Whiteness: Theorizing Race, Eliding Ethnicity

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Abstract

Arnesen too quickly dismisses recent whiteness scholarship without first taking stock of the ways in which this work has transformed the research agenda in labor history and beyond. Whiteness scholars have made three important contributions: theorizing class as identification, historicizing race, and centering the nation. After briefly elaborating on each of these contributions, I argue that this body of new research has been limited both by its inattention to the specificity of ethnic identification and by its acceptance of the standard assimilation narratives of American immigration history. Addressing these limitations points the way to some fruitful lines of new research.

Although there is much to critique in whiteness studies, I found Eric Arnesen's review of this new body of research to be dismissive and ultimately ineffective. By repeatedly concluding that "there is little that is new here," Arnensen fails to take stock of the innovative theoretical moves made by whiteness scholars, moves that clearly have resonated with many and have provoked a burgeoning of new empirical research. Instead, Arnensen posits an evasive distinction between theory (especially cultural theory) and rigorous empirical research that allows him to claim that we knew all this, and more, before and have little or nothing to learn from this new work. Throughout the essay, Arnesen holds up earlier work on "race and labor," "African-American labor history," as well as "the extraordinary rich history of American immigration" as counterpoints to whiteness studies. These extant bodies of work exemplify, for Arnesen, the classic strengths of historical research grounded in "rigorous" archival research. While I agree that we should not lose sight of this earlier work, I am not content, as Arnensen seems to be, to return to the status quo ante, as if nothing had changed. Excellent as much of the immigration, race and labor, and African-American labor histories are, they have their limits and might be productively rethought in light of the theoretical initiatives taken by whiteness scholars.

In contrast, I want to suggest that before advocating the wonders of the old, whether it be histories of labor, immigration, or race, we need to engage more fully in the new; we need to take seriously this new body of work, to reflect more carefully on its contributions and, only after doing so, begin to identify its limitations and suggest new lines of research. I wish that Arnesen had spent more time contemplating the contributions of the whiteness scholarship, but as he goes so quickly to critique, I want to identify three intellectual contributions of whiteness research that I think ought to be taken seriously by scholars working beyond the whiteness project itself.

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Theoretical Contributions

Whiteness scholars have challenged the conventional historical wisdom in at least three important areas: theorizing class and identification, historicizing racial categories, and reexamining questions of the nation and national identity. I select these three, not because they are the only contributions, but because they have significantly *changed the intellectual agenda* by opening up a series of extremely important questions that are currently being reworked in some fascinating new research. Indeed, even though I disagree with many of the central claims of the whiteness literature, I would not have been able to conceive of my current research on ethnicity without their path-breaking analyses. To be sure, the whiteness scholarship has by no means provided all the answers, but we would do well, I think, to consider more carefully what has changed and to contemplate what has been *gained* from this new research. Let me briefly outline the three theoretical contributions before raising some problems with the whiteness narrative, and conclude by identifying some suggestions for fruitful areas of new research.

Class as Identification

Contrary to Arnensen's claim that whiteness studies is hampered by a "Marxism light" in which scholars assume that a "logic of solidarity" "inexorably flows from economic conditions or the social relations of production," I find that whiteness scholars have broken more fully with the lingering materialism that pervades most labor history, and that one of David Roediger's innovative intellectual moves was to view class more fully as a project of identity formation in which questions of identification are seen as central to group formation.[1] Indeed, it is precisely the notion of class as an identity project that leads Roediger, Eric Lott, and Michael Rogin, in particular, to look to psychoanalysis for a theory of identification.[2] One can, and many do, disparage psychoanalytic notions of projection, and question whether this is the best way to understand the historically specific process of group formation. But the whiteness scholars have placed the question of identification squarely on the table. If one breaks with the lingering Marxian materialism, as I believe many whiteness scholars have done, then one needs an account of identification of some kind—an account, it seems to me, that ought not simply to be buried in the empirical details of historical research. Existing research on race, class, and immigration, as I see it, has yet to fully engage this question.

By disparaging psychoanalysis, and hailing instead the wonders of archival research, Arnesen avoids the difficult task of articulating his own theory of identification. If not psychoanalytic notions of projection, then what? I am inclined to *agree* with Arnesen that psychoanalytic accounts operate at too great a distance from the historical material, but I recognize the importance of theorizing identification once we break with Marx, and I appreciate the ways in which Roediger, Lott, and Rogin make this a central question for their research.

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Rather than dismiss these efforts as inadequate, I would rather see us discuss alternative means of theorizing identification and of—dare I say—operationalizing these theories in our empirical work. This is no small task, and some fascinating theoretical work is currently being done on questions of identification, most of which remains quite abstract and insufficiently tied to empirical research. But I expect this will be a fruitful area of new research if we can find a way to bring theorists and historians into conversation with each other.[3]

Historicizing Race: Becoming White

One of the great contributions of the whiteness literature has been its attention to changes in racial classification *over time.* By examining the processes through which various immigrant groups "became white," the whiteness scholars have drawn attention to the importance of historicizing our notions of race.[4] All too often, racial categories, while being acknowledged as social constructions, have often been used as transhistorical terms. Scholars of racial discourse per se have attended to changes in racial discourse over time, but when it comes to analyzing *racial practices,* we frequently invoke rather timeless notions of race as if we can move from 1860 through 1960, for example, without attending to the very dramatic shifts in languages of race over this period.[5]

Although discussions of how the Irish became white, as Arnesen points out in detail, are often vague and inexact, and have paid too little attention to questions of agency and counter-discourses, these limitations ought not lead us to set aside the project as a whole. Rather, I think we need to address these limitations while still holding onto the insights offered by whiteness scholars such as Noel Ignatiev, Karen Brodkin Sacks, and others into the changing place of immigrants in the American racial order. What I find exciting about new research by Gary Gerstle, Mae Ngai, Claire Jean Kim, George Sanchez, Ian Haney Lopez, and no doubt many others is the ways in which they have reexamined the complex intersection of immigration and race, and in doing so have brought many new questions to the fore. How were the Irish, Germans, or Jews treated by elites in 1890, 1914, and 1930? How has American immigration law reconfigured the relations between race and nation? What changes occurred over these critical decades? How did immigrants themselves identify culturally, politically, and racially? What conflicts and divisions emerged within different immigrant communities over questions of how to identify? Finally, have post-1965 immigrants followed or broken with their Progressive era counterparts? All of these questions, while certainly not answered by the existing whiteness literature, owe a debt to the new ground cleared by these scholars.[6]

Moreover, Arnesen's critique of the whiteness scholars' work on immigration and race falls prey to his own inattention to the changing languages of race. Arnesen claims that "the overwhelming distinction among workers was not between native-born American 'whites' and immigrant 'non-whites,' but between the 'Americans' and the 'foreigners.'" Arnesen supports this claim by looking to sources and events from 1910, 1916, and 1919, but he, too, fails to acknowledge

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that languages of race were changing dramatically in this same decade, especially as concerned the racial classification of immigrants. Terms such as "foreigner" and "alien" were not transhistorical words used to describe immigrants throughout American history, but only began to appear with increasing frequency precisely in the first two decades of the twentieth century when Lamarckian notions of race were breaking down.[7] Madison Grant, whom Arnesen invokes, was himself directly involved in this transition, and called explicitly for a break with Lamarckian notions of race in *The Passing of the Great Race* (New York, 1916). Grant can hardly be called upon as a neutral arbiter in the historiographic debate over Progressive era conceptions of race, but rather needs to be resituated as a protagonist within the changing racial discourse of the period.[8] Even though most of the whiteness literature does not look carefully enough at these fine-grained shifts in the languages of race, and subsumes too much within the category "white," they have, nevertheless, drawn our attention to the changing nature of racial identification in the United States at the turn of the century in ways that have already prompted many to ask important new questions about the relationship between immigration and American racial politics.

Although we do indeed need to be more precise and careful in the ways in which we both pose and answer questions about the changing language of race, there is much to be learned from this new work, and it would be a great mistake simply to return to the old immigration research in which questions of immigrant incorporation were largely *divorced* from discussions of race. In short, the innovation of seeing incorporation as entailing, at least in part, a process of racial as well as national identification, is a critical one that we should hold onto and explore. Doing so, I believe, is already producing a very different account of immigration history that works explicitly at the *intersection* of race and immigration. John Higham, indeed, might be claimed as an important antecedent to this vigorous new subfield of research, but his work was definitely the exception, not the rule. The old immigration history, by and large, had little to say about the legacies of slavery and racial inequality for immigration research.[9]

Centering the Nation

An extremely important piece of the whiteness contribution has been the way in which they have brought race to the center of American history. Race, for whiteness scholars, is no longer a discrete piece of American politics and history that can be relegated to subfields within our various academic disciplines. Rather, they claim that questions of racial classification and hierarchy are inextricably tied to the core institutions and events of our nation. Thus, Toni Morrison, Derek Bell, Cheryl Harris, Michael Omi, Howard Winant, and others have explored the ways in which racial inequality pervades all of American society.[10] The absence of race, these scholars argue, should not be taken literally. Thus, for Morrison, many of the classic works of American literature, although not explicitly about race, are nevertheless, Morrison argues, deeply structured by questions of racial inequality and identification. How one reads such silences is, in-

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deed, a complicated task since it is difficult to determine exactly what counts as confirming evidence. Difficulties of evidence notwithstanding, these more expansive readings of race have transformed the ways in which we view American political history for the better; I would certainly not want to set aside Morrison's very powerful rereading of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (Chicago, 1988 [1851]), nor Harris, Bell, and Lopez's re-readings of American law. Moreover, it is important to distinguish these accounts from other histories of race and class that generally have operated with a more literal view of race; even though they have often done an exquisite job of analyzing particular group experiences, they often failed to link their carefully grounded histories to the larger narratives of American society as a whole.[11]

Moving race centerstage led many whiteness scholars to re-engage questions of the nation and national identification. To what extent, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and others have asked, is the American conception of national belonging predicated on quite specific sets of racial exclusions?[12] These new explorations of the American nation have turned the longstanding accounts of America as essentially a liberal polity, offered most notably by Louis Hartz and Werner Sombart, on their heads.[13] The older consensus historians concerns with liberal conformity and its dangers have been replaced by questions of how to account for the persistence of *both* liberal and exclusionary ideologies and practices within American history. To be sure, whiteness scholars are not the first, nor the only ones, to focus on the contradictory impulses inherent in American political history, but they have added new fuel to this debate and have offered new ways of reconciling American liberalism with its enduring exclusions.[14]

An important aspect of this retelling of national identification has been the ways in which whiteness scholars have reconfigured older accounts of immigration in the United States by adding a racial dimension to the longstanding narratives of immigrant assimilation. When new comers "melted," Matthew Frye Jacobson, David Roediger, and James Barrett have claimed, there was a strong racial component to their new national identification. Thus, rather than simply celebrating immigrant incorporation, these scholars prompt us to reexamine the racialized aspects of American national identity that are part-and-parcel of the American assimilation story.[15] Whether or not their account of American nationalism is the right one is less important for me that the fact that they have reclaimed questions of national identification as a central problematic of American history. Gary Gerstle puts the issue succinctly when he suggests that we consider the nation "as a structure of power that circumscribes and shapes the identities to which individuals and groups can aspire."[16] Much new work is emerging from this reexamination of race and nation in both the United States and abroad.

Dangers and Possibilities for Future Research

Although much as been gained by the flourishing of whiteness scholarship, there are also significant dangers ahead for new research. First, there is the danger of

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the term "whiteness" following other innovative terms and becoming so spongelike that it loses its analytic edge. Daniel Rogers mapped such a fate for the notion of republican ideology, and the prospects for a similar trajectory seem quite real for notions of whiteness if scholars do not specify more carefully and exactly what they take to be the central tenets of the term.[17] What exactly does it mean to talk of assimilation? Is it useful to refer to this as a single omnibus process? I think much would be gained if we began to *disaggregate* the notion of *assimilation* and to look more carefully at how particular individuals and groups, in particular times and places, tried to position themselves, or were positioned by others, vis-à-vis questions of race, class, and nation.[18] Looking more closely at these dynamic relations, I think, quickly calls into question the longstanding assimilation narrative that has dominated much of American political history, and in so doing raises crucial questions about the nature and prospects of immigrant and racial politics today.

A second danger, as I see it, is the temptation simply to racialize old narratives of American history without fully interrogating the narratives themselves. Take, for example, the whiteness scholars' reinterpretation of immigrant assimilation. While they have indeed added the important component of racial identification to the older immigration histories, these new accounts nevertheless fail to question whether assimilation was in fact the principal trajectory for Progressive era immigrants. Jacobson's book *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, 1998), for example, retells the old assimilation story, but allocates it a different sign. Whereas earlier immigration historians often celebrated immigrants' capacity to assimilate, Jacobson and other whiteness scholars view the same process negatively due to the significant component of racial identification it necessarily entailed. None of the whiteness literature that I have read tries to deconstruct, or even critique, the central narrative of assimilation as the dominant form of American immigrant life. In short, they have accepted the basic historical narrative laid out by earlier immigration scholars while adding to it the neglected element of racial identification. While this reworking is no small accomplishment, I would like to push whiteness scholars to question whether we can simply assume that all or even most immigrants made assimilation their principal goal. If all or most immigrants did or do aspire to whiteness, what then are we to make of the category of ethnicity? What is the cultural and political significance of this category that was largely invented, as Werner Sollors has argued, in the early twentieth century? Why do we have a separate language of ethnicity if racial assimilation were all that was desired? What is lost by simply collapsing ethnicity into whiteness? As I see it, most whiteness scholars ultimately do so, and as a consequence fail to map the central dynamics of racial and ethnic politics for the twentieth-century United States.[19]

Finally, I want to underscore the importance of avoiding the division between theory and archival research. The distinction only serves to obscure the ways in which all of our work is infused with a set of theoretical underpinnings. The choice is *not* between theory and history, as the two can never be fully dis-

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entangled. Nor should we simply return to history as usual. This it seems to me, would be a failure to engage with the new historical work by dismissing it out of hand as if it offered nothing new for us to reflect upon. Instead, I would urge each of us to think through questions of identification, the changing nature of race, and the place of the nation in our research. I by no means expect that the central whiteness narrative offered to date is adequate to the task, and it will surely be challenged and reworked in crucial ways. But I do have very high hopes for a vigorous intellectual debate, waged both at the level of theory *and* history, as we continue to reinterpret the central dynamics of American history and politics by at least taking seriously the intellectual contributions of the whiteness scholars.

NOTES

1. For discussion of lingering materialism within labor history, see William H. Sewell, Jr., "A Post-Materialist Rhetoric for Labor History," in *Rethinking Labor History,* ed. Lenard Berlanstein (Urbana, 1993).

2. For the invoking of psychoanalysis by whiteness scholars, see especially David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York, 1991); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsey and the American Working Class* (New York, 1995); and Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, 1998).

3. Many scholars arguing for anti-essentialist views of identity also address questions of identification. Classic works in this vein include Michael Faucault, *History of Sexuality* (New York, 1990) vol. 1; Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York, 1995); Anne Norton, *Reflections on Political Identity* (Baltimore, 1983); Linda Zerilli, "Doing Without Knowing: Feminism's Politics of the Ordinary," *Political Theory* 26 (1998):435–58; and Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (New York, 1996). For an interesting exchange on this and related issues, see Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (New York, 2000).

4. See Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, 1995); David Roediger, "Irish-American Workers and White Racial Formation in the Antebellum United States," in his *Wages of Whiteness;* Karen Sacks, "How Did Jews become White Folks?" in *Race,* ed. Stephen Gregory and Roger Sanjek (New Brunswick, 1994); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (New York, 1998); James Barrett and David Roediger, "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the 'New Immigrant' Working Class," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16 (1997):3–44; and David A. J. Richards, *Italian American: The Racializing of an Ethnic Identity* (New York, 1999).

5. For discussion of changes in racial discourse, see Nicholas Hudson, "From 'Nation' to 'Race': The Origin of Racial Classification in Eighteenth-Century Thought," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 29 (1996):247–64; Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York, 1997); Earl W. Count, ed., *This is Race: An Anthology Selected from the International Literature on the Races of Man* (New York, 1950); Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origins and Evolution of a World View* (Boulder, CO, 1999). I do not see a translation of these careful discussions of changing languages of race into most works examining nineteenth- and twentieth-century racial practices. An important exception is Werner Sollors, *Invention of Ethnicity* (New York, 1989).

6. See, for example, Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 2001); Mae M. Ngai, "The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924," *Journal of American History* 86 (1999):67–92; Claire Jean Kim, "The Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics and Society* 27 (1999):105–38; George Sanchez, "Face the Nation: Race, Immigration, and the Rise of Nativism in Late Twentieth Century America," *International Migration Review* 31 (1997):1009–30; and Ian Haney Lopez, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York, 1996).

7. For a marvelous account of the break with Lamarck, see George Stocking, "Lamarck-

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ianism in American Social Science, 1890–1915," in *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology,* ed. George Stocking, (New York, 1982); and for the emergence of the terms "foreigner" and "alien," see Victoria Hattam, "Ethnicity: The Racial Politics of American Pluralism," book manuscript, chapter 2.

8. For example, Grant called repeatedly for more careful distinctions to be drawn among race, nation, and language, and in so doing broke with nineteenth-century Lamarckian notions of race in which environmental and even social characteristics were thought to become, over long periods of time, heritable traits. See Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race or the Racial Basis of European History* (New York, 1916), introduction and chapter 1.

9. For Higham's path-breaking work on immigration and race, see *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860–1925* (New York, 1963). The literature on Progressive era immigration is enormous, but for a useful synthesis which reveals the division between academic accounts of immigration and race, see Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait* (Berkeley, 1996).

10. For example, see Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York, 1993); Derek Bell, *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* (New York, 1989); Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, 8 (1993): 1707–1791; and Lopez, *White By Law.* One of the early works in this vein was Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York, 1994).

11. For an excellent review of these other works, see Eric Arnesen, "Up from Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History," 26 (1998) *Reviews in American History:* 146–174.

12. See James Baldwin, "On Being White . . . and Other Lies," *Essence* (April 1984); and Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark.*

13. See Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York, 1955); and Werner Sombart, *Why is There No Socialism in the United States?* (New York, 1976 [1906]).

14. See Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1995); Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie, and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley, 1988); Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in United States History (New Haven, 1997);* Uday Shing Mehta, *Anxiety of Freedom: Imagination and Individuality in Locke's Political Thought* (Ithaca, 1992); and George Shulman, "Prophecy and Redemption in American Political Culture," unpublished manuscript.

15. See Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color;* Barrett and Roediger, "Inbetween Peoples."

16. Quoted from, Gary Gerstle, "Liberty, Coercion, and the Making of America," *Journal of American History* 84 (1987):524–58, at 556–7.

17. See Daniel Rogers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History* 79 (June 1992): 11–38.

18. For an excellent account that underscores the importance of geographic location for the workings of race and class, see Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

19. For an excellent overview of the emergence of ethnicity, see Werner Sollors, ed., *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader* (New York, 1996), introduction. My own research on ethnicity has led me to think that we need to distinguish ethnicity from whiteness, not to separate them, but to better track their interactive effects.

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