Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination*

Eric Arnesen
University of Illinois at Chicago

Abstract

Scholarship on whiteness has grown dramatically over the past decade, affecting numerous academic disciplines from literary criticism and American studies to history, sociology, geography, education, and anthropology. Despite its visibility and quantity, the genre has generated few serious historiographical assessments of its rise, development, strengths, and weaknesses. This essay, which critically examines the concept of whiteness and the ways labor historians have built their analyses around it, seeks to subject historical studies of whiteness to overdue scrutiny and to stimulate a debate on the utility of whiteness as a category of historical analysis. Toward that end, the essay explores the multiple and shifting definitions of whiteness used by scholars, concluding that historians have employed arbitrary and inconsistent definitions of their core concept, some overly expansive or metaphorically grounded and others that are radically restricted; whiteness has become a blank screen onto which those who claim to analyze it can project their own meanings. The essay critically examines historians' use of W. E. B. Du Bois's reflections on the "psychological wage"—something of a foundational text for whiteness scholars—and concludes that the "psychological wage" of whiteness serves poorly as a new explanation for the old question of why white workers have refused to make common cause with African Americans. Whiteness scholars' assertions of the nonwhite status of various immigrant groups (the Irish and eastern and southern Europeans in particular) and the processes by which these groups allegedly became white are challenged, as is whiteness scholars' tendency toward highly selective readings of racial discourses. The essay faults some whiteness scholarship produced by historians for a lack of grounding in archival and other empirical evidence, for passive voice constructions (which obscure the agents who purportedly define immigrants as not white), and for a problematic reliance upon psychohistory in the absence of actual immigrant voices. Historians' use of the concept of whiteness, the essay concludes, suffers from a number of potentially fatal methodological and conceptual flaws; within American labor history, the whiteness project has failed to deliver on its promises.

The rise of a genre of scholarship centering on white racial identity—on whiteness—has been one of the most dramatic and commented upon developments regarding race in the humanities and social sciences in recent years. "Research on whiteness has recently exploded onto the academic scene," concludes communications scholar John T. Warren. "From a position of virtual invisibility only ten years ago," geographer Peter Jackson observed in 1998, "studies of 'whiteness' have now become commonplace." Whiteness has become "hip."[1] The new scholars of whiteness insist that race is not something that only nonwhites possess, but is a characteristic of whites as well, necessitating close scrutiny of

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 60, Fall 2001, pp. 3–32
© 2001 International Labor and Working-Class History, Inc.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

whites' race and racial identity and the very construction of race itself. In historian David Roediger's words, "Making whiteness, rather than simply white racism, the focus of study" throws into "sharp relief" the ways that "whites think of themselves, of power, of pleasure, and of gender."[2]

Few branches of the humanities and social sciences have escaped the increasing gravitational pull of "whiteness studies." Not surprisingly, literary critics and cultural studies theorists have led the way,[3] with their disciplinary relatives in American Studies close behind. But scholars in history, anthropology, sociology, geography, law, film studies, education, and philosophy have also embraced whiteness as a concept and subject of inquiry. The scope of subject matter susceptible to analysis by whiteness scholars appears vast. Topics range broadly from the more familiar explorations of race and racial identity in American history, fiction, and film, to the less well trod territory of downhill skiing in Colorado (as in "The Unbearable Whiteness of Skiing"), the various television and movie incarnations of *Star Trek* ("Race-ing toward a White Future"), the constructions of hysteria and Southern child labor, and tourism and travel literature.[4] Among American labor historians, whiteness has demonstrated a growing popularity, leading some to a call for the recasting of the very categories and narratives of labor history, on the grounds that the field's failure to address issues of racial identity has distorted its analyses. Their impact has been profound. David W. Stowe scarcely exaggerates when he writes that in "no field has whiteness scholarship had more of an impact than in that of labor history."[5] David Roediger, Noel Ignatiev, Bruce Nelson, Matthew Frye Jacobson, Dana Frank, and others have called for a concentrated focus not merely on white workers' attitudes *toward* African Americans and other nonwhites but on the very racial identity of those white workers themselves.

The popularity of the category of whiteness among labor historians coincides with two particular developments affecting the field since the 1990s. The first is the growing appeal of cultural studies, with its emphasis on language, word play, and discourse analysis. Historians of working-class whiteness spend considerable amounts of time interpreting texts, including literary ones. With the notable exception of Bruce Nelson, they eschew more traditional archival research and instead draw heavily upon the research of others, casting themselves in the role of interpreters of the meanings of race and racial identity (which more empirically minded historians presumably have missed). The second development involves a new sense of disquietude regarding their field's traditional subject—usually white male workers—and a revolt against romanticization. Critics of new labor history written in the 1970s and 1980s touched a nerve when they charged its practitioners with portraying white working-class struggles in too positive a light and with failing to portray white workers' conservatism and their racial and gender biases. Many labor historians on the Left also came to adopt a sharply critical stance toward the American labor movement and white male workers for their failure to live up to historians' hopes and expectations. David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness,* which helped launch the historical investigation of whiteness in 1991, was written "in reaction to the appalling extent to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which white male workers voted for Reaganism in the 1980s," its author admits in the afterword to that book's revised edition.[6] To a large degree, the new historians of working-class whiteness repudiate any lingering romanticism about white workers (although, as we will see, some retain it with regard to nonwhite workers) and replace it with a deep cynicism about the role of white labor in maintaining racial oppression over the past two centuries. Positioning themselves as hardheaded progressives, these academics have diminished or dismissed the significance of earlier cross-race alliances and instead champion a politics built around identity and race.

The "blizzard of 'whiteness' studies," as cultural theorist Homi Bhabha puts it,[7] it would seem, ought to elicit critical reflection. But with few exceptions,[8] the assessments in print today have been authored by those writing within the whiteness framework(s) and tend to be largely descriptive or supportive.[9] This essay, which seeks to subject historical studies of whiteness to overdue scrutiny, aims to open up the discussion by pursuing five lines of inquiry into the literature on working-class whiteness. By way of introduction, the first explores the multiple meanings that scholars from a variety of disciplines attribute to whiteness, as well as the inconsistencies in definitions that mark many of the historical studies on whiteness. The second is a conceptual audit of the so-called "wages of whiteness," which involves revisiting the seminal formulation of W. E. B. Du Bois, its meaning and context within Du Bois's writings, and its subsequent use by scholars of whiteness inspired by David Roediger. The third probes historians' arguments about the processes whereby various immigrant groups to the United States, deemed by whiteness scholars to be initially nonwhite, "*became* white" over time. The fourth line of questioning evaluates the use of psychohistory by whiteness historians who seek to probe the minds of those who "become white." Finally, the article examines particular maneuvers of historical reasoning—conceptual inflation, substitution, and overreaching—whereby scholars of whiteness become historical "alchemists" (to borrow Matthew Jacobson's oft-used term), transforming the meaning of a variety of historical events into example after example of purported whiteness.

Within American labor history, the whiteness project has yet to deliver on its promises. The most influential historical studies of whiteness—notably by David Roediger, Noel Ignatiev, Matthew Frye Jacobson, Neil Foley, and Karen Brodkin—rely on arbitrary and inconsistent definitions of their core concepts while they emphasize select elite constructions of race to the virtual exclusion of all other racial discourses. Offering little concrete evidence to support many of their arguments, these works often take creative liberties with the evidence they do have; they also put words into their subjects' mouths to compensate for the absence of first-hand perspectives by the historical actors themselves. Too much of the historical scholarship on whiteness has disregarded scholarly standards, employed sloppy methodology, generated new buzzwords and jargon, and, at times, produced an erroneous history. While whiteness scholars, along with others, have effectively and laudably made white racial identity a subject of direct examination, this essay argues that historians have defined whiteness too loose-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ly and that the category of whiteness has to date proven to be an inadequate tool of historical analysis.

Defining the Intangible

What sociologist Robert Miles once wrote about the concept of race is equally applicable to the concept of whiteness: There has been "a process of conceptual inflation whereby the concept has been redefined to refer to a wider range of phenomena."[10] Embraced by scholars from many disciplines, the concept of whiteness also, not surprisingly, is marked by overlapping and at times competing definitions and theoretical inflections.[11] Many practitioners even claim radical epistemological and political consequences for their interrogations of cultural and political forms. Their avowed aim is to "destabilize" or "subvert" racial categories and the very concept of "race" itself, calling explicit attention to what they consider to be whiteness's "unmarked, unnamed status," its "seeming normativity," "structured invisibility," and its false universality. The "invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in white (which is to say dominant) discourse is of a piece with its ubiquity," argues film scholar Richard Dyer.[12]

One common denominator of most whiteness studies is a core belief in the "social construction of race," an older notion widely accepted in the academy. In what seems to be an obligatory introductory section, scholars of whiteness remind us that race has no biological or genetic basis. Race is not transhistorical; it is ever changing, always mutable. Consisting of "public fictions," it is an "historical fabrication" and a "cultural construct."[13] To anyone familiar with American historiography of the past half century or so, none of this is particularly new. Despite Matthew Frye Jacobson's assertion that scholars in several disciplines have "recently shaken faith in this biological certainty" of race,[14] few credible biologists and other academics have maintained such a faith in "recent" decades. Whether or not whiteness scholars want to admit it, it is safe to say that, among most academics in the humanities, save for the rare crank, we are all social constructionists now.[15]

As social and historical constructs, racial identities have content and consequences, prompting many whiteness scholars to focus on the materiality, privileges, and rewards of whiteness. Whiteness "holds material/economic implications—indeed, white reign has its financial rewards," several education scholars insist.[16] Whiteness has "cash value," declares George Lipsitz, as whites benefit from discriminatory housing markets, "intergenerational transfers of wealth that pass on the spoils of discrimination to succeeding generations," exclusionary trade union contracts, and the like. Lipsitz recasts virtually the entire post-World War Two era around the notion of "the possessive investment in whiteness,"[17] portraying the familiar and well documented story of suburbanization, highway construction, urban renewal, minority poverty, environmental racism, and unequal access to education and health care as a morality tale of white advantage and unrelenting nonwhite oppression. In her article, "Segregation, Whiteness, and Transformation," legal scholar Martha R. Mahoney provides a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

solid overview of critical race theory and the meanings of whiteness, but ultimately deploys "whiteness" primarily as white privilege, in this case as access to segregated suburban home ownership and employment.[18] In the hands of legal scholar Cheryl Harris, the chief property of whiteness is the whiteness of property, or rather, whiteness *as* property. Being white means "gaining access to a whole set of public and private privileges that materially and permanently guaranteed basic subsistence needs and therefore, survival," Harris argues. In a sweeping article spanning most of United States history and drawing liberally, and selectively, from secondary studies, Harris concludes that whiteness is a "valuable asset" and a "treasured property" protected by law. While acknowledging that whiteness "is simultaneously an aspect of self-identity and of personhood," her focus is not on either. Whiteness is, among other things, "being white."[19]

Or is it? Being "white" and immersion in "whiteness," in some constructions, are not equivalent. Rather, some writers perceive whiteness as an identity constituted by power, position, *and* perspective: Not all white people "*automatically* exhibit the traits associated with 'whiteness,'" cautions literary scholar AnnLouise Keating, who insists on the need to distinguish between "literary representations of 'whiteness' and real-life people classified as 'white.'"[20] A recurring hero in some versions of whiteness studies is the "antiracist" or "race traitor," who essentially "just says no" to membership in the "club" that is the "white race."[21] Philosopher Charles Mills emphasizes that race is "*sociopolitical rather than biological,*" differentiating "whiteness as phenotype/genealogy and Whiteness as a political commitment to white supremacy." In a parallel universe, Mills muses, whiteness "could have been Yellowness, Redness, Brownness, or Blackness. Or alternatively phrased . . . *Whiteness is not really a color at all, but a set of power relations.*"[22] Neil Foley likewise conceives of whiteness as relational: It represents both the "pinnacle of ethnoracial status" as well as "the complex social and economic matrix wherein racial power and privilege were shared, not always equally, by those who were able to construct identities as Anglo-Saxons, Nordics, Caucasians, or simply whites." In this framework, not all whites "were equally white." Early twentieth-century Southern poor whites, "always low-ranking members of the whiteness club," found themselves "banished" on the grounds of imputed biological and cultural inferiority. If whiteness could be conferred, Foley argues, it could also be taken away.[23]

Shared terminology and, to some extent, political sensibilities mask the different meanings attributed to whiteness, even within American Studies and history. If some definitions of whiteness are overly expansive or metaphorically grounded, others are radically restricted, usually without explicit acknowledgement. In characterizing rank-and-file Eastern Europeans' lack of participation in the racial violence perpetrated by Irish-American gangs in post-World War One Chicago as "an *abstention from whiteness,*" David Roediger and James Barrett treat whiteness as synonymous with racial hatred, at least in this instance.[24] Ariela J. Gross's exploration of the construction of whiteness in the commercial law of slavery equates whiteness with "what it meant to be a white man in South-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ern plantation society," which, in the case of the owners of slaves, involved "honor and profit."[25] In the context of the Rocky Mountain skiing industry and ski culture, Annie Gilbert Colemen posits whiteness as "'European' ethnicity" or "ethnic image," a "'Europeanness' . . . full of *savoir faire* and glamour" promoted by resorts, which not only "'whitewashed' destination ski resorts in the West" but "transformed local people of color into either invisible workers or exotic objects of tourism."[26] For Karen Brodkin, whiteness is linked to job status. Jews became nonwhite only with the mass migration to the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, she argues. The "key to their nonwhite racial assignment" was their "performance" of work that was poorly paid, menial, and unpleasant. "[J]ob degradation and racial darkening were linked," she contends: "In turn, degraded forms of work confirmed the apparent obviousness of the racial inferiority of the workers who did it."[27] Like Brodkin, Noel Ignatiev also conflates race and economic position when he writes that at "every period . . . the 'white race' has included only groups that did 'white man's work,'" which was "work from which Afro-Americans were excluded."[28] The variety of definitions found in this diverse scholarship reveals the concept of whiteness to be sufficiently elastic as to resist any effort to give it formal or permanent shape. Or, to mix metaphors, it is a blank screen onto which those who claim to analyze it can project their own meanings.

Whiteness is not merely one more avenue of scholarly investigation among others, for many of its practitioners aggressively position themselves on the front lines of antiracism in the academy. Not satisfied with detached or neutral language, they proclaim their political commitments loudly and without hesitation, condemning whiteness in no uncertain terms, adopting what Homi Bhabha sees as a "stentorian tone of soul searching, accompanied by . . . rhetorical rectitude."[29] Whiteness is a "poisonous system of privilege that pits people against each other and prevents the creation of common ground," declares George Lipsitz. "Exposing, analyzing, and eradicating this pathology is an obligation that we all share, white people most of all."[30] David Roediger titles his second collection on the subject *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness;* in that volume, he decries the "empty culture of whiteness" and whiteness as a "destructive ideology." In aspiring to the "withering away of whiteness," Roediger finds comfort in white youth's appreciation of hiphop music, which, he claims, offers them "spontaneity, experimentation, humor, danger, sexuality, physical movement and rebellion absent from what passes as white culture" as well as an "explicitly, often harsh, critique of whiteness."[31] Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey's journal, *Race Traitor,* purports to serve "as an intellectual center for those seeking to abolish the white race." The journal's motto puts their goals bluntly: "Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity."[32] These writers, some of whom view themselves as the "new abolitionists," leave little to the imagination in declaring their political aspirations. To those skeptical of a politics they see as defined by the voluntary mass relinquishing of privilege and identity, envisioning the withering away of whiteness requires nothing but imagination.

While by no means a comprehensive overview of the many incarnations of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

whiteness across the disciplines, the above summary suggests both the diversity of definitions and the uses to which whiteness is put. Whiteness is, variously, a metaphor for power, a proxy for racially distributed material benefits, a synonym for "white supremacy," an epistemological stance defined by power, a position of invisibility or ignorance, and a set of beliefs about racial "Others" and oneself that can be rejected through "treason" to a racial category. For those seeking to interrogate the concept critically, it is nothing less than a moving target. For labor historians, fundamental questions arise: Which definitions of whiteness have historians relied on and to what effect? Is a concept so expansively defined a viable one for historical analysis? Can the category of whiteness bear the analytical weight its proponents place upon it? The remaining sections, which explore the weaknesses of the historical scholarship on whiteness, suggest that the concept's problems are sufficiently serious as to cast doubt on its utility.

The Essentialized Du Bois

Seeking theoretical validation in the classics, many scholars of whiteness follow David Roediger in turning to W. E. B. Du Bois's monumental study, *Black Reconstruction.* Invariably, they invoke the by-now canonical passage, that "brilliant, indispensable formulation," as Roediger terms it.[33] "It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage," the eminent activist, editor, author, and scholar concluded.[34] This psychological wage, or the "wages of whiteness," in Roediger's adaptation, consisted of "public deference and titles of courtesy" given to whites "because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools," and their votes "selected public officials," producing "small effect upon the economic situation" but having a "great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them." While historians of whiteness credit these lines with remarkable insight into the relationship between class and race, they fail to address several critical questions raised by the Du Bois passage: How does this passage function in Du Bois's larger argument about the relationship of black and white workers to one another, and of both to their employers? What assumptions are embedded in the formulation? And finally, what is new here? What does Du Bois's formulation, upon close inspection, actually tell us? The answers to these questions, I would argue, cast some doubt on the utility of the concept of the "psychological" wage.

Du Bois advanced—in passing, not in a sustained argument—the notion of the public and psychological wage to answer a rather specific historical and political question, one that continues to preoccupy whiteness scholars today: namely, why did white workers refuse to make common cause with their black counterparts? "The theory of laboring class unity," Du Bois explained only a few paragraphs earlier, "rests upon the assumption that laborers, despite internal jealousies, will unite because of their opposition to exploitation by the capitalists." The interests of the laboring class and those of the planter class were "di-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ametrically opposed," throwing "white and black labor into one class," and precipitating "a united fight for higher wage and better working conditions." Reality undermined the theory, for this expectation "failed to work in the South . . . because the theory of race was supplemented by a carefully planned and slowly evolved method, which drove such a wedge between the white and black workers that there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interest." Du Bois's words—his choices of "wedge" and "carefully planned and slowly evolved method"—suggest a divide-and-conquer strategy pursued by those in power. But however much white workers might be seen as co-equal victims with blacks in such a formulation, the complementary notion of the psychological wage suggests that white workers come out on top: despite low wages, they have access to various racial privileges. Whether imposed from above or adopted from below, race hatred and racial privilege separate black and white workers, providing the explanation for the failure of white labor to live up to its historic mission of working-class unity.

The assumptions embedded in *Black Reconstruction*'s discussion of the psychological wage are ignored or implicitly accepted by those invoking what Roediger calls "the essential Du Bois." Animating Du Bois's analysis—indeed, much of his political writing—was the problem of historical agency. As Adolph Reed has argued, Du Bois's discarding of the "proletariat as the lever of social transformation" left him "without an effective agency even as he proclaimed class struggle to be a reality."[35] But the failure of the working class to play the role assigned to it required explanation. In 1933, two years before the publication of *Black Reconstruction,* Du Bois's meditation on "Marxism and the Negro Problem" in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP's) *Crisis* answered the agency question. Labor, he argued, "far from being motivated by any vision of revolt against capitalism, has been blinded by the American vision of the possibility" of social mobility, setting off a "wild and ruthless scramble of labor groups over each other in order to climb to wealth on the backs of black labor and foreign immigrants." In place of the bleak economic circumstances promoting the common interests of white and black labor in *Black Reconstruction,* Du Bois's earlier musing married Werner Sombart's "shoals of roast beef" to white supremacy: Capitalists, Du Bois concluded, had "bribed the white workers with high wages, visions of wealth and the opportunity to drive 'niggers.'" What capital offered, white organized labor knowingly accepted. The "bulk of American white labor is neither ignorant nor fanatical. It knows exactly what it is doing and it means to do it." It was the American Federation of Labor's "deliberate intention to keep Negroes and Mexicans and other elements of common labor, in a lower proletariat as subservient to their interests as theirs are to the interests of capital."[36] Here, the wages of whiteness came in the form of . . . well, conventional wages and access to jobs.

The agency problem haunts the historical studies of whiteness, as it does much of leftist scholarship. If the white working class will not carry out the his-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

torical mission assigned to it, some historians have recently suggested that perhaps African Americans can assume the discarded mantle of the vanguard. "Blacks were, for historical rather than racial reasons, making more class-conscious choices, despite constraints, than whites," Roediger declares in his essay on the peripatetic Southern white radical Covington Hall, while Dana Frank asserts that "oppressed racial groups remain in the vanguard" of change today, agreeing with Roediger that "workers of color were far more sophisticated, committed, and advanced in challenging *class* domination" than whites.[37] But the problem with any theory that assigns agency in a broader historical project is that agents have an irritating tendency to disappoint those who have invested their hopes in them, exercising their agency by refusing to behave as theoreticians would have them. Here theory runs smack up against the evidence.

Let's return to Du Bois's formulation for a moment. Immediately after his brief lines on the "public and psychological wage," Du Bois reached a conclusion different from that of Roediger and Frank, concluding that the "Negro" was "a caged human being, driven into a curious mental provincialism," dominated by an "inferiority complex," one who "did not believe himself a man like other men," who "could not teach his children self-respect, and who sank into "apathy and fatalism."[38] Few would embrace such claims today, for over the past generation or so, numerous historians have explored the deep currents of post-bellum activism, working-class protest, and the multiple forms of resistance engaged in by black Americans. But rejecting Du Bois's pessimistic conclusion above doesn't justify transforming it into its opposite, a creative reinvention of nonwhite workers as the radical *avant garde.* Decades of scholarship have revealed a vast ideological, political, and programmatic diversity among African Americans. If some loudly supported militant nationalism, emigration, workers' and women's rights, or civil rights, others counseled accommodation with Jim Crow and white supremacy, supported private enterprise, advocated alliances with white capital, or otherwise avoided any overt challenge to the status quo. To describe working-class blacks as making greater "class-conscious choices" than whites or as playing the vanguard's role is to read historical evidence selectively, politically, and ahistorically. In certain places, at certain times, and in certain circumstances, these characterizations of black political orientations apply, but in many others they simply do not.

How useful is the "public and psychological wage" as an explanation for white workers' refusal to make common cause with African Americans in the workplace and embrace blacks as an integral part of the working class and labor movement? Only if one accepts, as do many of the historians of whiteness, the "theory of laboring class unity" or, in Bruce Nelson's words, the "logic of solidarity," does the failure of white workers to recognize their common interests with blacks, their creation of a labor movement that excludes people of color, and their own embrace of white racial privileges require explanation. For Nelson, race—and whiteness in particular—calls into question the fundamental "belief in the emergent reality of one working class, with a natural affinity toward solidarity and the capacity to develop a unified consciousness as a weapon

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of struggle."[39] For some, the psychological wage becomes a convenient answer to the question of solidarity's limits: This wage "blurs common interracial working-class interests," argues Venus Green.[40] For Roediger, the "pleasures of whiteness" and the "status and privileges conferred by race" could "make up for alienating and exploitative class relations."[41] The whiteness project becomes a variant on the question that will not die, the old "why no socialism in America" —or at least the "why no working-class unity"—question.

That some white workers benefit from racial hierarchies or that race/whiteness/racism have inhibited broader working-class mobilizations is hardly controversial. What *is* problematic is the very notion of unitary "common working-class interests," a notion that most labor historians, excluding whiteness scholars, have themselves jettisoned. One need not subscribe to postmodernist notions that question the very meaning of "class" or "interests" to arrive at an historical view of American workers as fractured along multiple lines of race, ethnicity, and gender (not to mention occupation, skill, religion, and geography) or to conceive of the "logic" of solidarity as an historical project, one largely contingent upon circumstances and human agency, not one that inexorably flows from economic conditions or the social relations of production. The problem is that at least some of Du Bois's assumptions remain alive and well in the form of a persistent "Marxism lite"—the expectation that common oppression or common enemies should promote unity, that all workers more or less share class interests regardless of race, and that the working class play the role of agent assigned to it by radical theory. These beliefs require the expenditure of tremendous amounts of energy to explain why things haven't turned out as the theorists have wished.

Du Bois's full phrase was "public and psychological wage." Only "public deference and titles of courtesy" and newspaper coverage that "flattered the poor whites" constitute the psychological portion of the phrase. The rest of what Du Bois listed were material benefits: access to public parks and "the best schools" which were well funded and "conspicuously placed," employment in the police, and lenient treatment by the courts. There is little to dispute in this assessment. For the past half century American historians have charted in minute detail how Jim Crow functioned to allocate resources and power disproportionately to whites. For their part, labor historians have demonstrated how the rhetoric of white supremacy championed the putative interests of white workers, how racially segmented labor markets produced wage differentials favorable to whites or allowed whites to maintain occupational monopolies, how municipal employment was reserved for whites, and how legalized segregation ensured white workers access to public resources.[42] In sum, the denial of resources, power, and even dignity to nonwhites and the conferral of influence, material benefits, and prestige upon whites are standard operating assumptions. Nor is it disputed that white workers' acceptance of segregation and insistence upon the prerogatives of whites made organizing across the color line extraordinarily difficult. Roediger informs us that "no body of thought rivals that of W. E. B. Du Bois for an understanding of the dynamics, indeed dialectics, of race

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and class in the U.S."[43] But Du Bois's insights in this passage state in poetic terms what is commonplace today: that racism divides the working class and that white workers gain access to resources and a modicum of power in certain arenas. Whether whiteness scholars emphasize the harder-to-pinpoint psychological advantages of membership in a dominant group—like Roediger or Jacobson—or the material advantages—like Lipsitz—the result is the same: There is little that is new here.

How Historians Made Immigrants White

For many decades, historians have chronicled the hostile encounter between Irish immigrants and African Americans in the antebellum North. They have described in copious detail Irish immigrants' political allegiance to the pro-slavery Democratic party, their workplace clashes with blacks, and their participation in anti-abolitionist and anti-black mobs.[44] Scholars of working-class whiteness have revisited these issues, asking once again, "How and why did the Irish in America adopt their anti-black stance?" Their answer lies not merely in job competition or in Irish hostility to Whigs, nativists, and finally Republicans. Rather, attempting nothing short of a paradigmatic revolution, they suggest that the necessarily prior question is, "How did the Irish become white?"[45] To pose this question is to assert that nineteenth century Irish immigrants to the United States were not white upon their arrival—that is, they were not seen as white by the larger American society, and did not see themselves as white. Over time, they "became white" through a process that involved the adoption of anti-black perspectives, the conscious self-identification with the larger white group, and that group's acceptance of the Irish as white. The "white racial status of the Irish was not at all certain," engendering a "complex discursive/rhetorical construction of Irish 'racial' subjectivity" that placed them "simultaneously inside and outside of the leaky category of whiteness," concludes Barrington Walker in his study of the Memphis Riots of 1866.[46] Because early and mid-nineteenth century commentators on the Irish did not speak of whiteness *per se* but invoked a more diverse discursive apparatus, weaving considerations of religion (which virtually vanish in the considerations of the whiteness scholars[47]), notions of innate and observed character and behavior, and yes, race too into their anti-Irish commentaries, whiteness historians must assume the role of interpreter, translating the nineteenth-century vernacular of race and group inferiority into the late twentieth-century idiom of whiteness. Their efforts have succeeded, at least in some quarters. The phrase "how the Irish became white" has been repeated so often as to have become a cliché. To numerous scholars, the notion that the nonwhite Irish became white has become axiomatic.[48]

But were the Irish in the United States ever, in fact, not white? If the Irish were not white, how, why, and when did they become white? According to whiteness historians, what did they have to do to enter the ranks of whiteness, whatever that is? Answering these questions requires a close reconstruction of the line of reasoning advanced by the scholars of whiteness. Upon arriving in the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

United States, Roediger declares, "it was by no means clear that the Irish were white."[49] This claim rests not on an examination of early and mid-nineteenth century scientific thought, nor upon the actual observations of contemporary native-born white opponents of Irish immigration, much less on any assessment of what the Irish newcomers themselves happened to think. Rather, it is rooted largely in the negative views, held by some, of the Catholic Irish "race" in the antebellum era. The Irish were mocked by political cartoonists who "played on the racial ambiguity of the Irish" through simian imagery and by ethnologists who "derided the 'Celtic race'"; they were the butt of nativist folk wisdom which "held that an Irishman was a 'nigger,' inside out." From these claims of Irish racial distinctiveness and inferiority—which historians have recognized and explored—Roediger decisively, if arbitrarily, places whiteness at the center of the equation. The whiteness of the Irish was called into "question" by, presumably, those who were indisputably white.[50] Ignatiev concurs: It was "not so obvious in the United States" when the Irish began "coming over here in large numbers in the 1830s and '40s, that they would in fact be admitted to all the rights of whites and granted all the privileges of citizenship."[51] That they were, in fact, granted all those rights and privileges upon naturalization—Irish immigrant men, once naturalized, could vote, serve on juries, etc.—does not give Ignatiev pause. Neither does the history of pre-famine migration, in which Irish immigrants, many if not all of them Protestants, often blended unproblematically into American society.[52] As for the question posed in his book's title, Ignatiev barely attempts to answer it, instead drawing upon Roediger for theoretical justification.

Present throughout the arguments of Roediger and Ignatiev is the assumption that the Irish might not have adopted a hostile stance toward African Americans, might have eschewed white supremacy, and pursued a different course. The Irish in Ireland were "not race-conscious in the sense that Irish-Americans would be," Roediger argues, although Ireland "probably shared in the longstanding Western European tradition of associating blackness with evil,"[53] a point which aligns Roediger with the decades-old Winthrop Jordan approach emphasizing the significance of color (an approach whose validity has been called into question by numerous historians).[54] Ignatiev goes even further: The Irish "came to this country essentially being a blank slate so far as color is concerned," he has recently argued; they knew "nothing about racial supremacy."[55] In his *Invention of the White Race* (vol. 1), Theodore W. Allen expresses the radicals' romantic hope that the oppressed might make common cause. "No immigrants ever came to the United States better prepared by tradition and experience to empathize with the African-Americans than were these Irish who were emerging directly from the historic struggle against racial oppression in their own country," he believes.[56] Both Ignatiev and Roediger chronicle at considerable length the antislavery proclivities of prominent Irish political leaders; they note that in crowded urban centers before the famine migration of the 1840s and 1850s, Irish immigrants often lived in urban neighborhoods alongside African Americans, "without significant friction." "For some time," Roediger concludes, "there were strong signs that the Irish might not fully embrace white

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

supremacy."[57] But alas, they did, much to the palpable disappointment of the whiteness historians.

If we momentarily presume that the Irish were initially not white, the next logical question is *how* and *why* they became white. Indeed, why would they *want* to become white? Achieving whiteness was a "two-sided process," Roediger contends, requiring the Irish to win "acceptance as whites among the larger American population" and to insist "on their own whiteness and on white supremacy." White skin, Ignatiev adds, "made the Irish eligible for membership in the white race, [but] it did not guarantee their admission; they had to earn it."[58] They did so by adopting white supremacy. Neil Foley concurs, charging that the Irish "remained outside the circle of whiteness until they learned the meaning of whiteness and adopted its racial ideology."[59] Karin Brodkin carries away the following, approvingly, from her reading of Ignatiev and Roediger: The Irish did not become white "until those claims were recognized by the political and economic elites. Then and only then were the Irish incorporated into the city's governing structure."[60] That many of America's elites hardly appreciated the Irish claims to intellectual, moral, or other forms of equality, if not whiteness, is widely acknowledged. But here it appears as if becoming white primarily involves a group's adherence to some monolithic ideology held by whites or to a group's acceptance by the only group that apparently matters—the white elite. Presented as a novel theoretical contribution, whiteness functions largely as an unacknowledged surrogate for, though not replacement of, earlier accepted formulations.

These last passages reveal a significant conceptual slippage between crucial terms—whiteness and white supremacy—that recurs in the work of the scholars of Irish whiteness. The two concepts are hardly equivalents. The former might consist of discursive construction of "who is white"; it might consist of material advantages (whites cannot be enslaved, for instance; white men possess the franchise; etc.) that accrue to those who fall in that category. But one can possess all the privileges and "pleasures" of whiteness and hold to political opinions that formally oppose slavery, black subordination, and the like. The historians of whiteness are on firm ground when, building on the substantial body of scholarship in American immigration and political history, they reiterate the well-chronicled point that many Irish workers responded enthusiastically to the calls for white supremacy, which in this case is defined as a support for slavery and other political measures designed to subordinate African Americans and participation in anti-black mobs in workplaces and communities. They are on thin ice, however, when they draw from this the conclusion that the Irish were not white but, in embracing white supremacy, eventually became so. The former point is hardly a controversial one in American historiography; the latter is the invention of whiteness scholars.

Upon close inspection, whiteness scholars' assertions of Irish non-whiteness rest largely upon their conflation of racialization and the category of whiteness. For Ignatiev and Roediger, the increased popularity of the "racialization of the Irish"—the tendency to see the Irish as a distinct and inferior race—is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

equated with their exclusion from "whiteness" itself. The two, however, are by no means equivalent. Matthew Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color* becomes relevant here. One need hardly accept Jacobson's assertion that the Famine Migration "announced a new era in the meaning of whiteness in the United States"—what he calls the "fracturing of monolithic whiteness" or "variegated whiteness"—to appreciate the grounding of his arguments in the contours of mid-nineteenth-century scientific racism. Jacobson insists that racial science produced, and American culture popularized, the notion of an "increasing fragmentation and hierarchical ordering of distinct white *races.*" The Irish become the Celtic race, but it is a white, if inferior white, race. Although Jacobson undercuts his own contribution by concentrating on what he sees as "vicissitudes"[61] of whiteness and by repeatedly translating a rich and complex language of race into the narrow idiom of whiteness, his formulation, if taken at its face value, can effectively dispatch the "how the Irish became white" question, replacing it with "how immigrants became racialized."

More complex than the Irish case is the question of race, whiteness, and the new immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe who arrived in the United States in the last decades of the nineteenth and the opening decades of the twentieth centuries. A vast literature on the immigrants' experience in the United States is available to historians of whiteness. John Higham's classic 1955 study, *Strangers in the Land,*[62] still remains unsurpassed as the most valuable exploration of American nativism. Higham explored in depth the increasingly racial nativism of the late nineteenth century which denounced the dangers posed by the inferior "races" of Southern and Eastern Europe; subsequent studies of immigration restriction, eugenics, and labor have documented the varieties of racial classifications that consigned Eastern and Southern Europeans to inferior slots.[63] So what do the historians of whiteness actually add to the extraordinarily rich history of American immigration? Aside from a new vocabulary, not a great deal. Extending the trope of immigrant whitening chronologically and thematically, whiteness scholars have deemed these new immigrants to be "inbetween peoples" (as Roediger and James Barrett put it in an article bearing that title), "consanguine 'whites'" and "provisional or probationary" whites (Jacobson's terms) who gradually became white, "not-yet-white" (Roediger's phrase), "off-white" and "not-bright-white" (Brodkin's term), and "not-quite-white" ethnics.[64] To a certain extent, whiteness scholarship has appropriated older historical narratives of immigration only to translate them into the lexicon of contemporary theory. Often, it is a case of old wine in new bottles.

"How did immigrant workers wind up 'inbetween,' ranked below whites but above African Americans?" ask Barrett and Roediger about immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century. Almost a half century ago Higham's study provided numerous elements of an enduring answer. The cultural and biological inferiority of Italians, Jews, Slavs, and other new European immigrants was widely advertised by scholarly experts and racist popularizers alike. Indeed, staunch advocates of immigration restriction, eugenicists, skilled trade unionists, the Dillingham Commission, university-based anthro-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

pologists, ethnologists, and biologists, and popularizers of scientific nativism and racism such as Charles Davenport, Lothrup Stoddard, and Madison Grant served up the belief that Europeans were composed of a range of distinct and unequal races. The "veritable cottage industry of racist theory and science" at the start of the twentieth century found its way to growing audiences through "inexpensive and newsworthy illustrated" monthly magazines and cheap daily newspapers, Lee D. Baker has recently argued. "Critical to an understanding of the processes of racial construction during this period is acknowledging how pervasive and virtually uncontested the idea of a naturalized racial hierarchy was throughout U.S. society."[65] New immigrants arrived in a country that readily slotted them into pre-existing or evolving categories of racial difference. There is no mystery to their "inbetweenness." But, as in the case of the Irish, whiteness scholars often conflate the ubiquity of racial thought—scientific and popular racisms which hierarchically ranked a variety of European "races"—and whiteness. Those scholars are on firmer ground when they build on the work of historians who have explored the racialization of new immigrants than when they superimpose definitions of whiteness upon the racialization process.[66]

To a large degree, scientists and the anti-immigrant popularizers of the belief in racial hierarchies did not employ whiteness as a category of racial difference. Instead, they talked of multiple races, which, depending on the particular classification, could number in the dozens for Europeans alone. As in other cases, whiteness scholars reduce a complex, many faceted racialization process to the matter of "becoming white." When elaborating on his racial classifications of Europeans in his *The Passing of the Great Race,* for instance, Madison Grant divided European populations into "three distinct subspecies of mankind"[67]—the Nordic/Baltic, Mediterranean/Iberian, and the Alpine subspecies, on the basis of what he discerned as profound physical differences. As Matthew Jacobson observes, Grant's emphasis on those distinctions led him to conclude that the "term 'Caucasian race' has ceased to have any meaning except where it is used, in the United States, to contrast white populations with Negroes or Indians or in the Old World with Mongols." "Caucasian" might have been a "cumbersome and archaic designation," Grant conceded, but it was still a "convenient term."[68] Grant did not speak of whiteness, either literally or metaphorically. What is gained by portraying Grant's arguments as his "views on the hierarchy of whiteness," as Jacobson does?[69]

It is evident, though, that in some circles, new immigrants were spoken of as though they were not white.[70] What to make of those claims is not always evident. A recurrent dogged "keyword literalism" operates in whiteness scholarship to locate single quotes in which a speaker draws a distinction between a particular group of immigrants and "whites," the implication being, of course, that the immigrants must not have been seen as "white." Jacobson cites an Ohio Know-Nothing newspaper charging that "Germans were driving 'white people' out of the labor market" as evidence of "ascriptions of Germanic racial identity."[71] Roediger quotes Higham's observation that "In all sections native-born and northern European laborers called themselves 'white men' to distinguish

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

themselves from the southern Europeans whom they worked beside."[72] "'You don't call . . . an Italian a white man?' a West Coast construction boss was asked" in another example. "'No, sir,' he answered, 'an Italian is a Dago.'"[73] Barrett and Roediger, Brodkin, and Ignatiev all put to their purposes an example originally used by David Brody over thirty years ago: "Only hunkies" worked blast furnace jobs which were "too damn dirty and too damn hot for a 'white' man."[74] In each case "whites" are set apart from an immigrant group in question—Germans, Italians, or Slavs. It is conceivable, perhaps likely, that some of the makers of these remarks did not view new immigrants as "white." But such anecdotes, taken out of their contexts, don't get us very far in convincingly reconstructing the outlooks of the speakers. Were these references to "whites" exclusively, primarily, or partially about "race" or "color"? Is it possible that these references were a kind of shorthand, specifying not some fixed, closed racial identity but rather native-born, English speaking whites of a variety of backgrounds? Whatever these references mean—and I think the jury is still out on how to "read" this suggestive terminology—a more important set of questions are: To what extent are these anecdotes representative of broader opinion? Can "public opinion" be reduced to a single discursive construction—the "nonwhite" status of new immigrants? If so, who makes up that public opinion, and who gets left out?

If "Hunkies" and other new immigrants were not "white" in the above examples, they were in others, or at least they were often not constructed as non-, almost-, or quasi-white. Investigators into the causes of the 1919 steel strike, for instance, found some fifty-four races employed in the steel industry. The overwhelming distinction among workers was not between native-born American "whites" and immigrant "nonwhites," but between the "Americans" and the "foreigners," with immigrant laborers complaining repeatedly that they were given the "hardest and most unpleasant jobs" and were "lorded over by the skilled American workers."[75] Margaret F. Byington's 1910 survey of Homestead, Pennsylvania, drawing on the Twelfth United States Census, broke down the population of this mill community into "native white of native parents," "native white of foreign parents," "foreign born white," and "colored." The distinctions between whites deal with nativity, not hierarchies of whiteness. And yet "Hunkies" were by no means the equals of native-born whites. "The break between the Slavs and the rest of the community is on the whole more absolute than that between the whites and the Negroes," Byington discovered. Many "an American workman . . . looks upon them with an utter absence of kinship." Differences of culture, language, and religion, *and* perceptions of race—but not necessarily whiteness—operated to keep them apart.[76]

Writing at the same time as Byington, Progressive reformer John A. Fitch explored the world of steel workers in Pittsburgh, finding comparable divisions. Americans felt "that it is a disgrace to work on a level with a Slav" and that they "degrade themselves by entering into competition with a Slav for a job," Fitch concluded. The "workingmen in the mills are divided racially into many groups" and the "labor force has been cleft horizontally into two great divisions." On one

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

side stood the "'English-speaking' men," and on the other were the newcomers—the "Hunkies", the "Ginnies," the "Slavs," a "mass of illiterate, unassimilated foreigners." "Or, if you prefer, the former are the 'white men,' the latter the 'foreigners.'" One could latch upon the reference to white men to build a case for the "nonwhite" status of Slavic immigrants. But to do so would be to single out one construction out of several and distort the meaning of a more complex language. More often, Fitch spoke of Americans, English-speakers, and once of the "wideawake Anglo-Saxon" and the "'Buckwheats' (young American country boys)," but rarely of whites. Most prominently featured in his prose are references to specific immigrant groups; even within the "English-speaking group" he discerned a lack of unanimity and "vertical as well as horizontal divisions."[77] Fitch, Byington, and others drew upon and fashioned a rich, descriptive language of racial difference. Why should it be reduced to what whiteness historians presume to be the more important common denominator of whiteness/not-quite-whiteness? Attentiveness to the diverse terminology historical actors actually employed when speaking of race and racial differences provides a broader range of insights into both the character of the consciousness of workers as well as the reasons for their hostility towards other groups.

The assignment of new immigrants to a wide array of hierarchically ranked races came under growing attack by the third decade of the twentieth century. Whatever the status of whiteness, the interwar years indisputably witnessed what Elazar Barkan calls the "scientific repudiation of racism," a decline "in the scientific respectability of applying racial-biological perspectives to cultural questions" that began in the 1920s. Anthropologists and biologists challenged prevailing definitions of race; culture and environment came to occupy significant places in new scholarly definitions of race, although older notions of distinct European "races" died more slowly at the level of the grass roots.[78] Historians of whiteness go further, concluding that the new immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, like the Irish before them, eventually became white. In Jacobson's view, a "pattern of Caucasian unity gradually" replaced "Anglo-Saxonist exclusivity," resulting in a "consolidation of a unified whiteness." Jacobson locates this momentous shift in the two decades or so after World War One, although some historians—Thomas Sugrue, Gary Gerstle, and Bruce Nelson, among others—have suggested that these immigrants and their children remained "not-quite-white ethnics" into the 1940s. But over time, Bruce Nelson has argued, "immigrant workers and their sons became more fully American" and "relinquished their status as 'in-between people' and became unambiguously 'white.'" For Nelson, "European immigrants' sense of their status as whites" was sharpened by the "escalating pace of the struggle for black equality during and after World War II."[79]

But whiteness historians do not specify the criteria they use to characterize the new immigrants and their children as "not-quite-white" during the Great Depression and World War Two years. Passive voice construction allows them to evade the necessary task of identifying the active agents denying or qualifying these groups' whiteness in the 1930s and 1940s, lessening the need to square

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the assertions of not-quite-whiteness with the countless examples to the contrary. Such grammatical constructions also permit them to avoid crucial questions like: If it was by no means clear that new immigrants were white, *to whom* was this not clear? If it was not obvious on which side of the color line they fell, *to whom* was this not obvious? Italian or Polish immigrants and their children may not have been the social or economic equals of the old Protestant Anglo-Saxon elite, but who, precisely, portrayed or "constructed" them as not-quite-white? It was not politicians courting their votes, government and military officials attempting to mobilize them, academic anthropologists and social scientists studying them, journalists writing about them, or industrial unionists seeking to organize them. Only if whiteness is merely a metaphor for class and social power are these men and women not white. But if it is merely a metaphor, then its descriptive and explanatory power is weak and its repetition in so many different contexts contributes only to confusion. Even if whiteness scholars managed to produce some convincing evidence that some Americans—manufacturers, professionals, or other elites—somehow doubted the full whiteness of new immigrant groups in the 1930s and 1940s, on what grounds do these historians single out those views, declare them hegemonic, and ignore all countervailing opinion, no matter how great? This raises the question of whose discourse counts.

Moving back a century in time to the case of Irish immigrants, similar questions can be posed regarding the people who ostensibly saw the Irish as "not white." Which Americans adopted this view, when, and for how long? Jacobson's answer is remarkable for its passive projection of a monolithic stance toward the Irish onto all of American society. By the mid-nineteenth century, he argues, "racial conceptions" of the Irish "would lead to a broad popular consensus that the Irish were 'constitutionally incapable of intelligent participation in the governance of the nation.'"[80] Without diminishing the significance of political nativism at particular moments, the notion of a "broad popular consensus" would have been news to many of the local and national leaders of the Democratic party, who courted and relied upon Irish political support; it would have been news to not only the Irish but to many non-Irish workers in the nation's urban centers. For if some Americans denied whiteness to the Irish, other Americans did not. Roediger acknowledges in passing that there were two institutions that did not question the whiteness of the Irish: the Democratic party and the Catholic church.[81] Neither can be described as insignificant in size or influence. But it matters little to historians of whiteness that one of the two major political parties in the United States—the Democrats—embraced, defended, and even championed the Irish, including them without hesitation in the category of "white" or "caucasian." Instead, the historians of whiteness ignore the significance of this counter-discourse and focus almost exclusively on the more explicitly racialist discourse of the American Ango-Saxon elite, the nativists, and their ilk. How and why whiteness historians present the views of only one portion of the "American public"—one that did not exercise unquestioned and continuous power, despite the elite status of many in its ranks—as the truly significant discourse on the racial construction of the Irish is never addressed. To

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

return to the initial query of "how the Irish became white," the short answer is a simple one: by manipulating definitions and putting words into historical subjects' mouths, the Irish became white because historians, not their contemporaries, first made them "nonwhite" before making them "white."

On the Couch: Psychoanalyzing the Closed-Lipped

The creative liberties taken by whiteness scholars are particularly manifest in their efforts to peer into the heart of whiteness. Unencumbered by evidence but exuding considerable confidence, they offer Freudian readings of the inner mind of white people or white-people-in-the-making. Roediger's treatment of the Northern, urban, antebellum, white working-class is a case in point. "In a sense," Thomas Holt observes in a reference to the probing of nineteenth-century keywords as clues to identity, Roediger "uses the *Oxford English Dictionary* to put the nation on the psychiatrist's couch."[82] At its core, Roediger's argument centers on "projection" by a working class traumatized by its uprooting from the Irish countryside, with the attendant "loss of a relationship with nature" that produced acute "anxieties" and "desires" and the relentless sweep of industrial discipline that deskilled their trades and undermined their independence. Workers "disciplined and made anxious by fear of dependency" began "to construct an image of the Black population as 'other'—as embodying the preindustrial, erotic, careless style of life the white worker hated and longed for." For Roediger, the anti-black riots of the antebellum era "bespoke the anxieties . . . of a working population experiencing new forms of industrial discipline," while the minstrel stage's attraction to white workers derived from the possibility that "preindustrial joys could survive amidst industrial discipline."[83] In effect moving from the psychological wage to a psychoanalytical one, Roediger informs us that "[p]sychoanalytically, the smearing of soot or blackening over the body represents the height of polymorphous perversity, an infantile playing with excrement or dirt. It is the polar opposite of the anal retentiveness usually associated with accumulating capitalist and Protestant cultures."[84] When these polymorphously perverse whites fought against black participation in antebellum public celebrations, Roediger suggests envy may well have been involved. For, as he informs us, slaves had come from "areas more aesthetically inclined" than had whites, a fact ostensibly recognized by whites who "credited Blacks with tremendous expressive power."[85] In this passage, one essentialized if speechless group —whites—apparently is motivated by jealousy of another essentialized group—people of African descent. Turning to the question of violence, Roediger finds a "convincing explanation" for the mobbing of African Americans by blackfaced whites in Philadelphia in the claim that whites "both admired what they imagined blackness to symbolize and hated themselves for doing so."[86] Without evidence, a little psychohistory can be a dangerous thing. In what is perhaps the least grounded exploration into workers' minds and motivations, Barrington Walker concludes that the 1866 Memphis riots were "an outward manifestation of psychocultural angst on the part of a despised group [the Irish] which des-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

perately wanted to identify with the dominant culture, and to symbolically stake its own claim to whiteness."[87]

It would have been helpful if, when the composite Irish were placed on the psychohistorians' couch, they would have cooperated by providing even a single line of firsthand reflection into their angst, desperate longings, "insecurity," and other motivations. Their silence, however, gives the historians of whiteness little pause. The psychoanalysis of whiteness here differs from the "talking cure" of Freudianism partly in its neglect of the speech of those under study. If psychoanalysis requires the patient's extensive verbalization of her or his problems, whiteness psychohistory dispenses altogether with real people and their words and instead freely ascribes deep motivation and belief to its subjects on the basis of the historians' freewheeling interpretation of behavior and other people's words. "I found not one single diary, or letter, or anything of that sort in which an ordinary Irish man or woman recorded in any detail the texture of daily life and relations with the black people who were often his or her closest neighbors," Ignatiev honestly admits at the conclusion of his book. "Consequently, like a paleontologist who builds a dinosaur from a tooth, I have been forced to reconstruct from fragments, and to infer."[88] No other historians of Irish whiteness have done any better. Paleontology requires different skills than psychoanalysis, and the patient who would confuse the former for the latter will surely not receive the treatment required. Likewise, readers of whiteness scholarship would do well to keep in mind the difference when evaluating the grand insights into the minds of essentialized but often silent subjects.

The weaknesses of Roediger's psychohistorical exegesis of the white worker's mind are abundant. First, it proffers a composite portrait of a white working class, with little regard for region, religion, craft or occupation, or, the Irish excepted, ethnicity; those actual workers it does examine make only cameo appearances in examples with insufficient context. Roediger's reluctance to link systematically his largely cultural analyses to chronological change or anchor them in historical institutions makes racism out to be "once again like some innate quality of human behavior," to borrow Holt's words. "The occasional thinness of Roediger's exposition of the historical specificity" of racial identity, Holt concludes, "leaves an appearance of vulnerability and incompleteness."[89] The model's analysis of early nineteenth-century capitalist industrialization and its relationship to the emotional worlds of workers is also strained, relying heavily on a stark but untenable dichotomy between preindustrial and industrial worlds.[90] The feelings attributed to white workers—including their alleged sense of intensifying whiteness—is derivative of their place in the emerging capitalist order, posited theoretically, not empirically. The exegesis is also highly selective in its choice of examples, drawing almost exclusively from moments of dramatic conflict pitting the Irish or other white workers against African Americans, while failing to account for patterns of coexistence. The "relations of Irish and African Americans were polyvalent," historian Graham Hodges has recently argued of mid-nineteenth-century New York City. "Although they competed economically and lived closely together, Irish and black coexisted far more

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

peacefully than historians have suggested . . . Although disharmony and conflict abounded, there were also many points of cooperation." This is a portrait at almost complete odds with the one drawn by historians of whiteness, who tend to depict their composite whites in a fairly one-dimensional manner and to focus almost exclusively on instances of dramatic conflict. A fuller consideration of the social and political history of racial identity, community development, and group interaction would reveal the profound cracks in the very foundations of whiteness scholarship.[91]

Whiteness: A Useful Category of Analysis?

Its conceptual imprecision and the creative literary and evidentiary liberties taken in its name render whiteness a problematic category of historical analysis. Its application, in many instances, involves the restating in new terms of what is already well understood, or the positing of conclusions that strain credulity. Since the devil is often in the details, the following three examples are offered as illustrations of the operation of conceptual inflation, substitution, and overreaching in historical studies of whiteness. The first two involve several historians' invocation of whiteness to improve upon understandings of racial conflict in New York during the Civil War. In the bloody New York City draft riots of 1863, Matthew Jacobson contends, the Irish rioters who embraced white supremacy and resorted to racial violence demonstrated their "insistence upon whiteness." With these and other words, Jacobson treats whiteness and racialist beliefs and actions as virtual synonyms, substituting the former for the latter and presenting the maneuver as a novel interpretation. Equally problematic are his efforts to force contemporaries' discourse about rioters' behavior into the mold of whiteness. To elite onlookers, the Irish rioters were little more than "savages," "wild Indians let loose" in the city, a "howling, demonic" mob. Rather than take contemporaries at their word, Jacobson perceives code: These words reveal that elite critics were "questioning the rioters' full status as 'white persons,'" and the riots became the "occasion for a contest over the racial meaning of Irishness itself."[92] But they do nothing of the sort. To the extent that anti-Irish sentiment involved casting the Irish as a separate, albeit white, race, Jacobson suggests nothing that immigration scholars haven't already demonstrated years ago. Jacobson's interpretive maneuver rests upon a definition of whiteness that is simultaneously cosmically expansive and narrowly circumscribed. Whiteness is so interpretively open as to subsume any related discourses into its fold. At the same time, the only whiteness that counts is that of the elite, implicitly defined as proper decorum, a refraining from street violence, and deference to law and order.

Absent from consideration are other constructions that suggest the precise opposite of the questioning of whiteness. What is one to make of the remarks of Horace Greeley's *Tribune,* no friend of the New York mob or the pro-slavery cause, when it admonished striking Irish-American longshore workers, just three months before the draft riots of July 1863, that while no law compelled

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

them to work with blacks, both the black and "the white man" have "a right to work for whoever will employ and pay him," and that the "negro is a citizen, with rights which white men are bound to respect"? What of the coverage of the New York *Herald,* which characterized striking longshoremen engaged in violent attacks on blacks simply as "white men"? There is little ambiguity here: These papers were confirming, not challenging, the status of the Irish as whites. But historians of whiteness appreciate neither ambiguity nor counter-discourses of race, the recognition of which would cast doubt on their bold claims.[93]

David Roediger's reflections on the New York Irish in 1863 makes Jacobson's appear almost restrained. "The attempt of Irish-American dockworkers in New York to expel *German* longshoremen from jobs under the banner of campaigning for an 'all-white waterfront' . . . reflects in part ill-fated Irish attempts to classify Germans as of a different color," he charges. "But it also suggests how much easier it was for the Irish to defend jobs and rights as 'white' entitlements instead of as Irish ones."[94] Bold as they might be, these claims do little justice to historical events on the docks of New York. On a technical note, no evidence of Irish-American attempts to expel Germans from the waterfront has been presented at all.[95] The Irish overwhelmingly dominated the ranks of New York longshoremen and their short-lived unions in the 1850s and 1860s (which employers regularly ignored or defeated). At mid-century, one such union's banner, adorned with an array of European flags under the word "unity" and the American flag, declared, "We know no distinction but that of merit."[96] Unity proved elusive, but Irish-American dockers directed their wrath not against the Germans but primarily against African Americans in the dock strikes of 1855, 1862, and 1863. (During a Brooklyn waterfront strike in 1846, however, Irish strikers did battle against newly arrived German immigrants whom contractors hired as strikebreakers.)[97] There was no campaign per se for an "all-white waterfront"; rather, certain dockers on certain piers forcibly advocated, usually in the context of wage disputes, for the employment of union members and other "such white laborers as they see fit to permit upon the premises."[98] Set aside for a moment Roediger's fictitious picture of waterfront labor and race relations and assume that the Irish did bar the Germans from the docks and that they did campaign explicitly for an "all-white waterfront." Even if true, where is the evidence to support the fantastic leap that the Irish attempted to "classify Germans as of a different color"? The imperative of racial reductionism—finding whiteness and color at the heart of every example—suggests a critical weakness in much whiteness scholarship. It is largely driven by its theoretical assumptions and evinces a disregard for evidence and primary research. The consequence is a cultural history that is always provocative but, at root, untrustworthy.[99]

A third example of conceptual imprecision and overreaching involves the use of whiteness as a metaphor equating social ranking with racial ranking and powerlessness with racialization. Neil Foley, in an otherwise compelling social history of Texas cotton culture in the late nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries, moves back and forth between the two, superimposing concepts of whiteness onto countless developments. Whiteness "came increasingly to mean a particular kind

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of white person," he argues in *The White Scourge,* omitting any sense of *how* it increasingly came to mean this. "Not all whites . . . were possessed of equal degrees of whiteness," he argues; poor Texas whites lost whiteness they once had. True whiteness rested upon the exercise of economic power, "manly" independence, home and farm ownership. The downward social mobility experienced by small white landholders or tenants who joined the ranks of sharecroppers "implied a loss of whiteness as well as of economic rank." Matters simply went from bad to worse, and by the New Deal poor white tenants were "systematically excluded from the rights and privileges accorded the higher class of white landowners—their whiteness having waned with the cotton they once produced." With this economic decline, "they came perilously close to becoming racially marked themselves," he claims at one point. Elsewhere in his book, the ambiguity vanishes: Successful whites "began to racialize poor whites," who then found themselves "banished in the early twentieth century on the grounds that they were culturally and biologically inferior." Note the transparent circularity of the argument: Real whiteness is made contingent upon status, power, and property; class inequalities among whites become evidence of a "fissure" in whiteness, with some whites being more white than others; the descent of formerly independent white farmers into the "racially" marked category of sharecroppers racially marks those same whites. Foley's subjects, of course, don't actually employ the terminology of whiteness. Instead, he provides it for them, and finds it lurking behind every division among whites.[100] "Loose thinking on these matters," Barbara Fields once observed about popular assumptions about race, "leads to careless language, which in turn promotes misinformation."[101] Her admonition, it would seem, applies equally to historians' considerations of whiteness.

Conclusion

Nothing in the previous pages should suggest that issues of race, racial identity in general, and white racial identity in particular are not tremendously important subjects deserving of the attention they have received and ought to receive in the future. Rather, what this essay has argued is that *how* one studies race and racial identity matters considerably and that many of the assumptions, interpretive styles and techniques, and methodologies pursued by cultural historians of whiteness are highly problematic. "Provocative" as some whiteness studies are, concludes historian David W. Stowe, "whiteness studies may be reaching a point of diminishing returns." Whiteness "risks dulling the historical imagination by obscuring the other equally important and generally more self-conscious categories—regional, familial, religious, occupational—through which people understand and situate themselves and others."[102]

Anthropologist John Hartigan, Jr., has recently explored what he calls the "class predicaments of whiteness" in the Detroit communities of Briggs, Corktown, and Warrendale and has offered a radically different means of approaching the subject of racial identity. In contrast to the sweeping generalizations of most whiteness scholars, Hartigan prefers more nuanced understandings of lo-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cal events. "In Detroit, white racialness is constituted, evaluated, and revised in numerous disparate settings," he argues. "Its structure and content are shaped by the centuries-long history of race in the United States, but its contours and quirks, which spring from the local versions and effects of that history, delineate a certain distance or remove from the shape of whiteness nationally." Hartigan's is perhaps the richest, most sensitive, and least didactic of whiteness studies to date; it also differs profoundly from other works in the genre in its impressive research, respect for the humanity of the subjects of the study, and its refusal to draw simplistic conclusions on the basis of only a little evidence. Whereas whiteness scholars of the culturalist mold relish clever wordplay or consider a few examples to be sufficient evidence for making vast claims across much time and place, Hartigan's work abounds in anecdotes and verbal testimony of countless examples of racial encounters. He allows "ambiguities and ambivalences to come to the fore," refusing to resolve definitively many of them. His emphasis on neighborhood, family background, and class position leads him to stress the "heterogeneity of whites," which he acknowledges "muddies the clarity with which whiteness can be analyzed as a cultural construct." Ultimately, he concludes, "the significance of white racialness can not be adequately comprehended by relying on abstractions that ignore the differences among whites."[103]

Its current popularity suggests that whiteness will retain its academic lease on life in a variety of disciplines. But historians, and especially historians of American labor, would do well to interrogate the concept, and the methodologies employed by those who invoke it, far more closely than they have. "Theory needs checking against the particularity and the sheer intractable messiness of any given example," film critic Richard Dyer has warned while calling attention to the frameworks that help apprehend cultural productions.[104] Racial identity is too important a subject to receive nothing less than the most rigorous treatment at historians' hands. If whiteness is to endure as a critical concept, its scholars need to demonstrate that more than the historian's imagination or aspirations are involved. If they cannot, then it is time to retire whiteness for more precise historical categories and analytical tools.

NOTES

* I would like to thank Katrin Schultheiss, Brian Kelly, Daniel Letwin, James Hall, Judith Stein, Alex Lichtenstein, Karin Shapiro, and Cliff Doerksen for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

1. John T. Warren, "Whiteness and Cultural Theory: Perspectives on Research and Education," *The Urban Review* 31 (1999):185; Alastair Bonnett, "Who Was White? The Disappearance of Non-European White Identities and the Formation of European Racial Whiteness," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21 (1998):1029; Peter Jackson, "Constructions of 'Whiteness' in the Geographical Imagination," *Area* 30 (1998):99. See also Alastair Bonnett, "How the British Working Class Became White: The Symbolic (Re)formation of Racialized Capitalism," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 11 (1998):317.

2. David Roediger, "Race and the Working-Class Past in the United States: Multiple Identities and the Future of Labor History," *International Review of Social History* 38 (1993):132; Mike Hill, "Introduction: Through the Ethnographic Looking Glass," *The Minnesota Review* 47 (1996):6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 1992); Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' Complicating 'Blackness': Remapping American Culture," *American Quarterly* 47 (1995):428–66.

4. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York, 1991); Annie Gilbert Coleman, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Skiing," *Pacific Historical Review* 65 (1996):583–614; Daniel Leonard Bernardi, *Star Trek and History: Race-ing Toward a White Future (*New Brunswick, 1998); Daniel Bernardi, ed., *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (New Brunswick, 1996); Laura Briggs, "The Race of Hysteria: 'Overcivilization' and the 'Savage' Woman in Late Nineteenth-Century Obstetrics and Gynecology," *American Quarterly* 52 (2000):246–73; Shelley Kathryn Sallee, "Inventing 'The Forgotten Child': The Whiteness of Child Labor Reform in the New South" (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1998); Jacqueline M. Battalora, "Toward a Critical White Racial Ethics: Constructions of Whiteness in Antimiscegenation Law" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1999); Angela Woollacott, "'All This is the Empire, I Told Myself': Australian Women's Voyages 'Home' and the Articulation of Colonial Whiteness," *American Historical Review* (1997):1003–29; Ann Garnsey, "Racial Touring in Twentieth Century America: The Politics and Possibilities of Whiteness" (Ph.D. diss., Washington State University, 1997). A few words on what is not covered in this essay: Not all works exploring the racial identity or interests of whites fall under the rubric of "whiteness." Accordingly, I do not include the work of Alexander Saxton, although his name is often grouped with those of whiteness scholars. Nor do I include Herbert Hill, a long-time critic of the new labor history for its treatment of race, whose work focuses on racial exclusion and racism, but not racial identity per se. See Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley, 1971); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1990); Herbert Hill, "Black Labor and Affirmative Action: An Historical Perspective," in *The Question of Discrimination: Racial Inequality in the U.S. Labor Market,* ed. Steven Shulman and William Darity, Jr. (Middletown, CT, 1989).

5. David W. Stowe, "Uncolored People: The Rise of Whiteness Studies," *Lingua Franca* (1996):71.

6. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991; revised edition, New York, 1999), 188.

7. Homi K. Bhabha, "The White Stuff," *Artforum* 36 (1998):24.

8. Frank Towers, "Projecting Whiteness: Race and the Unconscious in the History of 19th-Century American Workers," *Journal of American Culture* 21 (1998):47–57; Robyn Wiegman, "Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity," *boundary 2* (1999):115–50; Eric Arnesen, ""Up from Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History," *Reviews in American History* 26 (1998):146–74.

9. See, for instance, Jeremy Krikler, "Review Article: Lessons from America: The Writings of David Roediger," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 20 (1994):663–669; Cheryl Hyde, "The Meanings of Whiteness," *Qualitative Sociology* 18 (1995):87–95; Alastair Bonnett, "Geography, 'Race' and Whiteness: Invisible Traditions and Current Challenges," *Area* 29 (1997): 193–99; Thomas C. Holt, "Racism and the Working Class," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 45 (1994):86–95; Stowe, "Uncolored People"; Andrew Neather, "'Whiteness' and the Politics of Working-Class History," *Radical History Review* 61 (1995):190–96; Russell A. Kazal, "Revisiting Assimilation: The Rise, Fall, and Reappraisal of a Concept in American Ethnic History," *American Historical Review* 100 (1995):468–70; Erin Elizabeth Clune, "Beyond White and Black: History, Race, and the Challenges of (Studying) Culture," *Radical History Review* 68 (1997):154–64. For assessments verging on the celebratory, see David R. Roediger, "The Pursuit of Whiteness: Property, Terror, and Expansion, 1790–1860," *Journal of the Early Republic* 19 (1999):585; Roediger, "Race and the Working-Class Past," 127–43; Alastair Bonnett, "'White Studies': The Problems and Projects of a New Research Agenda," *Theory, Culture & Society* 13 (1996):145–55. In "The White Issue" of the *Minnesota Review* 47 (1996), see the following reviews: Peter A. Chvany, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Whiteness," 49–55; Scott Michaelsen, "What's 'White,' and Whither?" 71–80; Jonathan Scott, "Inside the White Race Corral," 93–103; Diane Negra, "The Stakes of Whiteness," 109–14; Rebecca Aanerud, "The Missing Adjective; or, Further Challenges to 'That Phantom Collectivity,' 177–82.

10. Robert Miles, *Racism* (London, 1989), 43.

11. Bonnett, "'White Studies'", 147; Wiegman, "Whiteness Studies," 122–23.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

12. Richard Dyer, *White* (New York, 1997), 3; Timothy Barnett, "Reading 'Whiteness' in English Studies," *College English* 63 (2000):9–37; Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness (*Minneapolis, 1993), 6, 18; James R. Barrett and David Roediger, "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the 'New Immigrant' Working Class," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16 (1997):6.

13. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 2, 280; Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment,* 2.

14. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color,* 1. On the earlier discrediting of race as a biological concept, see: Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States Between the World Wars* (Cambridge, 1992). On social construction, see also Ian F. Haney Lopez, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York, 1996), xiii–xiv, 155.

15. I would place myself within the category of social construction as well. See, for instance, my contribution to exploration of white racial identity, "'Like Banquo's Ghost, It Will Not Down': The Race Question and the American Railroad Brotherhoods, 1880–1920," *American Historical Review* 99 (1994):1606. One of the most compelling formulations is found in Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward,* ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York, 1982), 143–77.

16. Howard Winant, "Behind Blue Eyes: Whiteness and Contemporary US Racial Politics," *New Left Review* 225 (1997):73–88; Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg, "Addressing the Crisis of Whiteness: Reconfiguring White Identity in a Pedagogy of Whiteness," in *White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America,* ed. Kincheloe, Steinberg, Nelson M. Rodriguez, and Ronald E. Chennault (New York, 1998), 4. Without actually employing the term "whiteness," Dana Frank too emphasizes the concrete, material benefits received by whites because of their racial status. Dana Frank, "White Working Class Women and the Race Question," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 54 (1998):80–102.

17. The phrase "possessive investment in whiteness" is "hardly a user-friendly analytic concept and quite a mouthful as a political slogan," Carl Nightingale recently observed. See Nightingale's review of Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness,* revised edition, in *Labor History* 41 (2000):94.

18. Martha R. Mahoney, "Segregation, Whiteness, and Transformation," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 143 (1995):1659–84.

19. Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106 (1993):1713. See also Derrick Bell, "Property Rights in Whiteness—Their Legal Legacy, Their Economic Costs," in *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge,* ed. Richard Delgado (Philadelphia, 1995), 75–83.

20. AnnLouise Keating, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' (De)Constructing 'Race'," *College English* 57 (1995):909, 908.

21. "Editorial: Abolish the White Race—By Any Means Necessary," *Race Traitor* 1 (1993): 2.

22. Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, 1997), 106–07, 126–27.

23. Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley, 1997), 5, 7.

24. Barrett and Roediger, "Inbetween Peoples," 32.

25. Ariela J. Gross, "'Like Master, Like Man': Constructing Whiteness in the Commercial Law of Slavery, 1800–1861," *Cardozo Law Review* 18 (1996):265, 298.

26. Coleman, "Unbearable Whiteness of Skiing," 591, 586, 602, 614. Two other works whose definitions of whiteness are imprecise are Mary J. Hickman and Bronwen Walter, "Deconstructing Whiteness: Irish Women in Britain," *Feminist Review* 50 (1995):5–19; and Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940 (*New York, 1998). In some ways, the title of Hale's book is misleading, for it doesn't resemble most of the other cultural studies of whiteness. With postbellum Southern culture serving as her canvas, *Making Whiteness* is more successful in its analyses of literary texts than in probing either "whiteness" or racial identities in general among flesh-and-blood Southerners.

27. Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What that Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, 1998), 55, 57–58, 63, 76. For a critique of Brodkin's study that does not focus on whiteness, see Hasia Diner's review of *How Jews Became White Folks* in *Journal of American History* 87 (2000):699–700.

28. Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, 1995), 112; Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness,* 144–47.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

29. Bhabha, "White Stuff," 24; Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg, "Addressing the Crisis of Whiteness: Reconfiguring White Identity in a Pedagogy of Whiteness," in *White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America,* ed. Kincheloe, Steinberg, Nelson M. Rodriguez, and Ronald E. Chennault (New York, 1998), 8; Ruth Frankenberg, "Introduction: Local Whiteness, Localizing Whiteness," 1–33, and bell hooks, "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination," 165–79, in *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism,* ed. Ruth Frankenberg (Durham, 1997); Chris J. Cuomo and Kim Q. Hall, "Introduction: Reflections on Whiteness," in *Whiteness: Feminist Philosophical Reflections,* ed. Cuomo and Hall (Lanham, MD, 1999), 1–12.

30. George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, 1998), xix.

31. David R. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (New York, 1994), 3, 13, 15–16.

32. "Editorial: Abolish the White Race," 2.

33. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness,* 12. In another reference to this passage, Roediger has more recently maintained that "Du Bois provided . . . a still unequaled dissection of the attractions of the 'public and psychological wages' of whiteness for laboring people of the dominant race." Roediger, "Introduction," in *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to be White,* ed. David Roediger (New York, 1998), 14.

34. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880* (New York, 1985 [1935]), 700.

35. Adolph L. Reed, Jr., *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (New York, 1997), 85–7.

36. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Marxism and the Negro Problem," *Crisis* 40 (1933):104. On Du Bois and the agency problem, see Reed, Jr., *W. E. B. Du Bois,* 87–9.

37. Dana Frank, "A Class About Race," *Socialist Review* 24 (1995):245.

38. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction,* 701.

39. Bruce Nelson, "Class, Race and Democracy in the CIO: "The 'New' Labor History Meets the 'Wages of Whiteness,'" *International Review of Social History* 41 (1996):353.

40. Venus Green, "The 'Lady' Telephone Operator: Gendering Whiteness in the Bell System, 1900–70," in *Racializing Class, Classifying Race: Labour and Difference in Britain, the USA and Africa,* ed. Peter Alexander and Rick Halpern (London, 2000), 58.

41. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness,* 13.

42. The literature on "race and labor" and "African-American labor history" has grown dramatically in recent decades. See, for example, August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York, 1979); Peter Gottlieb, *Making their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916–1930* (Urbana, 1987); Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915–45* (Urbana, 1985); Peter J. Rachleff, *Black Labor in Richmond 1865–1890* (Urbana, 1988); Daniel Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers: Race, Labor, and Unionism 1892–1923* (Albany, 1988); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, 1990); Eric Arnesen, W*aterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863–1923 (*Urbana, 1994); Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana, 1993); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit (*Princeton, 1996); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA, 1997); Daniel Letwin, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878–1921* (Chapel Hill, 1997); Rick Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago's Packinghouses, 1904–54* (Urbana, 1997); Bryant Simon, *A Fabric of Defeat: The Politics of South Carolina Millhands, 1910–1948 (*Chapel Hill, 1998); Kimberley Phillips, *Alabama North: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915–45* (Urbana, 1999); Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge, MA, 2001).

43. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness,* 12.

44. See, for example, Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800–1850: The Shadow of the D*ream (Chicago, 1981); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York, 1970); Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800–1850* (Philadelphia, 1980); Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787–1848* (Philadelphia, 1988); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class,*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1788–1850 (New York, 1984); Michael Feldberg, *The Turbulent Era: Riot and Disorder in Jacksonian America (*New York, 1980).

45. Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White.*

46. Barrington Walker, "'This is the White Man's Day': The Irish, White Racial Identity, and the 1866 Memphis Riots," *Left History* 5 (1999):32.

47. On those rare occasions when it is discussed, religion is often reduced to a presumably fundamental aspect of race. See Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color,* 70.

48. In her *Great Arizona Orphan Abduction,* Linda Gordon suggests that Irish-American orphan children in early twentieth-century New York City were, in elite eyes, "benighted racially"; elites viewed them as Irish, not white; only when those children boarded a train for Arizona did they undergo a "racial transformation" that changed them from "Irish to white." Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge, 1999), 12, 19. A. Yvette Hugginnie, in her own study of the same incident, similarly concludes that the Irish in New York were "probably considered to be 'Irish," but when they arrived in Arizona, they were 'American,' 'white' and 'White-Saxon." A. Yvette Hugginnie "'Mexican Labour' in a 'White Man's Town': Racialism, Imperialism and Industrialization in the Making of Arizona, 1840–1905," in *Racializing Class, Classifying Race,* 35. Charles Mills, Alastair Bonnett, and Karen Brodkin also invoke the notion of the Irish becoming white.

49. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness,* 134.

50. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness,* 133. On the racialization of the Irish, see Dale K. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America* (Middletown, CT, 1986); L. Perry Curtis, Jr., *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (Washington, DC, 1997); Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York, 1985); Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color,* 48. For an excellent critique of the whiteness historians' "one dimensional picture of both Irish and Irish-American history," see David Brundage, "'Green over Black' Revisited: Ireland and Irish-Americans in the New Histories of American Working-Class 'Whiteness'" (paper delivered at the conference on "Racializing Class, Classifying Race: Labour and Difference in Africa, USA and Britain," St. Antony's College, University of Oxford, July 1997).

51. Noel Ignatiev, "Race in Pre-Civil War America," *Social Education* 62 (1998):342; Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White,* 41.

52. On the pre-Famine immigrants in the United States, see David A. Wilson, *United Irishmen, United States: Immigrant Radicals in the Early Republic* (Ithaca, 1998).

53. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness,* 137.

54. Kathleen Brown, "Native Americans and Early Modern Concepts of Race," in *Empire and Others: British Encounters with Indigenous Peoples, 1600–1850,* ed. Martin Daunton and Rick Halpern (Philadelphia, 1999), 79–100; Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States," *New Left Review* 181 (1990):101–5.

55. Ignatiev, "Race in Pre-Civil War America," 343; Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White,* 2.

56. Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race. Volume 1, Racial Oppression and Social Control* (New York, 1994), 168.

57. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness,* 134.

58. Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White,* 59.

59. Neil Foley, *The White Scourge,* 8.

60. Karen Brodkin, *How the Jews Became White Folks,* 65.

61. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color,* 38, 40–2.

62. John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860–1925* (New York, 1963 [1955]).

63. Higham, *Strangers in the Land,* 138, 140. Also see Gwendolyn Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants in American Political Development: Union, Party, and State, 1875–1920* (Ithaca, 1986); Robert Singerman, "The Jew as Racial Alien: The Genetic Component of American Anti-Semitism," in *Anti-Semitism in American History,* ed. David A. Gerber (Urbana, 1986), 103–28.

64. Barrett and Roediger, "Inbetween Peoples"; Robert Orsi, "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People: Street *Feste* and the Problem of the Dark-Skinned Other in Italian Harlem, 1920–1990," *American Quarterly* 44 (1992):313–47; Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color,* 8, 57, 91, 96, 103; Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folk,* 60. John Higham first used the term "in-betweenness" in his discussion of new immigrants to the South and Italian immigrants in Louisiana in particular. But the "in-betweenness" of which he spoke referred to the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

potential threat they posed "not only to the purity of the white race but also its solidarity," for their unfamiliarity with "southern traditions and values" might "relax the pattern of white supremacy." Higham, *Strangers in the Land,* 169.

65. Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896–1954* (Berkeley, 1998), 73, 78, 87.

66. For studies that explore racialism, the mechanics of racialization, and the social, political, and legal constructions of race that avoid many of the methodological and stylistic pitfalls of the more culturalist whiteness literature, see Peggy Pascoe, "Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of 'Race' in Twentieth-Century America," *Journal of American History* 83 (1996):44–69; Mae M. Ngai, "The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924," *Journal of American History* (1999):67–92.

67. Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race* (New York, 1918), 19–20.

68. Grant, *Passing of the Great Race,* 65–6.

69. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color,* 82.

70. Anticipating, to a slight degree, the current whiteness vogue, Higham noted in passing that the "new groups did, on the whole, have an exotic look about them for ethnological as well as cultural reasons, and in sections with a highly developed race consciousness their whiteness was easily open to question." Higham, *Strangers,* 168.

71. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color,* 47.

72. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness,* 185, quoting Higham, *Strangers,* 173.

73. Higham, *Strangers in the Land,* 66.

74. Barrett and Roediger, "'Inbetween Peoples,'" 16; Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks,* 57; Noel Ignatiev, "Immigrants and Whites," in *Race Traitor,* ed. Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey (New York, 1996), 15; David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (New York, 1969 [1960]), 120. In "Immigrants and Whites" (p. 14), Ignatiev also cites Higham's anecdote on Italians.

75. Commission on Inquiry, The Interchurch World Movement, *Report on the Steel Strike of 1919* (New York, 1920), 99, 133, 138–41. Thomas A. Guglielmo, in his "White On Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890–1945" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2000), challenges whiteness historians when he argues that Italian immigrants to Chicago suffered from racial discrimination but were nonetheless perceived of and treated as white.

76. Margaret F. Byington, *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town* (Pittsburgh, 1974 [1910]), 13–15.

77. John A. Fitch, *The Steel Workers* (Pittsburgh, 1989 [1911]), 143, 145, 147, 237. Barrett and Roediger begin their "Inbetween Peoples" with the Fitch quote contrasting the "'white men'" with the "foreigners," p. 3.

78. Barkan, *Retreat of Scientific Racism,* 1, 4. See also Nancy Leys Stepan and Sander L. Gilman, "Appropriating the Idioms of Science: The Rejection of Scientific Racism," in *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance,* ed. Dominick LaCapra (Ithaca, 1991), 72–103.

79. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color,* 91, 93, 110, 246; Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis,* 234, 241; Gary Gerstle, "Race and the Myth of the Liberal Consensus," *Journal of American History* 83 (1995):586; Bruce Nelson, "'CIO One Thing for the Whites and Another Thing for Us': Steelworkers and Civil Rights, 1936–1974," in *Southern Labor in Transition, 1940–1995,* ed. Robert Zieger (Knoxville, 1997), 115.

80. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 48.

81. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness,* 140.

82. Holt, "Racism and the Working Class," 92; see also Noel Ignatiev, "The Paradox of the White Worker: Studies in Race Formation," *Labour/Le Travail* 30 (1992):239.

83. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness,* 151, 14, 108, 118. Minstrelsy remains a popular theme in whiteness scholarship. See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York, 1995). Frank Towers offers an important critique of the psychoanalytic dimensions of Roediger's arguments in his "Projecting Whiteness." Also see Alexander Saxton's powerful critique of the psychohistorians' reliance upon a fictional "collective psyche" in Saxton, *Rise and Fall of the White Republic,* 12; Saxton, "Historical Explanations of Racial Inequality," *Marxist Perspectives* 2 (1979):156–61.

84. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness,* 118–19.

85. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness,* 107. This latter point is credited to Joseph Boskin, with whose arguments Roediger takes some liberty. Boskin acknowledges that "commentary" about blacks' "special endowments as 'exquisite performers' abounded in the North," and that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"whites were both fascinated and repelled by other aspects of black styles." Boskin finds the "attraction-repulsion" focused on "vibrantly expressive black mannerisms," but concludes that much of black culture "bordered on the ridiculous" to white observers. Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of An American Jester* (New York, 1986), 67–8.

86. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness,* 106.

87. Walker, "'This is the White Man's Day,'" 32, 45, 49–50.

88. Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White,* 178.

89. Holt, "Racism and the Working Class," 94; Towers, "Projecting Whiteness." I have elsewhere offered a critique of the psychohistorical tendencies of whiteness scholarship. See Arnesen, "Up From Exclusion," 162–6.

90. This was a point first made by David Brody in his review of *Wages of Whiteness* in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 24 (1993):379.

91. Graham Hodges, "'Desirable Companions and Lovers': Irish and African Americans in the Sixth Ward, 1830–1870," in *The New York Irish,* ed. Ronald H. Bayor and Timothy J. Meagher (Baltimore, 1996), 124.

92. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color,* 53. 56.

93. "The Right to Work," *New York Tribune,* April 14, 1863; "Serious Riot in South Street," *New York Herald,* April 14, 1863.

94. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness,* 148.

95. As Hasia R. Diner has recently observed, "As yet little research has been done on the nature of Irish-German relations," a topic "sorely in need of analysis." Diner, "'The Most Irish City in the Union': The Era of the Great Migration, 1844–1877," in *The New York Irish,* 602.

96. Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City 1825–1863* (New York, 1949), 108.

97. On white attacks against black dock workers, see: *New York Tribune,* January 18, 1855; April 14, 15, 16, 1863; *New York Herald,* January 18, 1855; April 14, 15, 1863; Albon P. Man, Jr., "Labor Competition and the New York Draft Riots of 1863," *Journal of Negro History* 34 (1951):386, 392–402; Ernst, *Immigrant Life,* 107.

98. *Daily News,* July 17, 1863, quoted in Man, Jr., "Labor Competition," 401. Neither the secondary literature nor primary sources support Roediger's claims. Iver Bernstein does discuss a demand for an "all-white waterfront," but this is his interpretation of the Irish longshoremen's battle to remove blacks from the docks and the longshore union's demand for the employment of union members and other "such white laborers as they see fit to permit upon the premises." His suggestion that the "non-white" longshoremen barred from the docks "included Germans as well as black workingmen" is not supported by the sources he cited. Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance for American Society and Politics in the Age of the Civil War (*New York, 1990), 120. Journalistic accounts occasionally referred to attacks on men who remained at work during labor conflicts, but other than African Americans, the race, ethnicity, or nationality of those targeted was never specified.

99. I would suggest that this is not an isolated cast of reading more into an event than is warranted by the evidence. For a critical reading of Roediger's interpretation of aspects of a Lincoln-Douglas debate in 1858 in his "Pursuit of Whiteness," see David Brion Davis, "The Culmination of Racial Polarities and Prejudice," *Journal of the Early Republic* 19 (1999):774–75.

100. Foley, *The White Scourge,* 5–7, 35, 39, 88–89, 164.

101. Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology," 99.

102. David W. Stowe, review of Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color,* in *Journal of American History* 86 (1999):1359.

103. John Hartigan, Jr., *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit* (Princeton, 1999), 7, 15, 17, 82, 282.

104. Dyer, *White,* xv.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004380 Published online by Cambridge University Press