mainstream is indeed both created and joined by segregating one's group from African Americans and redefining one's group as ethnics who are as white as can be made possible (Bashi

Treitler 2013). Sociologists adhering to assimilationism act out in their scholarship the same social distancing from African Americans that these other ethnic groups performed and continue to perform. In fact, it is this aspect of the assimilationist idea that continues to resuscitate a warped framing of Oscar Lewis's culture of poverty rubric that effectively uses science to further denigrate African Americans (Kelley 1997; Pierre 2004).<sup>4</sup> In sum, assimilationist scholarship provides little or no attention to the durable nature of racial structures; turns a blind eye to intermixing and conjoined ethnic histories that are the very definition of assimilation except when that involves loving and living with nonwhites and accepting their ways, especially when it is not a model of "downward assimilation"; and outright ignores counterfactual data that shows Euro-descendants no longer monopolize the top of the economic scale. These together enable pseudo-science—like that produced recently by legal scholars Chua and Rubenfeld (2014) with whom I know Alba and Nee to disagree—to take over the public discourse. At best, uncritical adherence to repeated iterations of Park's much-embraced definition—itsself an ideal typic construction of human relations under *ceteris paribus* conditions—promotes scholarship that ignores historical and statistical data that prove the existence and continual reinforcement of racial hierarchy and belie the accuracy of adherence to a white-European model of upward mobility. At worst, assimilationism supports the idea that tranquil and productive lives made with African Americans and other nonwhites are to be ignored and instead sees as useful scholarship that which promotes a stereotypical antisocial image of a dysfunctional homogeneous black American ethnicity to which assimilation must be downward (i.e., away from the "mainstream," which must be defined as upward and white). In other words, logic proves assimilation to be a white-supremacist ideology. Works following this tradition tend not only fail to critically engage the structural nature of race, but they promote a flawed assimilationist ideology that itself plays a role in maintaining status quo racial order. Perhaps this is the reason why alternatives to this model have had a difficult time displacing assimilationism from its seat as the dominant model for understanding migration and migrant or ethnic incorporation.

The two models under examination here put in entirely different places the locus of agency of the social actors involved. Assimilationism is modeled to see social agency as causal, either working to

bring ethnic groups into the mainstream, or not. In contrast, the racialization model assumes that all actors in the system are racialized and act in accordance with their racialized position. This is not to say that racial positioning determines all social action, rather that racialized subjects—whether accepting of their racial position or fighting against it—act to support their own interests in either dismantling or shoring up that racial system and act according to their knowledge of how the racial system works. Social agency, then, emerges from the process of racialization and one's response to it, and all actors in a racial system are capable of and expected to act in dialogue with that system—dominants in a society organized around white supremacy included. In an assimilationist model, the action that counts is only that of the social "other": the migrant, the outsider, the unassimilated.

Further, the ground upon which actors act is similarly circumscribed in the assimilation model. In assimilation models the system of incorporation is taken as a given—that is, contexts for assimilation remain just that: "context." These models poorly account for race as a dynamic and systematic social institution that affects decision making for all actors within the model. Indeed, when discussed, oppositional positions (e.g., those of African Americans, who are seen to be uniquely affected by racial discrimination) are considered to be exceptional and are oftentimes excluded from assimilationist analyses altogether (Jung 2009).

I emphasize here, again, that it is not the case that assimilationist/integrationist approaches have ignored race altogether. Indeed, renown adherents have even critiqued the position's history of reliance on ethnocentric stereotyping but believe that history can be expunged from the model's frame to make it be of use to the sociology of migration (Alba and Nee 1997, 2003). However, I follow others in critiquing assimilationists specifically and sociologists in general for insufficiently accounting for the paradigmatic and structural nature of racial barriers to social mobility and true integration. (See Bashi 2004, 2007; Bashi Treitler 2013; McKee 1993; Pierre 2004; Romero 2008; Steinberg 1995, 1997, 2001, 2007, among others.) Indeed, I argue that assimilationists instead (unwittingly or not) reinforce hope about the possibilities of inclusion by continuing to laud Anglo-/white-centric models of incorporation that are largely mythological, fail to acknowledge the ways racial structures created that very whiteness precisely to justify inequality among humans, and turn a blind eye to the continued significance and durability of racial structures

in purposefully shaping unequal socioeconomic outcomes. It seems a kind of scientific blindness to profess a quest to understand economic inequality and color stratification among humans in a racial system but peer far beyond the racial system that has inequality as its intent and sole purpose for being in order to discover why these inequalities exist.

Social science scholars too have agency in reinforcing or dismantling racial structures predicated on white supremacy. If we are to offer social science that can help make a better world free of the bonds of racial inequalities, it is mandatory that we admit that such deadly structures exist and infringe on the very hopes of racialized generations past and to come. It is also incumbent upon us to point out where and when well-established social scientists play a vital role in shoring up these structures by relegating race as a contextual variable that makes for barriers to assimilation that might be overcome if oppressed agents used their agency differently, rather than examining it as an organizing principal that engineers unequal outcomes around the globe. Where we choose not to understand the latter, we are complicit—we mystify and shore up white supremacy by focusing on ethnic character rather than the character of white supremacist societies.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the members of the ASA Section on Racial and Ethnic Minorities for the hard work and resources applied to making this journal a reality and to its editors for the outstanding opportunity they gave me via the invitation to make a bold statement to the subfield. I am also indebted to two anonymous reviewers, Richard Alba, Tanya Golash-Boza, Jemima Pierre, and Christian Treitler for their comments on an earlier draft of this article that aided in honing the argument.

## NOTES

1. My own scholarship is dedicated to making social structures visible and to dissect them to show how they operate. (In short, I not only offer this critique, but I walk the walk myself.) In particular, I have written two books that offer more extensive analyses of the import of social structures in racialized systems that are migrant destinations. *Survival of the Knitted: Immigrant Social Networks in a Stratified World* (Bashi 2007) shows (among other things) that we need not appeal to assimilation theory and analyses of ethnic “culture” to know why Afro-Caribbean people in the United States succeed economically when compared to African Americans. There are structural reasons—mainly their highly selective social networks, which manipulate local and international boundaries to their own

benefits, inserting chosen co-ethnics into labor and housing market niches. I show, too, that this does not happen in the same ways for Afro-Caribbeans who travel to other countries. Nor are non-migrants left behind in the Caribbean able to succeed; not being the network’s chosen ones, they have no ability to leverage network connections they may have. Assimilation scholars have made much of the social distancing work Afro-Caribbeans in the United States undertake to set themselves up as superior to African Americans, but this is only one small part of a greater and global socioeconomic picture that has structural rather than cultural import. Indeed, all ethnic groups in the United States (not only Afro-Caribbeans) use distancing behavior and language to benefit themselves. This fact is largely unacknowledged if not poorly understood by scholars of assimilation although Toni Morrison wrote of it back in 1993 and Malcolm X spoke of it well before then (Morrison 1993; Roediger 2010, see his Introduction). In *The Ethnic Project: Transforming Racial Fictions into Ethnic Factions* (Bashi Treitler 2013), I chronicle over 200 years of ethnic self-marketing where success varying according to their ability to the ethnic group’s ability to harness control over some part of the U.S. socioeconomic structures with which they most closely engage.

2. Here, O’Neil (2009) cites McCord and Freeman (1990).
3. Surely, some scholars have found that the racialization frame does indeed suffice to describe the incorporation experience of Hispanics/Latino(a)s and immigrant blacks (Bashi 1998, 2007; Bashi Bobb and Clarke 2001; Bonilla Silva 2000; Golash-Boza 2006, 2014; Golash-Boza and Darity 2008; Pierre 2004).
4. In developing his “culture of poverty” thesis, Lewis (1998) listed a number of positive cultural/psychological traits (not just negative ones), noting for example that most of the poor are less prone to repression than occupants of the middle class (Lewis, 1998:8). Lewis (1998) took umbrage to the use of his thesis by middle-class persons (including scholars) who concentrated on the negative aspects of the culture of poverty.

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