

THE RACIAL UNCONSCIOUS OF ASSIMILATION THEORY¹

Moon-Kie Jung

Department of Sociology, University of Illinois

Abstract

In the past two decades, migration scholars have revised and revitalized assimilation theory to study the large and growing numbers of migrants from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean and their offspring in the United States. Neoclassical and segmented assimilation theories seek to make sense of the current wave of migration that differs in important ways from the last great wave at the turn of the twentieth century and to overcome the conceptual shortcomings of earlier theories of assimilation that it inspired. This article examines some of the central assumptions and arguments of the new theories. In particular, it undertakes a detailed critique of their treatment of race and finds that 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.” Shifting the focus from *difference* to *inequality* and *domination*, the article concludes with a brief proposal for reorienting our theoretical approach, from *assimilation* to the *politics of national belonging*.

Keywords: Race, Assimilation, Migration, Theory, Nation

INTRODUCTION

In a 1983 literature review of the preceding decades, Charles Hirschman observed that “the assimilation model has been the dominant perspective in sociological studies of ethnic relations.” Even when the studies did “not draw formally upon assimilation theory,” he found “almost always an implicit, if not always explicitly stated, hypothesis that trends will show a moderation of differences between ethnic populations” (Hirschman 1983, pp. 399, 412). While acknowledging Hirschman’s article in a footnote, Rogers Brubaker incongruously detected a “*return* of assimilation” in U.S. sociology occurring at around the same time: “Since about 1985,

Du Bois Review, 6:2 (2009) 375–395.

© 2009 W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research 1742-058X/09 \$15.00
doi:10.1017/S1742058X09990245

however, one can discern a renewed theoretical concern with assimilation in the scholarly literature” (2004, p. 125, 224n13; emphasis added). To make sense of this discrepancy, we need not look to the gap year: assimilation did not mysteriously die in 1984, only to quickly revive. Rather, in the mid-1980s, the long dominant assimilation paradigm, characterized by routine accretion of empirical research, was theoretically reinvigorated. Through periodic challenges (e.g., pluralism, Marxism, transnationalism) and exaggerated reports of demise, often anticipatory self-reports, assimilation theories adapted and remained the primary framework within, as well as against, which to analyze the lives of migrants and their offspring in the United States. As Mary Waters and Tomás Jiménez proclaimed recently, sounding the recurrent note of return, “The concept of assimilation, which played such a great role in understanding the experiences of European immigrants, is once again center stage” (2005, p. 826).

Assimilation theories of the past two decades are indeed qualitatively different from their predecessors. Not only do they deal with new populations, notably recent migrants from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean and their descendants, but they also consciously acknowledge earlier conceptual failings and propose significant modifications to overcome them. Foremost, the new theories no longer conceive of assimilation as necessarily destined or desirable. Though initially lagging, empirical research is starting to assess and substantiate the theoretical developments; assimilation is, by all accounts, a multigenerational phenomenon, and only recently has the second generation of the new migrants begun to reach adulthood in large numbers.

There are currently two main strands of assimilation theory. What I refer to as neoclassical theory argues that, on the whole, assimilation continues to take place, with recent migrants and successive generations, like those at the turn of the last century, entering the “mainstream” of U.S. society. Segmented assimilation theory asserts that, unlike for European migrants of the past, there are now multiple possible paths of incorporation: upward mobility, not only through straightforward assimilation but also through selective retention of ethnicity, and downward mobility through assimilation into the “underclass.”

In this article, my purpose is not to detail the empirical findings that address the debates within and between the two strands. Nor do I assess the theories on their own terms and propose an alternative theory of assimilation. Instead, I examine some of the key taken-for-granted assumptions and habits of thought of this theoretical discourse. In particular, I analyze how race figures in the recent theories. After summarizing and underscoring the innovations of neoclassical and segmented assimilation theories, I undertake a detailed critique of their treatment of race. I conclude with a brief proposal for reorienting our theoretical approach to the politics of national belonging.

THE NEW WAVE OF ASSIMILATION THEORY

Neoclassical Assimilation

Perhaps no scholars are as explicit, ambitious, or successful in their effort to restore the theoretical respectability and viability of assimilation as Richard Alba and Victor Nee, on whose work I focus here (1997, 2003; see also Alba 1995; Bean and Stevens, 2003; Brubaker 2004; Jacoby 2004; Kazal 1995; Morawska 1994). They position their theory, though revisionist in many respects, squarely within the original assimilation tradition of the Chicago school: “Despite the accuracy of some of the criticisms of the canonical formulation of assimilation, we believe that there is still a vital

core to the concept, which has not lost its utility for illuminating many of the experiences of contemporary immigrants and the new second generation” (Alba and Nee, 2003, p. 9).

Alba and Nee (2003, pp. 2–6, 15) identify several features that made previous versions of assimilation theory objectionable. There is a more or less strong current of ethnocentrism in the classical accounts, with middle-class Protestant Whites as the normative reference category. Assimilation is assumed to be inexorable: it may take longer for some than others, but given enough time, it would happen. It is thought to be a unidirectional process of becoming assimilated *into* the dominant category. Not only inexorable and unidirectional, it is also seen as desirable. In other words, the old theories are not only descriptive but prescriptive. Finally, the potentially “positive” aspects of migrant ethnicity, like upward economic mobility through ethnic networks and niches, are not adequately considered.

To avoid these pitfalls, Alba and Nee redefine *assimilation* more neutrally as “the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences.”² Though not apparent in this catholic wording that could be about the lessening salience of *any* ethnic boundary, they are almost wholly concerned with the one between the “mainstream,” more precisely the “American mainstream,” and “minority individuals and groups” (2003, p. 11). What exactly do they mean by the *American mainstream*?

[It] encompasses a core set of interrelated institutional structures and organizations regulated by rules and practices that weaken, even undermine, the influence of ethnic origins per se. . . . A useful way of defining the mainstream is as that part of the society *within* which ethnic and racial origins have at most minor impacts on life chances or opportunities. (Alba and Nee, 2003, p. 12; emphasis in original)

The authors explain that this definition does not require the equality of life chances within the mainstream in general but only with respect to ethnic and racial origins. For example, the mainstream comprises the entire range of social classes, from the poor to the wealthy, and the obvious inequality of life chances they imply. Assimilation therefore does not necessarily entail entry into the middle class, as many other theorists suppose. Further, race and ethnicity can still be “powerful determinants of opportunities in the society as a whole, particularly when those outside the mainstream are compared to those in it” (Alba and Nee, 2003, p. 12). Open to the possibility of the mainstream itself being transformed, Alba and Nee do not assert that assimilation is a one-way process, nor do they claim that assimilation is inevitable. They also consciously seek to suppress the normative impulses of the “canonical” literature—“assimilation without ‘assimilationism,’” as Brubaker (2004, p. 125) puts it.

The most original theoretical contribution of Alba and Nee is that they specify the causal mechanisms that generate assimilation, something many past theorists, including the well regarded Milton Gordon (1964), failed to do. At the individual level, they assume that everyone engages in *purposive action*, pursuing rational self-interest but, per the new institutionalism, as figured by “cultural beliefs.” Moreover, the agents’ rational choices are limited by “incomplete information,” finite “cognitive capacity,” and institutional opportunities and constraints. In this “context-bound” manner, migrants’ and their descendants’ practical quests for better jobs, education, places to live, and so on often lead to assimilation, mostly without their conscious intent and even against it (Alba and Nee, 2003, pp. 37–39). *Network*

mechanisms refer to the ways in which “ethnic minorities,” particularly in hostile environments, “monitor and enforce norms of cooperation” toward collective “welfare maximization.” For example, networks vitally facilitate labor migration and ethnic economies (Alba and Nee, 2003, p. 43). Besides network resources, or *social capital*, Alba and Nee point to other *forms of capital*, namely financial and human, that impinge upon the adaptation patterns of migrants and their progeny (2003, p. 46). *Institutional mechanisms* provide the final piece in explaining assimilation. In relation to other theorists, Alba and Nee downplay, without discounting, the salience of economic growth. Above all, they emphasize the importance of “institutional changes,” the two most significant of which are, for the post-civil rights movement era, the “monitoring and enforcing [of] federal rules [that] have increased the cost of discrimination in nontrivial ways” and racism’s loss of “public legitimacy” resulting from “changes in values” (Alba and Nee, 2003, pp. 54, 57).

Before empirically testing this theory for the contemporary wave of migration to the United States, Alba and Nee reexamine the prewar migration from Europe and East Asia. Looking at various indicators, like socioeconomic status and intermarriage patterns, they conclude that assimilation has indeed been the “master trend, and for the majority of whites and Asians descended from the earlier era of mass immigration, ethnicity does mean considerably less than it did a generation or two ago” (Alba and Nee, 2003, p. 101). The precise mechanisms of this master trend are hard to nail down, they concede, because research interest dipped in the middle decades of the twentieth century, leaving us with relatively clear “before” and “after” pictures but only a few blurry ones in between. Nonetheless, the authors highlight three factors in relation to this hazy time period, when a majority of the early migrants’ children came of age, that generally confirm their model: “social mobility” through expanding opportunities, and concomitant incentives for assimilation, in employment, education, and residence; “cultural change” in the mainstream toward accepting the previously excluded; and “institutional changes stemming partly from collective action by the ethnics themselves,” for example, with regard to admissions to elite colleges (Alba and Nee, 2003, p. 120).

Alba and Nee then turn their attention to the postwar migration, particularly since the Immigration Act of 1965 removed the national origins quotas that had been in place for four decades. They choose to “focus . . . on the non-European groups, for they are thought to represent the hard test for assimilation” (2003, p. 184). Marshalling an impressive array of data on “linguistic assimilation,” “socioeconomic attainments,” “spatial patterns,” and “social relations,” Alba and Nee conclude that “assimilation remains a potent force affecting immigrant groups in the United States” (2003, pp. 217, 230, 248, 260, 267). There are potential exceptions to this pattern. Some “labor migrants”—as opposed to “human-capital migrants” with high levels of education and skills—stagnate socioeconomically by the third generation. And residential integration and intermarriage with Whites are more open to Asians and “light-skinned Latinos” than others. Nevertheless, assimilation, they argue, remains the dominant pattern.

Segmented Assimilation

Neoclassical assimilation theory is, in part, a rejoinder to the more numerous pessimistic interpretations that arose in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Although not all of the latter identify explicitly with the segmented assimilation framework, they all share a certain apprehension toward the future prospects of a significant segment of contemporary migrants and especially their offspring. In the aptly titled article “Second-Generation Decline,” Herbert Gans worries “that a significant number of

the children of poor immigrants, especially dark-skinned ones, might not obtain jobs in the mainstream economy" (1992, p. 173). Speculating "about the unknown future," he fears that "they—Vietnamese and other Asian-Americans, Salvadorans and other Central and Latin Americans, as well as Haitians and others from the Caribbean, Africa and elsewhere—may join blacks, and the Puerto Rican, Mexican and other 'Hispanics', who came to the cities at an earlier time, as well as 'Anglos' (in some places) as excluded from, or marginal to, the economy" (Gans 1992, pp. 174, 176). The combination of an unfavorable economy, with no sustained growth and declining demand for unskilled labor, and intractable racial discrimination against non-Whites, particularly those with dark skin, may keep many of the second generation in poverty. Prefiguring a major tenet of the segmented assimilation theory, Gans foresees the possibility of "an early convergence between the present American poor and some second-generation poor" (1992, p. 183).

The segmented assimilation theory, as first put forth by Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou, outlines three main "distinct forms of adaptation" for today's second generation: "growing acculturation and parallel integration into the white middle-class"; "permanent poverty and assimilation into the underclass"; and "rapid economic advancement with deliberate preservation of the immigrant community's values and tight solidarity" (1993, p. 82). To explain the early stage of this refraction of adaptation experiences, Portes and Rubén Rumbaut point to three sets of "background factors" that bear on migration and initial settlement: "individual features," "mode of incorporation," and "family structure." Migrants' "individual features," including financial resources and human capital (education, job skills and experience, and language proficiency), have an obvious impact on their socioeconomic prospects. The notion of "mode of incorporation" refers to the "contextual factors" that enable and constrain the migrants' deployment of their individual characteristics and resources: governmental policies toward migrants that can range from "exclusion" to "passive acceptance" to "active encouragement"; receptiveness of the "native population," especially the level of racial prejudice; and support from coethnics, contingent largely on the size and class composition of the ethnic community. Finally, Portes and Rumbaut posit that "the composition of the immigrant family, in particular the extent to which it includes both biological parents," can have a significant impact on how the second generation fares (2001b, pp. 46–49, 63).

The next part of the adaptation experience concerns intergenerational patterns of acculturation, or cultural assimilation, that can affect parental authority. What Portes and Rumbaut see as critical is the relative pace of acculturation between the migrant and second generations. Most likely among those migrants with substantial human capital, *consonant acculturation* happens when both generations acquire the language and customs of the "host" society and lose those of the "home" society at a similarly rapid rate. In *dissonant acculturation*, the children substantially outpace their parents. When both generations are "embedded in a co-ethnic community of sufficient size and institutional diversity," *selective acculturation* may occur, as the speed of assimilation is slowed and the children retain some of the parents' "culture." Portes and Rumbaut contend that dissonant acculturation undermines parental authority, putting the second generation "at risk." Consonant acculturation, on the other hand, allows parents to maintain authority over their children and enables both generations to face obstacles, like discrimination, together. Selective acculturation affords another layer of support, as families can draw on the coethnic community of which they are an integral part (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001b, pp. 53–54).

With the diverse resources and constraints brought to bear by background factors and intergenerational patterns of acculturation, the second generation nego-

tiates three “contextual source[s]” of “vulnerability to downward assimilation,” two of which coincide with those Gans mentions. First, unlike those of European migrants of the turn of the last century who were “uniformly white,” the children of contemporary Asian, Black, and “mestizo” migrants face a formidable racial barrier. Second, because of “national deindustrialization and global industrial restructuring,” the working-class part of the second generation enjoys fewer opportunities for social mobility than a half century ago, as better paying manufacturing jobs have disappeared or moved overseas, leaving an increasingly bifurcated “hourglass economy” in their wake. Finally, because migrants tend to live in large cities, there is a third source of vulnerability: contact with the “adversarial subculture developed by marginalized native youths” (Portes and Zhou, 1993, pp. 76, 83).

Among the migrant populations considered by Portes and Rumbaut, Filipinos represent a case of relatively swift assimilation into the middle class, enabled by high levels of human capital and families with two biological parents to avoid most, if not all, of the hazards faced by the second generation (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001a, b). On the other end of the spectrum, many migrants arrive with few personal, familial, or coethnic resources and against hostile policies and society. Their children not only assimilate faster than they but into the “culture” of the native-born poor. Mexicans, Nicaraguans, Haitians, and West Indians frequently serve as examples of this downward assimilation (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001a). Facilitated by entrepreneurial skills, favorable policies, low levels of discrimination, and a large and cohesive coethnic community, Cubans, particularly those who arrived before 1980 and their children, exemplify upward assimilation through selective acculturation. Of unique importance is an “institutionally diversified ethnic community” that can aid families in shielding and fostering the second generation (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001b, p. 275; see also Portes and Stepick, 1993; Portes and Zhou, 1993). Even among migrant populations with lower levels of human capital and/or less active assistance from the government, tight families and ethnic communities can clear similar paths of controlled assimilation that can steer the second generation away from the dangers of downward assimilation. The Vietnamese in New Orleans and Punjabi Sikhs in California are proffered as such cases (Gibson 1989; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Zhou and Bankston, 1994, 1998).

THE RACIAL UNDERTOW OF ASSIMILATION THEORY

As seen, both the neoclassical and segmented assimilation theories introduce significant innovations to make sense of the current wave of migration to the United States that differs in important ways, like places of origin and class composition, from the last great wave and to overcome the conceptual shortcomings of earlier theories of assimilation that it inspired. Specifically with regard to race, Alba and Nee stress the consequential institutional changes that the civil rights movement wrought, and Portes and colleagues chart the different routes, in large part because of racial discrimination, that assimilation can take. For all of their advances, however, assimilation theories do not adequately account for race. As the inadequacies inhere in implicit assumptions as much as in explicit analyses, I suggest that they call for a thorough rethinking of research on migrant settlement.

The reclamation of *assimilation*, for Brubaker, starts with the term itself. He recognizes that “transitive” and “organic” everyday definitions of the word reflect some of the old flaws of assimilation theory (2004, p. 119). In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first definition given for *assimilate* is a transitive one: “To make like to,

cause to resemble” (emphasis in original). Other transitive definitions additionally have a decidedly organic bent. For example, the one cited by Brubaker reads, “To convert into a substance of its own nature, as the bodily organs convert food into blood, and thence into animal tissue; to take in and appropriate as nourishment; to absorb into the system, incorporate.”³ Echoing past theories, practices, and policies of assimilation, these transitive and organic meanings connote normative prescriptions, advocating and even forcing assimilation, and ethnocentrism, evoking Anglo-conformist images of complete conversion. Therefore, Brubaker calls for retaining only the abstract, intransitive sense of the word: “to become similar” (2004, pp. 119, 129). It is in this sense, purged of unwanted denotations and connotations, that most revivalists of assimilation now employ the concept.⁴

Compared to the “classical” notions of assimilation, the semantic contraction is undoubtedly an improvement. Nevertheless, I argue that it may not be much better suited to contend with questions of race. In part, the word itself continues to pose conceptual difficulties, because the problem lies not only with marginal, discardable meanings of assimilation but its very core. Even shed of its transitive, organic meanings, it remains, in etymology and usage, rooted in the idea of similarity. No theorist of assimilation would disagree, and there appears to be, at first glance, little that is disagreeable. What is objectionable about *similarity* becomes clearer, however, when approached from the reverse angle. What constitutes the absence or opposite of similarity? *Difference*—which is the premise for Brubaker’s “return” thesis: the “massive *differentialist* turn in social thought, public discourse, and public policy” is what we are ostensibly returning from (2004, p. 117; emphasis added). In fact, the similarity/difference binary or continuum undergirds the entire assimilation literature: to assimilate is to become less different.⁵ For instance, as noted above, Alba and Nee redefine assimilation as “the decline of ethnic distinction and its corollary social and cultural *differences*”; the differences give an ethnic distinction its “concrete significance” (2003, p. 11; emphasis added). *Inequality*, however, is neither an antonym for similarity nor a synonym for difference. Same goes for *domination*. Inequality and domination do produce and may even presuppose difference, but to examine inequality and domination *as* difference risks mischaracterization or, worse, trivialization. And if the sociological literature on race agrees on anything, it is that race is fundamentally about inequality and domination.⁶ Assimilation, then, would seem to be a mismatched conceptual tool with which to dissect racial dynamics. To be clear, I am not arguing that assimilation theories wholly ignore race or that they do not at all address inequality and domination. Rather, the concept of assimilation instills analytical tendencies to approach racial inequality and domination from an oblique angle that misses and distorts, as well as illuminates.

Though exceptional in its inclusion of non-European migrants and its reconsideration of European migrants in light of recent historical studies on Whiteness, Alba and Nee’s analysis of prewar migration nevertheless turns out to be a case in point. As Waters and Jiménez summarize, “A number of scholars have noted that both popular and scholarly notions of what constitutes success for post-1965 immigrants to the United States are either implicitly or explicitly comparative with the experiences of immigrants who came in the last mass immigration between 1880 and 1920” (2005, p. 106). For nearly all, the comparison is specifically between the *European* migration of the earlier wave and the *non-European* migration of the contemporary wave. For example, segmented assimilation theorists make the comparison to argue that many contemporary non-European migrants and their children face a much more perilous situation than did their European predecessors: today’s migrants and second generation, being non-White, confront daunting racial barriers, and the increasingly

deindustrialized economy offers ever fewer opportunities for the unskilled.⁷ There is an obvious demographic reason for this methodological habit: a large majority of the early migrants were from Europe, and a large majority of contemporary migrants are not.⁸ But, in addition to the significant minority of non-European migrants in the past and the significant minority of European migrants in the present, there are good reasons to break the habit. The historical contexts of the two migration waves are radically different.⁹ Then, overlaying the historical difference coterminously with the difference in origin, European versus non-European, renders the comparison dubious: what meaningful inferences could be derived from such a conflated research design?

Alba and Nee also “compare the experience of [the] two major waves of immigrants to the United States and their descendants” (2003, p. x). But they add a promising twist. In their examination of the earlier wave, they include two groups of non-European origin: the Chinese and the Japanese. The promise, however, is betrayed by three analytical choices that, through the application of the assimilation concept, obfuscate racial inequalities and domination. First, Alba and Nee’s focus on *East* Asians is crucial for whom it omits. It leaves out the third major stream of prewar migration from Asia: Filipinos.¹⁰ Although the history of Filipinos is less well documented, what we do know indicates that its “master trend” was hardly assimilation (e.g., Azuma 2005; Friday 1994; Fujita-Rony 2003; Jung 2006; Ngai 2004). Racialized as more inferior than other Asians and indefinitely relegated to mostly unskilled labor, particularly in agriculture, prewar Filipino migrants did not undergo the upward social mobility that their Chinese and Japanese counterparts did. For example, in 1959, Filipino men earned \$3649 on average, while the comparable figures for all, Japanese, Chinese, and Black men were \$5308, \$4761, \$4034, and \$3740, respectively (Ong and Azores, 1994, p. 127). Only with the post-1965 migration of middle-class Filipinos did they begin to be touted as exemplars of assimilation.

Second, Alba and Nee incorporate the experiences of prewar Chinese and Japanese migrants and their descendants too seamlessly into the same assimilation narrative as their European contemporaries. They begin their analysis at the end of the story, presenting the largely affirmative data, from the close of the twentieth century, on acculturation, socioeconomic parity, residential integration, intermarriage and “mixed” offspring, and shifts in ethnic identity among third- and later-generation descendants of migrants from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Alba and Nee, 2003, pp. 71–98). Then, as noted earlier, they surmise, based on admittedly limited secondary sources, the mechanisms that begat this “master trend”: institutional and cultural changes in the mid-twentieth century that opened up opportunities (Alba and Nee, 2003, p. 101). But this explanation oversimplifies: it projects the “effect” backwards in time and transfigures earlier inequalities between Europeans and Asians differing in kind into ones differing in degree. If we were to begin at the beginning, the “master trend” of assimilation would be far from evident. A cursory glance at just the formal practices enacted or sanctioned by the state, for example, would quickly reveal the *qualitatively* harsher treatments of the Chinese and the Japanese based on race that affected each and every aspect of “assimilation” until as late as the 1960s: segregated schools, denial of naturalized citizenship, alien land laws, mass internment in concentration camps, restrictive covenants, antimiscegenation laws, and so on. While third- and fourth-generation Chinese and Japanese may now resemble their European-origin counterparts in many respects, retrofitting a common “assimilation” narrative necessarily minimizes the racial inequalities and oppression the Chinese and the Japanese endured and resisted and necessarily confounds what were racially disparate historical trajectories.¹¹ It is a subtle, unregistered form of teleology.

Finally, just as they blur the racial inequalities between European and non-European migrants from the turn of the last century, Alba and Nee also seek to emphasize the continuity between the two major waves of migration. They remind us that assimilation was not as easy and assured for the earlier wave, as commonly portrayed as a point of contradistinction by students of the contemporary wave. Drawing on findings in the burgeoning historical literature on Whiteness, they question the stark racial contrast made by segmented assimilation theorists between the mostly “White” migration of the past and the mostly non-White migration of the present.¹² Alba and Nee take note that the “Whiteness” of many early European migrants was not a given but an attainment.¹³ The historical formation of Whiteness thus serves as an example of how racial boundaries can fall away, from which they derive a direct implication for today’s non-White migrants: “We see no a priori reason why a shift in the perception of racial difference could not take place for some contemporary immigrant groups and some segments of others. . . . [namely] new Asian groups and light-skinned Latinos.” In this way, White racial formation is smoothly folded into the narrative of assimilation: “as these [disparaged European] groups climbed the socioeconomic ladder and mixed residentially with other whites, their perceived distinctiveness from the majority faded” (Alba and Nee, 2003, p. 132). But, precisely because they read the scholarship on Whiteness through the concept of assimilation, they blunt one of its cardinal points: Whiteness has been, above all, a racial formation that presupposed and reproduced relations of inequality and domination between “Whites” and their racial others (e.g., Guglielmo 2003; Jacobson 1998; Roediger 1991, 2005; Saxton 1971). The point is not that European migrants and native-born Whites became similar, which they did, but that becoming similar, including “climb[ing] the socioeconomic ladder and mix[ing] residentially with other whites” (Alba and Nee, 2003, p. 132), entailed perpetuating racial inequality and domination in relation to Blacks, Chinese, and others.¹⁴ It is telling that the concept of assimilation hardly figures in studies of Whiteness, despite the obvious shared research interest in European migrants (Kazal 1995).

The narrow reading of the historical research on Whiteness, obscuring racial inequalities and domination, overlaps with a ubiquitous, unreflexive practice of assimilation research of the past two decades: the absence of explicit analysis of native-born, or nonmigrant, Blacks. The absence is partly interrelated with a fairly recent divergence within sociology. Up to the mid-1980s, the sociologies of immigration and of race were overlying fields of inquiry. For instance, Hirschman’s (1983) review of the literature on assimilation took for granted that native-born, as well as migrant, minorities were populations to be examined, and it discussed alternative theoretical approaches that were also prominent in the sociology of race (e.g., split labor market theory, internal colonialism). Conversely, one of the major theoretical frameworks that Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986) engaged and critiqued in their influential book on racial formation was the “ethnicity paradigm,” which largely examined migrant experiences. Since then, however, the two fields have drifted apart. On the whole, assimilation theory, now ensconced in the sociology of immigration, no longer encompasses native-born Blacks within its purview. Yet African Americans, through their absence, continue to shape and haunt assimilation theory.

According to neoclassical assimilation theory, native-born Whites were and are implicitly a part of the “mainstream,” and the indications are that most migrants and their progeny did and continue to become a part of it. Aside from a relatively small number of migrants and their descendants, who is then shut out of the mainstream? In short, Blacks. In the past, from the Chicago school of the early twentieth century to the mid-1980s, assimilation theory treated African Americans as a population to

be studied and made sense of within its framework. But, by the last two decades of the twentieth century, African Americans have been cast as the exception, largely conceded to be unassimilated.¹⁵ Whether intentionally or not, neoclassical assimilation theory salvages *assimilation* by pushing out nonmigrant Blacks and focusing on “immigration,” a notion capacious enough to accommodate many generations of native-born descendants of non-Black migrants.¹⁶ In other words, whereas assimilation theory used to squeeze African Americans into the scope of analysis, it now squeezes them out. According to Alba and Nee (2003), though never stated straightforwardly, Blacks have been, are presently, and, compared to other populations, most likely will be the mainstream’s archetypal “other.” While they may lament the prospect of Blacks’ continued exclusion from the mainstream and also speculate on a more optimistic scenario, Blacks are nonetheless not a part of their empirical analysis: befitting the metaphor of the mainstream from which they are excluded, native-born Blacks appear almost entirely in the conclusion, but not the substantive chapters, of Alba and Nee’s book.¹⁷

The exclusion of native-born Blacks from the analysis is symptomatic of neoclassical assimilation theory’s inattention to the unequal *relations* between the mainstream and the nonmainstream. If the mainstream is “that part of the society *within* which ethnic and racial origins have at most minor impact on life chances or opportunities” (Alba and Nee, 2003, p. 12; emphasis in original), we can infer that “ethnic and racial origins” do have major impacts elsewhere. There are two possibilities: between the mainstream and the nonmainstream, and among the nonmainstream. They rightly see the former as more significant in terms of life chances: “particularly when those outside the mainstream are *compared to* those within it” (Alba and Nee, 2003, p. 12; emphasis added). However, I stress “compared to,” because the wording is revealing: the concept of assimilation invites, perhaps requires, *comparisons* to measure the degree of similarity but does not necessarily encourage discerning asymmetric *relations*. Specifically, they do not seriously consider the possibility that what goes on within the mainstream bears a relation to what goes on between it and the nonmainstream, that why and how race and ethnicity do not matter on the inside may be related to—may, in fact, be dependent on—why and how they do matter between the inside and the outside. Neither do they seriously consider the possibility that outsiders’ becoming a part of the mainstream may require them to participate in keeping out others, foremost Blacks. These possibilities are precisely the aspect of the historical scholarship on Whiteness that assimilation theories neglect.

There are three layers of irony in relation to Blacks, only the first of which neoclassical assimilation theory recognizes. The “institutional mechanisms” that ostensibly facilitate assimilation—state enforcement of antidiscrimination policies and a steep decline in racism’s “public legitimacy”—were brought about by the Black-led civil rights movement but have been least effective for Blacks (Alba and Nee, 2003, p. 57). The second irony is a reproduction of the first at the analytical level: neoclassical assimilation theory is aware of the significance of Blacks in forcing the institutional changes and the cruel injustice of Blacks’ not benefiting from those changes as fully as others but, instead of placing this inequality at the center of its inquiry, *excludes* Blacks from the analysis.¹⁸ Finally, although it was a mass social movement of those outside the mainstream—Blacks above all—that compelled the pivotal institutional changes, neoclassical assimilation theory has no *conceptual* room within it for explaining such movements or transformations; they are, in effect, historically unique *dei ex machina*.

Like its neoclassical counterpart, segmented assimilation theory is concerned with the assimilation patterns of migrants and their descendants, not of native-born

Blacks. Nonetheless, Blacks figure more conspicuously in it—not an absent presence so much as a marginal, and marginalized, presence. The theory features Blacks most visibly in one of its trimodal outcomes: “downward assimilation” in which some contemporary migrants—mostly those with few personal, familial, and coethnic resources—are immured in “permanent poverty” (Portes and Zhou, 1993, pp. 82, 83). For the second and presumably later generations, exposure to the native-born “underclass,” in addition to racial discrimination and a deindustrializing economy, purportedly sets and keeps them on this track. Segmented assimilation theory, as Roger Waldinger and Cynthia Feliciano point out, is not always forthright about who exactly belongs to this “underclass,” but “it is not difficult to infer” (2004, p. 377). At its core, the native-born “underclass” refers to poor urban Blacks, sometimes expanding to include similarly positioned Puerto Ricans and Mexicans.

In their mildly critical assessment of segmented assimilation theory, Alba and Nee write,

Yet the segmented assimilation concept risks essentializing central-city black culture in the image of the underclass, which the American mainstream views as the undeserving poor. This image overlooks the variety of cultural models found among urban African Americans and inflates the magnitude of the underclass population. To be sure, the black underclass may exercise a greater influence in shaping the cultural practices of the inner city than its relative size warrants. But the great majority of adult urban African Americans and Latinos hold down jobs, have families, and aspire to a better future for their children. . . . Thus, segmented assimilation, which has value in calling attention to an emergent social problem facing Afro-Caribbeans and arguably Mexicans and other Latinos, may predict an excessively pessimistic future for central-city minority youths. (2003, p. 8)

From the outside and outskirts of segmented assimilation theory, others voice similar reservations (Neckerman et al., 1999; Waldinger and Feliciano, 2004; Waters 1994, 1999). I think this criticism heads in the right direction but does not go far enough: segmented assimilation theory not only risks essentializing but, in fact, does essentialize poor urban Blacks in the image of the “underclass.” Contrary evidence is scant. I quote Alba and Nee at length to show how deeply taken for granted the concept of the “underclass” is in the assimilation literature, not only among segmented assimilation theorists but also their supposed critics: the existence of the “underclass” is not put in question, just its size and the extent of its baneful influence.

Segmented assimilation theorists seldom, if ever, provide a definition of the “underclass.” They may assume that it is unnecessary given their seemingly unmodified acceptance of the “underclass” literature from the 1980s and 1990s. William Julius Wilson’s *The Truly Disadvantaged* is probably the most cited, and his definition of the “underclass” appears to capture what they mean by the term: “large subpopulation of low-income families and individuals whose behavior contrasted sharply with the behavior of the general population. . . . inner-city joblessness, teenage pregnancy, out-of-wedlock births, female-headed families, welfare dependency, and serious crime” (1987, p. 3). As many have noted, *underclass* lacks conceptual coherence (e.g., Wacquant 1997): it does not refer to a class in any meaningful sense, for joblessness or poverty is merely a prerequisite. Rather, what this heterogeneous category of the unemployed, pregnant teenagers, the unmarried, nonnuclear families, recipients of public assistance, and criminals has in common are “social pathol-

ogies”: “behavior contrast[ing] sharply with that of mainstream America” (Wilson 1987, pp. 6, 7).¹⁹

The lineage from the “underclass” literature, Wilson’s work in particular, to segmented assimilation theory is quite direct. For example, Portes and Rumbaut write, “The result [of economic dislocation] was the rise of what Wacquant and Wilson [(1989)] have called the ‘hyperghetto’—veritable human warehouses where the disappearance of work and the everyday reality of marginalization led directly to a web of social pathologies. Proliferation of female teenage pregnancy, high involvement of youngsters in crime, and the disappearance of work habits and discipline are common traits in these areas” (2001b, pp. 59–60). The correspondence between theories of the “underclass” and segmented assimilation is not surprising. Both underscore the importance of political-economic forces, like deindustrialization and a bifurcated labor market.²⁰ At the same time, they conceive of the “culture” (i.e., values, norms, behavior) of the “underclass” to be both a response to those forces *and*, echoing the “culture of poverty” thesis, a relatively autonomous force in its own right in producing detrimental outcomes.

In the scenario of “downward assimilation,” segmented assimilation theory argues that the children of poor migrants who live in close proximity to “underclass” Blacks and others are liable to adopt their “deviant lifestyles” and fail to rise out of poverty (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001a, p. 310). Because the second generation is still generally young, most research to date centers on academic performance that stands in as a proxy for later trajectories (Portes and MacLeod 1996).²¹ Here, segmented assimilation theory aligns with and draws on the anthropology of education of John Ogbu and colleagues.²² Owing to the original “involuntary incorporation of Blacks into American society” through enslavement and their “subsequent subordination and discriminatory treatment” by Whites, African Americans, characteristic of “involuntary minorities,” are subjected to inferior education, housing, and employment.²³ Discrimination does not, however, fully explain the “low school performance” of Blacks, which also results from how they respond to their oppression. They develop an “oppositional identity and cultural frame of reference” that devalue academic achievement and consequently simply do not try hard enough (Ogbu 1991a, pp. 249, 259, 267). Ogbu argues that, although this oppositional stance partly reflects Black students’ realistic perception of limited future opportunities, it takes on a “life of [its] own” (1991b, p. 446, as quoted in Gould 1999, p. 177). Others report similar findings among native-born Mexicans (Gibson 1989; Matute-Bianchi 1991).

Segmented assimilation theory is concerned with the effects of this “oppositional culture” of the “underclass” on the academic performance of children of migrants, which are posited to be entirely harmful. Portes and Zhou write that, for poor second-generation Haitians who attend Miami’s “inner-city schools,” a “common message [from their African American peers] is the devaluation of education as a vehicle for advancement of all black youths, a message that directly contradicts the immigrant parents’ expectations.” While some Haitian students may successfully resist, most succumb to the “adversarial stance toward the white mainstream [that] is common among inner-city minority youths” and assimilate “not into mainstream culture but into the values and norms of the inner city” (1993, p. 81).²⁴ Although Waters (1994, 1999) herself is more circumspect with regard to the sway of “underclass” African Americans over second-generation West Indians in New York City, her work is regularly recruited to support the segmented assimilation theory’s idea of “rapid assimilation into ghetto youth subcultures” (Zhou 1997, p. 79). In Zhou and Carl Bankston’s (1994, 1998) study of poor second-generation Vietnamese in New Orleans, poor Blacks, who live nearby and attend the same schools, likewise appear as

a potential source of peril. However, “intact families” and a tight-knit “ethnic community” enable the Vietnamese children “to receive high grades, to have definite college plans, and to score high on academic orientation,” while only a minority of them fall prey to assuming the “oppositional culture” of the Black “underclass” (Zhou and Bankston, 1998, pp. 81, 134; 1994, p. 821). For children of Mexican migrants, U.S.-born Chicana/os are ostensibly the primary source of the debilitating cultural influence (Gibson 1989; Matute-Bianchi 1991).

As critics note, second-generation “oppositional culture,” past and present, does not require the influence of a native-born “underclass” to develop (Perlmann and Waldinger, 1997), and native-born “whites as well as minorities engage in oppositional behaviors” (Kasinitz et al., 2002, p. 1031). In any case, with partial exceptions, advocates of segmented assimilation theory do not actually study the African American and other native-born “underclass,” the imputed source of cultural contamination (cf. Kasinitz et al., 2002). It is more of a given than an object of their inquiry. They implicitly draw on and redraw the commonsensical, ominous image of the “underclass” that pervades not only U.S. society at large but social-scientific discourse, which marginalizes and racializes the very population whose marginalization and racialization it claims to analyze and even ameliorate through policy recommendations. Theoretical incoherence and empirical scarcity do not discourage but rather provide the conditions of possibility for unsubstantiated assertions about the “underclass.” In other words, not only do migrant parents see the native-born “underclass” as “a fait accompli conditioning their own and their children’s chances for success” (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001b, p. 61), so do many sociologists who study them. Consistently, normative, value-laden terms crop up in the rhetoric of segmented assimilation theory without comment or controversy. Aside from “underclass” itself, which is ubiquitous, words and phrases like “pathologies” (Gans 1992, pp. 174, 183; Portes et al., 2005, p. 1008; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001b, p. 59; Zhou 1997, p. 80), “deviant lifestyles” (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001b, p. 59; Portes et al., 2005, pp. 1008, 1013), “constructive forms of behavior,” “traditional family values” (Zhou and Bankston, 1994, p. 821), “maladaptation,” “problem kids” (Zhou and Bankston, 1998, p. 196), and “intact families” (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001a, p. 313; Zhou 1997, p. 69; Zhou and Bankston, 1994, p. 830) are summoned, all to the disadvantage of the Black, and sometimes other nonmigrant minority, urban poor.

If the Black “underclass” serves as a cauldron of contagious social ills, the “cultures” of migrants, largely regardless of whence they hail, are depicted explicitly and implicitly as the means to vaccinate them and their children. Just as the ways of the “underclass” are written about only in negative terms, those of migrants are held up in almost exclusively positive ones. Migrants bring with them or develop an array of virtues: hardworking, familially and coethnically cohesive, academically motivated, and so on. It is the protection and nurturance of these qualities that hold the most promise for migrants and their children, especially those with little financial or human capital. Segmented assimilation theory often emphasizes *social* capital—specifically “intact families” and coethnic networks—as much as or more than *cultural* values or norms, in an effort not to be confused with culture-of-poverty or cultural deprivation schools of thought. But when Zhou and Bankston in their study of the Vietnamese in New Orleans, for example, extol “social capital, provided by their intact families,” “the normative integration of families,” and their community’s “consensus over value and behavior standards,” as enabling them to elude the pathologies of their unstudied Black neighbors, how different are the assumptions (1994, p. 830)? Findings that underscore the importance of “strong adherence to traditional family values, strong commitment to a work ethic, and a

high degree of personal involvement in the ethnic community” only further muddy the distinction they seek to draw between the social and the cultural (Zhou and Bankston, 1994, p. 821).²⁵

Like assimilation theories of the past, segmented assimilation theory has a clear normative thrust. According to Portes and Rumbaut, “Despite the presence of large numbers of professionals and entrepreneurs in today’s first generation, the majority of immigrants are still poor workers. The best chance for educational achievement and economic ascent among their children lies in selective acculturation”: the path of measured assimilation through the retention of “a clear sense of their roots, the value of fluency in a second language, and the self-esteem grounded on strong family and community bonds” (2001a, pp. 315–316). The path to be avoided is downward assimilation into the “underclass” that results, in part, from insufficient defense against its cultural influences. In this theory, poor urban African Americans are both the cautionary tale and the ones who can drag poor migrants and their children into their plot, if they do not band together as families and ethnic communities.

Despite its explicit disavowals, neoclassical assimilation theory also harbors a normative desire, one for assimilation into the mainstream. After all, given their concept of the mainstream—“that part of society *within* which ethnic and racial origins have at most minor impacts on life chances or opportunities”—we should take with more than a grain of salt the claim that, in contrast to earlier assimilation theorists, Alba and Nee do not see assimilation (i.e., becoming a part of the mainstream) as “not only a ‘normal’ outcome . . . but also a beneficial one” (2003, pp. 12, 15; emphasis in original).²⁶ Here, African Americans represent the outer limit of assimilation, in theory and practice: they are the unanalyzed quintessence of those shut out of the mainstream, past and present, if not necessarily in the future (Alba and Nee, 2003, pp. 290–291).

Both neoclassical and segmented assimilation theories are politically conservative in their assumptions and implications. What Zhou and Bankston admit of their segmented assimilation approach is equally applicable to neoclassical assimilation theory:

All theoretical approaches to social issues make value judgments and reflect built-in assumptions. Our approach is no exception. . . .The fundamental value judgment of this book lies in our choice of “adaptation” as a research question. To some extent, this question involves taking mainstream American society, with all its injustices and inequalities, as given, and focusing on the factors that enable the children of Vietnamese refugees to advance in that society. In this respect, then, our research may seem to have an inherently conservative strand. (1998, p. 19)

Taking “mainstream American society” for granted, both neoclassical and segmented assimilation theories are concerned with how migrants and their descendants navigate it, but the possibility of significant changes to it, including structures of racial inequalities and domination, remain beyond consideration. Thus, as prominent as the Black-led civil rights movement is in its explanation of contemporary assimilation and as much as it expresses sympathy for Blacks, neoclassical assimilation theory cannot account for such movements or envisage anything but incremental changes. And, for all of their discussion of “oppositional culture,” proponents of segmented assimilation theory conceptualize and discuss it in unwaveringly disapproving terms and fail to contemplate how it could offer a valuable critique of the status quo and how interactions between working-class and poor migrants and Blacks could be

bidirectional and politically productive and transformative.²⁷ Even in the “mainstream” realm of electoral politics, do we have any doubt that the United States, as a polity, would be much more progressive and egalitarian if the voting preferences of the Black poor and working class were *more* influential, not less, including among migrants and their children?²⁸

CONCLUSION

Specifying an alternative to assimilation theory lies beyond the scope of this essay, the objective of which is strictly evaluative. I would like, however, to propose a fundamental reorientation in approaching such a task. Because assimilation theories are founded on “taking mainstream American society, with all its injustices and inequalities, as given” (Zhou and Bankston, 1998, p. 19), they often miss and misrepresent how race structures what they refer to as “assimilation.” For their “built-in assumptions” about race, their racial unconscious, they variously engage in suspect comparisons to the earlier wave of migration to the United States that had originally given rise to theories and practices of assimilation; 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 institutional 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.” A critical approach would cut a sharper angle to the prevailing assimilationist current in mainstream theory and society to channel analytical attention to the racial inequalities and domination that flow by unnoticed.

Though not framed as such, the phenomenon that assimilation theories are concerned with is “really the political process of nation-building” (Waldinger 2007c, p. 147; see also Wimmer and Schiller, 2003). In other words, the continual making and remaking of the nation—who belongs to the “imagined political community” and how (Anderson 1991, p. 6). And if nation-making is a *political* process, it is, at root, about relations of power (i.e., domination) and the inequalities of and struggles over resources that power relations ordinarily entail.²⁹ Questions of similarity and difference—the explicit focus of *assimilation* as a term, concept, and theory—are not wholly unrelated, but they distract and distort: *claims* of similarity and difference figure centrally in mainstream political discourse, but we should be careful not to take them at face value. Claims of radical and unassimilable difference in relation to prewar Japanese or today’s Arabs and Muslims in the United States, for instance, should not lead social scientists to unreflexively corroborate, or dispute, them. Rather, our critical task is to examine the relations of inequality and domination represented by, and partly exercised through, such claims.

If the politics of national belonging, and not the degree of ethnic similarity and difference, is the appropriate object of study, states are naturally implicated. Modern states monopolize the legitimate regulation of physical movement across their territorial borders (Torpey 1998, 2000) and the conferral of membership or citizenship, along with various partial memberships (e.g., permanent residency). Through these formal mechanisms of drawing boundaries of state belonging, geographical and juridical, states influence, to varying degrees, the always more informal, less clear-cut drawing of boundaries of national belonging. While they may be the political aspiration and manifestation of nations, states conversely help to define the nations of

which they are the “ga[u]ge and emblem” (Anderson 1991, p. 7) by authorizing who have the right to be within their borders and under what legal conditions.³⁰ For example, access to formal citizenship may not be sufficient for full acceptance as nationals, as the experiences of migrants from Asia and their offspring in the United States have continually shown, but may be vital and necessary, as the experiences of their counterparts of European origin have continually shown. Though far from realized or realizable, the normative assumption and ideal in this age of nation-states are the identity of national and state belonging—that the state boundaries of territory and citizenry should enclose nationals and only nationals. Deviations in practice, as inevitable and commonplace as they are, give rise to various ideologies, policies, and practices of exclusion and subordination, which often have the effect of exacerbating the deviations. Those who are excluded and subordinated may attempt to fit in and seek out paths of acceptance and social mobility. They may also tacitly or overtly engage in resistance—from everyday ideological and practical struggles in schools, workplaces, churches, and so on to organized mass movements—and, at times, significantly alter existing structures of inequality and domination.

Class is also squarely implicated in the politics of national belonging. With few exceptions, those who are physically within the territorial boundaries of states but are excluded from exercising citizenship rights or being fully considered nationals (i.e., migrants, subordinated native-born minorities) require gainful employment of some sort; for most migrants, it may be the overriding motive for migration. This is all the truer for those without access to the welfare state, most notably unauthorized migrants. At the same time, different classes and class fractions of a nation likely disagree on the desirability of nonnationals, usually pitting a set of employers who seek to increase the supply of labor against various others, often but not only working-class nationals. Conflicts between employers and nonnational workers, between national and nonnational workers, and between subordinated native-born and migrant workers are also likely and frequent. States juggle and vacillate between the competing national demands for labor, traditionally unskilled but increasingly both unskilled and highly skilled, and for exclusion, from territories and citizenship rights. One favored compromise in relation to international migrants is for states to admit them entry for their labor power, or turn a blind eye to it, but deny them access to rights and privileges accorded to citizens.

The approach advocated here generally corresponds with those of Waldinger (2007a, c) and Wimmer and Schiller (2003; see also Wimmer 2008). Unlike the literature on assimilation, the nation, the state, and the congruence of the two are not taken for granted but problematized, and politics, not ethnic similarity or difference, becomes the focal point. Further, unlike the literature on assimilation, subordinated native-born minorities, who are excluded variously from the nation, are not excluded from the analysis. However, following from my critique of the literature on assimilation, I would add and stress the need to fully account for race. If *ethnicity* were to stand in as the umbrella category for all types of peoplehood, I have no objections to “‘race’ [being] treated as a subtype of ethnicity, as is nationhood.” But, if race were to be thought of in this way as a “special case of ethnicity” (Wimmer 2008, pp. 973–974), its *specialness* calls for, though rarely receives, explication and theorization.

To be clear, I refer to *race* as a mode of constructing political communities. It is, as Omi and Winant remind us, “an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle” (1986, p. 68). Resistant to being reduced to a transhistorical essence, race is a “largely empty receptacle” to be filled with specific lived histories (Goldberg 1993, p. 79). Still, it is not entirely empty, and there are a few characteristics that give it minimal coherence across

different historical contexts. Though historically modern, race is almost always experienced as primordial. Relatedly, it involves categorizing people by “*some* notion of stock or collective heredity of traits” (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992, p. 2; *emphasis added*).³¹ Finally, race always implies inequality and domination, i.e., racism.

Understood in this fashion, the prominence and importance of race in the politics of national belonging, in relation to the United States and many other states, are hard to miss but are nonetheless routinely dismissed or diminished. Given the overwhelming historical evidence, the question, though empirical in character, is usually less of *whether* race matters than of *how* and *how much*. As argued elsewhere, affinities between race and nation as modes of inventing and dividing peoples—conceptually largely empty, historically specific and contingent, greatly variable in practice, objectively modern but subjectively primordial—form the condition of possibility and probability for their recurrent articulations in history (Jung 2006). Nations define themselves not only positively but also negatively, against those who putatively do not and shall not belong. For nations born of colonial empires and/or settler colonies, including the United States, these self-definitions have been shot through and through by race. Their corresponding states have reflected and shaped those definitions through the differential distribution of rights and privileges of citizenship and, increasingly from the latter half of the nineteenth century, the restrictive control of movement across their borders. Likewise, in conjunction with nation and state, race has been, to paraphrase Stuart Hall (1980), the modality in which class has been continually lived, determining who are allowed to participate in the “national” economy, to which sectors and jobs they have access, with and against whom to identify and struggle, and so on. The particular ways in which the politics of national belonging articulate with race, the state, and class, as well as other categories, are up for theoretical elaboration and empirical investigation. But the general approach of centering politics, including racial politics, to reveal the relations of power involved in the making, remaking, and even unmaking of the nation seems preferable to assimilation theories that take the nation and its structures of inequality and domination for granted. Barriers to equality and freedom, not similarity, should agitate our theoretical hackles.

Corresponding author: Moon-Kie Jung, Department of Sociology, University of Illinois, 57 CAB, 605 E. Springfield Ave., Champaign, IL 61820. E-mail: jung3@illinois.edu

NOTES

1. The author thanks Tyrone Forman, Amanda Lewis, Dave Roediger, Gillian Stevens, Caroline Yang, and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and Stanford University’s Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity for a visiting fellowship, during the tenure of which the article was begun. Because of the time lag to publication, this article could not consider the most recent writings on assimilation.
2. Alba and Nee (2003, pp. 60–61) identify three ideal-typical ways in which ethnic boundaries may change: “boundary crossing,” “boundary blurring,” and “boundary shifting.”
3. This is definition 7a for *assimilate* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The first definition listed in *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* is both transitive and organic: “to take in and appropriate as nourishment: absorb into the system.”
4. Some scholars attempt to shake free of the “assimilationist” senses of *assimilation* by using the term *incorporation* instead, but it may be similarly weighted by organic and transitive meanings: the word *incorporate* is etymologically derived from *corpus*, Latin for body, and its primary definition is “to unite or work into something already existent so as to form an indistinguishable whole” (*Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*). Thanks to Omar McRoberts for raising this point.

5. It is telling that *pluralism*—theorizing the persistence of ethnic difference—has been the primary “other” against which assimilation theory has argued and defined itself (e.g., Alba and Nee, 2003; Brubaker 2004; Gans 1997; Zhou 1997).
6. For two well-known examples, see Bonilla-Silva (1997) and Omi and Winant (1994), but this point is axiomatic and uncontroversial.
7. Some scholars like Joel Perlmann and Roger Waldinger refute these arguments through a careful historical examination of the earlier migration (1997; see also Waldinger 2007b). At the same time, they themselves engage in the same analytically suspect comparison in the process.
8. According to Portes and Zhou (1993, pp. 77–78), 85% of migrants’ children in 1940 were of European ancestry, and 77% of migrants since 1960 have been of non-European ancestry.
9. Here, note the transformations wrought by World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, postwar economic boom, civil rights movement and legislations, deindustrialization, and so on.
10. Another critical omission from their discussion of prewar migrants is Mexicans.
11. For a less optimistic interpretation of third- and fourth-generation Chinese and Japanese than Alba and Nee (2003), see Tuan (1999).
12. Perlmann and Waldinger (1997) make a similar argument.
13. For a counterargument from within the historical scholarship on Whiteness, see Guglielmo (2003).
14. This idea is not totally absent from Alba and Nee (2003, pp. 119–120, 131–132), but its dissonance with their notion of assimilation is not acknowledged. See also Waldinger (2003, pp. 266–268).
15. For a sense of this shift, compare Nathan Glazer’s articles from 1971 and 1993. In the former, he advocates seeing Blacks as an ethnic group like any other—different in degree, not in kind. In the latter, he views Blacks as the great exception to the American story of assimilation.
16. Note that the subtitle of Alba and Nee’s (2003) book is “Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration.”
17. Although recent Black *migrants* from the Caribbean and their children, like their counterparts of other non-European origins, are studied, they form the bulk of who, the authors fear, are at the greatest risk of not becoming a part of the mainstream.
18. Alba and Nee (2003, p. 58) write, “Immigrant minorities other than African Americans have derived considerably more benefit from institutional change, in part because their relationship to the mainstream is much less burdened by the legacies of the historic norms and etiquette governing race relations.” Rather than actually elucidating why migrants of color have benefited more than native-born Blacks, this statement deflects the question, reformulating it into one of explaining the “legacies of the historic norms and etiquette,” which they likewise do not take up.
19. Even among liberals and the left, Wilson was hardly alone. Nearly everyone writing on urban poverty in the 1980s and 1990s evidently felt compelled to comment unfavorably on the “culture” of the Black urban poor, although the empirical basis of such commentary was usually quite thin and speculative.
20. One difference is that segmented assimilation theorists recognize contemporary racial discrimination more prominently as a significant factor, whereas some “underclass” theorists downplay it.
21. For more recent findings on young adults, see Portes et al. (2005) and Zhou and Xiong (2005). Theoretically, there is little change.
22. The alignment is not perfect. Whereas Ogbu, in his later work, applies his argument to African Americans across class lines, segmented assimilation theory is concerned about the cultural influence of the “underclass.”
23. Ogbu also refers to “involuntary” minorities as “subordinate” (1974) and “castelike” (1978, 1991a).
24. For a more detailed analysis, see Portes and Stepick (1993).
25. They continue, “These findings indicate that strong positive immigrant *cultural* orientations can serve as a form of *social* capital that promotes value conformity and constructive forms of behavior, which provide otherwise disadvantaged children with an adaptive advantage” (Zhou and Bankston, 1994, p. 821; emphases added). On the false opposition of the cultural and the social, see Sewell (1992).

26. As Waldinger (2003, p. 255) writes of Alba and Nee's research on assimilation, "I doubt that it would have been pursued with such intensity were it not for the normative and political issues at stake." See also Brubaker (2004).
27. In many other subfields of sociology concerned with inequality and domination, characterizing "oppositional culture" as wholly undesirable and counterproductive would be received with much more skepticism and even bafflement.
The productive and transformative potential of "oppositional culture" could be seen in the participation of migrants and their children in the labor movement of the New Deal era (Waldinger 2003, pp. 267–268). The revitalization of unions and other political organizations with traditionally African American bases by recent migrants of color and their children points in a similar direction (Kasinitz et al., 2002).
28. For example, in the 2004 presidential election, a CNN exit poll revealed that only 11% of Blacks voted for George W. Bush, whereas 58% of Whites did. (Asians and Latina/os fell in-between, both at 44%.) Similarly, only 36% of those earning less than \$15,000 per year voted for Bush. (<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/states/US/P/00/epolls.0.html>) (accessed January 15, 2009).
29. Struggles over resources are, of course, at once struggles over cultural schemas or logics—of who controls resources and how.
30. See Bourdieu (1994, p. 1) on the state's capacity to inculcate and naturalize "categories of thought."
31. The emphasis on "some" underscores the idea that this schema, if always implicitly or explicitly present, is itself historically variable.

REFERENCES

- Alba, Richard (1995). Assimilation's Quiet Tide. *Public Interest*, 119: 3–18.
- Alba, Richard, and Victor Nee (1997). Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration. *International Migration Review*, 31(4): 826–874.
- Alba, Richard, and Victor Nee (2003). *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Anderson, Benedict (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso.
- Anthias, Floya, and Nira Yuval-Davis (1992). *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour and Class and the Anti-racist Struggle*. New York: Routledge.
- Azuma, Eiichiro (2005). *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bean, Frank D., and Gillian Stevens (2003). *America's Newcomers and the Dynamics of Diversity*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo (1997). Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation. *American Sociological Review*, 62(3): 465–480.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1994). Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field. *Sociological Theory*, 12(1): 1–18.
- Brubaker, Rogers (2004). The Return of Assimilation? In *Ethnicity without Groups*, pp. 116–131. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fernández-Kelly, M. Patricia, and Richard Schauffler (1994). Divided Fates: Immigrant Children in a Restructured U.S. Economy. *International Migration Review*, 28(4): 662–689.
- Friday, Chris (1994). *Organizing Asian American Labor: The Pacific Coast Canned-Salmon Industry, 1870–1942*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Fujita-Rony, Dorothy B. (2003). *American Workers, Colonial Power: Philippine Seattle and the Transpacific West, 1919–1941*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Gans, Herbert J. (1992). Second-Generation Decline: Scenarios for the Economic and Ethnic Futures of the Post-1965 American Immigrants. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 15(2): 173–192.
- Gans, Herbert J. (1997). Toward a Reconciliation of 'Assimilation' and 'Pluralism': The Interplay of Acculturation and Ethnic Retention. *International Migration Review*, 31(4): 875–892.
- Gibson, Margaret (1989). *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikh Immigrants in an American High School*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Glazer, Nathan (1971). Blacks and Ethnic Groups: The Difference and the Political Difference It Makes. *Social Problems*, 18: 444–61.
- Glazer, Nathan (1993). Is Assimilation Dead? *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 530: 122–136.

- Goldberg, David Theo (1993). *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Gordon, Milton (1964). *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gould, Mark (1999). Race and Theory: Culture, Poverty, and Adaptation to Discrimination in Wilson and Ogbu. *Sociological Theory*, 17(2): 171–200.
- Guglielmo, Thomas A. (2003). *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color and Power in Chicago, 1890–1945*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hall, Stuart (1980). Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance. In UNESCO (Ed.), *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*, pp. 305–345. Paris: UNESCO.
- Hirschman, Charles (1983). America's Melting Pot Reconsidered. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 9: 397–423.
- Jacobson, Matthew Frye (1998). *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jacoby, Tamar (Ed.) (2004). *Reinventing the Melting Pot: The New Immigrants and What It Means to Be American*. New York: Basic.
- Jung, Moon-Kie (2006). *Reworking Race: The Making of Hawaii's Interracial Labor Movement*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kasinitz, Philip, John Mollenkopf, and Mary C. Waters (2002). Becoming American/ Becoming New Yorkers: Immigrant Incorporation in a Majority Minority City. *International Migration Review*, 36(4): 1020–1036.
- Kazal, Russell A. (1995). Revisiting Assimilation: The Rise, Fall, and Reappraisal of a Concept in American Ethnic History. *American Historical Review*, 100(2): 437–471.
- Matute-Bianchi, Maria Eugenia (1991). Situational Ethnicity and Patterns of School Performance among Immigrant and Nonimmigrant Mexican-Descent Students. In Margaret Gibson and John U. Ogbu (Eds.), *Minority Status and Schooling: A Comparative Study of Immigrant and Involuntary Minorities*, pp. 205–247. New York: Garland.
- Morawska, Ewa (1994). In Defense of the Assimilation Model. *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 13(2): 76–87.
- Neckerman, Kathryn M., Prudence Carter, and Jennifer Lee (1999). Segmented Assimilation and Minority Cultures of Mobility. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22(6): 945–965.
- Ngai, Mae (2004). *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ogbu, John U. (1974). *The Next Generation: An Ethnography of Education in an Urban Neighborhood*. New York: Academic Press.
- Ogbu, John U. (1978). *Minority Education and Caste: The American System in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New York: Academic Press.
- Ogbu, John U. (1991a). Low School Performance as an Adaptation: The Case of Blacks in Stockton, California. In Margaret A. Gibson and John U. Ogbu (Eds.), *Minority Status and Schooling: A Comparative Study of Immigrant and Involuntary Minorities*, pp. 249–285. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Ogbu, John U. (1991b). Minority Coping Responses and School Experience. *The Journal of Psychobiology*, 18: 433–56.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant (1986). *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*. New York: Routledge.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant (1994). *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. Rev. ed. New York: Routledge.
- Ong, Paul, and Tania Azores (1994). Asian Immigrants in Los Angeles: Diversity and Divisions. In Paul Ong, Edna Bonacich, and Lucie Cheng (Eds.), *The New Asian Immigration in Los Angeles and Global Restructuring*, pp. 100–129. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Perlmann, Joel, and Roger Waldinger (1997). Second Generation Decline? Children of Immigrants, Past and Present—A Reconsideration. *International Migration Review*, 31(4): 893–922.
- Portes, Alejandro, and Rubén G. Rumbaut (2001a). Conclusion—The Forging of a New America: Lessons for Theory and Policy. In Rubén G. Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes (Eds.), *Ethnicities: Children of Immigrants in America*, pp. 301–317. Berkeley and New York: University of California Press and Russell Sage Foundation.
- Portes, Alejandro, and Rubén G. Rumbaut (2001b). *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*. Berkeley and New York: University of California Press and Russell Sage Foundation.
- Portes, Alejandro, Patricia Fernández-Kelly, and William Haller (2005). Segmented Assimilation on the Ground: The New Second Generation in Early Childhood. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28(6): 1000–1040.

- Portes, Alejandro, and Dag MacLeod (1996). Educational Progress of Children of Immigrants: The Roles of Class, Ethnicity, and School Context. *Sociology of Education*, 69: 255–275.
- Portes, Alejandro, and Alex Stepick (1993). *City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Portes, Alejandro, and Min Zhou (1993). The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 530: 74–96.
- Roediger, David R. (1991). *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. New York: Verso.
- Roediger, David R. (2005). *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White*. New York: Basic Books.
- Saxton, Alexander (1971). *Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Sewell, William H., Jr. (1992). A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation. *American Journal of Sociology*, 98(1): 1–29.
- Torpey, John (1998). Coming and Going: On the State Monopolization of the Legitimate “Means of Movement.” *Sociological Theory*, 16(3): 239–259.
- Torpey, John (2000). *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship, and the State*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tuan, Mia (1999). *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Wacquant, Loïc J.D. (1997). Three Pernicious Premises in the Study of the American Ghetto. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 21(2): 341–353.
- Wacquant, Loïc J.D., and William Julius Wilson (1989). The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion in the Inner City. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 501: 8–26.
- Waldinger, Roger (2003). Foreigners Transformed: International Migration and the Remaking of a Divided People. *Diaspora*, 12(2): 247–272.
- Waldinger, Roger (2007a). The Bounded Community: Turning Foreigners into Americans in Twenty-first Century L.A. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30(3): 341–374.
- Waldinger, Roger (2007b). Did Manufacturing Matter? The Experience of Yesterday's Second Generation: A Reassessment. *International Migration Review*, 41(1): 3–39.
- Waldinger, Roger (2007c). Transforming Foreigners into Americans. In Mary C. Waters and Reed Ueda (Eds.), *The New Americans: A Guide to Immigration since 1965*, pp. 137–148. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Waldinger, Roger, and Cynthia Feliciano (2004). Will the New Second Generation Experience ‘Downward Assimilation’? Segmented Assimilation Re-assessed. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 27(3): 376–402.
- Waters, Mary C. (1994). Ethnic and Racial Identities of Second-Generation Black Immigrants in New York City. *International Migration Review*, 28(4): 795–820.
- Waters, Mary C. (1999). *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*. Cambridge, MA and New York: Harvard University and Russell Sage Foundation.
- Waters, Mary C., and Tomás Jiménez (2005). Assessing Immigrant Assimilation: New Empirical and Theoretical Challenges. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 31: 105–125.
- Wilson, William Julius (1978). *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilson, William Julius (1987). *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Wimmer, Andreas (2008). The Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Boundaries: A Multilevel Process Theory. *American Journal of Sociology*, 113(4): 970–1022.
- Wimmer, Andreas, and Nina Glick Schiller (2003). Methodological Nationalism, the Social Sciences, and the Study of Migration: An Essay in Historical Epistemology. *International Migration Review*, 37(3): 576–610.
- Zhou, Min (1997). Growing Up American: The Challenge Confronting Immigrant Children and Children of Immigrants. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 23: 63–95.
- Zhou, Min, and Carl L. Bankston III (1994). Social Capital and the Adaptation of the Second Generation: The Case of Vietnamese Youth in New Orleans. *International Migration Review*, 28(4): 821–845.
- Zhou, Min, and Carl L. Bankston III (1998). *Growing Up American: The Adaptation of Vietnamese Adolescents in the United States*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Zhou, Min, and Yang Sao Xiong (2005). The Multifaceted American Experiences of the Children of Asian Immigrants: Lessons for Segmented Assimilation. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28(6): 1119–1152.