

WAR OF A MUCH DIFFERENT KIND: POVERTY AND THE POSSESSIVE INVESTMENT IN COLOR IN THE MULTIRACIAL 1960s UNITED STATES

TOM I. ROMERO, II*

William M. Taylor, Jr., Chief Judge for the United States District Court, North District of Texas, had never seen an employment discrimination case quite like *Badillo v. Dallas Action Committee, Inc.*¹ According to Judge Taylor, a “typical” suit usually “pits an individual or group of . . . minority plaintiffs against a white or Caucasian-controlled employer.”² The situation in this case, however, was very different. In *Badillo*,

a group of five individual Mexican-Americans sue in their own behalf and on behalf of other Mexican-Americans . . . alleging that the [Dallas County Community Action Committee] (DAC) through Black officials sitting in the middle or higher level management positions have either intentionally or inadvertently adhered to policies and employment decisions which have effectively discriminated against the plaintiff Mexican-American . . . employees and job applicants on the basis of their national origin.³

For Judge Taylor, the case was troubling because it highlighted “one minority group suing another minority group for its discriminatory conduct;” a situation (his opinion seemed to suggest) which was unprecedented.⁴

Consequently, *Badillo* laid bare the intense discord between Mexican Americans and African Americans in Dallas’ poverty program after its inception in 1965. In a case involving not only employment actions concerning hiring, retention, promotion, and dismissal of Mexican Americans by African Americans, but scru-

* Assistant Professor of Law, Hamline University School of Law. I wish to acknowledge Thomas Green, María Montoya, and Jon Kahn for giving me thoughtful feedback throughout various versions of this essay. I also want to thank Christina Lee for her able and effective research assistance.

1. *Badillo v. Dallas County Community Action Committee, Inc.*, 394 F. Supp. 694, 697 (N.D. Tex. 1975).

2. *Id.*

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.*

tiny of the proportional funds and priorities directed towards Dallas' most impoverished groups, *Badillo* highlighted a dramatic reconfiguration of racial entitlement and subsequent multi-racial tension spurred by the federal government's domestic war to eradicate social inequity in the mid-1960s. Perhaps because the War on Poverty clearly pitted "minority" group against "minority" group in the competition for "limited resources aimed at fighting social problems of almost unlimited dimensions,"⁵ Judge Taylor himself minimized the multiracial dimensions of the case. According to Judge Taylor, the case could simply be characterized as "minority groups' jealousies of their position relative to other minority recipients . . . [which] cast political overtones to everything that the DAC does."⁶ Although he framed the case as one of "ethnic" bias and political "jealousy," his opinion failed to recognize the fundamental point that in the struggle to control and organize space, resources, and opportunity in the United States' segregated and multiracial urban metropolises, the War on Poverty racialized class in altogether new ways.⁷

Inaugurated with President Lyndon B. Johnson's call to arms in March 1964, the official "War on Poverty" committed the federal government to a broad range of local community programs to combat poverty and impoverishment in the United States.⁸ In order to wage its campaign, the federal government created the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) in the waning months of 1964. Led by former Peace Corps Director Sargent Shriver—a man that President Johnson declared "a modern-day Lincoln"—the OEO coordinated local programs such as the

5. *Id.* at 699.

6. *Id.*

7. See generally, IRA KATZNELSON, *WHEN AFFIRMATIVE ACTION WAS WHITE: AN UNTOLD HISTORY OF RACIAL INEQUALITY IN TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICA* (2005) (arguing that New Deal support by Southern Democrats was designed to preserve a strict racial hierarchy and that resulting legislation and policy was explicitly designed for the majority. Accordingly, poor and middle class whites received the full benefit of rising prosperity while blacks were deliberately left out); THOMAS GUGLIELMO, *WHITE ON ARRIVAL: ITALIANS, RACE, COLOR, AND POWER CHICAGO 1890-1945* 129-45 (2003) (highlighting ways that color worked to exclude African Americans and empower working-class whites in New Deal legislation and labor organizing in the 1930s); GARY GERSLE, *AMERICAN CRUCIBLE: RACE AND NOTION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY* 186 128-86 (2001) (emphasizing that New Deal politics, popular culture, and labor movement organizations all revealed a "complicity in racialized notions of Americanness that carried consequences not just for the new immigrants themselves but for non-white groups of Americans who had been stigmatized as the most dangerous of racial others"); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the "White" Problem in American Studies*, 47 *AM. Q.* 369 (1995) (noting that New Deal legislation designed to combat unemployment and economic inequality expressly excluded non-White groups).

8. JAMES T. PATTERSON, *AMERICA'S STRUGGLE AGAINST POVERTY 1900-1980* 136 (1981); A.H. Raskin, *Generalissimo of the War on Poverty*, *N.Y. TIMES*, Nov. 22, 1964, at SM39.

Neighborhood Youth Corps (NYC), Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), and Project Head Start.⁹ Under the doctrine of “maximum feasible participation,” the OEO encouraged the full involvement of the poor in the local programs that it administered. Although ambiguously conceived and never fully defined, this doctrine created an expectation that the communities’ poor would be actively involved in the distribution of poverty funds.¹⁰

From its conception, the poverty war was under bitter attack. In one comic instance, Senator Gordon Allen of Colorado condemned as “depraved” a June 1965 OEO television broadcast designed to speak to the nation’s impoverished youth.¹¹ In order to encourage the nation’s youth to participate in OEO programs, the OEO organized a telecast that included performances by the Supremes, Dionne Warwick, Ray Charles, Johnny Mathis, Martha and the Vandellas, Herman’s Hermits, the Righteous Brothers, and Cannibal and the Headhunters.¹² According to one newspaper account, the television program was inappropriate because “it spoke not the language of the slum, but of the gutter. And it used the symbols, not of the underprivileged youths, but of the show-business creeps who prey on their ignorance.”¹³ Republican Senator John Tower of Texas also criticized the telecast and decried the rise of the Democratic Party power that used “militants” and “radicals” to take charge of local poverty funds.¹⁴ Unexpected, however, were challenges from those groups who the poverty program was supposed to help. During the annual national convention of the NAACP in Denver, Colorado, Herbert Hill, the NAACP’s National Director for Labor Affairs remarked that the poverty war “is only a BB shot against poverty . . . A *real* poverty program would require a fundamental alteration of the national economy . . . For the Negroes, the great problem is that the antipoverty program has become an extension of white paternalism.”¹⁵

9. Raskin, *supra* note 8.

10. PATTERSON, *supra* note 8, at 146.

11. Jessica Mitford, *So What is Happening, Baby?*, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, July 3, 1965, at 30; *U.S. Sponsored Rock ‘n Roll Defended*, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, July 1, 1965, at 49.

12. Bernard Weinraub, *Hey Man! It’s Murray the K and the Big Beat*, N.Y. TIMES, June 27, 1965, at X17.

13. See Mitford, *supra* note 11.

14. PATTERSON, *supra* note 8, at 144-48.

15. M.S. Handler, *Greater Poverty for the Negro is Feared at N.A.A.C.P. Parley*, N.Y. TIMES, June 29, 1965, at 22. See also, Editorial, *The War Against Poverty*, N.Y. TIMES, July 15, 1965, at 28; Herbert Hill, Letter to the Editor, *Limits of Poverty Program*, N.Y. TIMES, July 29, 1965, at 26; Hyman Bookbinder, Letter to the Editor, *War on Poverty*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 10, 1965, at 28.

More important, Hill's criticism reflected the extent to which racial tension animated the poverty war. From the appointment of Sargent Shriver—a descendant of “Maryland aristocrats”—as head of the OEO, to the emergence of “militant” poor activists in local poverty administrations; racial difference created an uneasy and, at times, contentious relationship.¹⁶ The experience of the DAC demonstrated the manner by which many of the racial animosity and racial competition for poverty funds was a multiracial issue in many of the nation's metropolitan centers. The War on Poverty was an opportunity for a multiracial population of urban poor to claim federal resources and political power in those cities. In the battle to secure leadership positions, distribute jobs, and distribute poverty resources, the War on Poverty therefore symbolized a fundamentally new possessive investment in race in the nation's multiracial urban metropolises.

The color line, like conceptions of race and ethnicity, is a social construct. It is not a physical description of whiteness and non-whiteness in American society; yet, its importance rests in that one's position in relation to the color line means that one either is extended or denied countless resources, rewards, and benefits.¹⁷ For much of American history, Americans—from popular cultural norms to legislation and jurisprudence—have explicitly and implicitly encouraged a “possessive investment” in whiteness as the penultimate marker of access to opportunities and rewards.¹⁸ The civil rights movements of the post-World War II period, however, slowly began to erode *some* of the basic premises and claims to whiteness that had historically existed. This erosion culminated in national legislation, from the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to the War on Poverty. Such legislation, in turn, created the conditions by which a fundamentally new possessive investment in color emerged; albeit one where a person's non-whiteness had political and legal value.

This shift also changed the scope of interracial group conflict and the formation of inter-group alliances in American culture and life. Although such conflict and coalitional building has been documented extensively in Race Crits intersectionality literature,¹⁹ none has explicitly identified the sizeable role that a newly

16. Raskin, *supra* note 8; PATTERSON, *supra* note 8, at 146-48; ROBERT O. SELF, AMERICAN BABYLON (2003); ALLEN J. MATUSOW, THE UNRAVELING OF AMERICA: A HISTORY OF LIBERALISM IN THE 1960's 217-71 (1986).

17. GUGLIELMO, *supra* note 7, at 7-9.

18. See GEORGE LIPSITZ, THE POSSESSIVE INVESTMENT IN WHITENESS: HOW WHITE PEOPLE PROFIT FROM IDENTITY POLITICS (1998).

19. See, e.g., Eric K. Yamamoto, *Rethinking Alliances: Agency, Responsibility and Interracial Justice*, 3 ASIAN PAC. AM. L. J. 33 (1995); Eric K. Yamamoto, *Critical Race Praxis: Race Theory and Political Lawyering in Post-Civil Rights America*, 95 MICH. L. REV. 821 (1997); Sumi K. Cho, *Exploring LatCrit Diversities: Essential*

re-constituted and multi-centered color line played in the identity politics and subsequent possessive investments in color made among the nation's subordinated groups. Most important in this regard is the way that law and legislation in the 1960s created incentives for individuals of many of the nation's subordinate, but inconsistently racialized groups,²⁰ to identify as "people of color." This identification would be neither easy nor precise and the process would reveal much about the paradox of color in a world where whiteness and all of its benefits would continue to reign supreme. Consequently, this essay adds historical perspective to this shift by examining the War on Poverty in one locale, Denver, Colorado, in order to explore the ways the federal program, like its counterparts across the nation, racialized class and color in an unprecedented multiracial manner. Despite the fact that poverty crossed racial, ethnic, religious, and political lines, the War on Poverty was infused almost exclusively with color meaning. Although many believed that "African Americans" were the primary, if not the sole, beneficiaries of federal civil rights programs and laws in the 1960s,²¹ multiracial patterns of poverty challenged this understanding about the government's re-distribution of power and resources. This paper will assess the conflict that existed between Mexican Americans and African Americans over War on Poverty funds. It will highlight the extent that racial entitlement became reconfigured and contained in an urban city like Denver, Colorado. More important, it was a war that re-positioned the social, legal, and political claims of whiteness and non-whiteness being made by the nation's most impoverished groups.

Politics, 2 HARV. LATINO L. REV. 433 (1997); Barbara J. Cox, *Coalescing Communities, Discourses and Practices: Synergies in the Anti-subordination Project*, 2 HARV. LATINO L. REV. 473 (1997); Jerome McCristal Culp, Jr., *Latinos, Blacks, Others, and the New Legal Narrative*, 2 HARV. LATINO L. REV. 479 (1997); George A. Martinez, *African-Americans, Latinos, and the Construction of Race: Toward an Epistemic Coalition*, 19 CHICANO-LATINO L. REV. 213 (1998); Guadalupe T. Luna, *The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo and Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 53 U. MIAMI L. REV. 691 (1999); Cheryl Little, *Intergroup Coalitions and Immigration Politics: The Haitian Experience in Florida*, 53 U. MIAMI L. REV. 717 (1999); Dorothy E. Roberts, *BlackCrit Theory and the Problem of Essentialism*, 53 U. MIAMI L. REV. 855 (1999); Victor C. Romero, *"Aren't You Latino?": Building Bridges upon Common Misperceptions*, 33 U.C. DAVIS L. REV. 837 (2000); Tayyab Mahmud, *Genealogy of a State-Engineered "Model Minority": "Not Quite/Not Quite" South Asian Americans*, 78 DENV. U. L. REV. 657 (2001); Joe R. Feagin, *White Supremacy and Mexican Americans: Rethinking the "Black-White Paradigm"*, 54 RUTGERS L. REV. 959 (2002); Felipe H. López, *The Construction of Mexican Identity*, 54 RUTGERS L. REV. 989 (2002).

20. See, e.g., the literature cited in *supra* note 19.

21. HUGH DAVIS GRAHAM, *THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA: ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL POLICY 1960-1972* (2001).

I. ECONOMIC INEQUITY IN ONE POST-WORLD WAR II MULTIRACIAL AMERICAN CITY

The Denver metropolitan area experienced phenomenal economic growth in the decades after World War II. Between 1950 and 1966, personal income more than tripled, "increasing from \$1.1 billion in 1950 to over \$3.5 billion in 1966—an average annual growth rate of 7.5 percent, or one-fourth higher than the national rate for the same period [and] personal income before tax rose from slightly less than \$7,300 in 1950 to almost \$13,000 by 1966."²² Moreover, wages rose rapidly in the Denver area. From 1952 to 1967, nonagricultural wage and salary employment rose 61 percent "for Denver contrasted with an increase of only 33 per cent (sic) for the nation."²³ Of these jobs, an overwhelming number were with the federal government or government related industries.²⁴

Despite such economic growth, the Denver metropolitan area contained 28 of 192 census tracts in the nation's largest one hundred metropolitan areas designated by the Bureau of the Census to be "urban poverty areas."²⁵ Indeed, nearly "two-fifths" of the total metropolitan area population (over 40,000) lived in poverty in the 1960s.²⁶ Economic opportunity, therefore, seemed to be denied to the city's largest and most visible "minority" and racialized groups. According to one 1967 study, poverty in Denver "is a racial as well as an economic ghetto—three out of every five of its residents are either Spanish-surnamed or non-white and the Hispanos outnumber Negroes two to one."²⁷ The study also found that poverty led to racially segregated and underachieving schools as well as disproportionate representation of poor "minorities" in the area's public welfare, criminal court, and public health systems.²⁸ From such data, it was clear that racialized patterns of poverty that had established themselves during World War II had become entrenched in the Denver met-

22. R.A. ZUBROW, ET AL., *POVERTY AND JOBS: A STUDY OF EMPLOYMENT, UNEMPLOYMENT, AND JOB VACANCIES IN THE DENVER LABOR MARKET 2* (1969).

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.* at 1.

25. The Bureau of the Census used the 1960 census data on family income, educational achievement of male adults, unskilled male labor force, condition of housing, and proportion of broken homes to determine poverty level. A "poverty area" was found if it fell into any one of the following three categories: (1) one to four contiguous poverty tracts containing 4,000 or more families; (2) five or more contiguous poverty tracts regardless of the number of families residing within it; (3) a census tract or two contiguous tracts, not ranked in the lowest quartile, completely surrounded by poverty tracts. U.S. BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, *CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILIES RESIDING IN POVERTY AREAS* (1966).

26. ZUBROW, *supra* note 22, at 7.

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.* at 7-8.

ropolitan area by the 1960s.²⁹ Reports and research data reiterated that the city's Spanish-surnamed population did not benefit from Denver's economic boom. Rather, Mexican Americans continued to represent Denver's most impoverished, most segregated, and least employable group.³⁰ Consequently, Mexican American antipoverty activists—both nationally and locally—worked to direct the War on Poverty's efforts towards their community.

Nationally, Mexican American leaders had long believed that the community would be one of the prime beneficiaries of the War on Poverty program. As early as 1963—when the Kennedy Administration began to conceive of a national effort to eradicate economic inequality—Walter Heller, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors, “and the most influential proponent of a poverty program” emphasized that “having mounted a dramatic program for one disadvantaged group [civil rights for blacks] it was both equitable and politically attractive to launch one specifically designed to aid other disadvantaged groups.”³¹ For Mexican Americans, this policy became tangible with the ascension of Lyndon B. Johnson to President of the United States. As a rising Texas politician who at one time was a teacher in a Spanish-speaking school, Johnson consciously cultivated the Mexican American vote. Indeed, not long into his presidency, Johnson became the first chief executive in the history of the United States to meet with Mexican American leaders.³²

As a result, many “Mexican Americans” strongly believed that Johnson's “War on Poverty” would finally address problems of inequality that the community faced.³³ According to one account, “the same president who taught in Cotulla [Texas] knows that Mexican Americans comprised the majority of poor people in neighborhoods and that Johnson realized better than anyone the importance of . . . Mexican Americans” in the antipoverty project.³⁴ Despite such expectations, Mexican Americans were largely excluded in early efforts to establish the national and local War on Poverty programs. Within a year of the OEO's found-

29. Tom I. Romero, II, *Of Race and Rights: Legal Culture, Social Change, and the Making of a Multiracial Metropolis* (2004) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan) (on file with author).

30. Bob Jain, *The Spanish-American in Denver*, DENVER POST, July 20, 1965, at 31.

31. PATTERSON, *supra* note 8, at 134-35.

32. JULIE LEININGER PYCIOR, *LBJ AND MEXICAN AMERICANS: THE PARADOX OF POWER* 154 (1997).

33. *Id.* at 151-58; MARIO T. GARCÍA, *MEXICAN AMERICANS* 210-12 (1991).

34. LEININGER PYCIOR, *supra* note 32, at 154.

ing, only eight of its 1,139 employees were Mexican American or Spanish-surnamed.³⁵

The City and County of Denver had already begun to mobilize for the federal poverty war prior to Congress' enactment of the Economic Opportunity Act in August 1964. On July 11, 1964, Mayor Tom Currigan declared that the City and County of Denver would join the federal government "toward the banishment of conditions which produce and perpetuate poverty in our midst."³⁶ The effort, in Currigan's estimation, would produce a "renewal of hope and an enlargement of opportunity for the disadvantaged among our citizens."³⁷ The city held an open meeting to establish the local unit of the proposed federal antipoverty agency. Over four hundred "interested citizens, primarily from the middle class," attended the meeting.³⁸

On August 26, 1964, soon after Congress authorized funds for the implementation of the War on Poverty, Mayor Currigan joined with Denverites—Bernard Valdez (Manager of Welfare), Walter Emery (President of the Bank of Denver), Dr. James Galvin (Executive Director of Denver's Job Opportunity Center) and Dr. Henry Welch (Executive Director of the Metropolitan Council of Community Service, Inc)—to form Denver's War on Poverty, Inc. ("DWOP"). Incorporated as a non-profit corporation, power and authority in the DWOP was accorded between membership of the Board of Directors, residents of "poverty target areas," and an everyday director.³⁹ The By-Laws also provided that the Board of Directors include a broad cross-section of the city's political, business, legal, and municipal elite that included the Mile High United Fund, the Denver Chamber of Commerce, the Denver Bar Association, the Metropolitan Council for Community Services, the Colorado Labor Council, the Denver Housing Authority, the Denver Board of Education, the

35. *Id.*

36. Memorandum from Mayor Tom Currigan to Denver's War on Poverty, Inc. (July 11, 1964) (on file with the Denver War on Poverty Collection, Archives and Special Collection, Auraria Library, Denver, 2 Box 1, FF 4) [hereinafter "DWOP Collection"].

37. *Id.*

38. Memorandum, Decisions Reached at July 11, 1964 Meeting, Denver's War on Poverty, Inc. (on file with the DWOP Collection, Box 1, FF 4).

39. The original Board of Directors included such prominent Denverites as Mayor Tom Currigan, School Board members A. Edgar Benton and James Voorhees, Juvenile Court Judge Phillip Gilliam, and Mexican American activist Rodolfo Gonzales. In August 1965, the Board of Directors amended this provision to include 15 members. See Memorandum from the Special Committee, Denver's War on Poverty, Inc. (Aug. 12, 1965) (on file with the DWOP Collection, Box 1, FF 4).

Denver Medical Society, and the Denver Urban Renewal Authority.⁴⁰

Although the DWOP included select representatives from Denver's "poverty areas," DWOP's nascent political agenda was set by those who strongly criticized Denver's poor for not conforming to mainstream, middle-class, "White" American values. Most notable was the influence of Dr. Galvin and former state senator, Robert E. Allen, in charting the early course of Denver's antipoverty efforts. As executive director of Denver's Job Opportunity Center, Galvin worked closely with many of Denver's poor and underemployed. His first priority, as Chair of the DWOP Board was to expand the definition of poverty used by the city's antipoverty officials. The DWOP adopted the view that "poverty" was demonstrated not only by one's wealth and employability, but also by a higher incidence of crime and delinquency, geographic immobility, educational deprivation, an increased incidence of brain damage, a high percentage of low-grade chronic diseases, increased incidents of discrimination practiced by bureaucratic and public safety officials, and cultural deviancy. The combination of these factors directly implicated the city's "Spanish American" and "Negro" groups.⁴¹

Former Colorado state Senator Robert Allen, as the Executive Director of the organization, likewise believed the cultural values of the city's poor needed to be transformed. As a result, he advocated that the DWOP use its limited resources on promoting those educational projects designed to help disadvantaged pupils make the transition from a culture of poverty to one of affluence.⁴² Despite recognizing stereotypes that society had placed on the area's poor, both Galvin and Allen nevertheless claimed that the "minority" poor themselves had a culture poorly suited for the demands of urban life.⁴³

It should come as no surprise that Denver's War on Poverty program, like its counterparts across the nation, was challenged for its color and class exclusivity. As the NAACP's labor director remarked, the War on Poverty was controlled or beholden to "downtown Whites."⁴⁴ In light of the competing class and racial dynamics embedded in these early programs, the DWOP's first year was rocked by contentious in-fighting, a change in leader-

40. By-Laws, Denver's War on Poverty, Inc. (on file with the DWOP Collection Box 1, FF 4).

41. Memorandum from James Galvin of the Denver's War on Poverty, Inc. to Poverty Taskforce (undated) (on file with the DWOP Collection, 3-4, Box 1, FF 4).

42. *Id.* at 5-6.

43. Memorandum from the Special Committee, *supra* note 39, at 3.

44. Fritz Lalendorf, *Official Hits Critics of War on Poverty*, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, July 3, 1965, at 50.

ship, and a fundamental re-orientation in the ideological direction of the antipoverty program. Most importantly, the federal government—through the OEO office in Washington D.C.—“delayed approving Denver’s anti-poverty programs for months because it wanted an ‘indigenous person’ at the head of the organization.”⁴⁵ Although the federal government never explained what exactly “indigenous” meant, it was clear that Galvin and Allen were on the wrong side of Washington’s conception of the class and color line. On August 2, 1965, Mayor Currigan asked Senator Allen to resign as Executive Director of the DWOP for the “good of the [antipoverty] program.”⁴⁶ At the same time, “minority” members of the DWOP’s Board demanded that Dr. Galvin step down as Chair.⁴⁷ The precise issue driving their criticism was Galvin’s sustained opposition to the OEO’s request that at least one-third of the DWOP Board have “indigenous representatives.”⁴⁸ On August 12, 1965, Galvin announced his resignation. Galvin unequivocally made his friction with several “minority” board members known, by declaring: “I have been criticized . . . and I think the board should be given the leeway to do what it wants from now on.”⁴⁹

II. DISSONANCE AND DISCORD AMONG THE “INDIGENOUS” POOR

On September 1, 1965, the DWOP Board of Directors met to select a new leader of the antipoverty program. In the days leading up to the meeting, a special Nominating Committee remained bitterly divided over Galvin’s successor. While some Board members believed that Bank of Denver President, Walter Emery, would bring community acceptance to the beleaguered DWOP, others were adamant that a “true,” “indigenous” representative of the poor be selected. After a prolonged debate, Board members elected fellow member and current NYC director, Rodolfo (Corky) Gonzales to Chair the DWOP.⁵⁰ A former and highly popular prize fighter from Denver’s east-side, the city’s first youth probation officer, a Democratic ward captain,

45. Jack Gaskie, *Gonzales Views His Poverty Role*, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, Sept. 29, 1965, at 5.

46. Letter from Mayor Tom Currigan to DWOP Board (Aug. 2, 1965) (on file with the DWOP Collection, Box 1, FF 4).

47. Minutes from the Denver’s War on Poverty Board of Directors Meeting (Aug. 12, 1965) (on file with the DWOP Collection, Box 1, FF 4).

48. Jack Gaskie, *Red Tape Slows Denver’s War on Poverty*, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, June 30, 1966, at 18. See also Memorandum from the Special Committee, *supra* note 39, at 3.

49. Fritz Lalendorf, *Embattled Denver Poverty Chief Quits*, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, Aug. 13, 1965, at 88.

50. *Id.*

the state head of the Colorado's "¡Viva Kennedy!" campaign, and the director of Denver's NYC, Gonzales initially represented the type of "indigenous" leader sought by the OEO to represent the poor.⁵¹ As the new public leader of Denver's Poverty War, Gonzales explained his philosophy: "I'm an agitator and a trouble-maker. That's my reputation and that's what I'm going to be. They didn't buy me when they put me in this job."⁵²

Soon after the Board elected Gonzales as chair of the DWOP, however, it became clear that the term and meaning of "indigenous" would be subject to a great deal of complication and subsequent contention. In an interview with the *Rocky Mountain News* shortly after his selection as chair in 1965, Gonzales made it expressly known whom he believed the DWOP served: "[t]he Negro has done it in Denver. Now we have to do it too." The *Rocky Mountain News* helped to clarify Gonzales' statement by writing that "the 'we' in that sentence, if there is any doubt, means the Spanish-named. Gonzales drives the point home."⁵³ At the time Gonzales assumed leadership of the DWOP, Denver's Mexican Americans were beginning to articulate a sense of their own distinct racial identity vis-à-vis other groups. Like Mexican Americans throughout the Southwest, there was no consistent understanding about the racial positioning of the Spanish-surnamed community. Some in the community, for instance, argued that despite "Indian physical traits" and "Negroid features," "Spanish-origin" citizens are "officially" and "scientifically" "White." Proponents of this belief argued that "the cultural background of the Spanish-named people of the American Southwest is essentially European or Hispanic."⁵⁴

Many others, however, increasingly challenged such claims to whiteness. As local community activist Mary Chavez pointed out, "'Mexican' is clearly incorrect. So is 'Spanish American.'" Instead, Chavez contended that the term "Chicano" more fully captured the "Indian" and "Spanish" mixed-racial genealogy of Denver's largest "minority" group.⁵⁵ Gonzales himself explained the social consequences of Chicano. In testimony before the Colorado Legislature, Gonzales argued that racial "bigotry, discrimination, prejudice, political . . . and economic exploitation" against "Chicanos" made these issues the major civil rights

51. Tom I. Romero, II, *Wearing the Red, White, and Blue Trunks of Aztlán: Rodolfo 'Corky' Gonzales and the Convergence of American and Chicano Nationalism*, 29 *AZTLÁN* 83, 103-05 (2004).

52. Gaskie, *supra* note 45.

53. *Id.*

54. Daniel T. Valdez, *Spanish-Origin Citizens: People Without A Name*, *DENVER POST*, July 5, 1965, at 17. (Dr. Daniel T. Valdez, who made these remarks, was a Professor of Sociology at the Metropolitan State College in Denver, Colorado).

55. Jain, *supra* note 30.

problems facing the state.⁵⁶ The comments of both Gonzales and Chavez suggested a subtle, but nonetheless meaningful re-positioning of Latino/as understanding about their racialization as non-white. More importantly, their comments indicated that Chicanos would define themselves and place the issues of the Mexican American community both in comparison to and directly at odds with those on the non-white side of the color line. Moreover, their comments illustrate how federal programs like the War on Poverty re-deployed the color line to create opportunities, no matter how small, for all those who had consistently been denied the benefits of whiteness.

Gonzales' stated determination to use the DWOP on behalf of the city's Mexican American poor exposed the new politics and positioning of color that would emerge with the nation's civil rights efforts. Within months, members of Denver's black community began to publicly question Gonzales' actions. The first public accusation came in February 1966 after the DWOP Board demoted African American Richard Clark from his position as the DWOP's Assistant Director. In a meeting to protest the demotion, several members of Denver's black community questioned the "limited participation of African Americans in the poverty program."⁵⁷ In response to such accusations, Gonzales pointed out that five of the ten permanent staff members of the DWOP were "Black." Moreover, he "deplored the fact that two minority groups are jockeying for a position against each other."⁵⁸ He implored the DWOP's African American constituents to rethink their strategy: "[I]f we are to push each out of position, we are defeating our purposes."⁵⁹ Despite his plea for unity, questions of bias continued to follow Gonzales and the DWOP.

By April 1966, the racial fault lines beneath the poverty war's re-deployment of the color line were exposed by one local newspaper, the *Rocky Mountain News*. In a series of articles, the paper detailed an alleged investigation of Gonzales by the OEO. According to the report, "anti-poverty officials are keeping a wary eye on Rudolph Gonzales, chief of Denver's War on Poverty, Inc. There is a feeling Gonzales might be placing too much emphasis on Spanish-American problems rather than the broad

56. Leonard Larsen, *Study of Spanish-American Problems Backed*, DENVER POST, Apr. 11, 1965, at 3.

57. *Denver's Negroes Accuse Poverty War Head of Bias*, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, Feb. 11, 1966, at 8.

58. *Id.*

59. *Id.*

spectrum of the poor.”⁶⁰ The *News* series subsequently went on to detail how Gonzales’ explicit public declaration on behalf of the city’s “Spanish-surnamed” created anxiety in Washington, D.C. Quoting an unnamed OEO source, the *News* reported that “when he [Gonzales] reaches the point of representing a group rather than a whole clientele, it will be up to the local organization to do something about it.”⁶¹

Because he had so effectively linked himself and his position to Denver’s Chicana/o community, the controversy was not just about Gonzales. The controversy also produced multiracial complications unforeseen by either local or federal officials. An editorial that appeared in the *Denver Post*, criticized the city’s two largest “minority” groups for “not getting [their] quota of well-paid jobs on the various staffs of the poverty programs.”⁶² Although not stating specifically what “minorities” made such claims, the *Post* editorial nevertheless suggested a dramatic fissure among the city’s racialized poor. No longer an undifferentiated “minority” group, Denver’s Mexican Americans and African Americans had distinct, and in many ways, different claims of entitlement to the poverty program. Consequently, the War on Poverty gave the city’s Mexican Americans and African Americans a possessive investment and vested rights over who would be categorized as the most impoverished and downtrodden group.

As a result of this race to the bottom, tensions between the city’s Mexican American and African American communities increased. The tension between the two groups was a recent phenomenon. In the immediate years after World War II, activists from both of these groups openly worked together to dismantle discrimination in the city.⁶³ By the 1960s, however, Chicano activists became increasingly disconcerted with local and national civil rights efforts. At one time labeled unambiguously as the city’s largest “problem” group, Mexican American activists increasingly came to argue that their plight was ignored in favor of African Americans in any discussion of civil rights legislation.⁶⁴

60. Dan Thomasson, *Denver’s Poverty War Under Watch*, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, Apr. 22, 1966, at 5.

61. *Id.*

62. Editorial, *Misunderstanding the Poverty War*, DENVER POST, Apr. 21, 1966, at 26.

63. See Romero, II, *supra* note 29, at 304-34. This is not to suggest, however, that relations between the groups were harmonious. There were documented accounts of hostility between African Americans and Mexican Americans. Such cases, however, were few and far between.

64. See Larsen, *supra* note 56 (discussing further the development in Denver and Colorado); Zeke Scher, *Test Project Slated for Spanish-American Problem*, DENVER POST, Oct. 13, 1964, at 37; Gonzales, *Head of Denver’s Poverty War, to Talk in L.A.*, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, Apr. 28, 1966, at 23; *Unity Plan Urged at Minority*

As "Chicanos" claimed entitlement to the benefits of color embedded in the various state and federal civil rights programs, tension rather than unity and commonality ensued. Gonzales' ascension to the head of the antipoverty program and his subsequent actions on behalf of Denver's "Chicanos" only exacerbated the ways that Spanish-surnamed activists increasingly understood that being on the non-white side of the color line held some actual and tangible benefit in the poverty war.

Although the OEO eventually exonerated Gonzales of the charges directed against him, Mayor Currigan relieved Gonzales from his duties and responsibilities as Director of the city's NYC.⁶⁵ Gonzales' Chicano-centered activism, however, continued to cause tension in the DWOP. A few months later, Gonzales himself angrily resigned his position as Chair and as member of the DWOP Board after the organization was again criticized for its bias. At the Board meeting where he submitted his resignation, Gonzales angrily declared that "the only savior to the new board will be the tough, militant people from the poor."⁶⁶ Gonzales was alluding to an increasingly racial nationalist ethic being embraced by many of the city's Chicana/o community; that in turn, rejected any claims to whiteness that many Mexican Americans had traditionally made.

Neither Gonzales' divisive rhetoric nor his increasingly racial centered activism meshed well with the inclusionary rhetoric of the poverty war. Nevertheless, poverty officials attempted to recognize the multiple racial interests at work in antipoverty programs. Under directions from the OEO, Denver War on Poverty, Inc. changed its name to Denver Opportunity ("DO") in August 1966. The OEO also instructed the newly renamed antipoverty organization to reorganize in order to "give more of a voice to poor people in deciding on poverty projects."⁶⁷ Notably, the "voice of the poor" was itself racialized as racial rights organizations were given an explicit stake in the "democratic practices" of

Meet, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, Apr. 26, 1966, at 88. Such concern about the federal government's exclusive focus on "Blacks" and civil rights also occurred nationwide. See generally, LEININGER PYCIOR, *supra* note 32, at 146-47, 177-82; MARIO T. GARCIA, MEMORIES OF CHICANO HISTORY: THE LIFE AND NARRATIVE OF BERT CORONA 217-31 (1994).

65. John Toohey, *Denver Poverty Dispute*, DENVER POST, Apr. 24, 1966, at 39; John Morehead, *Gonzales Is Fired From Youth Post*, DENVER POST, Apr. 25, 1966, at 1.

66. Richard Tucker, *Poverty Board Head Quits With Blast*, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, Aug. 5, 1966, at 5; Bartell Nyberg, *Corky Quits DO Post; New Staff Setup OKd*, DENVER POST, Aug. 5, 1966, at 21.

67. Richard Tucker, *New Poverty Board to Go Into Action*, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, Sept. 1, 1966, at 8.

the newly reorganized antipoverty program.⁶⁸ Consequently, the Congress of Racial Equality (“CORE”), the Latin American Research and Services Agency (“LARASA”), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (“NAACP”), the American G.I. Forum, the Chicano group, and the Crusade for Justice’s Motivation Against Poverty (“MAP”) were all recognized as formal members in the DO’s new corporate charter.⁶⁹ The OEO’s reorganization institutionalized the multiracial and non-white claim for federal funds provided by the federal program.

In spite of the reorganization and an attempt to give each non-white racial group an equal share, DO continued to be rocked by internal racial strife. One member noted that although there were many new faces to the DO, “there was the same old bickering, the old factionalism.”⁷⁰ Shortly after the new DO’s Board confirmed Michael Moore as the DO’s Executive Director, one Chicano organization questioned the action. In a bilingual pamphlet, the organization asked: “Moore belongs to CORE and NAACP, does he belong to any Spanish-named organizations?”⁷¹ Ironically, criticism from both Denver’s Chicano/a and black communities compelled Moore to resign in June 1968.⁷² Multiracial tension on the non-white side of the color line continued throughout the end of the decade. In one heated exchange in December 1968, blacks complained that DO’s official newspaper, the *Neighborhood Journal*, devoted more space and attention to the city’s Chicano poor.⁷³ Although the *Journal*’s editor, Julius Martinez denied the accusation, one member of the DO claimed the periodical’s “bias” was “justified because there are more poverty-stricken Hispanos than Negroes.”⁷⁴ Charles Poe, Assistant Director of DO, and himself an African American, summed up the feelings held by many in each of the racialized poverty communities: “[I]t bugs [the] hell out of me to see blacks and browns fighting each other over crumbs.”⁷⁵

68. Memorandum from Dwain Alexander, Field Representative, Community Action Program, Region VI, OEO, to the Denver’s War on Poverty, Inc. (Mar. 1966) (on file with the DWOP Collection, Box 1, Folder 11).

69. Tucker, *supra* note 67.

70. Bartell Nyberg, *Sound, Fury Points Up Persistent DO Strife*, DENVER POST, Sept. 2, 1966, at 32.

71. Pamphlet, *La Pregunta Picante (The Hot Question)* (on file with the DWOP Collection, Box 1, Folder 5).

72. Judith Brimberg, *Buckles Prime Contender for DO Post*, DENVER POST, June 2, 1968, at 32.

73. Richard Tucker, *Hispanos, Blacks Present Arguments to DO Board*, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, Dec. 6, 1968, at 29; Richard O’Reilly, *DO Funds Restored to Save Jobs*, DENVER POST, Dec. 6, 1968, at 21.

74. Tucker, *supra* note 73.

75. *Id.*

III. CONCLUSION

A little over a year after the inauguration of the War on Poverty, violent riots in one of the nation's premier metropolises—Los Angeles, California—permanently altered the struggle for civil rights in the United States. In conjunction with race riots in such urban centers as Detroit and Newark, the optimism of the poverty program turned into extreme pessimism about the achievement of racial equality. The federal government, in its now infamous Kerner Commission Report, could only helplessly declare that the nation was unequally divided between its black and white populations.⁷⁶ Not surprisingly, the Watts Riot in Los Angeles was framed as a bi-racial issue, although it took place in a neighborhood not far from other neighborhoods that had significant numbers of non-white and non-black groups. The War on Poverty experience in places like Denver demonstrated that “Black” and “White” were clearly insufficient social distinctions to fully capture the nature of inequality and social difference in the United States.

Although an effort to eradicate poverty among *everyone* in the United States, the federal government's War on Poverty—much like the nation's hot and cold wars⁷⁷—was shaped by the primacy of the color line and its racial dimensions in the United States. As this line shifted to redefine the boundaries between whiteness and non-whiteness, it accordingly created powerful incentives to disperse what came to be extremely finite power and resources among the nation's subordinated groups. In this very important sense, claims to non-whiteness were contained and controlled by a program and policy's own limited political capacity and good will. For many astute individuals, the tragedy and tension in the Poverty War rested in the fact that the poverty program provided nothing more than “crumbs” to the nation's poorest communities. A possessive investment in color, as a result, carried very little of the social, political, and legal advantages that claims to whiteness played and continued to play in American history and life.⁷⁸

Nevertheless, the federal government's efforts represented a new sense of rights and expectations among the nation's highly fractured urban poor. The OEO's demand for an “indigenous” leadership and plural democratic representation in a city like Denver demonstrates the extent which the federal government

76. KERNER COMMISSION, REPORT OF THE NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMISSION ON CIVIL DISORDERS (1968).

77. See, e.g., MARY DUDZIAK, COLD WAR CIVIL RIGHTS: RACE AND THE IMAGE OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY (2002); JAMES E. WESTHEIDER, FIGHTING ON TWO FRONTS: AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE VIETNAM WAR (1997).

78. See, e.g., the literature cited in *supra* note 7.

could not fully contain the multiracial tensions of the poverty war. Consequently, as the city's largest and most impoverished racialized community, Denver's Spanish-surnamed population claimed they were the legitimate beneficiaries of the poverty war's resources vis-à-vis blacks. The emergence of self-identified non-white Chicano leadership who held key antipoverty posts raised considerable dissension among the city's other impoverished groups. Denver's black community came into heated conflict with the city's Chicanos over the focus and direction of the poverty war. At stake in these efforts were not only the resources over how to eradicate poverty, but also who, by the virtue of their non-whiteness, could claim entitlement to all the rights and privileges (however limited) to federal civil rights and poverty legislation.

In the end, the federal government's War on Poverty—one front of a larger battle to eradicate intolerance and inequity in the 1960s—created a possessive investment in non-whiteness that fundamentally altered the meaning of the color line in post-World War II America. Individuals in many of the nation's urban communities used the War on Poverty to distinguish themselves socially, politically, and racially from whites and blacks. This was a tension that neither federal bureaucrats, local activists, nor federal judges fully comprehended. While the War on Poverty contributed to an emerging multiracial language of color and class, it anticipated the manner by which the meaning of equality, opportunity, and civil rights would come to be misunderstood and ultimately contained in a racially fractured United States.

