A VOICE FROM THE GRAVE:
A POSTHUMOUS DIALOGUE
WITH NORMA WILLIAMS

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ABSTRACT

This article summarizes and makes the case for the continued relevancy of the scholarly works of the late sociologist Norma Williams. Informed by the multicultural tradition in which Norma Williams and the author both inhabit, and drawing upon their autobiographical experiences as data, the article makes an argument for the relevancy, indeed desirability of multiculturalism (especially as an alternative to assimilation) for clarifying the multiple ways in which diversity and diverse claims promote basic human rights. Drawing extensively from the scholarly works of Herbert Blumer, we highlight how some of the assumptions upon which assimilationist arguments are constructed do not hold up empirically.

The sociology community lost a passionate and cogent voice and tireless advocate for alternative perspectives upon the death of Norma Williams on September 11, 2004. And although her voice has been silenced, the body of scholarship she left behind continues to resonate loudly. Indeed, this article represents the continuing echo of Norma’s work. Informed by the multicultural tradition in which she inhabited, this article builds upon her...
body of work. By drawing upon elements of our respective autobiographies, we illustrate the relevancy, indeed desirability of multiculturalism (especially as an alternative to assimilation) for clarifying the multiple ways in which diversity and diverse claims promote basic human rights. Further, we highlight how some of the assumptions upon which assimilationist arguments are constructed do not hold up empirically.

THE BICULTURAL/MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT

The bi/multicultural perspective – that is to say, perspectives that emerge from being situated within both a minority culture that is part of a dominant culture – provides a unique perspective from which to view the social and cultural world. This has been especially true in the case of both Norma and me because of the mostly incorrect assumptions that are part and parcel of our personal identities within these two domains. As will be discussed, we are in a sense each other’s antithesis and it is this dynamic that is especially informative on the specification of race and ethnicity in American society. Working in tandem but from opposite ends of the racial/ethnic spectrum, our perspectives, which is consistent with and builds upon the work of Herbert Blumer, allow us to challenge many of the assumptions (indeed even the desirability) of the assimilationist perspective while at the same time revealing novel ways in which the color line continues to be enforced in American society.

Those who knew her personally or have read her autobiography know that Norma lived a diverse and varied life replete with interesting experiences and contradictions. As she described herself, Norma (Williams, 1988a) was a fourth-generation Mexican American with an Anglo surname. She was born and raised in Kingsville, Texas (home of the famous King Ranch and most notable of late for being the location where current VP Dick Cheney accidentally shot his hunting partner), to Mexican American parents for whom Spanish was their first language. From modest roots, she and her five siblings were raised bilingually and in a household where the importance of education was stressed. Indeed, Norma and her siblings all completed high school. Although the desire to attend college was strong, the actual funds with which to do so were lacking. Consequently, Norma went to work in her hometown as a legal secretary before moving to California where her job as an administrative assistant for a powerful labor union sparked her sociological imagination.
After accumulating the necessary funds, Norma returned to Kingsville where she enrolled at Texas A&I University and obtained a bachelor’s degree in education and later a master’s degree in sociology. Norma went on to complete her Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Texas at Austin. Her foray into teaching sociology began after she had completed her masters and was assigned an instructor position within the sociology department at Texas A&I University. As an instructor, she was assigned to teach sociology courses to students, primarily women, who were enrolled in a marginalized bilingual program in education. This experience, as her autobiography attests, further fueled her sociological imagination, and the experiences gleaned from that position continued to influence her sociology until her death. Her first position as a newly minted Ph.D. was at Texas A&M University. From there Norma took a position at the University of North Texas in Denton where she served as the Assistant Vice President for Cultural Affairs. It was in this capacity that she founded and served as the first director of the Center for Cultural Development. Norma was the first Mexican American to be elected president of the Southwestern Sociological Association and she was a recipient of the Lee Founders Award from the Society for the Study of Social Problems. Norma finished her career as a professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Arlington (Sjoberg, www.asanet.org/footnotes/dec04/departments.html).

As for myself, I am the natural offspring of a European-American father and a Japanese war-bride mother. While growing up in Texas, I shared the household with my older siblings, both infant transracial adoptees of my parents. The significance of these distinctions would not come to any of us immediately, and in fact, up until his death my dad remained blissfully unaware of the racial/ethnic maelstrom he had created for his children. Like the suburban children of many white, middle-class parents, segregation shielded us from the larger racial realities. However, this cocoon would not endure especially when we left the artificially created color-blind world of suburbia for the Peyton Place of rural Texas. Life would take on a whole new complexion.

It was in this environment that the mixed racial soup that my parents had created would begin to simmer. It was here we learned that what seemed “normal” to us, was in fact, very much atypical, especially in small-town west Texas where racial-ethnic categories generally fell along two very distinct lines – Anglo and Mexican. My family only partially fit these categories – my father was Anglo. But what to do with the rest of us proved more problematic. In the aging community where my parents would live out the rest of their lives, stories of battles fought during World War II were not
uncommon. In fact, it seemed that every grown man (and some of the women) who lived in our community had served in some capacity in WWII. To some, my mother represented the enemy. But my father, himself a patriot and veteran of the Korean War, provided cover against the most overt hostility aimed at “Japs” (a term we would hear many times during our childhood but never fully fathomed until much later that the slur was also aimed at our mother).

The issue of race was especially punctuated upon the death of my sister when her racial identity was solidified upon her death (Douglas, 2005). Notes on medical records, her autopsy report, and death certificate removed any vestiges of doubt about her racial identity. “Black,” these official documents proclaimed. She can rest in peace. For my brother and me, what exactly we are (except not white) remains more ambiguous. Ironically, to much of the outside world and especially in Texas my racial-ethnic identity is not ambiguous – I am without a doubt Hispanic. Indeed, this misidentification is so constant that not only am I extremely self-conscious of it, I have altered my behavior as well shying away from locations in which my identity is typically confused.

SOCIOLOGY FROM THE MARGINS

As traditionally defined, I cannot say that Norma and I were friends. Based upon our limited contact, acquaintance is probably a more apt description although that term does not really do justice either. Even before her untimely death, I puzzled over the exact nature of our relationship. I knew of her long before I actually met her. And after our initial meeting, we spoke only infrequently and saw each other even less. Still we had a strong bond. Although we only rarely encountered each other (generally only at annual sociology meetings), when we did, we never experienced the awkward silence that often accompanies lengthy absences. We had plenty to say to each other and our conversations were rarely short.

In fact, as I’ve learned mostly posthumously, Norma and I shared a lot in common. Norma wrote of being “twice a minority” (Williams, 1988a) reflecting on the contradictions and dilemmas that arise out of the inferior status assigned to gender and ethnicity. In fact, we are thrice a minority. Both Norma and I are small-town girls. We hail from relatively small, rural environments of Texas and both of us have had to negotiate the attendant features of this within primarily urban arenas in which our adult lives have been lived.
These negotiations began in earnest with our entrée into higher education. At a basic level, we both went to the same school for our Ph.D.s – the University of Texas at Austin. Although roughly 15 years separated our cohorts, the people we gravitated to work with overlapped considerably. Remarkably, we shared three of the same people on our dissertation committee: Norval Glenn, Walter Firey, and Gideon Sjoberg. This, itself, is quite significant because it provides a foundation for the considerable worldview overlap that Norma and I share.

I have, as Norma did before me and both of us under the tutelage of Gideon Sjoberg, come to better understand my own autobiography and location within a theoretical tradition (see also Sjoberg & Kuhn, 1989). Indeed, my view of the world, like Norma’s and most people’s, has been shaped by personal experiences. However, perhaps unlike many, Norma and my experiences almost always begin with people’s incorrect assumptions about us. The misperception starts with the most basic of identification – our names: Norma Williams and Karen Douglas. What does a name convey about a person’s racial/ethnic identity? Relying only upon our names, people – strangers – form an idea about who we are before even having met us. For both of us, our names do not forecast a racial or ethnic identity. Based upon considerable experience I can comfortably say that I am not the “Karen Douglas” most are anticipating. Perhaps the name conjures a brighter image than my own olive-tinged one. Likewise for Norma, neither her name nor physical appearance forecasted her as the proud and strong Latina she was. Indeed, people would assume that Norma’s surname (Williams) was her married name when in fact it was her family name.

These shared ambiguities and incorrect assumptions form much of the base that informs on our sociology. For Norma, this often involved convincing people that appearances aside, she was indeed Latina. However, so deeply do we hold to our racial conclusions that even when presented with evidence to the contrary, rarely can we let go of our initial assessments. Norma battled for seven years a particularly virulent form of cancer called multiple myeloma. Upon her difficult diagnoses, Norma had the opportunity to participate in clinical studies and experimental therapies for her form of cancer. Doctors were particularly encouraging Norma’s enrollment because of her relatively young age (multiple myeloma typically strikes elderly women and Norma was in her early 50s) and otherwise good health which made her an ideal candidate. Over the course of her lengthy involvement in these trials, Norma came to learn that her coded race/ethnicity was “white.” Wishing to correct the record and maintain the integrity of the study, Norma pointed out the mistake to her doctor who
in turn refused to change this designation. Organizational imperative it
seems trumps individual designations even of dying patients.

Regardless of the comfort (or discomfort) of initial appearance, Norma
was very secure with her identity even if others were not (Norma relayed
another story to me of a student of hers who repeatedly insisted that she
“did not have to be Hispanic”). As she wrote in her autobiography, Norma
was fully aware of the various, often simultaneous roles she played, another
thing we shared in common. One dual role included what Norma dubbed
the “insider-outsiders” (Williams, 1988a). Building upon Zurcher’s (1986a,
1986b) concept of constructive brokering, which as he used it meant
brokering among equals, Norma modified the term to describe her teaching
sociology courses to minority students – themselves part of a marginalized
bilingual education program – to mean brokering among unequals. In so
doing, she also rejected the idea that one can only take the perspective of
only a single group at any given time. In her own life, Norma spoke of being
an outsider. However, she was fully aware that among the students she was
teaching, she was definitely an insider. Although at the time still a relative
novice in the field of sociology, she was, like her students, a representative of
a minority group. Nevertheless, she was always fully aware of the role and
status distinction between herself and her students and that she was
translating sociology, developed from a majority point of view (that of
insiders), to persons in the minority sector (the outsiders). No doubt, she
was simultaneously playing multiple roles with multiple perspectives
(Williams, 1988a).

Norma was one of the first to empirically document Ralph Turner’s
(1962) theoretical discussion on role making. She observed and wrote about
the active roles that working-class and professional Mexican American
women in South Texas played in redefining and creating new roles for
themselves both within and outside their families (Williams, 1988b). Her
research clearly demonstrated that even the most traditional Mexican
American women – those from the working class – were far from passive
pawns in a highly gendered world. Instead, as she documented, they were
active in shaping their current and future roles often bucking the status quo.
Per Norma, “…although Mexican Americans are struggling to adapt to
broader social forces, they are also active agents in remaking roles for
themselves (1990, p. 139).”

Without having to think too hard, most of us could probably provide
numerous examples of the way we play multiple roles. In my own case, my
first academic position out of graduate school was at a historically black
university. Like Norma’s story before, if I was to have any success in this
environment, I had no choice but to take on the multiple roles of others. Like Norma, I was fully aware of the various (and varying) roles I played in this environment. Because of my gender (female) and race (neither white nor black), I was both an insider and an outsider, dominant and subordinate. Further, like Norma, I worried the difficult tight-rope my students walked in navigating their lives in our still-racist system.

Interestingly, I have assumed a new role (still teaching) at another university located in the piney woods of east Texas. Here, unlike the previous setting in which the majority of students were African American as were a good portion of the faculty (and where I was perceived as “white”), I have assumed an ambiguous status but still playing the insider-outside roles. In the classroom, while an insider with regards to sociology, my gender, ethnicity and the course material itself (race and ethnic relations), in a somewhat conservative environment seems to provide greater license to my students to regularly challenge the scholarship. Assumed, I guess, is that both my gender and ethnicity somehow minimizes the scholarship, with only occasional (and then grudgingly) acknowledgment that “whiteness” might also similarly color scholarship.

Nevertheless, the ambiguous place I occupy in my new teaching position allows me to create and adopt a variety of new roles for myself, especially in the classroom. Although students initially assume by my appearance that they can readily identify my racial/ethnic status, with no other visible or auditory markers such as an accent (other than a Southern one) or readily identifiable attire to confirm the initial ethnic impression, enough ambiguity is afforded whereby I am able to sufficiently take on the roles of multiple others to create a bridge onto which students from a variety of racial and ethnic groups, including whites, are able to cross.

ARE NOT WE AMERICANS?

Having established the capacity to simultaneously take on the role of multiple others, Norma began a sustained critique of the assimilation model. Feagin and Feagin (1999, p. 36) define assimilation as “a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life.” According to Kelly and Schauffler (1996) assimilation is “linked to an expectation that foreigners will shed, or at least contain,
their native culture while embracing the mores and language of the host country” (1996, p. 30).

Segmented assimilation, while more nuanced than earlier heavily criticized forms of assimilation, in fact seems to be little changed from the class-based (and biased) original versions. Segmented assimilation expands the assimilation concept to allow for different outcome trajectories – both upward and downward. Typically, this involves placing white and black Americans on polar opposite scales and then gauging assimilation “success” in the movement toward white. For example, Portes and Zhou (1993) differentiate a desirable “white mainstream” from the undesirable “inner-city minority youths.” Immigrants who adopt the ways and means of the deviant inner city are essentially purchasing their ticket to downward economic mobility and “downward assimilation” (p. 83). For these immigrants, “assimilation may not be into mainstream values and expectations but into the adversarial stance of impoverished groups confined to the bottom of the new economic hourglass” (p. 85).

Furthermore, new immigrants who move into impoverished ethnic enclaves (or as Portes and Zhou (1993) designate, “downtrodden coethnic communities” (p. 87)) are vulnerable to downward assimilation. In fact, the existence of a large but downtrodden coethnic community may be even less desirable than no community at all presumably because these downtrodden ethnics will indoctrinate the newly arriving immigrants into a negative subculture which includes its “bad attitude.” According to Portes and Zhou (1993), “this is because newly arrived youths enter into ready contact with the reactive subculture developed by earlier generations. Its influence is all the more powerful because it comes from individuals of the same national origin “people like us” who can more effectively define the proper stance and attitudes of the newcomer” (p. 87). This contributes to the native (white) population’s conflation of recent immigrants with ghetto, inner-city (read poor black) populations. As Portes and Zhou (1993) explain, immigrants who locate in central cities in close proximity to native-born minorities are often similarly viewed by the dominant group. In such a context, native- and foreign-born individuals are “the same in the eyes of the majority” (Portes & Zhou, 1993, p. 83).

Alba and Nee (2003), in their highly acclaimed Remaking the American Mainstream, define assimilation as the “attenuation of distinctions based on ethnic origins” (p. 38) and adopt Portes and Zhou’s (1993) multiple trajectory outcomes for assimilation. Similarly as well, Alba and Nee (2003) adopt middle-class whites as the standard benchmark from which to gauge immigrant assimilation “progress” including similar rhetoric and
individual-level measures. For example, like Portes and Zhou, Alba and Nee discuss immigrant residence in “racially segregated ghettos,” “ethnic enclaves,” and employment within “mainstream labor markets” (p. 48). Alba and Nee emphasize individual-level decisions in the assimilation process asserting that “to the extent that assimilation occurs, it proceeds incrementally, usually as an intergenerational process, stemming both from individuals’ purposive action and from the unintended consequences of their workaday decisions” (2003, p. 38).

Further, per Alba and Nee (2003), “a key to assimilation...is boundary spanning and altering” (p. 59). They then delineate three types of boundaries that must be negotiated for assimilation: boundary crossing, boundary blurring, and boundary shifting. Boundary crossing is akin to definitions of assimilation closely tied to Anglo conformity. In this respect, racial and ethnic minorities whose physical attributes resemble those of the majority group may “pass” as white by altering “their names and taking on the habits of speech, dress, and behavior” (Alba and Nee, 2003, p. 61). Boundary crossing can also occur across generations through intermarriage which ultimately results in “…individuals ... whose social appearance is indistinguishable from majority group members of the same social class and region” (Alba & Nee, 2003, p. 61). Boundary blurring occurs when members of a minority group blur the social categories between them and the dominant group. Boundary blurring occurs primarily through interracial marriage and the resulting offspring. It is the latter, final process of boundary shifting that culminates in successful assimilation. Boundary shifting “involves the relocation of a boundary so that populations once situated on one side are now included on the other: former outsiders are thereby transformed into insiders” (Alba & Nee, 2003, p. 61).

Even with this admittedly adumbrated synopsis of segmented assimilation, it appears that the assumptions upon which the updated assimilation theories are based appear not to differ significantly from their earlier counterparts. As Williams, Himmel, Sjoberg, and Torrez (1995) documented more than a decade ago,
and individual rewards over group attachments and demands, except to the state.
(pp. 383–384)

Norma’s critique of assimilation was two-pronged – one empirical, the other more personal. She elaborates over the course of several articles how majority and minority perspectives regarding assimilation differ greatly. Assimilation and its assumptions simply do not seem to match the empirical reality of much of south Texas. In fact, Norma challenges the very core assumptions upon which assimilation and assimilationist theories are built, namely, the idea that minority groups – via the assimilation process – begin to resemble the dominant European-Anglo majority because of the dominant group’s gradual acceptance of the minority group as reflected by their increasing participation in various social and economic institutions.

Instead, she posits that if minority groups and majority groups begin to resemble each other at all it is because both groups are responding in similar fashions to larger economic and social forces (e.g., globalization and the transfer of risk from government and corporate entities onto individuals). In large part, these forces reside outside the control of both majority and minority groups. However, it is the most economically vulnerable (traditionally members of minority groups) that are initially affected by such structural strains and/or have had to contend with them for much longer periods of time. As these external forces begin to increasingly impact all segments of the population, all sectors respond and generally in similar fashions.

The formalization and bureaucratization that Mexican American funerals have undergone in more recent times provides one illustration. As described by Norma (Williams, 1990), traditional Mexican American funerals were highly emotional affairs where the body was prepared and kept in the home and open expressions of grief like sobbing were an accepted part of the grieving process. Today, funeral homes serve the functions once reserved for family. Time-constrained rosaries are conducted at the funeral home and have banished the once common all-night wake to distant memories. Emotions themselves are constrained by the funeral home setting with expressions of grief much more muted. In fact, it is not uncommon for those who are too expressive in their grief to be admonished by funeral home staff that such expressions disturb other people. These responses to the formalization of the funeral ritual have resulted in Mexican American funerals more closely resembling Anglo funerals. This increasing similarity is not, however, a result Mexican Americans’ conscious decision to wholly adopt the ideology, culture, and habits of the mainstream society, or the
mainstream’s gradual acceptance of the minority group. Instead, bureaucratic organizations like funeral homes “…with their hierarchy of authority, division of labor, and emphasis on standardization and efficiency have restructured people’s family life in dramatic ways…” (1990, p. 148).

The declining stability of white families provides another example. As Hacker (2003) points out contemporary white families are remarkably similar to black families of the 1960s with regards to marriage rates, children in two-parent households, and female-headed households. And while much ink has been devoted to trying to explain the convergence of black and white families, few, if any, have likened this trend to the downward assimilation of whites.

Indeed, assimilation theories whether old or new share in their middle-class assumptions and remain largely rooted in individual experiences (although lip service is paid to structural dimensions, benchmarks remain individually based). Indeed, they appear to be updated versions of the classic mobility and status attainment studies of Blau and Duncan (1967). Both new and old explanations fail to fully see what Blumer (1958) noted more than 50 years ago – namely, that the immigrant experience (and thusly the assimilation process) is one that is largely defined by the dominant group and is always situated relative to the dominant group position. The focus on individual experiences does indeed misdirect (Blumer’s word) the analytic gaze in the wrong direction. As Blumer (1958) argues in his cogent article “Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position” “race prejudice is fundamentally a matter of relationship between racial groups” (p. 3). Blumer also points out that “racial feelings point to and depend on a positional arrangement of the racial groups” (1958, p. 4). Blumer (1958) additionally notes that

The feeling of superiority places the subordinate people below; the feeling of alienation places them beyond; the feeling of proprietary claim excludes them from the prerogatives of position; and the fear of encroachment is an emotional recoil from the endangering of group position. … The dominant group is not concerned with the subordinate group as such but it is deeply concerned with its position vis-à-vis the subordinate group…. (p. 4)

Blumer (1965) reinforces his thesis that dominant groups work to maintain, reinforce, and protect their privileged group position by way of the color line. Indeed, Blumer was well aware of the tremendous power imbalance that exists between dominant and subordinate groups which contributed to the maintenance of the color line. Similarly, Norma adopted Blumer’s articulation of the color line as mechanisms for maintaining an
exclusive club couched in *scientific* terms. According to Norma (Williams & Correa, 2003)

...The views of persons in subordinate positions, as Blumer recognized, differ considerably from the definition of the situation by those in the dominant positions. The latter are able to impose their views on the former, with the latter (such as blacks) having to accommodate to the former. If one takes Blumer seriously, symbolic interactionists will need to come to terms with the fact that dominant and subordinate groups can define many social situations quite differently. The dominant group’s conception of the subordinate group can be quite at odds with subordinates’ conceptions of those who are dominant. (p. 749)

In her chapter “Taking the Role of Multiple Others” (Williams, 2002), for example, Norma points out how standardized tests reflect dominant Anglo standards for which minorities are expected to measure. And the inability to do so is then used as justification for their exclusion from the ranks of higher education. She also correctly points out that regardless of the fact that standardized tests can be poor predictors of who will succeed or fail in college, this tends to be ignored, as most universities still require the GRE even though they say they accord it “less weight.” These tests are defined by members of the more privileged groups as measuring “intelligence” in a supposedly “objective” and “scientific” manner.

Moreover, Norma (Williams, 2002) points out that these same people have the resources to provide their own children with tutors or special classes that help them do well on standardized tests. By excluding subordinate groups from universities and colleges, the dominant group creates a part of the context in which interaction occurs. As Norma observes, patterns of discrimination and exclusion reinforce class and gender divisions among subordinate racial and ethnic groups.

“How is it possible for Mexican Americans to be assimilated into the Anglo social and cultural order when they are being discriminated against in a variety of ways?” asks Norma (Williams, 1990, p. 145). How indeed?

Instead, Norma posits we must understand both the social processes as well as the resulting organizational arrangements “through which the dominant group seeks to maintain its position of privilege in the face of the burgeoning minority populations” (Williams & Correa, 2003, p. 754). Indeed, Douglas Massey devotes an entire book (Categorically Unequal, 2007) to outlining a myriad of structural factors including the American education system and the body politic that has been structured to privilege and more importantly maintain the privilege of a select group.

Ironically, such discrimination and marginalization by the dominant society rather than fostering the absorption into dominant culture serves
instead to keep minority cultures alive in that it reinforces the sense of being outsiders while also providing common ground and solidarity for those within the group. Norma (Williams, 1990) observed this pattern in her work:

As a result of the continuing negation of Mexican Americans by the majority sector, Mexican American’s identification with their culture serves as a buffer against the onslaught to self. To the extent that one gains an identity from one’s particular culture, one is able to carve out a somewhat more meaningful existence. (p. 145)

Also largely unrecognized by assimilationist ideology is the fact that Mexican Americans – especially those born in the United States or immigrating at a young age – do not derive their social identity from Mexico but from their status as citizens or long-term residents of the United States. The dominant group’s lack of knowledge about Mexican Americans and their tendency to lump together native- and foreign-born persons (as well as citizens and noncitizens) continues to result in all persons of Mexican origin being viewed as “foreigners.”

However, more fundamental than the question of how it is possible for Mexican Americans to assimilate in a society in which they are discriminated against is the more basic question of whether or not Mexican Americans aspire to be assimilated into Anglo society in the first place. Norma’s research indicates that this is not necessarily the case. Instead assimilation remains a goal espoused largely by only one segment of society – the dominant sector including many social scientists.

Norma understood that social scientists themselves can be mired in their own class and racial/ethnic situations which sometimes blind them to and biases them against the realities of others. She observes that

One of the problems sociologists encounter in studying poor people is that researchers tend to come from the more privileged groups who find it hazardous to conduct research in the inner cities. Also, the people they study are likely to hide many of their views…. In these situations, researchers need to be careful not to impose the standards of the privileged middle class on these poor minorities. (Williams & Correa, 2003, p. 755)

As Norma notes, while the views of persons in subordinate positions may differ from those in dominant positions, nevertheless, these standards continue to be imposed. Descriptors such as “downtrodden coethnic communities” used by Portes and Zhou (1993, p. 87) to describe the neighborhoods inhabited typically by poor minorities or the pursuit of “interesting friends and acquaintances” as described by Alba and Nee (2003, p. 41) regarding the types of friends that immigrants acquire when they assimilate serve as key illustrations of this point. Are we to believe that the friendships of “non-assimilating” immigrants are dull and uninteresting?
Norma also points out that assimilation ideology contradicts a key assumption of the Declaration of Independence and US Constitution: that all are equal. If we are all equal, why the need to assimilate? She found galling, as do I, the assimilation assumption of cultural and structural inferiority of minority groups that motivates the assimilation process. Norma knew she could “pass” – the term meaning a person of color being mistaken for white – a scenario that played out many times during her life (itself quite revealing). She often confronted the puzzled wonderment of people (recall the earlier example) who could never understand her indignation regarding the supreme complement they thought they were paying her by assuming she was white. These all-too-common encounters expose the hypocrisy with the “all-are-equal” ideology and its first cousin, the “color-blind” ideology (for a detailed description of the rhetorical devices employed in defense of the color-blind ideology by the dominant society, see Bonilla-Silva’s (2003) book *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*).

Similarly, no matter that my own birth certificate strongly implies that I am “white,” any white person will tell you that I am not. In fact, my physical appearance has created a host of interesting experiences – enough so that I am well aware that I, unlike Norma, could never even begin to pass for “white.” But like Norma, what part of American culture have I not already assimilated? Both Norma and I are both US-born and bred, highly educated, and gainfully employed in our chosen profession. It appears as if the problem resides with neither of us. And indeed it does not. Common to most definitions of assimilation (and acculturation, for that matter) is the glaring omission of the mention of disproportionate power between minority and majority groups. Recalling Feagin and Feagin’s (1996) definition of assimilation provided earlier, one need only acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of the dominant group and share in these experiences and history in order to eventually be incorporated into the larger society. The process of assimilation seems a relatively benign process. However, for the multitude of reasons just provided the boundary-shifting process that Alba and Nee (2003) describe marking the final process to assimilation seems unachievable especially because as Blumer points out, the dominant group is concerned with maintaining its position of dominance – in maintaining the boundaries. While in the United States the racial boundaries were well on their way to being defined prior to 1924, historian Mae Ngai (1999) points to the Immigration Act of 1924 (aka the National Origins Act) as the codification of the racialized worldviews of those in power during its crafting: “the law constructed a white American
race, in which persons of European descent shared a common whiteness and made them distinct from those deemed to be not white” (p. 2). As a result of this process, Euro-Americans acquired variable ethnicities and a fixed racial category of white. This construction of whiteness in the immigration policy greatly facilitated European immigrants “Americanization” process.

For those not white (e.g., non-Europeans including Japanese, Chinese, Mexicans, and Filipinos), the law fixed both racial and ethnic designations. These significant distinctions translated into different social processes for European immigrants and non-European immigrants. European immigrants “became American,” non-Europeans remained foreigners. In fact, today these same non-European groups occupy the second-class status prescribed for them in the National Origin Act. Racial and ethnic categories remain nebulously defined along a continuum between white and black. The color line that differentiates white from nonwhite continues much as it did in 1923 when the Supreme Court explained that “the words ‘free white persons’ are words of common speech, to be interpreted with the understanding of the common man” (as quoted by Ngai, 1999, p. 85). Who fits into the white category is “simply understood.” White remains a fairly fixed and protected category, the benefits conferred by the designation largely unacknowledged. Even Portes and Zhou, two of the early expounders of segmented assimilation, admit that gaining access to middle-class white society may well be impossible for some, specifically children of nonwhite immigrants, to achieve no matter their level of acculturation.

Just as Blumer and Norma discuss the asymmetry in power and discourse between dominant and subordinate groups, Ngai (2004) similarly recognizes this disconnect. Ngai (2004, p. 5) argues that

“The telos of immigrant settlement, assimilation, and citizenship has been an enduring narrative of American history, but it has not always been the reality of migrants’ desires or their experiences and interactions with American society and state. The myth of “immigrant America” derives its power in large part from the labor that it performs for American exceptionalism.

Assimilationist ideology fits this myth perfectly.

“GIVE ME YOUR TIRED, YOUR POOR, YOUR HUDDLED MASSES”...ON SECOND THOUGHT....

Norma and I also shared a mutual concern regarding the assumptions governing a most vulnerable population – namely, welfare mothers. Here,
too, Norma vividly illustrates how incorrect assumptions, not surprisingly steeped in an assimilationist ideology, have further marginalized an already vulnerable population. As Norma and her collaborators (Williams et al., 1995) point out, none of the welfare policies adequately address the reality that the transnational corporate structure has left us with an economy that has little use for the unskilled worker and is increasingly unwilling to pay people an adequate wage with which to raise a family. Instead, poor women’s problems are framed within the backdrop of their refusal to simply take “personal responsibility” for their own lives. She points out the research shows instead that states refuse to meet their funding obligations and many recipients are tracked into low-paying, unstable jobs that keep them poor or only temporarily remove them from the welfare system. In other words, the assimilation ideology remains a convenient mechanism for maintaining the status quo and the continuance of blaming the victim for his/her own plight.

Having spent the past several years engaged in my research with Laura Lein (Life after Welfare, 2007) on the effects of welfare reform in Texas, these are all conclusions that I have arrived at independent of Norma, but also in concert with her. Like Norma and her collaborators, I, too, share in the principle of responsibility of human beings for one another. However, as she points out, that responsibility cannot be nurtured in the face of grave unfairness and injustice. What I did not arrive at independent of Norma was a way out of this cycle. But here too, Norma articulates a solution – one that she also admits will not be easy to achieve for it involves rejecting the old assimilationist ideology in favor of a universal one – one premised on the very Declaration of Independence itself which guarantees the inalienable rights and equality for all (Williams et al., 1995).

Per the universalism model, if democracy is to be maintained, we must emphasize common cultural values and beliefs. Instead Norma posits that a fairer social order involves persons learning to take the role of multiple others so as to develop a democratic dialogue and mutual understanding that is not premised on the faulty assumption that the status of racial-ethnic minorities stems from their failure to adopt the same core values as the dominant group. Rather, modern democratic theory needs to be embedded in a theory of human rights that can hold multinational corporations accountable and provide a basis for dialogue among people who differ from one another. This thinking and framing of fundamental human rights is very different from thinking about a shared set of core values.

From where I sit in my role as an insider-outsider, occupying a similar ambiguous position that Norma occupied, this seems obvious. But as with
many things, sociology also teaches that what is obvious to some can be ignored by others – especially those in power positions.

ECHOING NORMA’S CALL

Both Norma and my own experiences transcend the traditional racial/ethnic categories. Today’s multiracial, multi-ethnic world requires a broader multicultural perspective in which to construct a dialogue. I am deeply and profoundly saddened not only by the death of Norma but also in my discovery, mainly after her death, of the many commonalities that Norma and I shared. In the process, however, I discovered why we got along so well – we have both been profoundly shaped by our common experiences as outsiders. We, in fact, see the world in similar ways. We had many more things in common than I realized before my journey into her scholarly record. More profoundly, Norma left a footprint for us all to follow – and one that I am convinced will stand the test of time. There can be no greater tribute to a person than to continue to advance her work. And Norma left a considerable blueprint from which we all can build.

For example, emerging from Norma’s work is an optimistic and constructive agenda for coping with, bridging, and transcending the increasingly diverse racial and ethnic landscape that is US society. Influenced by the works of Turner, Zurcher and Blumer (all discussed earlier), Norma came to the view, grounded both in her own experience as well as from her empirical work, that persons are capable of taking roles of multiple others and consequently are able to live with and enhance their own lives through participation in a diverse multicultural social order. By taking the role of multiple others one enriches one’s own experiences.

However, as Norma cautions, this will not be easy. While we all have the capacity to take on the roles of multiple others, we in fact appear to be reluctant to do so especially when the “other” involves someone significantly different from ourselves. Instead, many of the more privileged in American society have instead opted to spatially separate themselves from these divergent others.

Nevertheless, as Norma recognized, the uniquely human capacity of role taking allows for bridges to be built that link any number of diverse groups to each other. Deeper and broader reflections on this point can, for example, serve to reveal the value-laden assumptions that ground some of the literature on immigration. Immigrant success in the host society is not guaranteed by the individual choices of the immigrant to adopt Western
values and lifestyles (even assuming that that is desirable) mutually exclusive of the policies, labor conditions, race-ethnic history, and general receptivity of the population to immigrants of the host society.

It is worth echoing Norma’s call for researchers to begin to understand how people accomplish role-taking and the construction of a generalized other under circumstances of great cultural diversity. Only then can we begin to advance the meaning and practice of democracy, not just in an electoral sense, but in how persons come to participate with one another in everyday life and in making major decisions that affect their lives. But as Norma also fully realized, first we have to recognize and study both racial and ethnic groups, and recognize that these groups are far from homogenous within their ranks. Norma attempted to reveal these differences in her academic writing on the Mexican American family and the instructive articles on role-making and role-taking that provided an empirical counter to the submissive Mexican-American female stereotype. Further, Norma cites the works of Kim (2000) regarding the black–Korean conflicts in New York as the type of work that is necessary in order to make better sense of the complex inter-minority relations along with dominant–subordinate relationships.

Without a doubt the racial/ethnic landscape in the United States has gotten significantly more complex. Immigration from Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, not to mention the increasing rates of intermarriage, has rendered the traditional white–black racial dichotomy insufficient to capture the more nuanced reality that reflects modern-day America. Despite a significantly changed US complexion, as Norma points out (Williams & Correa, 2003), race and ethnic studies continue to overemphasize black–white relationships. Norma specifically called for sociologists to expand the traditional analytic categories of black/white or Mexican American/Anglo to include interactions with each other. Indeed, it appears that some have begun to heed this call as the Foner and Frederickson (2004) edited book Not Just Black and White: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Immigration, Race and Ethnicity in the United States indicates. But in the ever increasing hostile-to-immigrant environment that characterizes the present climate of the United States, clearly much work remains to be done.

Similarly, the traditional models for explaining racial/ethnic relations in the United States, like assimilation which despite its repackaging cannot or will not look beyond a white, middle class as its reference group, need reorienting as well. The assimilationists, it seems to me, assume that democracy is possible only if we have one standard (the white society) and
all minorities come to be absorbed in that. Norma points to another vision of what might be and can be – one far closer to achieving the ideals expressed by the founders of US society. I wish to join Norma in pressing forward as a plausible alternative to the narrow assimilationist model, a model based on multiculturalism which can only be realized (at least as an important first step) if persons recognize that they have the capability to take the role of multicultural others in ways constructive to themselves and to others. It seems somehow appropriate to end with one final quote from Norma (Williams et al., 1995) who was, after all, the most eloquent advocate for this perspective:

The multicultural alternative is multicultural in the sense that it does not make access to the most basic elements of the American Dream dependent on cultural conformity. Yet, it recognizes the similarities between the problems that all families face in confronting the demands for economic survival in the United States at the end of the 20th century. Thus, it avoids the trap of trying to remake minority families into imitations of privileged families. (1995, p. 398)

**UNCITED REFERENCES**

Sjoberg, Williams, Gill, & Himmel (1995); Williams (1988b).

**REFERENCES**


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