



WHITENESS OF A
DIFFERENT COLOR

*European Immigrants and the
Alchemy of Race*

Matthew Frye Jacobson

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To Fran, Nick, and Tess ☞



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Note on Usage

It has become customary among academics to set words like “race,” “races,” “Anglo-Saxons,” or “whiteness” in undermining quotation marks. The practice certainly suits the spirit of this book, whose central theme is the social fabrication of “race” and “races.” But I have forgone the quotation marks except in those instances where the words in question are in fact a quotation—as, for instance, when I want it to be clear that a certain author actually did refer to “Nordics,” “Hebrews,” “Teutons,” and “Anglo-Saxons.” Otherwise I have left out the quotation marks altogether, even where I do refer to archaic categories like Nordic, Hebrew, Teuton, and Anglo-Saxon.

This began as a stylistic decision: scarcely a sentence went by in which one phrase or another did not seem to require quotation marks, and this, I felt, became distracting. More important than style, however, is the inconspicuous racial logic of the practice itself. I notice that few of the writers who put “race” in quotation marks also put “Caucasian” in quotation marks, and I wonder about the unexamined racial certainty that this denotes. For my own part, as I went through the manuscript to streamline the punctuation, I found that I had always set “Caucasian,” “Anglo-Saxon,” “Hebrew” and many other appellations in quotes, and almost always “race,” “racial,” or “races,” but only sometimes “white” or “black.” I wonder about the unexamined racial certainty that this denotes, too. All these designations belong on the same epistemological foot-

ing, and so they appear before you now without any stylistic marker to separate archaic fabrications from current ones. If you are inclined to supply your own as you go, I only invite you, too, to note the patterns in your own choices. A principled consistency on this score is rendered very difficult by the culture within which we operate.

Hardly two [scientists] agree as to the number and composition of the races. Thus one scholar makes an elaborate classification of twenty-nine races; another tells us there are six; Huxley gives us four; Kroeber, three; Goldenweiser, five; and Boas inclines to two, while his colleague, Linton, says there are twelve or fifteen. Even my dullest students sometimes note this apparent contradiction.

—Brewton Berry, “A Southerner Learns about Race,”
Common Ground (1942)

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Caucasian Variety. I have taken the name of this variety from Mount Caucasus, both because its neighborhood, and especially the southern slope, produces the most beautiful race of men, I mean the Georgian; and because all the physiological reasons converge to this, that in that region, if anywhere, it seems we ought with greatest probability to place the autochthones of mankind . . . That stock displays . . . the most beautiful form of the skull, from which, as from a mean and primeval type, the others diverge . . . Besides, it is white in color, which we may fairly assume to be the primitive color of mankind, since . . . it is very easy to degenerate into brown, but very much more difficult for dark to become white.

—Johann Fredrich Blumenbach, *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind* (1775)

Of all the odd myths that have arisen in the scientific world, the “Caucasian mystery” invented quite innocently by Blumenbach is the oddest. A Georgian woman’s skull was the handsomest in his collection. Hence it became his model exemplar of human skulls, from which all others might be regarded as deviations; and out of this, by some strange intellectual hocus-pocus, grew up the notion that the Caucasian man is the prototypic “Adamic” man.

—Thomas Henry Huxley, “Methods and Results of Ethnology” (1868)



Introduction: The Fabrication of Race

We tend to think of race as being indisputable, *real*. It frames our notions of kinship and descent and influences our movements in the social world; we see it plainly on one another’s faces. It seems a product not of the social imagination but of biology. Like some mid-century liberals who saw race as a “myth” or a “superstition,” however, scholars in several disciplines have recently shaken faith in this biological certainty. The conventions by which “race mixing” is understood, they point out, is one site where the unreality of race comes into view. Why is it that in the United

States a white woman can have black children but a black woman cannot have white children? Doesn't this bespeak a degree of arbitrariness in this business of affixing racial labels?¹

The history of racial classification over time is a second such site: entire races have disappeared from view, from public discussion, and from modern memory, though their flesh-and-blood members still walk the earth. What has become of the nineteenth century's Celts and Slavs, for instance? Its Hebrews, Iberics, Mediterraneans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons? This book tells the story of how these races—these public fictions—rose and fell in American social consciousness, and how the twentieth century's Caucasians emerged to take their place.

In Philip Roth's *Counterlife* (1988) a Gentile woman chances to comment that she seldom repays the attention of Jewish men "because there are enough politics in sex without racial politics coming into it." "We're not a race," objects her Jewish listener. The ensuing exchange cuts to the very heart of "difference" and the epistemology of race.

"It is a racial matter," she insisted.

"No, we're the same race. You're thinking of Eskimos."

"We are *not* the same race. Not according to anthropologists, or whoever measures these things. There's Caucasian, Semitic—there are about five different groups. Don't look at me like that."

"I can't help it. Some nasty superstitions always tend to crop up when people talk about a Jewish 'race.' "

". . . All I can tell you is that you *are* a different race. We're supposed to be closer to Indians than to Jews, actually;—I'm talking about Caucasians."

"But I am Caucasian, kiddo. In the U.S. census I am, for good or bad, counted as Caucasian."

"*Are you? Am I wrong?*"²

This passage beautifully conveys the seemingly natural but finally unstable logic of race. The debate over Jews' racial identity begins merely as a matter of conflicting classification: at the outset stable, meaningful categories are assumed, and the question is simply where a particular group belongs—which pigeonhole do Jews fit into, Caucasian or Semite? But the question itself points to a more profound epistemological crisis: if he is certain that he is a Caucasian, and she is certain that he is not, then what does it mean to call a person a Caucasian in the first place? And where does all this certainty come from?

Once the two characters recognize the slippage in what they had each thought an uncompromising natural fact, both scramble to appeal to some higher authority in order to uphold their initial views. She invokes science (“according to anthropologists . . .”); he invokes the state (“in the U.S. census . . .”). They thus identify what, historically, have been two key actors in the creation and enforcement of these public fictions called races. (Not incidentally, the narratives and images of popular culture, like Roth’s best-seller itself, represent another.) Caucasians are not born, these combatants now seem to understand; they are somehow made. It’s just a question of who does the making.

If both characters are dubious as to the origin of these distinctions, they do seem to grasp the inherent stakes. Although each seems to be talking about race as a neutral feature of the natural landscape—tree, rock, pond, Caucasian, Eskimo—the conversation nonetheless becomes highly charged, as an element of value is inescapable in these allegedly neutral observations. That the woman is perhaps too insistent is indicated in her heated, italicized speech—it *is* a racial matter, we are *not* the same race. The man’s condescending “kiddo” is retaliatory. Likewise, neither character’s conception of the Caucasian race is itself entirely innocent: his understanding of “Caucasian” integrity is constituted by excluded “Eskimos,” just as hers is constituted by excluded “Indians” and “Semites.” Although they suppose that they are talking about scientific facts, they also intuit the supremacist baggage attached to the term. In this respect it is not merely incidental that the issue came up in the context of interracial sexuality in the first place. The policing of sexual boundaries—the defense against hybridity—is precisely what keeps a racial group a racial group. As Glenda Gilmore has written of the Jim Crow South, from the perspective of white supremacism interracial liaisons “resulted in mixed race progeny who slipped back and forth across the color line and defied social control.”³ Thus sexuality is one site at which all the economic advantages, political privileges, and social benefits inhering in a cultural invention like *Caucasian* converge and reside.

Roth himself is most interested here in the idea of Jewishness—the poor bastard, as one of his own characters puts it, “has Jew on the brain”—and certainly the notion of racial Jewishness, like anti-Semitism, has an independent history of its own. But the vicissitude of Jewish whiteness is intimately related to the racial odysseys of myriad other groups—the Irish, Armenians, Italians, Poles, Syrians, Greeks, Ruthenians, Sicilians, Finns, and a host of others—who came ashore in the United States as “free white

persons” under the terms of reigning naturalization law, yet whose racial credentials were not equivalent to those of the Anglo-Saxon “old stock” who laid proprietary claim to the nation’s founding documents and hence to its stewardship. All of these groups became Caucasians only over time; and all of them, like Roth’s fictional Caucasian/Semite, faced certain challenges to their racial pedigrees along the way.

As races are invented categories—designations coined for the sake of grouping and separating peoples along lines of presumed difference—Caucasians are made and not born. White privilege in various forms has been a constant in American political culture since colonial times, but whiteness itself has been subject to all kinds of contests and has gone through a series of historical vicissitudes. In the case of *Rollins v. Alabama* (1922), for instance, an Alabama Circuit Court of Appeals reversed the conviction of one Jim Rollins, a black man convicted of the crime of miscegenation, on the grounds that the state had produced “no competent evidence to show that the woman in question, Edith Labue, was a white woman.” Labue was a Sicilian immigrant, a fact that, this court held, “can in no sense be taken as conclusive that she was therefore a white woman, or that she was not a negro or a descendant of a negro.” Although it is important to underscore that this court did not find that a Sicilian was necessarily nonwhite, its finding that a Sicilian was inconclusively white does speak volumes about whiteness in 1920s Alabama. If the court left room for the possibility that Edith Labue *may* have been white, the ruling also made clear that she was not the sort of white woman whose purity was to be “protected” by that bulwark of white supremacy, the miscegenation statute.⁴

This ruling is not an oddity of the Alabama courts, but part of a much broader pattern of racial thinking throughout the United States between the mid-nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth. The racially inflected caricatures of the Irish at mid-century are well known, as when *Harper’s* depicted the “Celt” and the “Negro” weighing in identically on the scales of civic merit, but in the 1890s even the Irish novelist John Brennan could write that the Irishness of the emigrants’ children showed in their “physiognomy, or the color of their countenances.”⁵ When in 1891 a *Detroit News* reporter asked a Negro whitewasher whether or not he worked with any white men, the laborer answered (in a dialect provided by the journalist), “No, dere’s no wite men. Dere’s some Polacks, but dey ain’t wite men, you know. Ha! ha! ha!”⁶ In his 1908 study *Race or Mongrel?* Alfred Schultz lamented in unambiguously biological language:

The opinion is advanced that the public schools change the children of all races into Americans. Put a Scandinavian, a German, and a Magyar boy in at one end, and they will come out Americans at the other end. Which is like saying, let a pointer, a setter, and a pug enter one end of a tunnel and they will come out three greyhounds at the other end.⁷

In her 1910 study of Homestead, Pennsylvania, the sociologist Margaret Byington broke the community down along the “racial” lines of “Slav, English-speaking European, native white, and colored.”⁸ H. L. Mencken later casually alluded to the volume of literature crossing his desk by “Negro and other non-Nordic writers,” by which, evidently, he meant people like John Fante and Louis Adamic. In *The Sheik* (1921), Rudolph Valentino traded on his physiognomical ability to be both the exotic, racial Other and the acceptable, chivalric European—first, as a “savage” Arab, kidnapping Agnes Ayers, and later (safely revealed to be of English and Spanish descent), rescuing her from an even darker African foe. When *Porgy and Bess* appeared (1935) critics broadly attributed George Gershwin’s talent for “American-Negroid music” to the “common Oriental ancestry in both Negro and Jew.”⁹

The contest over whiteness—its definition, its internal hierarchies, its proper boundaries, and its rightful claimants—has been critical to American culture throughout the nation’s history, and it has been a fairly untidy affair. Conflicting or overlapping racial designations such as *white*, *Caucasian*, and *Celt* may operate in popular perception and discussion simultaneously, despite their contradictions—the Irish simians of the Thomas Nast cartoon, for example, were “white” according to naturalization law; they proclaimed themselves “Caucasians” in various political organizations using that term; and they were degraded “Celts” in the patrician lexicon of proud Anglo-Saxons. Indeed, this is the nature of ideological contest. Such usages have had regional valences as well: it is one of the compelling circumstances of American cultural history that an Irish immigrant in 1877 could be a despised Celt in Boston—a threat to the republic—and yet a solid member of The Order of Caucasians for the Extermination of the Chinaman in San Francisco, gallantly defending U.S. shores from an invasion of “Mongolians.”

There has been a tendency on the part of late-twentieth-century scholars, when confronted by the many jarring expressions of an earlier era’s race consciousness, simply to dismiss the discrepancy as a shift in the

meaning of the word “race.” But a closer examination of the vicissitudes of “difference” is in order. Racism, as Alexander Saxton writes, is “fundamentally a theory of history.”¹⁰ It is a theory of who is who, of who belongs and who does not, of who deserves what and who is capable of what. By looking at racial categories and their fluidity over time, we glimpse the competing theories of history which inform the society and define its internal struggles. Despite the slippages in American racial thinking, some broad patterns are discernible across time. This book proposes to map the significance of the racial designations that have framed the history of European immigration—white and Caucasian on the one hand, and narrower distinctions such as Anglo-Saxon, Celt, Hebrew, Slav, Alpine, Mediterranean, or Nordic on the other—in order to make sense of pervasive racial articulations that scholars have too conveniently passed over simply as *misuses* of the word “race.” The patterns in literary, legal, political, and graphic evidence suggest that it was not just an archaic meaning of the word “race” but rather an archaic perception of “difference” by which Emma Lazarus wrote of the “Oriental blood” of the Jew and John Brennan described the distinct physiognomy and skin color of the Celt.

American scholarship on immigration has generally conflated race and color, and so has transported a late-twentieth-century understanding of “difference” into a period whose inhabitants recognized biologically based “races” rather than culturally based “ethnicities.” But in the interest of an accurate historical rendering of race in the structure of U.S. culture and in the experience of those immigrant groups now called “Caucasians,” we must listen more carefully to the historical sources than to the conventions of our own era; we must admit of a system of “difference” by which one might be both white *and* racially distinct from other whites.

Two sorts of anachronism have resulted from the general failure to recover the historical processes of racial mutability. First, historians have most often cast the history of nineteenth-century immigration in the logic of twentieth-century “ethnic” groups—“race” did not really *mean* “race” back then, in other words. This blithe disbelief not only distorts the historical record but also carries with it some troubling baggage. Tacitly assuming that “race” did not mean “race”—that Hebrews, Celts, Mediterraneans, Iberics, or Teutons were *really* Caucasians—is worse than merely underestimating the ideological power of racialism: it is surrendering to that power. To miss the fluidity of race itself in this process of becoming Caucasian is to reify a monolithic whiteness, and, further, to

cordon that whiteness off from other racial groupings along lines that are silently presumed to be more genuine. Failure properly to theorize the transmutation of white races into Caucasians has left open the way for a second kind of anachronism: seizing upon their forebears' status as racial Others, writers like Michael Novak and Michael Lerner now disavow any participation in twentieth-century white privilege on the spurious basis of their parents' and grandparents' racial oppression. Novak wrote the Bible of the "ethnic revival" decades ago; but the move toward reclaimed otherness has become more common in recent years, in part in response to group-based social policies like affirmative action. As one African-American leader of a seminar on racism put it when, one by one, his class explained away their whiteness ("I'm not white; I'm Italian"), "Where are all the white people who were here just a minute ago?"¹¹

The sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant assert that the contending forces of class formation and racial formation in American political culture produced "the institutionalization of a racial order that drew a color line *around* rather than *within* Europe."¹² True enough, and a useful corrective to those who would disavow their whiteness even while they live lives predicated upon its privileges. But between the 1840s and the 1920s it was not altogether clear just where that line ultimately *would* be drawn. Just as it is crucial to recognize the legal whiteness undergirding the status of the white races in the United States, so is it crucial to reckon seriously with the racial othering that overlaid that whiteness. One way of doing that is to examine the relationship among competing ideas such as *white*, *Caucasian*, *Nordic*, *Anglo-Saxon*, *Celt*, *Slav*, *Alpine*, *Hebrew*, *Mediterranean*, *Iberic*, *Latin*, and so on.

The vicissitudes of race represent glacial, nonlinear cultural movements. Nonetheless, the history of whiteness in the United States is divisible into three great epochs. The nation's first naturalization law in 1790 (limiting naturalized citizenship to "free white persons") demonstrates the republican convergence of race and "fitness for self-government"; the law's wording denotes an unconflicted view of the presumed character and unambiguous boundaries of whiteness. Fifty years later, however, beginning with the massive influx of highly undesirable but nonetheless "white" persons from Ireland, whiteness was subject to new interpretations. The period of mass European immigration, from the 1840s to the restrictive legislation of 1924, witnessed a fracturing of whiteness into a hierarchy of plural and scientifically determined white races. Vigorous debate ensued over which of these was truly "fit for self-government" in

the good old Anglo-Saxon sense. Finally, in the 1920s and after, partly because the crisis of over-inclusive whiteness had been solved by restrictive legislation and partly in response to a new racial alchemy generated by African-American migrations to the North and West, whiteness was reconsolidated: the late nineteenth century's probationary white groups were now remade and granted the scientific stamp of authenticity as the unitary Caucasian race—an earlier era's Celts, Slavs, Hebrews, Iberics, and Saracens, among others, had become the Caucasians so familiar to our own visual economy and racial lexicon.

The 1965 immigration act, passed by the first Congress in U.S. history in which Roman Catholics constituted a plurality, consecrated the massive and theretofore problematic immigration of the pre-1924 period by giving preference to those immigrants' relatives. Indeed, a few years earlier the election of John F. Kennedy, a Celt whose "Papist" allegiances were questioned, but whose racial character never was, marked the ascendance and utter hegemony of this third paradigm. The crossing over of the scientific appellation "Caucasian" into the vernacular with increasing regularity in the mid-twentieth century marks a profound readjustment in popular thinking as to the relationship among the immigrant white races. *Becoming* Caucasian, then, has been crucial to the politico-cultural saga of European migration and settlement, and the process by which this came about touches the histories of every other racially coded group on the American scene.

Two premises guide my approach to these questions. First, race is absolutely central to the history of European immigration and settlement. It was the racial appellation "white persons" in the nation's naturalization law that allowed the migrations from Europe in the first place; the problem this immigration posed to the polity was increasingly cast in terms of racial difference and assimilability; the most significant revision of immigration policy, the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, was founded upon a racial logic borrowed from biology and eugenics; and, consequently, the civic story of assimilation (the process by which the Irish, Russian Jews, Poles, and Greeks became Americans) is inseparable from the cultural story of racial alchemy (the process by which Celts, Hebrews, Slavs, and Mediterraneans became Caucasians). The European immigrants' experience was decisively shaped by their entering an arena where European-ness—that is to say, whiteness—was among the most important possessions one could lay claim to. It was their *whiteness*, not any kind of New World magnanimity, that opened the Golden Door. And yet, for those

who arrived between 1840 and 1924, New World experience was also decisively stamped by their entering an arena where race was the prevailing idiom for discussing citizenship and the relative merits of a given people.¹³

The second premise guiding this work is that race resides not in nature but in politics and culture. One of the tasks before the historian is to discover which racial categories are useful to whom at a given moment, and why. Nor is this simply a case of immigrants' insisting upon their whiteness while nativists tarred them as "Hebrews" or "Slavs." Immigrants were often as quick to recognize their racial distance from the Anglo-Saxon as vice versa. Immigrant nationalisms were particularly prolific in generating and sustaining distinct racial identities—the Irish Race Conventions of the 1910s, for example, represent another instance where "race" really meant "race."¹⁴ Racial categories themselves—their vicissitudes and the contests over them—reflect the competing notions of history, peoplehood, and collective destiny by which power has been organized and contested on the American scene.

This is not to argue that race is freighted the same way from period to period or from case to case. No one who has looked into this country's maze of segregation statutes, miscegenation codes, housing covenants, slavery laws, or civil rights debates could ever suppose that being a "Celt," say, was tantamount to being some kind of European "Negro." My point here is not to equate one racial experience with another, but rather to demonstrate the inadequacy of modern notions of "ethnicity" in rendering the history of whiteness in American social and political life. Ultimately, I would argue, this treatment of the racial history of European immigration counters any facile comparisons of the African-American experience with the white immigrant experience: it is not just that various white immigrant groups' economic successes came at the expense of nonwhites, but that they owe their now stabilized and broadly recognized whiteness *itself* in part to these nonwhite groups.

And so this history of whiteness and its fluidity is very much a history of power and its disposition. But there is a second dimension: race is not just a conception; it is also a perception. The problem is not merely how races are comprehended, but how they are seen. In her 1943 obituary of Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict recounted how Boas the physicist, having gone to the Arctic to study the properties of water, became Boas the anthropologist upon discovering that his observations did not at all match those of the Eskimos he encountered. Remarkd Benedict, "He returned with

an abiding conviction that if we are ever to understand human behavior we must know as much about the eye that sees as about the object seen. And he had understood once and for all that the eye that sees is not a mere physical organ but a means of perception conditioned by the tradition in which its possessor has been reared.”¹⁵

If this passage sums up Boas’s understanding of the power of culture, it also nicely sums up the properties of race itself. In racial matters above all else, the eye that sees is “a means of perception conditioned by the tradition in which its possessor has been reared.” The American eye sees a certain person as black, for instance, whom Haitian or Brazilian eyes might see as white. Similarly, an earlier generation of Americans *saw* Celtic, Hebrew, Anglo-Saxon, or Mediterranean physiognomies where today we see only subtly varying shades of a mostly undifferentiated whiteness. (If pressed, we might come to a consensus on the physiognomical properties of Irishness, Slaviness, or Jewishness, but at a glance these certainly do not strike most Americans with anything like the perceptible force that they did a century ago, or that live racial distinctions do today.) Although much of this study is given over to the history of various conceptions of racial “difference,” the second half of the equation consists of the ways in which those conceptions of difference successfully masquerade as nature. The awesome power of race as an ideology resides precisely in its ability to pass as a feature of the natural landscape. Perhaps the most far-reaching ambition of this book, then, is to help loosen the grip of race by laying bare the moribund, and now quite peculiar, circuitry of an earlier era’s racial conceptions and perceptions.

I initially identified a number of well-delineated arenas for this investigation of race and its workings: science, law, politics, popular culture, and the literary work of immigrants and natives, Caucasians and non-Caucasians. But these arenas did not remain well delineated at all. This was the source of much excitement and consternation as my research progressed. Franz Boas wandered out of his niche in “science” and into the arena of “law,” testifying in court as to the Caucasian origins of a group of Armenian immigrants petitioning for citizenship. Local conflicts such as the lynching of eleven Italians in New Orleans surfaced well beyond the pale of “political conflict,” now recast as “literature” in Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. Political debates over slavery, naturalization law, and immigration drew on the sciences of anthropology and eugenics, but these bodies of knowledge had arisen in answer to questions about peoplehood generated by the politics of exploration, expansion, colonialism, slavery,

and republicanism in the first place. Scientists and politicians freely cited the first-hand accounts of white travelers in order to assert this or that truth about Africa or Asia, and yet those accounts—like the travelers' experiences—had already been structured by technologies, modes of seeing, a set of social relations, and an epistemology entwined in the project of Euro-American exploration and imperial expansion.

How, then, to render something at once so thick and so vaporous as *ideology* in a thin black line of linear prose? The eight chapters that define the structure of this book represent an experimental answer. My narrative takes three separate tacks on the problem, each illuminating one particular dimension of race and its workings in American culture: race as an organizer of power whose vicissitudes track power relationships through time; race as a mode of perception contingent upon the circumstances of the moment; and race as the product of specific struggles for power at specific cultural sites.

More than once in the process of this research I have been reminded of Oscar Handlin's famous remark, "Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants *were* American history."¹⁶ Race and races are American history, it now seems to me; that is, to write about race in American culture is to exclude virtually nothing. A word, then, on some of the choices I have made along the way. As race is a public fiction, I have confined myself to public images and expressions with the power both to articulate and to influence racial conceptions. Since race is a kind of social currency, it seemed most useful to begin with an analysis of its public exchange. My conclusions derive from patterns observed in the racial logic of novels, films, and print journalism; from legal codes, colonial charters, and state constitutions; from congressional debates over citizenship, immigration, expansionism, and civil rights; from the court records of various naturalization and miscegenation cases; from published tracts in ethnology and anthropology; from immigrant journalism; from political speeches and nativist lectures; from cartoons and engravings; from travel literature; from newspaper coverage of sensational events like the Leo Frank case and the draft riots, and from coverage of more mundane affairs, like the daily police blotter. This study is of necessity structured something like a pointillist painting: the separate points, in this case, consist of close readings and historical analyses of an idiosyncratic assemblage of texts, events, images, and utterances. Some choices will be predictable, others less so; but taken together, I hope, they add up to a suggestive tableau of coherent ideological

and cultural patterns across a rather large sweep of time—the *Grande Jatte*, as it were, of American race thinking.

My intent here is to join scholars like David Roediger and Karen Brod-kin Sacks in moving race to the foreground of historiography on European immigration and assimilation. The saga of European immigration has long been held up as proof of the openness of American society, the benign and absorptive powers of American capitalism, and the robust health of American democracy. “Ethnic inclusion,” “ethnic mobility,” and “ethnic assimilation” on the European model set the standard upon which “America,” as an ideal, is presumed to *work*; they provide the normative experience against which others are measured. But this pretty story suddenly fades once one recognizes how crucial Europeans’ racial status as “free white persons” was to their gaining entrance in the first place; how profoundly dependent their racial inclusion was upon the racial *exclusion* of others; how racially accented the native resistance was even to *their* inclusion for something over half a century; and how completely intertwined were the prospects of becoming American and becoming Caucasian. Racism now appears not anomalous to the working of American democracy, but fundamental to it.

I focus on the historical contingency of Europeans’ racial identities not so that so-called white ethnics can conveniently disassociate themselves from the historic legacies of white privilege. On the contrary, recognizing how that privilege is constituted depends upon our first understanding how whiteness itself has been built and maintained. Recasting the saga of Europeans’ immigration and assimilation in the United States as a *racial* odyssey is a first step in that direction.



THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF WHITENESS

Scholars in several disciplines have discovered that racial whiteness can be quite changeable. The nineteenth-century antagonism between the English and the Irish, for instance, was at the time a racial conflict between Anglo-Saxons and Celts, though few today would invoke the language of race in recounting the “Troubles.” Having emigrated to North America, moreover, many maligned Celts took on a new racial identity, now participating in a politics of white supremacy in groups like The Order of Caucasians, often right alongside the Anglo-Saxons with whom, in other settings, their racial equality was so vigorously denied.

These observations raise a number of questions in their turn. If whiteness is indeed changeable, under what circumstances does it change? What have been the historical patterns that characterize whiteness and its vicissitudes? What does the racial history of European immigration look like across the chronological sweep of U.S. history?

The three chapters of part one sketch the history of whiteness through three periods in the American setting. The contending forces that have fashioned and refashioned whiteness in the United States across time, I argue, are capitalism (with its insatiable appetite for cheap labor) and republicanism (with its imperative of responsible citizenship). Citizenship was a racially inscribed concept at the outset of the new nation: by an act of Congress, only “free white” immigrants could be naturalized. Yet as

immigration soared in the second half of the nineteenth century, incoming “white” peasants and laborers from unanticipated regions of Europe aroused doubts about this equation of “whiteness” with “fitness for self-government.” Over the latter half of the nineteenth century a second regime of racial understanding emerged in response, cataloguing the newcomers as racial types, pronouncing upon their innate, biological distance from the nation’s “original stock,” and speculating as to their fitness for citizenship. This regime culminated in the racially based and highly restrictive immigration legislation of 1924, which in its turn laid the way for yet a third racial regime.

The period from the 1920s to the 1960s saw a dramatic decline in the perceived differences among these white Others. Immigration restriction, along with internal black migrations, altered the nation’s racial alchemy and redrew the dominant racial configuration along the strict, binary line of white and black, creating Caucasians where before had been so many Celts, Hebrews, Teutons, Mediterraneans, and Slavs.

To track racial whiteness across time is to depict American political culture in its major adjustments, as shifting demographics have chafed against the more rigid imperatives of this fragile experiment in self-governance. To trace the process by which Celts or Slavs became Caucasians is to recognize race as an ideological, political deployment rather than as a neutral, biologically determined element of nature.

“All men are created equal.” So wrote Thomas Jefferson, and so agreed with him the delegates from the American colonies. But we must not press them too closely nor insist on the literal interpretation of their words.

—John R. Commons, *Races and Immigrants in America* (1907)

Tell the republicans on your side of the line that we royalists do not know men by their color. Should you come to us you will be entitled to all the privileges of the rest of His Majesty’s subjects.

—Governor of Upper Canada to a delegation of Cincinnati Negroes (1829)



“Free White Persons” in the Republic, 1790–1840

In *Modern Chivalry* (1792), Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s extended meditation on republican government, the Irish servant Teague O’Regan undergoes a dramatic transformation. When he is introduced in the novel’s opening paragraph, the servant is but a cipher—“an Irishman,” according to Brackenridge’s contemptuous narrator, “whose name was Teague Oregan [later O’Regan]. I shall say nothing of the character of this man, because the very name imports what he was.” By the closing lines, some eight hundred pages later, O’Regan has become the novel’s central character, he has pursued with some success the plums made available by the new nation’s democratic politics, and the narrator is reflecting on the possibility that, in some future volume, “my bog-trotter” might even venture to England as the U.S. ambassador.¹

This transformation reflects not only the Irishman’s mobility of station but also a certain alchemy of race. The “aborigines of Ireland,” Brackenridge avers, “are far from being destitute of talents, and yet there is a certain liability to blunders, both in their words and actions, that is singular.” Here as elsewhere the narrative testifies to certain immutable

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