When today's activists try to learn from the movements of the 1960s, one simple lesson should be remembered: liberation has similar meanings for all people of color engaged in struggle. It means an end to racist oppression, the birth of collective self-respect and genuine hope of the social justice that we sometimes call equality. That common dream requires us to build alliances among progressive people of color.

Such alliances require a knowledge and wisdom that we have yet to acquire. Today it remains painful to see how divide-and-conquer strategies succeed among people of color. It is painful to see how prejudice, resentment, petty competitiveness and sheer ignorance fester. It is positively pitiful to see how we echo Anglo stereotypes about each other.

These divisions indicate that we urgently need some fresh and fearless thinking about racism, which might begin with analyzing the strong tendency to frame U.S. racial issues in strictly Black-white terms. Such terms make little sense when a 1996 U.S. Census report says that 33 percent of our population will be Asian/Pacific Island-American, Latino, Native American/Indigenous (which includes Hawaiian) and Arab-American by the year 2050—in other words, neither white nor Black. (Steven A. Holmes, “Census Sees a Profound Ethnic Shift in U.S.,” New York Times, March 14, 1996.) Also, we find an increasing number of mixed people who incorporate two, three or more “races.”

The racial and ethnic landscape has changed too much in recent years to view it with the same eyes as before. We are looking at a multi-dimensional reality in which race, ethnicity, nationality, culture and immigrant status come together with breathtakingly new results. We are also seeing global changes that have a massive impact on our domestic situation, especially the economy and labor force. For a group of Korean restaurant entrepreneurs to hire Mexican cooks to prepare Chinese dishes for mainly African-American customers, as happened in Houston, Texas, has ceased to be unusual.

The ever-changing demographic landscape compels those struggling against racism and for a transformed, non-capitalist society to resolve several strategic questions. Among them: doesn't the exclusively Black-white framework discourage the perception of common interests among people of color and thus sustain White Supremacy? Doesn't the view that only African Americans face serious institutionalized racism isolate them from potential allies? Doesn't the Black-white model encourage people of color to spend too
much energy understanding our lives in relation to whiteness, obsessing about what white society will think and do?

That tendency is inevitable in some ways: the locus of power over our lives has long been white (although big shifts have recently taken place in the color of capital, as we see in Japan, Singapore and elsewhere). The oppressed have always survived by becoming experts on the oppressor’s ways. But that can become a prison of sorts, a trap of compulsive vigilance. Let us liberate ourselves, then, from the tunnel vision of whiteness and behold the many colors around us! Let us summon the courage to reject outdated ideas and stretch our imaginations into the next century. . . .

The current, exclusively Black-white framework for racism prevails throughout U.S. society, even when it is obviously inappropriate. Everywhere we can find major discussions of race and race relations that totally ignore people of color other than African Americans. President Bill Clinton led the way in the first stages of his “dialogue on race” during 1997, with a commission that included no Native Americans, Asian Americans or Latinos. East Coast-based institutions including academia and the media, our ideological mentors, are especially myopic. Books continue to be published that define U.S. race relations in exclusively Black-white terms, like Simon & Schuster’s 1997 volume America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible, coauthored by Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom. Television programs, panel discussions and conferences on race see only in bipolar terms (does ABC’s Ted Koppel ever see more than Black and white in his reports on racial issues?). Major outbreaks of Latino unrest, like the uprisings in Morningside Heights, New York City, and the Mt. Pleasant district of Washington, D.C., make little if any dent; Latinos are in the news today and invisible again tomorrow. Except in the arena of electoral politics, much of New York City appears indifferent to the fact that, as of the early 1990s, Latinos totalled 24.4 percent of its population while Asians formed 6.9 percent. New Yorkers often dismiss the need for a new, more complex model of racial issues as “a California hangup.”

Not that California is so much less myopic than the East and the Midwestern states. In fact the West Coast has only recently begun to move away from its own denial. In California, this most multinational of states, where Latinos have usually been the largest population of color, it is not rare for reports on racial issues to stay strictly inside the Black-white framework. In San Francisco, whose population is almost half Latino and Asian/Pacific Island American, the media often use that afterthought phrase, “Blacks and other minorities.” Millions of Americans saw massive Latino participation in the April 1992 Los Angeles uprising on their television screens. The most heavily damaged areas were 49 percent Latino; of the dead, 18 out of 50 were Latino; and the majority of people arrested were Latino, according to a 1993 report by the Tomás Rivera Center, a research institute in Claremont, California. Yet the mass media and most people continue to call that event “a Black riot.”

For its annual conference held in northern California in August 1997, the American Civil Liberties Union had 18 panelists listed in the program; only one had a Spanish surname. Across the nation, educational resource projects do not include Latinos except in the category of “immigrants.” In daily life, to cite several personal experiences, Anglos will admit to having made a racist remark or gesture toward an African American much more quickly than one made toward a Latino. Or they will respond to an account of police brutality toward some Latino/a with an irrelevant remark about the terrible crimes committed by Spanish conquistadores against indigenous people. (In other words, “your people” did the same thing, so don’t complain.) Or: try to discuss racist acts against Asians, and people of any color will complain about rich Japanese businessmen supposedly taking over everything.

Innumerable statistics, reports and daily incidents should make it impossible to exclude Latinos and other non-Black populations of color when racism is discussed, but they
don’t. Police killings, hate crimes by racist individuals and murders with impunity by border officials should make it impossible, but they don’t. With chilling regularity, ranch owners compel migrant workers, usually Mexican, to repay the cost of smuggling them into the United States by laboring the rest of their lives for free. The forty-five Latino and Thai garment workers locked up in an El Monte, California, factory—working eighteen hours a day, seven days a week for $299 a month—can also be considered slaves (and one must ask why it took three years for the Immigration and Naturalization Service to act on its own reports about this horror) (San Francisco Examiner, August 8, 1995).

Abusive treatment of migrant workers can be found all over the United States. In Jackson Hole, Wyoming, for example, police and federal agents rounded up 150 Latino workers in 1997, inked numbers on their arms and hauled them off to jail in patrol cars and a horse trailer full of manure (Los Angeles Times, September 6, 1997).

These experiences cannot be attributed to xenophobia, cultural prejudice, or some other term, less repellant than racism. Take the case of two small Latino children in San Francisco who were found in 1997 covered from head to toe with flour. They explained they had hoped to make their skin white enough for school. There is no way to understand their action except as the result of fear in the racist climate that accompanied passage of Proposition 187, which denies schooling to the children of undocumented immigrants. Another example: Mexican and Chicana women working at a Nabisco plant in Oxnard, California, were not allowed to take bathroom breaks from the assembly line and were told to wear diapers instead. Can we really imagine white workers being treated that way? (The Nabisco women did file a suit and won, in 1997.)

No “model minority” myth protects Asians and Asian Americans from hate crimes, police brutality, immigrant-bashing, stereotyping and everyday racist prejudice. Scapegoating can even take their lives, as happened with the murder of Vincent Chin in Detroit some years ago. Two auto workers thought he was Japanese (he was Chinese) and thus responsible for all those Japanese cars that left them unemployed. Hate crimes against Asians mounted steadily in the 1990s, with a leap of 17 percent nationwide in one year alone—from 1995 to 1996 (San Francisco Examiner, October 26, 1997). A Chinese-American man outside a supermarket was killed in 1995 in northern California by an unemployed meat cutter who said he just felt an urge to “kill me a Chinaman” (New York Times, December 13, 1995). A popular Vietnamese youth, Thien Minh Ly, was stabbed twenty-three times while skating at the local high school in Tustin, California; the murderer wrote in a letter, “Oh, I killed a Jap” (San Francisco Chronicle, October 22, 1996). As in the Vincent Chin killing, this case exemplifies the confusion over nationality, another similarity between the experience of Latinos and Asian/Pacific Island Americans: both are homogenized.

In a particularly outrageous case, police killed a young Chinese engineer and father of three young children in Rohnert Park, California, on April 24, 1997. The man had received racist insults while at a bar celebrating a new job, and had gone home furious. Hearing his drunken shouts, neighbors called police, who shot him immediately when he waved a long stick at them that he had grabbed from the garage. Police would not let his wife convince him to go inside their home, as she thought she could, or give him cardiopulmonary resuscitation (she is a nurse) after he was shot. Instead, they handcuffed the man and left him to die in his driveway. Their explanation was a racist stereotype: the stick (which was all of one-eighth inch thick) made the officer think the man would use “martial arts” against them. When we hear about this unending list of racist horrors, it is hard to understand how Asian/Pacific Island Americans, like Latinos and other peoples of color, have been excluded from the framework of racism.

We also need to look at the often stunning commonalities of racist experience. When some 120,000 Japanese—most of them U.S. citizens—were packed off to “internment” camps during World War II, this should have rung an old, familiar bell. We have lived
with the internment camp under so many other names: reservation, plantation, migrant labor camp. It is not hard to imagine Arab Americans being rounded up someday for imprisonment in "terrorist camps."

Along with African Americans, millions of other people of color have been invisibilized, terrorized, demonized and dehumanized by White Supremacy. Yet up to now, the prevailing framework for racial issues has not included them, except occasionally in books and articles (mainly by people of color). We need to ask: why?

**Why the Black-White Model?**

A bipolar model of racism has never been really accurate for the United States. Early in this nation’s history, Benjamin Franklin perceived a tri-racial society based on skin color—"the lovely white" (Franklin's words), the Black, and the "tawny," as Ronald Takaki tells us in his Iron Cages (1979). But this concept changed as capital's need for labor intensified in the new nation and came to focus on African slave labor. The "tawny" were decimated or forcibly exiled to distant areas; Mexicans were not yet available to be the main labor force. As enslaved Africans became the crucial labor force for the primitive accumulation of capital, they also served as the foundation for the very idea of whiteness—based on the concept of blackness as inferior.

Three other reasons for the Black-white framework seem obvious: numbers, geography and history. African Americans have long been the largest population of color in the United States; only recently has this begun to change. Also, African Americans have long been found in sizable numbers in most parts of the United States, including major cities, which has not been true of Latinos until recent times. Historically, the Black-white relationship has been entrenched in the nation’s collective memory for some 300 years—whereas it is only 150 years since the United States seized half of Mexico and incorporated those lands and their peoples. Slavery and the struggle to end it formed a central theme in this country's only civil war—a prolonged, momentous conflict. Above all, enslaved Africans in the United States, and subsequent African Americans, have created an unmatched heritage of massive, persistent, dramatic and infinitely courageous resistance, with individual leaders of worldwide note.

We also find sociological and psychological explanations for the Black-white model's persistence. From the days of Thomas Jefferson onward, Native Americans, Mexicans and later the Asian/Pacific Islanders did not seem as much a threat to racial purity or as capable of arousing white sexual anxieties as did Blacks. A major reason for this must have been Anglo ambiguity about who could be called white. Most of the Mexican ranchero elite in California had welcomed the U.S. takeover, and Mexicans were partly European—therefore "semicivilized"; this allowed Anglos to see them as white, unlike lower-class Mexicans. For years Mexicans were legally white, and even today we hear the ambiguous U.S. Census term "Non-Hispanic Whites."

Like Latinos, Asian Americans have also been officially counted as white in some historical periods. They have been defined as "colored" in others, with "Chinese" being yet another category. Like Mexicans, they were often seen as not really white but not quite Black either. Such ambiguity tended to put Asian Americans along with Latinos outside the prevailing framework of racism.

Blacks, on the other hand, were not defined as white, could rarely become upper-class and maintained an almost constant rebelliousness. Contemporary Black rebellion has been urban: right in the Man's face, scary. Mexicans, by contrast, have lived primarily in rural areas until a few decades ago and "have no Mau-Mau image," as one Black friend said, even when protesting injustice energetically. Only the nineteenth-century resistance heroes labeled "bandits" stirred white fear, and that was along the border, a limited area. Latino stereotypes are mostly silly: snoozing next to a cactus, eating greasy food,
always being late and disorganized, rolling big Carmen Miranda eyes, shrugging with self-deprecation "me no speck good engleesh." In other words, not serious. This view may be altered today by stereotypes of the gangbanger, criminal or dirty immigrant, but the prevailing image of Latinos remains that of a debased white, at best.

In his book *Racial Oppression in America* (1972), Robert Blauner, an Anglo and one of the few authorities on racism to have questioned the Black-white framework, looks at some psychological factors as revealed in literature:

We buy black writers, not only because they can write and have something to say, but because the white racial mind is obsessed with blackness.... Mexican-Americans, on the other hand, have been unseen as individuals and as a group.... James Baldwin has pointed to the deep mutual involvement of black and white in America. The profound ambivalence, the love-hate relationship, which Baldwin's own work expresses and dissects, does not exist in the racism that comes down on La Raza.... Even the racial stereotypes that plague Mexican-Americans tend to lack those positive attributes that mark antiblack fantasies: supersexuality, inborn athletic and musical power, natural rhythm.

In short: whiteness would not exist without blackness to define its superiority, nor does whiteness exist without envy of blackness. But white envy of *mexicanidad,"* "Mexicanness," has always been very limited, and even less so white envy of the so-called Oriental. Anglo attitudes toward the Native American combine romanticized envy with racist stereotypes, yet carry too little weight numerically to challenge the existing racist model.

Among other important reasons for the exclusively Black-white model, sheer ignorance leaps to mind. The oppression and exploitation of Latinos (like Asians) have historical roots unknown to most Americans. People who learn at least a little about Black slavery remain totally ignorant about how the United States seized half of Mexico or how it has colonized Puerto Rico. Robert Blauner has rightly commented on the Latino situation that

[even informed Anglos know almost nothing about La Raza, its historical experience, its present situation.... And the average citizen doesn't have the foggiest notion that Chicanos have been lynched in the Southwest and continue to be abused by the police, that an entire population has been exploited economically, dominated politically, and raped culturally.

One other important reason for the bipolar model of racism is the stubborn self-centeredness of U.S. political culture. It has meant that the nation lacks any global vision other than relations of domination. In particular, the United States refuses to see itself as one among some twenty countries in a hemisphere whose dominant languages are Spanish and Portuguese, not English. It has only a big yawn of contempt or at best indifference for the people, languages and issues of Latin America. It arrogantly took for itself alone the name of half the western hemisphere, America, as was its "Manifest Destiny," of course.

So Mexico may be nice for a vacation and lots of Yankees like tacos, but the political image of Latin America combines incompetence with absurdity, fat corrupt dictators with endless siestas. Similar attitudes extend to Latinos within the United States. My parents, both Spanish teachers, endured decades of being told that students were better off learning French or German. The mass media complain that "people can't relate to Hispanics (or Asians)." It takes mysterious masked rebels, a beautiful young murdered singer or salsa outselling ketchup for the Anglo world to take notice of Latinos. If there weren't a mushrooming, billion-dollar "Hispanic" market to be wooed, the Anglo world might still not know we exist. No wonder that racial paradigm sees only two poles.

The exclusively Black-white framework is also sustained by the "model minority" myth, because it distances Asian Americans from other victims of racism. Portraying Asian Americans as people who work hard, study hard, obey the established order and therefore prosper, the myth in effect admonishes Blacks and Latinos: "See, anyone can
make it in this society if you try hard enough. The poverty and prejudice you face are all your fault."

The "model" label has been a wedge separating Asian Americans from others of color by denying their commonalities. It creates a sort of racial bourgeoisie, which White Supremacy uses to keep Asian Americans from joining forces with the poor, the homeless and criminalized youth. People then see Asian Americans as a special class of yuppy: young, single, college-educated, on the white-collar track—and they like to shop for fun. Here is a dandy minority group, ready to be used against others.

The stereotype of Asian Americans as whiz kids is also enraging because it hides so many harsh truths about the impoverishment, oppression and racist treatment they experience. Some do come from middle- or upper-class families in Asia, some do attain middle-class or higher status in the U.S., and their community must deal with the reality of class privilege where it exists. But the hidden truths include the poverty of many Asian/Pacific Islander groups, especially women, who often work under intolerable conditions, as in the sweatshops. Many youths are not students but live on the streets or in pool halls. A 1993 U.S. Census study reported that the poverty rate for peoples of Asian origin in the United States ran as high as 26 percent (Vietnamese), 35 percent (Laotian), 43 percent (Cambodian) and a monstrous 64 percent (Hmong) (San Francisco Examiner, October 7, 1997). Just how "model" is that? . . .

Racism Evolves

A glimpse into the next century tells us how much we need to look beyond the bipolar model of race relations. Black and white are real poles, central to the history of U.S. racism. We should not ignore them; neither should we stop there. Our effectiveness in fighting racism depends on seeing the changes taking place today and trying to perceive the contours of the future, which includes defining new poles. . . . Racism has had certain common characteristics around the world but no permanently fixed character. So it is today as well.

Racism evolves. If you thought Latinos were just "Messicans" down at the border, wake up. They are all over North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Manhattan, too, although you may not see them on your streets. If you thought Asians were just a few old guys chatting in Chinatown, look again at a California mall or the Atlanta, Georgia, airport or a New York state university campus. Qualitative as well as quantitative changes are taking place. With the broader geographic spread of Latinos and Asian/Pacific Island Americans, policies and attitudes that were once regional have become national. California leads the way: the West is going east and the oldest part of this country is taking on many new colors.

Racism evolves; our models must also evolve. Today's challenge is to move beyond the Black-white dualism that has served as the foundation of White Supremacy. In taking up this challenge, we have to proceed with both boldness and infinite care. Talking race in these United States is an intellectual minefield; for every observation, one can find three contradictions and four necessary qualifications from five different racial groups. Making your way through that complexity, you have to think: keep your eyes on the prize.

References