

# Whose “America”? The Politics of Rhetoric and Space in the Formation of U.S. Nationalism

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In New York City, two more officers were arraigned today in the alleged police brutality case that's quickly become a citywide scandal. Officer T. W. and T. B. pleaded not guilty to charges they assaulted Abner Louima, a Haitian immigrant. . . . The superseding indictment handed up late yesterday added a new charge against all four arrested officers — aggravated harassment — meaning the officers allegedly assaulted Louima because of his race.  
—*All Things Considered*, August 22, 1997

A few years ago, the narrative of Abner Louima's abuse arose as a disturbing blip on the liberal screen of the U.S. national imaginary. The scandalous abuse Louima endured at the hands of the New York Police Department (NYPD), which has since been celebrated as a national hero in the wake of September 11, 2001, served as a brief rallying point for activists within and outside of academia seeking to mark the unrestrained and institutionally sanctioned violence that arises within the interface between the state's protection of citizens and the deeply embedded racist and imperialistic assumptions that undergird U.S. citizenship. The bodily form of Louima's abuse — particularly the queering of the police force that his sodomization represents — ruptures white Western codes of civility so essential to the hegemony of

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whiteness.<sup>1</sup> In such moments, the brutality of white hegemony leaks, and the humanitarian basis of white supremacy, on which the U.S. national body is founded, is momentarily called into question.<sup>2</sup> The contradictions that erupt in such cases are contained through a surgical removal of the cancerous cells, so that the larger white body politic may remain intact. The ongoing abuse of black and brown bodies is the unspoken subtext of this white body politic—a set of discursive and material practices designed to keep us in our place: a largely indentured population whose labor sustains the nation, but whose voices, needs, and basic human rights must be subordinated to the needs of U.S. capitalism.

The dismissal of such overt reassertions of the white nation as the inexplicable acts of sick individuals localizes systematic violence in order to submerge the contradiction of unfreedom in the land of the free—how painfully ironic that we forget the NYPD as sodomizers only to recast them as national heroes. Such acts, far from uncommon,<sup>3</sup> should be understood as the material manifestations, embodied consequences, and, indeed, defining moments within a particular spatial arrangement of the U.S. nation. I situate this argument within the broader discursive formation of the contemporary U.S. context that has been called “white victimage.”<sup>4</sup> White victimage thrives through the cultural production of white anxiety at the perceived dissolution of historically centered white identity, now dislocated by the shifting racial and national configuration of its population. White victimage discourse assumes whiteness as the necessary foundation of national civility, now under siege by foreign bodies. This argument predates and justifies the logic through which the second President George Bush has so successfully launched his campaign of terror both within the national body and around the globe.<sup>5</sup> Through the logics of white victimization, regressive politics are legitimized through the assumption of a level playing field (“we are all victims now”), which undermines claims to inclusion by systematically excluded groups.

Within such a regressive historical context of U.S. nationalism, how do we begin to imagine radical visions of inclusion for a transformative (trans)nationalism that, over a century ago, Cuban American organizer and visionary José Martí pronounced as “Our America”? In his work, Martí was highly critical of Latin American countries modeling their nationalisms on European or U.S. American national forms, insisting that the former should emerge out of the experiences and knowledge bases of the indigenous, colored, classed, and most disenfranchised populations from within the national space. His vision was as grassroots as it was transnational. He was an astute student of the liberation struggles of *all* Latin American countries, not just Cuba, and the connections that were possible for forge among them. In this sense, Martí envisioned a transnational, anticolonial nationalism that leaves us the legacy of a vision for how we, as cultural critics and radical historians, might forge an integrative approach to the studies of nationalism and transnationalism, and of Latin America and Latinos living in the United States.

The ominous role of Latin America’s “Northern neighbor,” driven by “madness and ambition,” is prevalent in Martí’s work: “The scorn of our formidable neighbor who does not know us is Our America’s greatest danger.”<sup>6</sup> Martí envisioned “Our America” as a liberated Latin America that would build from the momentum of gaining its first independence from Spain to gain its second independence from the United States.<sup>7</sup> Martí’s concerns over U.S. American imperialist expansion have proven to be a legitimate obstacle to the class- and race-based revolutionary forms he envisioned. In the wake of U.S. annexation of northern Mexico 150 years ago, U.S. America is actively pursuing new forms of colonization that undermine Latin American independence on many disparate and interrelated fronts. Within this era of transnationalism, in which capital, media, culture, and (certain) people flow more freely across national boundaries, capitalist exploitation assumes a more flexible character than its previous, place-based, industrial rendition.<sup>8</sup> Thus military occupation and annexation, by and large, give way to interrelated economic, ideological, and state forms of control.

For instance, ideological, economic, and state forms of control collude within the present U.S. American context to create a climate ripe for exploitation of Latin Americans. Here the cultural production of Anglo anxieties over demographic shifts is one form of ideological control in which fear is turned inside out and redirected as state-sanctioned violence against racialized immigrants such as Abner Louima and countless Latin American migrant workers. This is the process through which whiteness becomes a material force. Anti-immigration discourse inverts violence, projecting it onto racialized bodies to create the condition of possibility for state-sanctioned white-on-color violence, which, in turn, may legitimately terrorize entire populations. This dynamic creates such a climate of uncertainty among immigrants and their allies that it undermines their capacity to organize, thereby (re)producing a docile, readily exploitable labor force. It produces a spatial arrangement within the United States in which whites benefit from this violence: they may move freely, buy cheaply, and retain social control, all the while believing it is they who are under siege. This is the inversion of white privilege that secures power through its seeming lack of substance, or unmarked character,<sup>9</sup> and becomes a material force as it constrains and/or forces the mobilities of racialized subjects while liberating that of unmarked white bodies. Martí’s concern over the formidable neighbor warrants our attention as we work within the legacy of his vision of an independent and united Latin America, because such hostilities create U.S. America as space inhospitable to Latin Americans and Latinos, particularly the poor. The formation of U.S. nationalism, then, precludes the empowerment and free movement of working-class people of color and thus undermines the possibility of Our America.

To untangle this regressive production of U.S. American nationalism is to reveal the importance of retaining sight of the formation of the national *in conjunc-*

*tion with* the transnational. While it is tempting to celebrate the moment of transnationalism as the demise of the nation-state and the disintegration of its borders,<sup>10</sup> this can prove a dangerous move. Within the Latin American/Latino studies context, a hemispheric approach to “the Americas” becomes deeply problematized when we consider the powerful role that U.S. nationalism exerts over the rest of the Americas. In other words, if we seek to mobilize the power of Martí’s vision for Our America, one in which Latinos/Latin Americans are free, we must do so in full sight of the regressive articulations of U.S. America produced within the borders of the U.S. national space in order to (re)produce those very borders as one-way turnstiles for white “Americans.”

Scholars in my own field of communication studies are turning their attention to work emerging in the field of critical geography to question the ways in which space is culturally produced.<sup>11</sup> Critical geographers—such as Doreen Massey, David Harvey, Edward Soja, Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Michel de Certeau, Nancy Duncan, and Gillian Rose—have called attention to the social, cultural, and political nature of space.<sup>12</sup> Tuathail tells us that “geography is about power. Although often assumed to be innocent, the geography of the world is not a product of nature but a product of histories of struggle between competing authorities over the power to organize, occupy, and administer space.”<sup>13</sup> For scholars of radical history this means asking questions about the subtle ways in which history itself is a cultural production that emerges through the rhetorical processes through which spaces take on meanings that differently (dis)empower its inhabitants. What is at stake within such an investigation is to apprehend the ways in which rhetoric, space, and power inflect one another to produce differentiated (im)mobilities, opportunities, and levels of (un)safety for differently racialized, classed, gendered, and sexed subjects. The national space is one of multiple spatial layers that warrant our attention, especially given the sovereign violence it propagates and its legitimated status to wield power unevenly among the Americas.

### **White Space, Brown Border**

Immigration laws have *privatized* the nation; it is now a bounded space into which only some of the people can walk some of the time.

—Anannya Bhattacharjee, “The Public/Private Mirage” (317)

Anannya Bhattacharjee’s study of domestic violence finds that noncitizen South Asian women living in the United States are subjected to citizenship tests of “good faith” mediated by their husbands or domestic employers. Immigration laws position such women as dependent on the man who sponsors her, thus empowering him to determine her capacity to be recognized as a member of the national community. Bhattacharjee writes, “A man’s control over his wife or an employer’s control over

the domestic worker in the home extends to controlling her recognition as a member of what constitutes the public—in this case, being a legal resident of a national community (in itself a private concept).<sup>14</sup> Her analysis reveals the ways in which the public/private distinction assumed by Western feminist theorists of domestic violence overlooks the work of the nation-state to construct what for some is a private sphere (the home) as a public sphere, and what for some is a public sphere (the nation) as a private one. Her work compellingly demonstrates the ways in which the nation-state exerts an active and, for many, invisible pressure that constrains the mobility of social subjects disenfranchised by their lack of access to citizenship. The various points of pressure the nation-state exerts over noncitizens, particularly as it confines their mobility and renders them susceptible to public and private forms of abuse, must be rendered visible.

Racial and ethnic demographic shifts within the U.S. population, particularly in the southwestern United States, have called into question the viability of U.S. America because they destabilize its implicit foundation in whiteness. Post-1965 “Third World” immigration is constructed as a significant factor contributing to this shift, producing tremendous white anxiety surrounding the security of the nation’s borders to keep “unwanted others” out. In the words of popular author Peter Brimelow, the 1965 Immigration Act “triggered a renewed mass immigration, so huge and so systematically different from anything that had gone before as to transform—and ultimately, perhaps, even destroy—the one unquestioned victor of World War II: the American nation.”<sup>15</sup> This anxiety is contained within anti-immigration texts through the effort to “resecure the nation’s borders.” The border becomes a highly contested site wherein the contradictory needs of the capital-driven U.S. nation-state clash: the need for cheap labor clashes with its fear of the racialized, classed, noncitizen subjects of its southern neighbor. The latter, then, become increasingly susceptible to public and private abuse as the nation emerges as a bounded space into which “only some of the people can walk some of the time.” The border, which they must cross in order to earn the relatively high wages only possible through the neocolonization of their own homelands, becomes a particularly dangerous zone.

The very existence of the “bounded [national] space” to which Bhattarcharjee refers relies on its borders. Borders are necessary for the production of any space, since spaces only take on meaning through negation, through their capacity to demarcate boundaries and limits on that space. Borders provide space with meaning by carving it up and signifying, both materially and discursively, zones of demarcation between inside and outside, one side of the border and the other. A methodology of rhetoric, space, and power entails a critical examination of the discursive formations through which the borders, and that which those borders distinguish and divide, become a material force. In their introduction to *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics*, Scott Michaelsen and David E. Johnson describe the border

as one composed of “cement trenches, chain-link fences, light-green paddy wagons, uniforms, binoculars, and soon, perhaps, steel walls, as well as multiple paranoid discourses of national and racial contagion.”<sup>16</sup> Here the book begins with a slippage between that “virulent form of border production,” or what Gloria Anzaldúa calls “that thin edge of barbwire,”<sup>17</sup> and the “paranoid discourses” through which that particular line is produced and managed. This slippage overlooks the cultural production through which this thin line secures meanings, not just for the immediate border space it defines but also for the lived experiences of people on both sides of it. The connection between such paranoid discourses and the kinds of cultural spaces they produce, then, must be untangled.

The U.S.-Mexican border region has historically been a highly contested space, revealing the competing and converging needs of capitalism, imperialist expansionism, and a U.S. nationalism deeply embedded in whiteness. The United States annexed this region (California, Texas, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico) from Mexico following the U.S.-Mexican war. At that time, there existed among Anglo-Americans a significant “All Mexico” sentiment, which held that the United States should annex the whole of Mexico. The argument against this move was based not in a critique of its imperialist foundations but rather in the anxiety around the (in)capacity of Anglo-American society to incorporate such large numbers of nonwhite, non-English-speaking people.<sup>18</sup> The history of the southwestern United States, “the borderlands,” has been and remains a site of Anglo uncertainty that seeks to strike a balance between competing hegemonic desires: the impulse toward expansion, the protection of a material space, and the perceived need to assimilate the others who populate that space.

The shifting articulation of this border region produces a range of social relations, differentiated mobilities, and lived experiences for its inhabitants. The transfer of “ownership” of this space following annexation literally reconfigured its meanings—in terms of the state policies through which the space was being governed, the meanings of land and ownership, the definition of citizenship, and the ways in which work and industry were organized. The transfer of the Southwest from Mexican to U.S. territory redefined the spatial mobilities and the types of activities that became possible within that space. For instance, “Mexican Americans experienced vast structural displacement as the local economy shifted rapidly from a pastoral one, based predominantly on ranching and subsistence farming, to a capitalist one, increasingly based on commercial agriculture, trade, and later, large-scale infrastructural development of the [California] region.”<sup>19</sup> As Martí’s concern over the annexation of Latin America foreshadowed, the changing conceptualization of the border region radically alters the lived experiences of its inhabitants, demarcating who can move within a certain space and under what conditions, as well as the nature and agency of the forms of mobility that become possible for differently situated social groups. This

means that the cultural production of space creates the condition of possibility for a range of lives and livelihoods that might be possible for any group of people living within and/or moving through that space. Space is not inert, but rather a site of highly contested meanings with tremendous consequences for those who occupy it.

Such meanings carry over into contemporary border politics in the forms of the increasingly militarized U.S.-Mexican border and the brutalization of migrant populations. These are the material effects of anti-immigration rhetoric as it provides certain meanings to the border region. The hegemonic status of whiteness, historically and today, is central to the process through which the current articulation of this border space takes on a material force that preserves the white space bounded and enabled by it. The proliferation of popular discourses addressing population shifts in the nation as a whole and within this border region expresses a tremendous anxiety around the traditionally hegemonic national status of whiteness. The potential of a “white minority” calls into question the viability of a white nation under a democratic regime, marking the apartheid system that undergirds the logic of the white national space. At the same time, the fear that whites would become a minority brings into sharp relief the contradiction of white domination through consent within an allegedly democratic nation—in which all voices are purported to be equal. If whites were outnumbered, could they maintain social control within an allegedly representational system of governance?

The anxiety that accompanies the contested status of the U.S.-Mexican border region positions the Southwest as a prevalent site from which contemporary anti-immigration rhetoric emerges. The conservative strategy of this rhetoric is to contain the threat of immigrant takeover through the reassertion of whiteness as synonymous with citizenship. Former California governor Pete Wilson’s now famous speech, “Securing Our Nation’s Borders,” delivered in 1994, was one of the first popular articulations of anti-immigration within the contemporary backlash. This speech is paradigmatic of his “message of the day” approach to saturate the public with a single message: the need to “secure our nation’s borders.”<sup>20</sup> Wilson salvaged his own waning popularity among voters in the 1994 gubernatorial election through his anti-immigrant campaign.<sup>21</sup> Wilson’s voice reverberates throughout national politics as other state leaders and Congress debate adopting similar measures in their respective sectors. He has been credited with “almost single-handedly elevat[ing] immigration to the national stage.”<sup>22</sup> Wilson has since emerged as a vocal participant in the immigration debate, which has had a series of regressive effects: to immobilize resistive immigrant and allied communities; to mobilize a new wave of assimilation among nonwhite U.S. citizens (another concern Martí rightly held); and to mobilize whites to new levels of entitlement. For instance, under Wilson’s leadership, California voters have called for an end to both benefits for illegal immigrants (Proposition 187) and affirmative action within the University of California system (Proposi-

tion 209). Both measures enable white mobility and access, while constraining that of nonwhites, for a variety of reasons: the increased availability of a docile, racialized, politically silenced labor force; the institutionalization of white violence against and exclusion of Latinos and Latin Americans; the displacement of students of color and the simultaneous re-placement of white students, now depicted as “the new minority.”

In the wake of Wilson’s anti-immigrant campaign, the space of the nation’s border region has literally been reconfigured. The success of his campaign in reasserting whiteness as the legitimized basis of U.S. national identity has served a vital function in defining the terms of the immigration debate and in reasserting the conditions of Latino participation within the “democratic” process. He does so by legitimizing a particular “we” of the nation over and against a “them” of “illegal aliens.” This analysis suggests, then, not only that “the people are already a rhetorical effect”<sup>23</sup> but also that the production of “the people” is constitutive of the differentiation of mobilities that become possible for those who qualify in relation to those who do not. This analysis, then, seeks to move beyond the question of how identities are produced to an examination of the deeply intertwined relationships between identity and spatial formations.

Wilson’s speech announces his lawsuit against the federal government for their “failure to control our nation’s borders.”<sup>24</sup> His urgent plea is articulated as a condition that “we” can no longer afford to tolerate. The “we” he evokes is a “nation of laws,” of “taxpayers and needy legal residents,” and of victims of big government mismanagement. Newspaper articles reiterate such claims of economic irresponsibility by the federal government, coded in the language of “scarce government funds” used to educate, imprison, or provide health services to undeserving “illegals.” These arguments depict migrants as non-tax paying, as sucking up funds “that could be spent on programs for U.S. citizens,”<sup>25</sup> and thus delegitimize their speaking positions, (re)producing their subalternity.

Wilson’s popular claims were soon echoed by the columnist Peter Brimelow in his book *Alien Nation*. There, Brimelow also equates whiteness and citizenship: “The American nation has always had a specific ethnic core. And that core has been white.”<sup>26</sup> In order to support such claims, Brimelow must resolve a fundamental contradiction his argument assumes between his nativist bias and the historical construction of the United States as a nation of immigrants. He does so by distinguishing between pre- and post-1965 immigration in racialized terms. The difference for Brimelow is that while earlier waves of immigration arose “overwhelmingly from Europe . . . now, immigrants are overwhelmingly visible minorities from the Third World.”<sup>27</sup> The notion of contributing to the nation becomes the basis for a racially coded construction of immigration. *Some* immigrants (white) come to the U.S. to build the nation, while *others* (racialized) are here only to exploit that which “we” have built. This rhetoric succeeds, then, through its ability to define the terms of

nation building, and thus the legitimacy to participate in its political processes, along racial lines.

Pete Wilson draws on his own immigrant roots to build a similar argument when he claims that “we are a state and a nation of immigrants”<sup>28</sup> by foregrounding his white immigrant roots: “My grandmother came to this country in steerage from Ireland.” His reference to his Irish roots evokes a history of the assimilation of various ethnic groups absorbed into mainstream U.S. America by becoming white. The Irish immigrated to the United States in the nineteenth century to escape the economic and political oppression they faced at the hands of the British. On arrival, they found themselves in a similar social class as African Americans. Yet, as time passed, they made strategic choices (e.g., using labor unions, the Catholic Church, and the Democratic Party) to secure white privileges.<sup>29</sup> Because the history of the Irish in the United States provides evidence for the myth of meritocracy that undergirds the narrative of the American dream, Wilson’s reference evokes this idealized democratic historicity and the race-based exclusions it entails.

One of the strategies both rhetors deploy in order to distinguish between waves of immigrants is to criminalize immigrant populations. For instance, Wilson provides several statistics that construct this group of Latin American immigrants, in particular Mexicans, as a threat, and as his speech progresses, he begins to refer to them as criminal aliens:

As we struggle to keep dangerous criminals off our streets, we find that fourteen percent of California’s prison population are illegal immigrants—enough to fill eight state prisons to design-capacity. And through a recession that has caused the loss of one-third of the revenues previously received by state government, as we have struggled to maintain per pupil spending and to cover fully enrollment growth with classrooms around the state bursting at the seams, we’re forced to spend \$1.7 billion each year to educate students who are acknowledged to be in this country illegally.<sup>30</sup>

A number of newspapers picked up Wilson’s use of the term *criminal alien*, revealing the extent to which this metaphor has come to represent the national common sense regarding immigration. In a letter to the editor, for example, a writer makes the analogy between immigration and robbery: If “someone [breaks] into your house,” you cannot fight them off if your hands are tied. We must, the analogy continues, “untie the hands of the INS” (Immigration and Naturalization Service).<sup>31</sup> This discourse foregrounds inappropriate and dangerous modes of travel and access, embodied in the metonymic *criminal alien*. The white property owner/citizen is depicted here as the object of racialized aggression, thus inverting the narrative of white-on-color violence. Through rhetorical moves such as these, here internalized by a citizen writing to the editor, we see the extent to which white anxieties get

played out on immigrant bodies. This framing erases all traces of whiteness as the white subject recedes from view and the gaze is blazed onto the racialized immigrant body. It erases the violence of the INS and actually sanctions the agency's unrestrained use of force: "Untie the hands of the INS."

The white nation constructed within these popular texts needs its brown borders in order to define the parameters of the national space. The U.S. border region has long been a contested site, and it is particularly so under the current racial/ethnic population shifts that threaten white hegemony under a democratic regime. The rhetoric at hand serves as a violent reassertion of the nation's whiteness—"we" must secure "our" nation's borders—in an effort to naturalize white supremacy and contain anxiety of an alien takeover. Because whiteness is "a 'not' of a 'not' [that] comes to self-name, [invent] itself, by means of its declaration that it is *not* that which it projects as Other,"<sup>32</sup> the construction of the white national space requires an other against which it can define itself. It needs its brown border. The power of whiteness to define the national space secures a privileged standpoint for whites, since whiteness is defined *against* racialized others, who are at once reduced to a dark backdrop on which the unmarked hegemonic space of whiteness performs.

It is through this process of (de)legitimizing certain bodies through the trope of citizenship that differentiated mobilities, forms of institutional access, and capacities to participate in political processes take shape. Whiteness, citizenship, and freedom function within these texts as a chain of equivalences. Whiteness becomes equated with citizenship, and citizenship with freedom, revealing the specific moves through which "this country's national identity, normality, and superiority are not independent, however, of the existence of nonwhites. An integral part of defining free Americans is by contrast to those who are non-American and unfree."<sup>33</sup> The nation constructed by this discourse empowers whites to associate their identities with freedom. Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek's study of college students, who were inclined to conflate *white* with *majority*, *status*, and *American*, reveals the extent to which these articulations become internalized within U.S. Americans.<sup>34</sup> Such equivalences are assumed, acted on, and thus provide the parameters for the social scripts we follow in our daily practices. In this sense, the discourse of whiteness explored within this section becomes a "material force"<sup>35</sup> by defining citizenship as both white and free vis-à-vis immigrant alien as racialized and unfree, thus *enabling* the differentiated mobilities of citizens and noncitizens. The spatial formation of a nation in which whiteness is synonymous with freedom articulates the nation as a free space for whites, in which they are able to move when and where they wish, while those whose bodies are marked through the tropes of race and class through which illegal alien is imagined may be detained, exploited, and abused.

This means that citizenship is not merely an identity but is perhaps more adequately understood as a function of space and power. For instance, many Latino

citizens suffer abuse at the hands of the INS and other state officials. Even though their identities may be defined as U.S. citizens, they are not necessarily free to participate, move, or belong to U.S. America in the same ways as white Anglos, for whom the national space is defined.<sup>36</sup> When Latino students in Los Angeles hit the streets in protest of Proposition 187, Anglos passing by in cars shouted at them to “go back to Mexico.” This case reveals that some citizens are freer to exercise their citizenship than others. The fact that Anglo motorists responded to Latino citizens as *noncitizens*, even as the latter were exercising their fundamental right to free speech, demonstrates the unevenness with which citizenship may be enacted. Here, white citizens’ sense of ownership over the national space is enacted as both a racist and a nationalist exclusion. While all people involved in the scenario are citizens, then, Latino citizenship is subordinated to a white sense of belonging (and a sense that Latinos do *not* belong), which is a material manifestation of the kinds of anti-immigration discourse legitimating such differentiated forms of belonging.

### **White Victims: White Hegemony**

For who is it in these times who feels dislocated/placeless/invaded? To what extent, for instance, is this a predominantly white/First World take on things? . . .

While there is no clear recognition here that the “periphery” has been colonized, there is no such recognition that *from the point of view of that* colonized periphery that encounter has for centuries been “immediate and intense.”

—Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (165)

The discourse of white victimization is one of the most successful moves by the Right in recent times to rearticulate the terrain of the national space in response to the civil rights era. In the wake of certain advancements made by white women and people of color,<sup>37</sup> the discourse of whiteness has adapted by constructing white men as the new minority.<sup>38</sup> This move effectively levels the playing field by negating the assertion by marginalized groups of difference as a legitimate basis for articulating resistance. As Liam Kennedy aptly notes, “Across political, educational and popular cultures in the United States white males have been busy claiming their own rights to victimhood and in the process displacing and crudely relativizing the oppressions experienced in everyday and institutional terms by those they define as other.”<sup>39</sup> The discourse of reverse racism and the corresponding crisis of white male authority have functioned to recenter white masculinity through the appropriation of leftist terminology regarding discrimination and racism.

The hegemony of this discourse of white victimization, then, provides the cultural-political common sense which organizes social relations within the space of the U.S. nation. The material effects of this discourse can be witnessed in a range of

social practices, such as the admission of only one African American student to UC Berkeley's law school the year following the passage of Proposition 209, and the abuse of Abner Louima in New York City. These cases result from particular meanings that get taken up to define the whiteness of local and national social spaces. The acts of violence directed at Louima and the admission of only one African American student are effects of a particular configuration of space and access, interpretations of who belongs within a given space and under what conditions. The construction of white victimage operates within anti-immigration rhetoric through the construction of the criminal alien as both a physical threat to whites and as a biological threat to the viability of the white nation. The U.S. nation is constructed through the trope of white femininity. White and especially masculinist anxieties are effectively mobilized through the gendered and (de)racialized construction of the nation as a white mother, the threat of her rape that illegal immigration comes to represent, and the fear of her replacement by a brown, overly sexualized mother. This rhetorical production functions through the narrative rape of the nation by criminalized and racialized immigrants, figuring whites and the nation as innocent victims and immigrants as violent perpetrators.

The feminization of space is a rhetorical device through which dominant groups secure and retain power. To feminize a space is to define it as bounded and fixed, a site of nostalgia that, secured in time and space, will always be home to the powerful.<sup>40</sup> Anti-immigration discourse constructs the nation as an ambivalent feminized home that fluctuates uneasily between the tropes of mother and whore. Narratives in which white women are raped by racialized others have historically been deployed in a variety of contexts to reassert colonial domination in the face of potential disruption to such relations in a variety of contexts.<sup>41</sup> Such narration fantasizes the white female body as an homogenized mark of the Western nation in which the white male self and the racialized other are construed as violently opposed vis-à-vis the white female figure—with regard to the ownership of, access to, and protection of this fragile body.<sup>42</sup> *White woman* in this context represents the procreator of citizenship and the mother of the nation, so any threat to this figure of woman represents a threat to the sustenance of the nation. Because this narrative relies on the presumption that white women are incapable of taking care of themselves, the dirty work of protecting the feminized nation from such threats falls squarely on the shoulders of capable white men.<sup>43</sup> Further, *white woman* functions here as metaphor for the national space. Her metaphoric rape produces its affective response based on the abjection of the mobility of racialized criminal aliens. The production of the feminized national space, then, emerges out of a particular articulation of migrant (im)mobility.

Wilson's address frames the crisis of illegal immigration by constructing the nation as defiled female body. He blames the federal government for the weakened

nation based on two, interdependent arguments that may be read through the trope of the white female body: that they have failed to protect the nation's borders and that federal welfare policies seduce Latino immigrants to penetrate that nation's borders to come to this country for a free ride. For instance, Wilson notes that "by compelling California to provide this safety-net for illegals, the feds are tearing gaping holes in the safety-net we seek to provide for our own needy legal residents."<sup>44</sup> His language evokes the nurturing mother nation as a safety net that ensures the well-being of taxpayers and needy legal residents. He feminizes the nation as a rape victim through his repeated use of penetration tropes—such as "porous border" and "gaping holes"—to describe the compromised condition of the nation. His reference to California as a "magnetic lure" that "rewards" those who "successfully evade the border patrol and cross the border illegally" sexualizes the nation. His rhetoric has been picked up by popular media sources, such as newspaper articles that construct the nation as magnet blamed for "draw[ing] illegal immigrants to California."<sup>45</sup> The illegal immigrant who succeeds in penetrating the porous border is rewarded for his crime. The "nation of laws" is articulated as a "magnetic" whore whose poorly protected body anyone may enter at will to take her prize. Access here becomes heterosexualized through the production of the nation as white female body in need of white male protection.

If whiteness and citizenship become conflated within these texts in ways that produce the nation as a white space, then threats to citizens or the national space evoke the victimization of whites. Because the "magnetic lure" of federal welfare policies undermines the nation's capacity to care for its "needy and legal residents," immigration represents a direct threat to the security and benevolence that white citizenship promises. The nation as mother, now overburdened by the sheer quantity of current immigration, can no longer serve her needy citizens. Wilson notes: "They [the federal government] would see that the federal resources necessary to secure our nation's border are dwarfed by the billions that California and other states spend today in making massive illegal immigration to America a safety-net for the world."<sup>46</sup> The scarcity of the nation's resources becomes the basis of the claim that America cannot be the world's mother. This scarcity is a source of tremendous anxiety because it contradicts the myths of meritocracy and the "American Dream," which suggests that anyone who tries can make it.

These myths rely on a certain material quality of life made possible in this country through a history of colonialism and current neocolonial practices. Brimelow unabashedly notes, with a nostalgic tone, that "America took off, economically and indeed morally, in the Colonial Era. That momentum continues, albeit now increasingly obscured."<sup>47</sup> Such neocolonial relations create the material conditions of possibility for the American Dream, but scarce resources literally preclude the "world" from holding out this "dream." Two centuries of enslavement, genocide, and resource

extraction have produced such material imbalance that the “dream” is equated with privilege and exploitation—a contradiction that must be submerged in order for the dream to stay alive. The contradiction that must be submerged within anti-immigration discourses is that privileged, white Americans must face up to the fact that their dream is enabled by the so-called Third World’s nightmare. Because immigration is that process through which the Third World comes to occupy the space of the “First World,” the boundary between world and nation becomes blurred. The very presence of the Third World in the first (“we are here because you were there”) threatens to expose this contradiction, especially as populations shift, producing a new white minority. The trope of white victimage evokes fear and rage, providing the affective appeal necessary to contain this contradiction.

Brimelow constructs the violent nature of immigrants by foregrounding the physical threat that this new population poses to the white nation. His scenario extends Wilson’s fear of penetration to pose a vision of the already-raped nation as a site of terror for whites. He claims that “*aliens make up one quarter of the prisoners in federal penitentiaries—almost three times their proportion in the population at large*” (7). The disproportionate percentage of immigrants that are “criminal aliens” suggests that their violent nature threatens the white population:

In January 1993, a Pakistani applicant for political asylum (and, simultaneously for amnesty as an illegal immigrant) opens fire on employees entering CIA headquarters, killing two and wounding three! In February 1993, a gang of Middle Easterners (most illegally overstaying after entering on non-immigrant visas—one banned as a terrorist but admitted on a tourist visa in error) blow up New York’s World Trade Center, killing six and injuring more than 1,000!! In December 1993, a Jamaican immigrant (admitted as a student but stayed, illegal status automatically regularized after marriage to a U.S. citizen) opens fire on commuters on New York’s Long Island Rail Road, killing six and wounding 19!!!  
WHAT’S GOING ON? (6)

Brimelow accounts for these violent acts by claiming that racialized immigrants are motivated by a deep hatred toward whites, producing and drawing on the broader discourse in which whites are framed as the victims of reverse racism. Such rhetorical moves displace white guilt over having their privilege marked by the civil rights era, their fear of the deep hatred of those whom they have oppressed, onto the racialized bodies of immigrants. Whites, and especially the “white woman,” are then (re)produced as innocent victims, and the direction of (neo)colonial violence becomes inverted.

Related to this perceived colored displacement of whites is the threat of immigrant mothers outstripping the reproductive work of white mothers. The national fear that emerges within these texts is that the white national mother is in danger of being

replaced by a brown mother. The construction of racialized immigrants as overly sexualized and technologically backward depicts the white nation as “bursting at the seams” with “inassimilable,” brown, non-English-speaking children. Wilson describes the problem of illegal immigration as “explosively growing” due to excessive illegal immigrant procreation: “Two-thirds of all babies born in Los Angeles public hospitals are born to illegal immigrants.”<sup>48</sup> Because of this excessive birthrate, the state is “bursting at the seams, we’re forced to spend \$1.7 billion each year to educate students who are acknowledged to be in the country illegally.” The anxiety that surrounds the scarcity of resources gets conflated with the replacement of the white mother by a brown mother of an explosively growing racialized population. Brimelow evokes on the same statistic, that “two-thirds of births in Los Angeles County hospitals are to illegal-immigrant mothers,” to extend Wilson’s California-based argument to the national stage. He argues against the overwhelming ease with which foreign progeny become American citizens: “Any child born in the United States is automatically a citizen. Even if its mother is a foreigner. Even if she’s just passing through.”<sup>49</sup> The possessive pronoun used here is *its*, objectifying these children, reducing them to nonhuman status. That the mothers are “just passing through” evokes his broader argument that immigrants have nothing to contribute to the nation.

The production of the white space of the nation emerges through intersecting tropes of race and gender as they produce and respond to differentiated mobilities. The discursive production of the white national space defines the parameters of different levels and modes of mobility, access, and legitimacy, which then produces the material effect of these differentiations. In this case, Brimelow and a wide range of media sources extend the border anxiety around white female penetration and replacement of the white mother to a national scale. So while the border itself is a space of intense violence for the crossing immigrant, the violence so prevalent along that “thin line” is not contained to it. This is why Abner Louima’s abuse in a New York police department is related to Latin American immigrant abuse along the border and within the border region. As Martí teaches us with his legacy of “Our America,” the work of dismantling power entails seeing the connections and overlapping forces that maintain (neo)colonial rule.

### **Conclusion: Whose America?**

Since Gatekeeper began, at least 324 migrants have died trying to cross the border, including 155 overcome by the heat and 115 who drowned in the All American Canal.

—*U.S. News and World Report*, October 1998

Returning now to Martí’s anticolonial vision of “Our America,” how is it possible to imagine, let alone organize, such a vision within the contemporary climate of white

victimage detailed in these pages? Is Martí's vision ultimately utopian? What, if anything, do his insights offer us in this day and age? I would suggest that Martí's vision holds out for us a series of clues that may help us as we forge anticolonial struggles within and outside of the walls of academia. Martí's power to mobilize people, and his insights into strategies to forge anticolonial nationalism(s), give testament to the transformative power of rhetoric. Yet this power cuts both ways, and in this historical moment, the Right has secured its power and mobilized the people through the appropriation of leftist and liberal rhetoric. Thus we see the ways in which the rhetoric of white victimage serves as the basis of a whole host of frightening and regressive policies and actions. This rhetoric becomes a defining narrative as the U.S. nation imagines itself, and thus it becomes the basis on which assertions of white privilege and exclusive claims to U.S. citizenship are made. It also serves to mobilize systemic as well as individual acts of exclusion, often violent ones.

As the national body becomes defined through tropes of whiteness and white bodies, those bodies who deviate from this norm become suspect and may become targets of violence. Because whiteness operates through a series of inversions in which its unmarked character allows it to objectively direct and frame the national gaze, the color of violence becomes inverted in the process. Thus it becomes possible to imagine a whole host of narrative forms featuring whites as the victims: victims of immigrant violence and hatred; their women victims of immigrant rape; victims of the senseless greed of immigrants who seek to take over U.S. America. This imaginary frames border patrol and the containment of immigrant bodies as a war. The stakes are high and, as the author of the letter to the editor discussed earlier exclaims, the response is to "untie the hands of the INS." This language contains a lightly veiled battle cry. It assumes that the hands of the INS are tied, restrained, when in fact they are not. It calls for an increase in the unrestrained use of controlling hands. Such violent impulses are the naturalized responses to the kinds of threats to the U.S. national body rhetors such as Brimelow and Wilson conjure up. The sodomization of Abner Louima's Haitian immigrant body may be understood as an in-kind national response to the rhetorics of penetration ever present within the contemporary popular context. And, in light of Martí's insights on overlapping modes of U.S. American hostilities against Latin Americans of various national and regional spaces, this act must be seen as it interlaces with broader questions surrounding anticolonial struggles. These connections—between and among various modes of oppression and resistance—must be made as we continue the struggle to forge a just "America" in the wake of Martí's vision.

Martí's work also reveals the importance of examining the cultural production of space: Who gains access to and control over spaces? What are the rhetorical maneuverings through which such meanings get secured? The above analysis seeks to follow Martí's lead by revealing the history of U.S. annexation as always already

fraught with contradictions and anxiety. These insights can guide us as we consider contemporary strategies through which neocolonization takes hold. Within the context of late capitalism, it may not be necessary for colonization to take place through annexation; rather it can employ various modes of transnational control: economic (the so-called free market enforced by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization); cultural (the power of the West to define desire); and political (the exportation of neoliberalism through the coupling of capitalism and democracy).

In this essay, I am concerned with the ways in which whiteness becomes a spatial force, producing what Doreen Massey calls “differentiated mobilities” for the differentiated subjects who occupy it. Differentiated mobilities shape not only people’s lives but also, in the case of immigrant abuse, many people’s deaths. Massey’s discussion of an “anyway differentiated mobility” calls our attention to the increased mobility of certain groups.<sup>50</sup> In the case of U.S. America, white mobility is enabled at the expense of brown and black mobilities. Whiteness is a discourse that enables differentiated mobilities because it provides social spaces with certain meanings, concepts, values, and categories through which those spaces are read and acted on and within. The white hegemony through which the U.S. national space is defined becomes naturalized within anti-immigration rhetoric, producing a variety of material outcomes for the inhabitants of “this America.” The meanings attached to any space become the basis for defining the conditions under which individuals and groups may (inter)act within that space. Whiteness, then, is a discourse that organizes these mobilities by defining the terms of mobility within a particular space.

The anti-immigration rhetoric under analysis in this essay dates back to 1994. At that time, many have argued, Pete Wilson elevated immigration to the national stage. While the validity of this claim is arguable, I only point it out to suggest that this most recent anti-immigrant fervor began to take hold of the public imaginary over the past several years and now sets the stage through which the response to 9/11 is negotiated. It is also worth noting that in the wake of this rhetoric, the U.S.-Mexican border space has literally undergone reconfiguration. As the Chicano cultural critic José David Saldívar notes: “The government is gearing up to implement a new ‘battle plan’ against border-crossers from the South into the North, a plan involving a complex network of support from the military, the National Guard, and local police departments. The border-control program, at a cost to the [INS] of \$2.6 million a month, will militarize areas along the border in California and Arizona.”<sup>51</sup> Just a few years prior, Pete Wilson and Peter Brimelow clamored that the nation was being overrun by “criminal aliens.” Their battle cry was “secure our nation’s border!”—a discourse which, as Saldívar argues, has materialized. The links asserted between whiteness and citizenship take on a material force in a variety of social and local contexts. But certainly the recent militarization of the nation’s borders, and the

increasing brutalization of immigrants more broadly, must be recognized as the materialization of this particular moment of whiteness that constrains the capacity of migrants and racialized and classed citizens to secure access within the national space.

Rhetoric, space, power. The themes Martí raised so long ago still haunt us today. Our work is to learn the lessons history has to offer with a critical eye and yet to maintain the sense of hope so present in Martí's own rhetoric. As we struggle to respond to the question, "whose America?" in each historical context, we gain our vantage point as we stand on the shoulders of those visionaries for social justice who have come before us.

### Notes

1. Partha Chatterjee, "Beyond the Nation? Or Within?" *Social Text* 56 (Fall 1998): 57–59.
2. Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and K. H. Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 411–40.
3. B. Shuster, "Consulate Takes Activist Role for Mexicans in US," *Los Angeles Times*, April 9, 1997.
4. See Liam Kennedy, "Alien Nation: White Male Paranoia and Imperial Culture in the United States," *Journal of American Studies* 30 (1996): 87–100; Michelle Fine et al., *Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81 (1995): 291–309.
5. See Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Sheena Malhotra, "Chameleon Conservatism: Post-9/11 Rhetorics of Innocence," *Poroi: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Inquiry* 2, no. 1 (2003). [www.inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/poroi/poroi/issues.html](http://www.inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/poroi/poroi/issues.html).
6. José Martí, *Our America: Writings on Latin America and the Struggle for Cuban Independence*, trans. Elinor Randall (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 93.
7. See Philip S. Foner, introduction to *Our America*, by José Martí (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 24–25.
8. See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990).
9. See Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
10. See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
11. See Larry Grossberg, *Bringing It All Back Home* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); and Raka Shome, "Space Matters: The Power and Practices of Space," *Communication Theory* 13, no. 1 (February 2003): 39–56.
12. Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*; Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989); Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Nancy Duncan, *Body Space* (New

- York: Routledge, 1996); and Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
13. Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics*, 1.
  14. Anannya Bhattacharjee, “The Public/Private Mirage: Mapping Homes and Undomesticating Violence Work in the South Asian Immigrant Community,” in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), 317.
  15. Peter Brimelow, *Alien Nation: Common Sense about America’s Immigration Disaster* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), xvii.
  16. Scott Michaelsen and David E. Johnson, “Border Secrets: An Introduction,” in *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics*, ed. Michaelsen and Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 1.
  17. *Ibid.*; Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1999), 35.
  18. David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 14–20.
  19. *Ibid.*, 26.
  20. D. T. Weintraub, “Wilson to Sue U.S. on Inmate Immigrants,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 1994.
  21. J. A. Barnes, “The Comeback Kid II,” *National Journal* (1994): 2074. Wilson’s political strategy was to saturate his audience with a single message, modeled after Ronald Reagan’s “message of the day” approach (Weintraub, “Wilson to Sue”). The “secure our nation’s borders” theme is recursive, contained within the text at hand and Wilson’s larger campaign. The theme arose in the fall of 1993 when his campaign advisers, fearing “Wilson couldn’t be resurrected in 1994,” conducted “intensive focus groups and . . . identified two issues, crime and immigration, that might revive his candidacy” (Barnes, “Comeback Kid,” 2076).
  22. R. Guskind, “Border Backlash,” *National Journal* (1994): 1296.
  23. Maurice Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the People Québécois,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73 (1987): 133–50.
  24. Pete Wilson, “Securing Our Nation’s Borders: Illegal Immigration,” *Vital Speeches* 60, no. 17 (1994): 534.
  25. E. Mendel, “Proposition 187 Immigration Reform,” *San Diego Union Tribune*, 1994.
  26. Brimelow, *Alien Nation*, 10.
  27. *Ibid.*, 19.
  28. Wilson, “Securing our Nation’s Borders,” 534.
  29. Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
  30. Wilson, “Securing Our Nation’s Borders,” 534.
  31. Quoted in Wimbish, letter to the editor, *San Diego Union Tribune*, 1994.
  32. Ruth Frankenberg, “When We Are Capable of Stopping, We Begin to See: Being White, Seeing Whiteness,” in *Names We Call Home: Autobiography on Racial Identity*, ed. Becky Thompson and Sangeeta Tyagi (New York: Routledge, 1996), 7.
  33. Aída Hurtado, *The Color of Privilege: Three Blasphemies on Race and Feminism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 140.
  34. Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek, “Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81 (1995): 298.

35. Stuart Hall, "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and K. H. Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 25–46.
36. See Shome, "Space Matters"; and Michael Brown, *Re-placing Citizenship* (New York: Guilford, 1996).
37. While white women are the primary beneficiaries of affirmative action, affirmative action is generally spoken of with regard to race, not gender. That is why I include white women in this study of white victimage, because they are also constructed as being victimized, although differently than white males. This is not to say that they are not *also* constructed as a threat to white males, which they often are. But rather, the discourse of white victimage, as an articulation within anti-immigration rhetoric, places white femininity as the property in need of protection by white males.
38. Fine et al., *Off White*, vii–xii.
39. Kennedy, "Alien Nation," 90.
40. Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 5–13.
41. See Raka Shome, "Race and Popular Cinema: The Rhetorical Strategies of Whiteness in *City of Joy*," *Communication Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1996): 502–18; Ann L. Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).
42. Zillah Eisenstein, *Hatreds: Racialized and Sexualized Conflicts in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 43.
43. Jesse Daniels, *White Lies: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in White Supremacist Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
44. Wilson, "Securing Our Nation's Borders," 535.
45. Mendel, "Proposition 187," 10.
46. Wilson, "Securing Our Nation's Borders," 535.
47. Brimelow, *Alien Nation*, xviii.
48. Wilson, "Securing Our Nation's Borders," 534.
49. Brimelow, *Alien Nation*, 4.
50. Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*. Massey's concept of "power geometry" calls attention to the "differentiated" nature of mobility within transnationalism. While movement and communication across space has enabled the "geographical stretching-out of social relations" across the globe (147), Massey clarifies that this condition of late capitalism differently (dis)empowers social subjects. She writes: "For different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections. This point concerns not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn't, although that is an important element of it; it is also about power in relation to the flows and the movement. Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it" (149).
51. José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), x.

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