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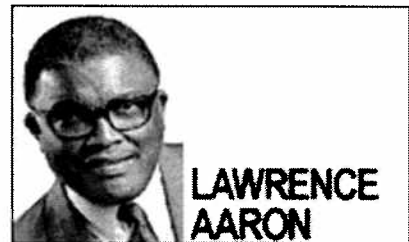
On the rift between minorities

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By **LAWRENCE AARON**
RECORD COLUMNIST

WHEN W.E.B. DuBois said a troublesome issue of the 20th century would be the color line, he was referring to conflicts between black and white Americans.

In case you missed it, the color line has shifted and morphed into something that more resembles a pie chart. People that you may think of as black don't want to be considered black, are happy being "other," and may in fact be accepted as white.



This trend is occurring because of increased interracial marriages, and because of the high number of newcomers who don't fit the European immigrant mold, which forces a reconsideration and redefinition of who is white.

To top it off, the number of Hispanics in the United States has surpassed the number of blacks for the first time, according to the 2000 census. It's only by a fraction of a percentage point difference, but enough to spark interest on political, social, and academic fronts.

Will the emergence of Hispanics as the nation's largest minority lead to antagonism between the two groups and redraw the color lines even more? Black and Hispanic people need to examine what these numbers mean before jumping to any conclusions.

Both sides, heavily Democratic, should take a step back and seek ways to translate their combined numbers into greater political power.

For African-Americans, looking at some Latinos may be jarring because they see hints of their cousin Charlie, but Hispanics (and other brown-skinned people in the United States) are shifting the meaning of black and white.

What may be confusing in a visceral way to many African-Americans is that color or racial similarities don't necessarily make for kindred spirits.

Lawyer and sociologist Nicolas Vaca, author of a new book, "Presumed Alliance," says Hispanics do not shy away from the term "minority." But he says it would be a mistake to draw too many conclusions from the fact that they identify themselves that way.

"Just because a segment of the Hispanic community can identify with discrimination doesn't mean that they will identify with black people," he said.

Communities from Compton to Camden are experiencing tensions between African-Americans and Hispanics.

African-Americans should appreciate their own history of struggle as unique, and not oblige Hispanics to share their fight to make it into the mainstream.

As Record Staff Writer Liz Llorente's recent detailed discussion of Paterson's black/brown conflict shows, the

perception of blacks there is that Hispanics are thriving without paying dues in the crucible of racial conflict. They say Latinos achieve more middle-class acceptance and comfort, and enjoy more breaks than African-Americans. The implication is that blacks need to have newcomers suffer the same amount of discrimination before they are allowed to move into the mainstream, i.e., the white neighborhoods, the better jobs and professions, the exclusive tier in public schools classes, etc.

The poverty rate of Paterson blacks is 26 percent, exceeding that of Hispanics, 21 percent, and whites, 16 percent, census figures indicate.

In the politics of color, African-Americans want to avoid being left in the dust as competition intensifies for diversity crumbs.

Llorente noted that African-Americans are also annoyed that Hispanic newcomers don't seem to understand or appreciate the significance of the centuries of slavery in North America.

Black Americans, who still feel slavery's repercussions thundering in their lives after many generations of emancipation, resent newer Americans who dismiss the relevance of the black slave experience. Slavery's legacy is real, tracing back to the destruction of slave families, forced labor, forced sex, denial of education, deprivation, humiliation, mistreatment, lynching, and KKK terrorism.

As Llorente observed in Paterson, the Hispanic immigrants' vision of the future is effusively gung-ho, while they see African-Americans as needlessly mired in the past, unable to help with their immigration issues, unwilling to share political power, and having no jobs to offer them.

Within a couple of generations, African-Americans will find new ways of thinking about color and forming alliances in many quarters as the fight for equality continues. And among the allies will be some Hispanics and others of goodwill sharing the recognition that coalitions, not color, are among the strongest forces for change in America.

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