

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

REFLECTING ON OUR PROGRESS IN THE RACIAL JUSTICE JOURNEY

With apologies to President Joe Biden, the highlight of his inauguration on Jan. 21 wasn't his speech. It was the poem recited by National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman, who stole the show.

In "The Hill We Climb," Gorman expressed her hope that Americans will create a more just and more inclusive society. The poem envisions a way in which our country can come together and heal, while still addressing hard truths.

Sadly, it turns out that — to some — Gorman is just another threatening Black girl.

Gorman recalls that, recently, as she was walking home, she was "tallied" by a security guard. He demanded to know if she lived in a nearby building, telling her: "You look suspicious." When Gorman showed her keys and gained access to the building, the guard left. But he didn't apologize.

In a poetic retort, the 23-year-old later tweeted, "In a sense he was right. I AM A THREAT": a threat to injustice, to inequality, to

ignorance. Anyone who speaks the truth and walks with hope is an obvious and fatal danger to the powers that be. A threat and proud."

Touch , Amanda Gorman. I wonder: Just how far have we come as a country in the fight against racial injustice?

It's an apt time to reflect, with the trial of Derek Chauvin — the White Minneapolis police officer accused of murdering a Black man, George Floyd — about to begin. The horrific event last May sent shivers through our country, stirred outrage and revitalized the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

In the aftermath of Floyd's death, I imagined that we were finally on our way to enduring change. Black Lives Matter protests were drawing participants of all races. Police departments began to take stock of enforcement practices, implementing changes to improve the safety of all citizens, regardless of color. And corporations were pledging support for #BlackLivesMatter and Black causes.

Yet, our season of solidarity was fleeting. We've returned to an ugly place.

We're seeing sinister attacks on voting rights. According to the Brennan Center, legislators in 43 states have introduced 253 bills to restrict voter access. While presented with the intent of preserving the safety of voting, the restrictions would be borne, disproportionately, by people of color and young voters.

To Cheryl Morrow, public perceptions — often *misperceptions* — of Black Americans must change to achieve real progress. Until then, Morrow says, we will continue to react to the crisis du jour with well-intentioned programs that provide a measure of relief but don't solve systemic problems. Morrow, a leading voice in San Diego's Black community, is CEO of California Curl Beauty and editor of San Diego Monitor News. She speaks frankly about the way Black people are commonly depicted in the media and treated by police — often as criminals.

These "optics" and "acoustics,"

as Morrow calls them, affect the way White America sees Black people. She cites a recent press conference at which San Diego government and law enforcement leaders announced the launch of "No Shots Fired," a pilot program to stop gang-involved shootings. The event was held in southeastern San Diego, a community of color. Morrow thinks that this backdrop reinforced an image of Black people as the poster children for gun violence.

It's a stigma that they just can't seem to shake. Yet more than 60 percent of gun deaths in the United States are suicides. And White men account for three-quarters of them — 288,000 deaths between 1999 and 2018, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Just in the last few weeks, we've seen 18 lives lost in mass shootings at the hands of two men, neither of whom is Black.

So, how do we change perceptions, and begin again the hard work of rooting out racism? The process starts with awareness —

and a belief that every human being deserves to be valued and treated justly. And it requires us to examine and sometimes rethink our most deeply held convictions, which are often shaped by the optics and acoustics that Morrow mentioned.

With greater awareness, we can have a deeper understanding of our daily encounters with race. But changes in attitude alone aren't sufficient.

Ibram X. Kendi, author of "How to Be an Antiracist," puts it so well. Racism will continue, he says, unless and until we take action and become engaged participants in the fight against racism in all its forms.

Along with Amanda Gorman — and so many other "threatening" individuals out there — I'm ready and eager to fight.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC's programming, visit ncrconline.com

79TH • Some say having Black woman replace Weber in Legislature important

FROM B1 experience, credentials and coalitions, but it also involves calculations about historic underrepresentation among women and minorities.

The first Black woman to serve in the California State Assembly was Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, who took office in 1966 amid the Civil Rights Movement, according to the California Legislative Black Caucus.

Only 15 Black women have served in the state legislature since, including the elder Weber and two current legislators, Assemblywoman Autumn Burke, D-Marina del Ray, and newly elected State Sen. Sydney Kamlager, D-Los Angeles.

Some previous members have gone on to national office, including U.S. Reps. Maxine Waters and Karen Bass, both Democrats representing Los Angeles. But there has not been a steady flow of younger Black women backfilling those positions at the state level.

With historically few Black women in the California legislature, it's important for both the district and the state to boost their representation, some political observers say.

Moreover, they argue that Black women typically must clear more personal and professional hurdles than other candidates, and start their political campaigns more thoroughly vetted and better prepared.

"It's really important that a Black woman replace Shirley Weber," said Angela de Joseph, producer of the political media organization Women of Color Roar, and a supporter of Dr. Akilah Weber. "The Black women who step up are qualified, are experienced, have the right temperament, have the right community relationships. So we're looking at someone who is supremely qualified, often over-qualified, for the position."

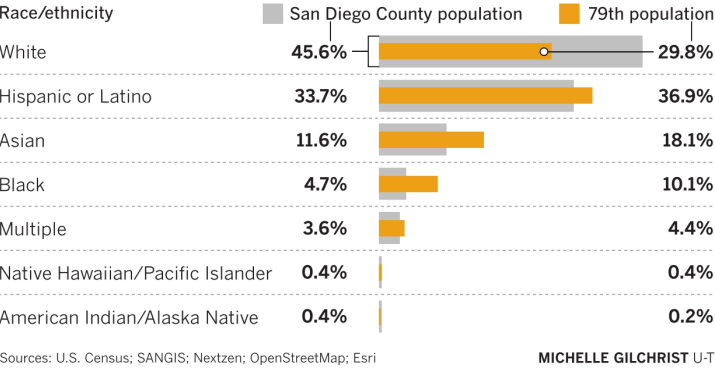
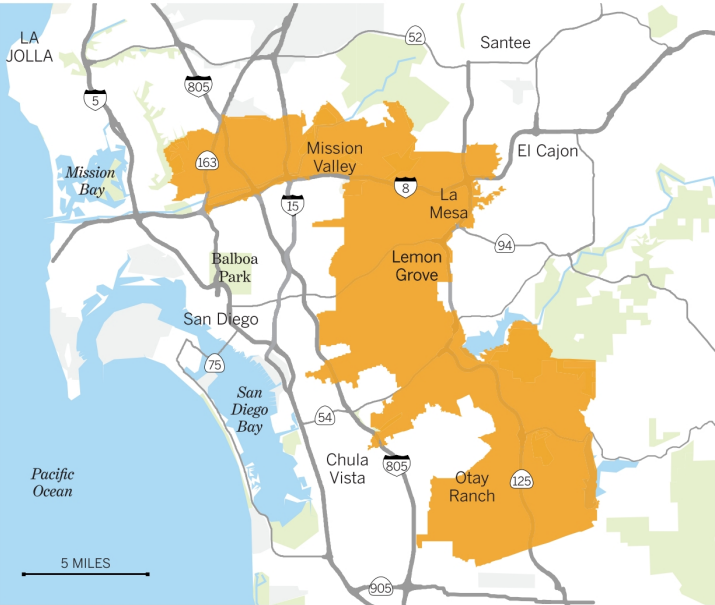
Even some potential competitors have expressed similar sentiments.

In January former congressional candidate Ammar Campa-Najjar announced that he would not seek the 79th seat, despite polls showing he could be competitive in the race. Campa-Najjar said he ruled out a possible run because the district should be represented by a woman of color, after the departure of Assemblywoman Shirley Weber.

"I don't want to be the

79th Assembly District

The district has higher concentrations of Latinos, Asians and Blacks than the county as a whole.



MICHELLE GILCHRIST U-T

person in office who marginalized the Black community," he said at the time.

Parmely, the lone White candidate for the 79th seat, said she gets the desire to elect a Black woman. As a person who identifies as non-binary, she recognizes the struggle of underrepresented groups and said the Black community's goal to place more people in public office is a fair consideration.

"I understand that sentiment, and I totally respect it," she said. "I'm a non-binary person, and there's never been a non-binary transgender person elected at the state level, so I understand the point about representation mattering."

79th candidate Glass said

Black women are well-equipped to serve the broader community by addressing issues of poverty, social justice and systemic racism while helping build a political body that looks more like the people it represents.

"When we're having this conversation about equity and representation, when you elect a Black woman you would be meeting the needs of both of those areas at once," said Glass, who is Black. "We're underrepresented, and we are the ones that have the most disparities and inequities."

Black women have long formed the backbone of political campaigns by organizing, phone-banking and knocking on doors for other

candidates, so they've earned their place on the ballot, several observers said.

Witness Stacy Abrams, a former member of the Georgia House of Representatives who narrowly lost her own race for governor but helped deliver two key senate seats for Democrats through her organizing efforts.

"It's time that society as a whole realize that Black women have been doing the work of organizing, voter registration, child care, but yet when it comes to leadership positions, we're left behind," De Joseph said.

It's an old, tired story of the loyal "Girl Friday" behind the successful male politician, and it's overdue

for a rewrite, some community leaders said.

When Ken Malbrough ran for county supervisor in 2018, four of his five campaign team members were Black women, he said. Malbrough, a retired assistant fire chief who is Black, did not prevail in his bid, but he believes it's their turn now.

"Black women are strong, they deserve more than what they have gotten," said Malbrough. "They're leaders, and it's their time."

Dr. Akilah Weber said that with her experience in medicine, she can improve representation for both the health care field and the Black community, amid the global pandemic.

"I am running for office because our communities need help recovering from the worst public health crisis in a century," she said in an e-mail.

"Representation is important, as is a diversity of experiences and backgrounds. This year, if I am elected to represent the diverse constituency of the 79th, there will be only two Black women in the State Assembly and a handful of physicians in the legislature, and I believe we need more of both."

Political representation covers multiple facets of voters' identities and interests, so it isn't always a straightforward choice, experts said.

Representation can be "descriptive," meaning it mirrors the ethnic and demographic attributes of a constituency, said Thad Kousser, a political science professor at UC San Diego who studies state and national politics.

It can also be "substantive," meaning it reflects the policies voters favor.

The two are highly correlated but not entirely overlapping, Kousser said. A politician need not share the ethnic identity of constituents to fight for their interests, he said.

However, lawmakers' connection to voters goes beyond ideological ties, and having the same background as constituents can foster trust and civic involvement.

"There's also evidence that just descriptive representation, in itself, can help voters feel more connected to a candidate and more engaged in the political process," Kousser said.

The cultural diversity of the 79th District complicates that equation, he added.

"This is a district that actually is more Latino than Black in its population," Kousser said. "That adds another layer. And there are a number of Asian community members."

Munguia said both substantive and descriptive representation matter, and she believes she checks both boxes as a candidate.

"I am a woman of color," she said. "I am a Latina. I am bilingual and have been working in communities for 30 plus years. The voters will make that choice, but the person elected should be able to champion on behalf of working families, to get us to the new normal."

Contreras, the only man and sole Republican on the primary ballot, said he reflects the experience of many Latinos in the district, as a Spanish-speaking American who was born in San Diego, grew up in Tijuana and crossed the border to the U.S. to attend high school.

More importantly, he said, he can speak for voters throughout the district who share his interest in public safety, business development and other conservative priorities.

"Listen, I'm a Brown man and I get it, but I have the same dream that Dr. King had, that we would live in a nation where we're judged not by the color of our skin but by the content of our character," he wrote in an e-mail. "There are other more important things than the color of the candidate's skin: his or her values, integrity, character, service to the community, and the ideas they have to make our community and state better."

The primary election for the 79th Assembly District will be held April 6. Early voting is under way now, and a runoff election is scheduled for June 8.

The results of the election — with a multicultural field of candidates in an exceptionally diverse region — could illuminate how voters identify the candidate who best embodies their interests and priorities, Kousser said.

"Do we want to have someone who looks descriptively like the last representative in this seat or like the largest ethnic group in this seat?" Kousser asked.

"Or do we just want someone who shares our values? That's the choice that voters appropriately get to make."

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FROM B1 threatened areas — has been met with angry resistance up and down the California coast.

State and local officials mostly have focused on how to adapt or move public infrastructure, while urging private property owners to consider the alternative if they do not plan for the inevitable.

"Countless lives and businesses, from Crescent City in the North to Imperial Beach in the South, could be upended if California does not take action," Atkins said in a statement.

Coastal erosion, sea level rise and climate change — concerns for years in San Diego County — have come into intense focus with the most recent Del Mar bluff collapse, which again has threatened the passenger and cargo rail line along the coast.

The SB 1 analysis mentions that incident, the 20-year effort to shore up the bluffs, and the expectation that building a tunnel for the tracks a bit inland could take a decade or so and cost billions of

dollars.

Other big problems and changes up the coast along California's iconic Highway 1 are also noted. A short stretch near Gleason Beach in Sonoma County was moved inland after a 15-year effort "and several homes were lost." Moving another portion of the highway near Hearst Castle also took about 15 years for planning and approvals and cost \$60 million.

In Pacifica, coastal erosion resulted in the city buying out bluff-top homes and apartment buildings.

Assembly member Tasha Boerner Horvath, D-Encinitas, has introduced Assembly Bill 66 that would provide \$2.5 million in state funding to the Scripps Institution of Oceanography to research coastal bluff erosion and collapses, with the goal of developing an early warning system when a beachside cliff is about to tumble.

The Atkins bill is making its way through the state Senate, and was passed by the Committee on Natural Resources and Water on March 16.

In addition to providing hundreds of millions of dollars for local planning and investment, SB 1 would fund community outreach and education for "disadvantaged communities along the coast."

The measure also would direct the California Coastal Commission to take sea level rise into account regarding planning, development and mitigation efforts. The panel has been doing that for a while.

"The Coastal Commission does already deal with sea level rise. Every single meeting, almost every single item," Commissioner Sara Aminzadeh told the Santa Cruz Sentinel. "But this bill would modernize the Coastal Act by calling sea level rise by its name, reaffirming the commission's mandate to protect the coast and probably most importantly, committing the resources necessary to help local governments plan for future sea level rise."

The bill calls for the creation of the California Sea Level Rise State and Regional Support Collaborative. This would include members of the governor's Cabinet and appointees selected by the Assem-

bly speaker and Senate Rules Committee, which is chaired by Atkins.

The bill's analysis raises a red flag about creating a new cross-agency state panel, however. The issues the collaborative would deal with already are being addressed by various state agencies. The existing Ocean Protection Council coordinates coastal policy and includes some of the same officials who would be in the collaborative.

"It is not clear that a new collaborative would necessarily provide better coordination and consistency across all of the state entities already working in this space," the analysis says.

The report recommends folding the proposed collaborative into the council.

Those bureaucratic concerns aside, the Atkins bill, if approved, will make sea level rise a top state priority within the broader effort to address climate change caused by greenhouse gas emissions.

"A recent study by the non-partisan Legislative Analyst's Office estimated that California could experience up to seven feet of sea level rise in less than 80

years. But even half that amount of sea level rise would put San Diego at risk of major economic damage," Atkins said in a column published by the Times of San Diego.

The Coast and Ocean Report of the state's Fourth Climate Assessment, according to the SB 1 analysis, suggests the future choice "is not between spending for adaption or not spending, but it is between spending a great deal for adaptation and an unimaginably large amount."

In other words, start paying now, or pay much, much more later.

Tweets of the Week

Goes to Margaret Sullivan (@SullivanV), Washington Post media columnist.

Before: "Biden's first news conference Thursday is a big test for him. But it's a bigger test for White House reporters..."

After: "Not one question about the pandemic. Almost all immigration. Plus ... Re-election plans? Running mate?"

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