

# Black-Brown Relations: Are Alliances Possible?

**J. Jorge Klor de Alva and Cornel West**

**Moderator (Ronald Wakabayashi):** To begin, may I ask you both to share some of your thoughts on the issue of race in general and how your recent work touches on the matter of alliances?

**West:** Let me begin by briefly saying that I'm delighted to be here. And I'd like to thank brother Leonard Robinette [Chairman and Executive Director, WLCAC] and those at the Getty Center and Arco for having the vision and determination to bring us together, building on the rich legacy of Ted Watkins [Founder, WLCAC], who in so many ways was an exemplary organic intellectual, as both a progressive activist and institution builder. First, there is a real sense in which my own understanding of race builds very much on the kind of deep class concerns that brother Ted Watkins had, one that encompasses an understanding that it is very difficult to talk about race without talking about that larger economic, political, and cultural context, while always keeping one's eye on the internal dynamics of business elites, bank elites, cultural elites, and how they shape the very framework in which we not only confront one another, but perceive one another. And that's so crucial to me. The second point is that a Black-Brown alliance must always be understood within something bigger than itself. Jorge and I have had a long-standing relationship. We have been friends, taught at Princeton together, but we are not here just to chit chat and have a Black-Brown, touchy-feely kind of thing.

We are talking about ways in which larger ideals and principles, radically democratic ones, sit at the center of what ought to hold any desirable Black-Brown alliance together. I can imagine a whole host of Black-Brown alliances on which I would bring serious critique to bear, precisely because they would not be focusing on the various ways in which the working poor and very poor within our

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**J. JORGE KLOR DE ALVA** is a Professor of Comparative Ethnic Studies and Anthropology (Department of Anthropology, 232 Kroeber, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720; e-mail: kd\_alva@uclink4.berkeley.edu). **CORNEL WEST** is a Professor of Religion and Afro-American Studies (Department of Afro-American Studies, 1430 Mass. Ave., Rm. 6, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138; e-mail: cmacleod@fas.harvard.edu).

This dialogue, edited by Beverly J. Robinson, Professor of Theatre Arts and Folklore Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, was moderated by Ronald K. Wakabayashi, Executive Director, Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission. It took place on October 23, 1994, at the Watts Labor Community Action Committee, Los Angeles, California, and was sponsored by the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, the Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC), and Arco.

Black and Brown communities are actually being empowered. There are a number of Black and Brown alliances one can conceive of that are themselves in alliance with business and bank elites of a conservative sort, that are disempowering or setting up impediments to the empowerment of the masses, the vast majority of Brown and Black brothers and sisters. So in this regard Black-Brown dialogue is just an instance of what it means to take seriously a radically democratic project for the masses that keeps track of working people, the working poor, and the very poor, and at the same time tries to enrich the quality of our public life, which is a precondition for keeping that radical democratic tradition alive.

**Klor de Alva:** I have been working on questions of race and ethnicity for a long time in a wide variety of settings. However, the questions surrounding the relationships between Blacks and Browns had not been a central feature because most of my work had focused on interactions between indigenous peoples and Europeans and between Latinos and so-called Anglos. Over time, I became progressively more engaged with relationships between Blacks and Browns, Asians and Blacks, and Asians and Latinos. Yet in the course of my professional career there have been very few opportunities where those particular interests were nourished. After all, most people adhere to the dominant view that sees race and ethnicity as something essential. That is, they see race and ethnicity as something primordial, unchanging, fundamentally fixed and determinative. And that has been a very important assumption that has driven conversations about race and ethnicity in the United States and has made it very difficult to carry on a conversation like the one we are having now.

There are many conversations taking place between Browns and Blacks today. Most of them are based on mutual suspicion, fear, and stereotypes that we cannot repeat in public. There are many nasty ones I have been witness to, and accusatory and distrustful ones filled with anger and hate. My hope is that today we will be terribly frank and open so that we can use this opportunity as a springboard for many other, better conversations, among yourselves, among the people you all interact with, and in all the other settings where I hope Cornel and I will also have the chance to carry our discussions forward.

Although we will discuss later the question of whether alliances are possible, I would like to begin by summarizing the central problem with alliances between Blacks and Browns by quoting some graffiti written on a wall not far from here during the 1992 Los Angeles riots. It read:

	4/30/92	
Crips	Together	LAPD X 187
Bloods	Forever	
Mexicans	Tonite	

Now, for the most part the alliances we have been familiar with have been alliances of the “together forever tonite” type, which are primarily the result of there being some external threat out there (such as the police in Los Angeles) that

brings Blacks and Browns together seemingly “forever,” but really only for a night. I would like to see a conversation begin and a framework put together that would permit us to break out of that mold and make it possible to begin a dialogue with a sense of togetherness that is focused more on “forever” than just for “tonite.”

**Moderator:** The existing paradigm around race in this country is largely framed historically and in the present around Black-White relations. That is the nexus of how this country has come to understand and address the issue of race. Now, that paradigm assumes two populations that today are American-born. They are a cohort group in the sense that both are raised and live in the same national boundaries and share much in common. This framework, however, contrasts with the paradigm that must address a situation like that found in Los Angeles. The current diversity includes a population that is 40% foreign-born, that does not share that sort of life experience, has different historical roots and social histories, and arrives at this intersection often carrying different social paradigms and different institutions. Is that part of our challenge in dealing with these alliances, that there are issues concerning both the racial paradigm itself and the structures of the institutions?

**West:** I think so. We have to begin with the tremendous weight and gravity of the vicious, pernicious ideology and practice of white supremacy that is at the very core of the European settlement that understood itself as a precious, yet precarious experiment in democracy. When we look at Black-Brown relations, it is important to keep in mind the specific histories of the particular peoples. Because what would be distinctive about white supremacy is that it has to do with the weight and gravity of the particular roles that people play. White supremacy understood itself primarily over and against people of African descent, and it could have done that *vis à vis* Red brothers and sisters because it was ugly, atrocious, immoral, and so forth. The way in which American identity was constituted, then, was as positively charged whiteness, negatively charged blackness.

In the process of America’s imperial expansion, with the Lone Star Republic and the Bear Flag Republic, you get dispossession of the land of Mexican brothers and sisters. That nation already understands itself as primarily a nation construed through this whiteness-blackness discourse. The question then becomes: How does one respond to, interact with, dominate, and engage in forms of conquest *vis à vis* these Mexicans whose land one is after, as well as what is on the land? It is the first wave of Brown brothers and sisters, interacting with a nation with basically a white supremacist identity. Then there is the second wave, after the Mexican Revolution, that pushed many Mexican brothers and sisters to make their way into what used to be their country and is now the United States. Then came the subsequent waves of new immigrants who have to contend with an America with a vicious legacy of white supremacy in which blackness has been privileged as the second term in the binary opposition of race talk. But that’s historic; it is operative with all of the residues and effects and consequences in our

day, given this larger historical development over time in terms of how we understand the USA.

**Klor de Alva:** I have a slightly different take. First, it is very difficult to engage in dialogue without making problematic some of the assumptions we hold. If we look at the history of the United States, and we could also look at the general history of Western European expansion, we would see a very complicated and mixed affair. Experiences of social interaction were different in different places. For example, the people you would expect to hate each other in a specific area did not necessarily do so, or the people who got along in one place did not do so elsewhere. There have been a number of occasions in the history of the United States when a kind of pluralism or, if you want, a kind of *mestizaje*, *métissage*, or creolism, was quite feasible. We see it in the very early history of Black-Indian relations. In many corners there was great affinity between both sides — and nowadays there are a good number of Native American communities composed of people that physically you would not be able to tell apart from a community of African Americans. Interaction had taken place, in the sense of folks getting by, getting along, trying to make a life together, reproducing, and working to make ends meet. In many places the same could be said for relations among white and Native American groups and even among whites and Blacks. For the latter, we have the case of the northern part of the South, where for a long time there was much close interaction between both sides. And we know that at the beginning of contact between the early Euro-Americans and Latinos/Mexicans in the Southwest, an incredibly high rate of intermarriage (not just rape) took place. Of course, some of these were marriages of convenience, folks marrying into Mexican families with the intention of inheriting what lands and property existed. But it is not necessary to paint an idyllic picture to make the point.

The following observation will suffice: evil and rottenness are evenly distributed across the world, and are likely to occur in every instance of social interaction. In trying to address your question, what I am interested in answering is: What are the operative issues? What are the structural problems? What are the paradigms, perceptions, and world views we bring with us and to our interpretations? What is going on in our educational system that makes it so difficult for us to overcome the fact that we continue to identify the critical differences between Cornel and me by the least significant thing about us: the color of our skin?

We need to learn to *not* think that it is *obvious* Blacks are black and Latinos are brown or white. We must come to understand that those colors are *not* somehow natural markers of social difference. The reason why this or that color has such a profound effect on the society is because certain meanings have been given to it. It is the making and unmaking of those meanings that I am after. There should be no reason why one should not be able to marry a woman who is Black, by all contemporary definitions, and be able to have children with her and have them be identified differently, as frequently happens in Latino families, with “Look, this

is my *negrito* [Black one] and this is my *güerito* [blond one]” — a phenomenon practically unknown in the U.S. outside of Latino/Caribbean families.

Therefore, when Cornel speaks about foreigners recently arriving, it must be remembered that, *whatever their color, they have to learn the color codes that reign in this country*. In effect, they have to learn to become U.S. racists because racism, of any kind, does not come with one’s blood or with our mother’s milk, any more than we carry culture in our genes. We are not born with it. There are serious problems that need to be addressed through the inspirational and prophetic approaches that have been raised in many different and important forums. And there are also issues of a social-scientific sort that we must figure out, a key one being: What is the specific, empirical nature of Black-Brown relations? We know very little, practically nothing, about this topic because not one book has been written on the subject. Little can be found based on serious empirical data that is realistic or helpful, although *relations between these two groups may very well be the central social issue in the future of America’s race relations*.

**West:** It is certainly the case that race is absurd when viewed from the vantage point of persons who recognize that any constructed meaning about race has a history that is contingent, shifting, changing. At the same time, it is always very important to link any constructed meanings to the way they are mobilized to justify and legitimate asymmetric relations of power, structures of domination. That is why I begin with white supremacy. Part of the problem with Black-Brown relations is that so many Brown brothers and sisters look at Black brothers and sisters through white supremacist lenses, and so many Black brothers and sisters look at Brown brothers and sisters through white supremacist lenses. Now race itself has been constructed that way. We talk about alliances, but there can be no alliances without bonds of trust. How do you generate bonds of trust when you are perceiving one another through white supremacist lenses? It is not just an accident that those lenses are in place, not simply just a matter of divide and conquer, but deeper than that. It has to do with all the various dimensions of white supremacist assaults on Black and Brown beauty and moral character, which have a history that makes it difficult for us actually to feel as if we can generate the energy, vision, interests, and bonds to confront a tremendously powerful set of institutions already in place. That is part of the challenge and that is, of course, what we are going to be dealing with here as well as subsequently in our other dialogues.

**Klor de Alva:** Let me bring the issue you have just raised to the kind of contemporary setting that can elucidate the two visions you mentioned. Blacks very frequently see Hispanics as yet another white immigrant group. This is a problematic situation. We need to address it in our respective communities and we need to think about it very cautiously. For most Blacks the fundamental division, the key social fracture is *race*, and thus Hispanics are perceived as whites in many, many contexts. That’s why Clarence Mitchell, one of the lobbyists for the NAACP, could state, “Blacks were dying for the right to vote when you people

could not decide whether you were Caucasians.” Now this dangerous remark is from one of the head lobbyists for the NAACP — what can we expect others to be saying? On the other hand, with Latinos, instead of *race*, there is another big dividing line: *culture*. Many Hispanics see Blacks as an extension of the oppressive Anglo society; they are just Anglos of another color. You have to be as careful of them as of the others, perhaps more so, because they have all sorts of other insights about what you might be up to. You have, on the one hand, *the lens of race* and, on the other, *the lens of culture*. These divisions are very different. Hence, *our conversations are very different because we are not really speaking about the same thing even when we are speaking about race*. “*Raza*” doesn’t mean “race,” just as “*pueblo*” doesn’t mean “town.” “*Raza*” has other meanings, other histories, other implications, and other effects.

The point is that there’s no question about the existence of white supremacy, but if you spend time doing fieldwork in the Appalachians, you can see what else “white supremacy” gets you: the most devastating poverty among whites one can possibly imagine. And it doesn’t take much to find poor white folks rendered poor by some of the same mechanisms of oppression that you have mentioned. It is useful to think, and maybe this comes out of my recent experience doing work in places like South Africa, that whites are also deeply damaged and trapped by that same racism. They must be educated, and race must be made problematic for them, not unlike the way we have to be made to understand it as a problem, because it is a horrific and crippling entrapment. It is a horrific thing for anyone to be unable to move safely around any part of a city or region he or she chooses, to have your world shrink around you, even as you are pretending you are becoming more global in your vision and transnational in your reach, unable to do the things you want to do because of your color. The safe world is shrinking for everyone as even the well-off are finding it reduced to their enclosed worlds of cars and gated communities. With all this in mind, I want to put everyone and every assumption on trial.

**West:** I am with you on that. The problem is that white skin privilege is terribly seductive. It has been a challenge to every immigrant group. When the Irish came they did not really know they were white. They had to be told. They had been colonized and they had been oppressed and exploited by British lords, but they thought they had more in common with the British lords than they did with Black folks, at least most of them, because they were in America, which was a new situation. Why? Because the white skin privilege system in a land with all this prosperity and opportunity is tremendously seductive. The same was true for Jewish brothers and sisters when they arrived. They knew whites were *goyim*, but they knew another thing: they looked around in America and said America has made being Black a crime. “I’m not Black, I’ll tell you that! I may not be white, but I’m not Black.” And that was a challenge for Brown brothers and sisters, because America, from the top, has shaped itself in such a way that it’s Manichean:

it is either/or. And to the degree to which you distance yourself from these folks, who you know are underdogs, you distance yourself from what you know are the markers of the limits of American discourse.

It was difficult to find space for the Irish: “I guess I’m with the British lords and company, I’m going white here.” Brown brothers and sisters, you have an ambivalence there. And, of course, we’re talking about all Brown peoples: a Chicano is different from a Dominican, a Puerto Rican, or a Cuban. They all have their respective history. But it was ambivalent. For example, Texas, after the response to the Alamo, prior to 1848, when the sale of the north of Mexico took place, on the one hand they said, “Okay, Black folks can’t vote,” but on the other hand, Brown folks could not vote either. They pushed Brown folks with the Black folks into the same restaurants. Now what are we going to do? Are we going to create certain Brown spaces in those restaurants *vis à vis* the Black? Well, this is part of the history. Why? The sheer absurdity of it as such, we can perceive it in retrospect and say, “my God!” But the other side is that the limited nature of the discourse of Blackness-Whiteness forced people to make certain kinds of choices that were based on concrete interests and had to do with resources. You are talking about two deeply despised and poor peoples when you are talking about the vast majority of Black people and Brown people in America. They have had to make choices. There were many Black folks who decided being Black is a crime and tried to pass as white. They were confused, but there were concrete reasons why they made those choices: “Look, I’ve got one life! And it seems to me that Blacks are catching too much hell for me to have to put up with it.” If they were white enough, they moved right in to that white skin privilege. There were psychic scars that resulted. Yet that is the kind of narrowness of the discourse. The question becomes: How do we broaden it in such a way that we are true to the history? How do we also acknowledge the way in which power operates and resources are made accessible to people based on how narrow that discourse has been in this country?

**Moderator:** We can take some local, contemporary examples of those kinds of interests and histories and see how they play out. For instance, if we look at public-sector employment, we will see the concentration of African Americans, when compared to their percentage of the population, is over parity. If we look at the evidence of hiring in the private sector, albeit service-sector jobs for the most part, the hiring rate among Latinos far outstrips African Americans. So the interests that are aligned around those perceptions in different sectors, through somebody’s lens, have different phenomena and interests attached to different communities, which then have the potential to cause the groups to bump into contention. How do we address that? Are we discussing apples and oranges when talk about employment gets woven into a conversation on interests and race?

**Klor de Alva:** You are raising the most complicated issue of all. The bottom line, as Cornel was saying, is interests in one form or another. And those interests are shaped not only by images concerning solidarity around ideas such as race and

culture, but also by material concerns such as jobs, security, housing, education, and the like. It is easy for a social scientist to access for you a bushel of statistics to back the points you raise, but some relevant generalizations may be preferable at this time. First, it should be noted that one of the conditions complicating the dialogue between Blacks and Browns on the question of jobs, employment, and related issues is the fact that we live in a nation that is more like a continent than a country and that Blacks and Latinos are not proportionately distributed across it. A consequence of this is that very different employment effects can happen in one place than might happen in another.

For example, if you look at the non-movie/TV-related media, such as the most widely read middle-brow magazines, to say nothing of the high-brow journals and most other publications of national circulation, you get an image of the U.S. that is East Coast based, and the perception is of a world that, like an old television, only comes in black and white. There's very little "high-tech" reading and viewing available when it comes to racial thinking. We have already noted this problem, but it bears repeating because of the way it may affect our understanding of federal statistics. You mentioned that in public-sector employment the concentration of African Americans, when compared to their percentage of the population, is over parity, but it is important to remember that most federal jobs are on the East Coast, where employable Blacks still tend to predominate over employable Latinos (although even in Los Angeles, where Latinos are the largest ethnic group, Blacks outnumber them on the federal rolls). However, if you then look at nationwide statistics of, say, county or city employees, you begin to see a different picture and a serious problem comes to light because Black public employment is overwhelmingly higher than the proportion of Blacks would indicate for the immediately employable residential area, especially in comparison to Latinos, who are grossly underrepresented in these two categories.

This leads to a related and inevitably highly divisive question: Does government affirmative action serve all affected groups proportionately? We know that affirmative action has underserved Latinos, who have been grossly underrepresented in public employment across the board. We also know that most key civil rights-related Title VII and Title VIII appointments are made out of Washington, with its East Coast employment needs and its tendency to hire Blacks over Latinos for public employment. Together this means that the government has inadvertently placed a very significant layer of Black employees, with decision-making powers, in the key offices where one would go to complain in order to get redress for discrimination in employment, education, health care, etc. A barrier has been built that is difficult for Latinos to penetrate. These Black functionaries, then, serve like the *migra* [the border patrol], keeping Latino employment seekers and grievances out of the loop. If you look at the number of claims that Latinos have made successfully in the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), you will be stunned. But most people do not know the figures because these statistics

are not commonly quoted. As Charles Kamasaki, vice president for research at the National Council of La Raza, has shown, the probability of being heard on an EEOC case if you are a Latino, compared to a Black, depending on the kind of issue you are pleading, can be as low as 100 to one.

Therefore, a fundamental question we have to grapple with and discuss is: What are the ways in which each group has worked to exclude the other from access to resources? We have to talk about this everywhere if we are going to address the issue of alliances properly. We need to deal with the way in which public employment has been structured so as to yield these disproportionate numbers when affirmative action programs have been implemented. In my opinion this situation is bad for all sides. To a great extent the Black community is shooting itself in the foot when it permits the overwhelming majority of its most talented members to be locked into public employment, with its very low glass ceilings, where individuals can only have an effect within a relatively small area, and where they cannot generate major enterprises that could employ larger numbers of people, here in Watts or anyplace else.

Because of the lack of Latino political power, what we are getting are Latinos who are squeezed out of affirmative action and who are therefore “forced” into the private sphere, where they are growing economically in disproportion to their numbers when compared to Blacks. After all, the private sphere is where the multiplier effect in employment can best take place. That is where most folks work and where you do not have a glass ceiling right over your head. We are in a potentially tragic trajectory because, on the one hand, a tremendous amount of Latino anger against Blacks is building up as a consequence of their being cut off from most civil service and civil rights-oriented spheres. Meanwhile, Latinos are moving into the private economic sector where they are generally unwilling to hire Blacks. In effect, we are on a path to disaster unless we talk very seriously and address very frankly and directly these obviously threatening matters.

**West:** I don't know where to start here. On the one hand, when we look at the Black social structure, we see that 51% of the Black middle class work for the public sphere, which already gives you a sign that it is a “lumpen bourgeoisie.” It is a middle class that does not have much wealth *vis à vis* other middle classes because in a capitalist society your middle class is primarily residing in the private sphere, where most of your resources are, along with money, capital, and so forth. So you do, in fact, have a preoccupation with affirmative action, especially as it relates to public jobs. The EEOC is looking over to the private sphere, but especially to the right to public jobs, because so much of Black progress exists in relation to it. It is disproportionate for the Black middle class, but to some extent it also spills over to the Black working class. That is one of the preconditions for insuring that discrimination is not in place as usual and therefore can be pushed back. What we need to do is to look at the respective histories of the Black and Brown professional and managerial classes. It is a very fascinating comparative

analysis to make because my hunch is — partly because of the history of those relatively autonomous Black institutions that have been producing Black professionals for over a hundred years, but were bumping up against Jim Crow — that in the Black community you had a long history of Black professional business development “behind the veil,” to use Du Bois’ metaphor.

Whereas in the Brown community, specifically the Chicano community where you also have linguistic differences, you have a professional managerial class that either had to distance itself or “pass” into the mainstream — where you find isolated individuals in the professional managerial space with names like Hernandez and Fernandez, but who are very mainstreamish in terms of behavior (an impossible thing for a Black professional, because a Black professional in that space would be already quite apparent as such) — or had to exist within the very rich tradition of the Brown community of professionals and managers who stayed within the context of the Brown community. Now we must try to understand these histories and these classes, which, you are absolutely right, are trying to say, “Let’s look at the ways in which affirmative action has been used to downplay the Brown presence or pit Brown against Black,” or have overlooked some things. The major beneficiaries of affirmative action have been sisters, white sisters rightly so — there are more of them — but it is still quite easy to use them as a way of pitting Black against Brown because the slots are so limited. Of course, those who are making the fundamental decisions as to who will gain access to those slots for the most part tend not to be Black or Brown or female.

If you look clearly at the American professional managerial class, you are going to find more Black folks than Brown. Just like Princeton, where we both worked. Black or Brown professors, you can fit us all in a couple of closets. Still, you are going to have more Black than Brown because that is one example of a professional managerial space where you have more Blacks than Browns. When I was at Harvard College, we had three Brown students in the whole school — one was my roommate, brother Roberto Garcia — and we had 300 Black folks! We must be able to tell a story to account for why at a site of elite formation like Harvard College you have three Brown students in the whole school and you have 300 Blacks. Yet both communities are still catching hell. We do not have time to tell that whole story now, but that is the kind of analysis that it seems to me we must pursue to look at some of the imbalance here, and then to see the various strategies that people come up with when moving through the private sphere, where we decide that if we cannot move here, we’re going to move there. And if we move there, we are going to do just like most Americans. We are going to hire people who are close to us, given our spatial contiguity, connections, and so forth. Black businessmen and businesswomen do the same thing in terms of whom they hire. So, this is not in any way an adequate response or a reply to brother Jorge, but I think these are the kinds of issues we have to flesh out in our dialogue, both at the analytical and the political levels.

**Klor de Alva:** I would like to add to this last point because I think you are absolutely correct. It links us back, Ron [Wakabayashi], to your statement about foreigners, non-foreigners, etc. One of the critical issues here is the existence of a “labor of choice.” Who is the laborer of choice in the U.S.? What happens when Black and Brown laborers are standing on the corner, any one of the many corners in L.A.? Who gets picked up and by whom is important. As James Johnson, the head of the Urban Poverty Center at UCLA, has observed, Latinos are being picked up to go work, while it is the cops who are coming to pick up the Blacks. So everybody is getting picked up! But it is not just a matter of getting picked up. Given this context, in our own dialogue — and by dialogue I do not mean just conversation, but dialogue as strategy, as tactics, as the process of redefining things, as moving things around, as giving up here and adding things there — we must address very carefully and very seriously the fact that historically immigration has been a big question in any Black-Brown dialogue. As the economist Vernon Briggs has noted, at the moment the United States was industrializing, when the North was opening up to industrialization, when much mechanization came in — the kind that needed relatively low levels of skill — and this coincided with the freeing of enslaved Africans, it all should have come together because much of this free labor was migrating north, or could have migrated north, and that was the labor that should have been employed. After all, the Blacks were citizens. Instead, most of the employment went to “the chosen alternative,” the newly arrived immigrants. That is the history of early immigration, the history of Irish, Italian, Jewish, Slavic, and Polish labor. As these folks were coming in at the turn of the century, they were not coming into a vacuum. They were coming into jobs for which millions of perfectly fit citizens already existed. Because of the conditions you have already mentioned, these citizens were not the labor of choice.

The same question is on the minds of many people today because since the turn of the century we have not seen levels of immigration like those of these last decades. In this context, many new conversations are being heard that sound like very old conversations, as the positive talk on the anti-immigration Proposition 187 suggests. We need to look very carefully at the question of immigration and be hard-nosed about exploring just who thinks they are getting displaced, who publicly claims they are getting displaced, and who really is getting displaced by this new immigration. It is not yet clear, from the most serious studies I have seen to date, that Latino immigration coming into L.A. has widely displaced Black laborers who can claim to have been performing the same jobs. Perhaps it may have devastated some Black-dominated unions, but I have not seen solid data that can convince me that large-scale Latino displacement of Blacks is taking place.

Every time mass immigration has occurred in the United States, whoever was already employed has tended to get pushed up. Examples abound, including the case of many Puerto Ricans in New York who are being displaced upward by

incoming, undocumented Mexicans and Guatemalans, or the case of Chicanos in East San Jose, where I was raised, who were and are being bumped up by recently arrived Mexican nationals. What we are speaking about is the necessity of and difficulty with identifying who the real enemy is, if there is such a thing. We need to come to grips with this because a successful dialogue on such critical issues as immigration and displacement depends on knowing who is really doing harm, by knowing what is actually happening. We need hard data.

**West:** I think a lot of what you are talking about does have much to do with what is going on. My hunch is that it is true that anytime one finds oneself in a situation of economic decline, one looks for scapegoats because one feels as if the situation is out of control. When one also looks at cultural decay and sees not just crime and violence, but sees everybody seemingly closing ranks and turning inward to protect themselves, given the need for security and the kind of psychic and physical violence that is proliferating in this society, so many of these powerful myths are very difficult to disentangle and demystify. On the other hand, even on empirical grounds, if there is some displacement taking place, it may not be as significant as it is put forth. The reason I say this is because I think it is still very difficult to draw analogies between other groups that have been “bumped up” and Black folks.

*One of the most fascinating features of American civilization is the degree to which the rules of the game do not hold when it comes to Black people.* That is the kind of basic hypothesis you can go on. If you are looking for powerful mayors that can have a significant impact on the quality of life, when you have a Black mayor you can rest assured that some kind of shift has taken place in terms of power. They become cathartic, symbolic entities with very little capacity to have an impact on the working poor and the very poor, as opposed to some little, truncated patronage system for Black bourgeois folk. Even though we would have to look at the data, if I looked at the Black janitors and the Blacks cleaning up the airports 10 years ago and I look now and see Brown brothers and sisters — God bless both groups, they are both struggling for crumbs — my hunch is that those Black janitors have not been bumped up, they have been bumped out! That still in no way radically calls into question what brother Jorge is talking about. It is just that in that case, or even in the situation of Puerto Ricans in New York, it is not analogous with the Black folks, be they cleaning hotels in Washington, D.C., or cleaning the airport in Los Angeles. Who gets bumped up or out is an empirical question; we leave it up to what the data and evidence show.

**Moderator:** Help me with that. Whether the reality and/or perception of that kind of history of social injustice, that point of view, the Black point of view — perceiving the world in terms of the field not being level — if that generates an inescapable perspective for Black folks, giving them a certain attitude, and if that translates in the marketplace in terms of who is being hired, because there are data that suggest that that is a piece of what is going on in terms of preferences and the

work force, how does that perception get managed in a way that helps bring us to alliance as opposed to the tendency it has to drive us apart?

**West:** First, I think it becomes incumbent upon leaders to tell Black people the truth about what is going on. That is to say, to give an analysis to the folks so that they will see that there may indeed be some bumping going on, that the truth of the matter is that certain choices are being made by both groups that allow access for a new group. All new immigrants hit the ground running. They come here with a lot of energy because they are getting out from under some hell. You can come from Europe or from Brazil, or what have you, whereas Black folks have been for 13 generations sitting around watching all this mess and saying, “Hey, wait a minute!” Let me tell these folks that they are being hired for these reasons and that there must be some ways in which we can keep the focus on the decision makers. There must be some ways in which, when these particular folks are pushed out, they also can become potential allies with those who have also been pushed out. That has much to do, of course, with the quality of the labor movement in the society, and this is one of our problems. This is why the Watts Labor Community Action Center is so very important. I like that “labor” in the title, because to bring that in is not just to bring in common ground, but it is also to add the moral dimension of what it is to be part and parcel of a society. Labor is not just about working people’s interests; it is about making democracy work.

People who are not concerned about making democracy work and think that somehow you can have entrenched interests among management and total arbitrary power at the work place are saying: “To hell with democracy.” What you have is an oligarchy that tries to keep democratic trimmings in place long enough so that the folks do not create chaos, like they did here in Los Angeles in the uprisings of 1992. And our message to the oligarchs is “You can’t do it!” There are not enough prisons, not enough police, not enough coercion at the workplace. You cannot do it. You are going to lose your democracy. Make your choice. That is what Black folks have been saying in general. But we do not have enough folks who are with us, agree with us, or take our suffering seriously enough. That is the larger issue and what we have in mind when we talk about this larger issue in terms of Black-Brown alliances.

**Moderator:** And that issue is on our ballot in the upcoming election as well, under the guise of “three strikes and you’re out.”

**West:** Yes. The “three strikes” law is basically a Black-Brown affair.

**Klor de Alva:** The issue Cornel is raising with regard to leadership is absolutely critical. I believe we have not been well served by most of our leaders, Black, Brown, or otherwise. To a great extent, the failure of leadership has been the result of our leaders constantly organizing constituencies and policy debates around very narrow visions of who their constituency is, whom their policy serves, and who is getting excluded by putting their practices in play. Such practices help generate some of the problems we have between say Watts and East

L.A. and create incredible gaps between these two areas. They are not unlike the gaps that occur in so many other places in California, such as San Jose, where foreigners and recent immigrants are pitted against folks who have been here for some time. As long as the leadership is organized so obsessively around color — so that if you are a Black leader you address Black issues, if you are a Latino leader you address Latino issues, and if you are a Latino leader and address Black issues you are going to have trouble getting reelected — we will continue to be in trouble.

We have to go back to some things that Cornel has been saying for some time, and they are very important. We need to have some kind of prophetic leadership, a leadership that says: “Well, okay. You know, I may lose the next time around, but we’re going to call it like it is. We’re going to address democratic questions the way democratic questions need to be addressed, inclusive of everyone who is going to be affected.” What we need is not just vague moral posturing by our leaders, but rather moral behavior in the democratic sense. That is, with the deep commitment that recognizes that, “Hey, these people are all my constituency, these are all citizens or would-be citizens, and in any event they’re productive taxpayers. And if they’re not, my job is to make them so.” That should cut across all sorts of color and class lines. It should force new conversations to take place. It should force that leadership to be right here with us, sitting in the first row taking notes, because unless they start to do that, we will not have many alternatives to Black-Brown conflict.

There is a dramatic demographic shift taking place in favor of Latinos. It is a tectonic shift, and Latinos can learn to be as racist as whites or Blacks. And this large-scale shift taking place is not moving slowly everywhere — around L.A. you are seeing it speed up all around you. Those demographic changes are creating a very different political landscape. If we are not addressing how to make this society more democratic, in the sense of truly effective, so that we are not beating up on each other, but rather beating up on the forces that are oppressing us, we are all going to be the losers. And I do not mean beating up on “Whitey.” I am talking about opposing the way in which the economic structure is organized. After all, lots of white folks — poor and so-called middle class — are also being squeezed totally out of the picture. To bring all those suffering groups together and to permit them to vote for their common interests requires a kind of moral leadership that either can be generated internally, possibly with a kind of social renewal (although I’m not a Utopianist), or it can be forced through social and economic policy. Only under the condition that we speak to each other across all barriers, however, can we come to grips with these problems, including those created by patronage systems. If you have a Latino mayor, you can be assured that he or she is going to be primarily hiring Latinos. If you have a Black mayor, that mayor is going to be hiring primarily Blacks. If you break out of that through a democratic will, then maybe this current situation will at last be history.

**West:** But you have Black folks who like to be objective when they get in office, too. It is very interesting. Like when David Dinkins was mayor of New York, he had to be very careful not to hire too many Blacks.

**Klor de Alva:** That's right, to a point.

**West:** An Italian brother gets in there and it becomes a very Italian affair.

**Klor de Alva:** That's right.

**West:** The Irish get in there and all of a sudden you have all these Irish policemen and teachers and so forth. But a Black mayor gets in there and it's, "Well, I'm going to try to be fair here, we have to apportion this thing out." Now there is something very good about that. Yet at the same time it also gives you a sense of the pressures that even these mainstream, milquetoast, no-backbone Black elites have to deal with. It is still very interesting in that regard. I did not mean to cut you off, but you made that analogy and you can see again how the analogy does not always fit even with the Black elite.

**Moderator:** Let me ask the two of you, in simplistic terms, the core question we have arrived at: Are political alliances possible between Blacks and Browns, alliances that are critical because we have common turf and we will have either to contend or share? For instance, there is a neighborhood down the street, Compton, California, which once was a white community, then it became a Black community, and now it has become 51% Latino. Yet it has a city work force that is 78% Black and 11% Latino and it has not had a Latino in the city government structure. If you look at the Compton School District you have a five percent Latino work force. There are not a lot of signs of political alliance here. But our question is a bit theoretical. Are the alliances possible at all? If they are possible, what has to take place? Do people have to give up things? What has to occur?

**Klor de Alva:** You are asking the central question implicit in all the conversations about Black-Brown relations: What are we going to do about the zero-sum situation? That is, what can be done about the fact that there is a limited good, that budgets are generally fixed, the number of positions for employment is generally fixed, there is only so much money that is going to be awarded to small minority businesses, and there are only so many seats in the House. If these are all fixed figures — and usually that is the case — whatever one group gets, another group does not. The easy answer to this dilemma, which I hear all the time in my interviews, is, "Well, instead of fighting for the crumbs, we need to enlarge the pie." That is a really easy answer. That is what everybody, including elite whites, wants to do. After all, even Reagan came in here saying we are going to enlarge the pie, and he claimed he would do so by reducing taxes because that would stimulate economic growth, which would lead to the hiring of more people. We all know the tragedies that agenda led to. Expanding the pie is still a great idea, but how can one really do it?

First, let me note that no small part of Cornel's and my job is to generate certain kinds of unsettling data, to present some uncomfortable ideas, and then to force

people to think about them by putting them in their face. With that in mind, I suggest we think more strategically and empirically than we have about the problematic side of this idea of a limited good, because it is not always understood the same way by all sides. Let me take an example from Texas. The Rangers, a baseball team, budgeted \$185 million just to get their massive new coliseum off the ground. The question arose as to who would be hired to do the construction, given the troubled climate around affirmative action. President George Bush's son, no friend of minority preferences or set-asides, is one of the owners of the coliseum operation. So here is the issue. A coalition was organized, made up of Black and Brown businessmen — and women, I suspect, although I doubt there were very many in either camp. They formed a coalition to get 10% of the construction contracts handed out to Black and Brown people. The young Mr. Bush [now Governor of Texas] came in and said there would be no quotas, no affirmative action, no preferences of that sort. The Blacks in the coalition said, "OK, then we're going to sue." Meanwhile the Latinos responded, "Oh man, that's pretty aggressive; hey, let's think about it; let's be a little more diplomatic, let's rethink that; I mean, that's pretty strong." They wanted out of the coalition because if they sued along with Blacks, what would that mean in terms of the connections they would want to make with other non-Latinos in the future? But the Blacks wanted to sue.

There are gloomy ways to look at this. You can say, "Hey, Latinos aren't getting the picture. You know they're not getting the picture because otherwise they would realize that only the squeaky wheel gets the oil." There is also the reality that there is a big cultural difference between the two groups in regard to how to negotiate. Even more important, there is the reality that almost everything we are seeing right now with regard to Black-Brown relations is a blip, a momentary tension that, in a profoundly transforming environment, may soon be history.

I obviously cannot tell you what the future will be like. But I can assure you that the way things are moving right now suggests these forms of Black-Brown competition may soon be history. They are going to be history because demographically, economically, and politically, things are changing in many different ways for everybody. Although today it is very difficult to get Latinos — who, for the most part, are first generation in the political field, just as they are primarily first generation in the universities and other professional settings — to act like experienced veterans of American minority life. That will not continue forever. My Black colleagues at Princeton or other universities are generally children of people who lived around books. Most Latinos have not, yet.

We Latinos are in a very different stage in our assimilation. We are in a dangerous stage because we are becoming Americans at a moment when a demographic leapfrogging effect is taking place. That is dangerous for everyone because expectations of who follows and who leads, and who gets what, are very

likely to change quickly. Part of the job we have in common here, in our dialogue today, is to help open the kinds of conversations that unsettle expectations in ways that force people not to be able to think and do things in regard to race and ethnic relations the way they have been doing them. If they keep that up, Blacks and Browns and others will be heading for a disaster as the implications of the demographic shifts become evident. Otherwise L.A. may go up in flames, New York may go up in flames, Chicago may go up in flames, and for sure Miami may also. All these communities have already gotten a little taste of that kind of civil strife. My final point is that we need to be somewhat radical about the solutions we suggest. It is not just a matter of enlarging the pie, because everybody is after that. How do we do it in a way that benefits everyone? Maybe we should move into thinking along those lines.

**West:** Ron [Wakabayashi, the moderator], about your question as to whether alliances are possible, it is true that we are living in a moment in which conservative forces have played such a disproportionate role in shaping the very framework in which we view the issues that you can get a crime bill now where the “new Democrats,” and the neoliberals or crypto-liberals, whatever word one wants to use, can view it as their major issue. It is a matter now of their trying to out-Republican the Republicans. There are no countervailing forces within the deeply fragmented progressive community that could bring power and pressure to bear to broaden the dialogue. This is how desperate things are at this point. We have the scapegoating leading to [the anti-immigration Proposition] 187, and the scapegoating in terms of calling for more criminalization, and so forth. That will, in fact, ricochet into a kind of group consciousness, clannishness, even tribalization, which is already at work, given the history of the country *vis à vis* whites and Blacks, whites and Browns, and Blacks and Browns. We have to cut radically against the grain in this particular moment, even given these transformations.

But you take a concrete case like Compton. If you have a group of Black politicians who are not taking seriously Brown suffering, you must make a moral appeal, but you do not make a program on it. You must organize and mobilize to highlight Brown suffering alongside Black suffering and it is not just a matter of numbers; that is already the mere quantification of the issue. It is a matter of creating a public life in that city. You are not going to have a significant public life in that city if you have a lot of Brown suffering going on, but you have a group of Black elites targeting primarily or almost exclusively Black suffering. I am not saying that that is what is going on. I am just saying that would be the case if it were near that situation. It is not just a matter of Brown brothers and sisters doing the organizing and mobilizing to highlight their suffering. It is looking for Black progressives, who are concerned about Brown suffering, to create the alliances, which are precisely the kinds of alliances that we are talking about. Keeping in mind that the creation of these kinds of alliances is the countervailing force to so much of the conservative tilt that is itself a social Darwinian way of saying, “I’m

only after my own self and group anyway.” Therefore, we are talking about an alternative vision and way of understanding why people are catching the hell they are catching and then, on the ground, a courageous coming together based on vision, based on the story told, based on the analysis put forward. At this moment, this will unfortunately put you on the margins. Brother Ted Watkins [founder of WLCAC] struggled against the mainstream. He was on the margins in this sense of a vision, trying continually to get it out there. At the same time, people looking on labor as a general rubric are saying, “Oh, we better form our own group project first, labor has its own ambiguous history.” The UAW does have an ambiguous history, but look at what it has done positively. I can see brother Ted right now, and I think his example, among many others, is part of the great tradition upon which we stand.

### **“Afterword” by Beverly Robinson**

The issues set forth in the question of whether Black-Brown alliances are possible largely revolve around the concepts of racism and applied democracy. The foundations of racism in the United States have their roots in slavery. There were early attempts to enslave indigenous people of color, which failed, but it was not until Blacks were transported from Africa that the repression of people of color was firmly entrenched socially, economically, and culturally. Along with the Industrial Revolution came the emancipation of enslaved Africans. They should have been the natural work force, but were displaced by the wave of incoming immigrants strictly based on color. Though the immigrant waves (i.e., different eras of immigration) brought with them a diverse mix of what Ronald Wakabayashi suggests to be historical roots, social histories, and different institutions, color and privilege mandated the assimilation of the immigrants into the work place in the United States. The preferred workers quickly learned of the privileges of white skin in a social, economic, and political environment that claimed democracy.

Traditionally, Black and Brown relations are not discussed until problems or incidents occur that affect race relations. In modern society, tensions have existed among these two groups due to the viewing of one another through white supremacist lenses. Klor de Alva questions whether one group has special insight into another group. How is it acquired, and is it used to suppress that group? Perhaps the suspicions of each other place further distance between relations of Black and Brown people. Klor de Alva is less optimistic about an alliance unless forced changes occur in their thinking and in doing things the way they have been done in the past. History has not provided enough examples of the possibilities. The only exceptions in the last 30 years have been the Civil Rights Movement (marked by the leadership of such people as Cesar Chavez and Dr. Martin Luther King), Rev. Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition, and the 1990’s uprising based in Southern California, when it became apparent that the continued exclusion and oppression were affecting both Blacks and Browns. These aforementioned

exceptions should serve as inspiration as sources of insights that should not be overlooked.

Without democratic change, the race wars for what remains of the pie will not be between Blacks and whites or Browns and whites, but between Blacks and Browns. There are many single and collective instances that can be given to show who is faring better relative to Blacks and Browns. Yet, how and whether there can be an alliance is still in question, given these circumstances. Economic survival being a paramount issue, do Blacks and Browns want an alliance and at what cost? Perhaps the cost of an alliance of Black and Brown folks, not pushed up but pushed out, will put to task the true meaning of democracy. One panelist suggests that for change to occur, a radical democracy must replace “democracy” as we know it. Democracy in the United States, as stated by West, is an oligarchy with the illusion of democracy. The illusion helps to bridle the working class.

The issue of change and alliance must have its roots in the joining of the vastly expanding lower economic classes of all colors within the United States. The critical difference of skin color has been a manipulative tool to foster an economic racism in this country. If Blacks and Browns decisively unite to battle for change, rather than continuing on separate economic, social, and political paths, they have an opportunity to set a precedent and forge the beginnings of an alliance that will have far-reaching effects and meaning for the nation as a whole.