

Whiteness and Ethnicity in the History of "White Ethnics" in the United States

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Barbara Fields has recently argued that the absence of the term *white people* in the United States Constitution "is not surprising [since] in a legal document . . . slang of that kind would be hopelessly imprecise." Nonetheless, the first Congress convened under that Constitution voted in 1790 to require that a person be "white" in order to become a naturalized citizen of the US. Predictably enough, the hopeless imprecision of the term left the courts with impossible problems of interpretation that stretched well into the twentieth century. As Robert T. Devlin, United States Attorney at San Francisco, understated it in 1907: "There is considerable uncertainty as to just what nationalities come within the term 'white person.'" The courts thus discovered in the early part of this century what historians have belatedly learned in its latter stages: that the social fiction of race defies rigorous definition. If science were to determine whiteness, problems proliferated because ethnological wisdom constantly changed. In particular, modern ethnology shunned the word *white* and used instead terms like *caucasian* and *Aryan*, which were not current when the legislation was passed in 1790. Moreover, science tended to classify Syrians and Asian Indians as caucasians, a view that clashed with the commonsense view of federal naturalization officials and of some judges bent on excluding them as nonwhites.

If the ground were shifted to culture and geography as determinants of who was white, the inconvenient fact was that these standards too

had evolved messily over time. The Pennsylvania jurist Oliver B. Dickin-
son acutely noted, "Although the original 1790 statute probably was not
intended to include the Latin races . . . later immigration expanded the
term to cover Latin Europeans," and still later southeastern Europeans
came to be included. Color differences were so varied within so-called
"races" as to preclude the possibility that whiteness could have literally
been measured by (absence of) pigmentation. The 1923 Supreme Court
decision to deny naturalization to Bhagat Singh Thind marked the cul-
mination of a process by which the legal system, in the words of Joan
M. Jensen, "rejected science, history, legal precedent and logic to put
the Constitution at the disposal of a legal fiction called 'the common
man'" – an invented figure who knew that Asian Indians were not
white. Between 1923 and 1927, sixty-five Asian Indians suffered
denaturalization in the wake of the Thind decision. Lower courts had
naturalized them as white immigrants, but under the test of "common
understanding" they had become nonwhite.¹

If the legal and social history of Jim Crow often turned on the ques-
tion "Who was Black?" the legal and social history of immigration often
turned on the question "Who was white?" And yet, amidst the large and
sophisticated literature on ethnic consciousness and Americanization
among immigrants, we know very little about how the Irish and Ital-
ians, for example, became white; about how the Chinese and Japanese
became nonwhite; or about how groups like Asian Indians and Mexican
Americans were at least partly identified as white before becoming
nonwhite.²

The recent outpouring of historical writing on the social construc-
tion of whiteness as a racial category and as an identity opens the pos-
sibility of closing this gap in the historical literature and of undertaking
a full reconsideration of the relationship between race and ethnicity in
US history.³ Until now, most objections to the conflation of the category
of race with that of ethnicity have turned on the quite reasonable point
that, historically, civilly, and structurally, racial minorities have not been
treated in a relevantly similar way to those immigrants who came to be
identified as "white ethnics." Richard Williams's elegant *Hierarchical
Structures and Social Value* has recently pushed this argument to the fas-
cinating conclusion that in the US ethnicity is made possible by race –
that ethnicity is a social status assigned to those immigrants who,
though slotted into low-wage jobs, were *not* reduced to the slavery or

systematic civil discrimination that "racial" minorities suffered. But
however compelling the case that racial oppression has not equalled
ethnic oppression, another challenge deserves to be made to analyses
that do not sharply differentiate between race and ethnicity as ideologi-
cal categories. *Among whites*, racial identity (whiteness) and ethnic iden-
tity are distinct, and this article will argue, often counterposed, forms of
consciousness.⁴

This latter distinction, and its importance, becomes clearer as we
look at a recent passage from the distinguished legal historian William
Forbath's *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement*. Forbath
aptly summarizes the position of the "new labor history" on why US
labor is not so "exceptional" by world standards in its historical lack of
class-consciousness. He writes, "Ethnic division is the other principle
factor in the traditional exceptionalism story. In any revised account,
ethnic and racial cleavages will surely remain central. However, the
new labor historians have discovered that ethnic identities and affilia-
tions were not as corrosive of class-based identities and actions as we
tend to assume."⁵ The sliding here from an argument about ethnicity
to one about race and ethnicity and back to one about ethnicity is sig-
nificant. Surely, as the work of Wayne Broehl, Earl Lewis, Vicki Ruiz,
Victor Greene, Robin D. G. Kelley, and others shows, specific white ethnic
(that is, Polish American, Irish American, and so on), African Ameri-
can and Mexican American cultural forms and institutions often under-
girded class mobilization in the US past.⁶ But what happens when we
remember that racial identity also means *whiteness*? The central point
of much of the recent writing on the instances of attempts to organize
specifically as white workers – in hate strikes and campaigns for Ori-
ental exclusionism, for example – is how fully such mobilization played into
the emergence of a narrow, brittle, and at best craft-conscious labor
movement. Ethnicity is one thing in this case, and whiteness quite
another.

"Racial identities are not only Black, Latino, Asian, Native American
and so on," Coco Fusco has written, "they are also white. To ignore
white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it." Fusco's
comment is breathtakingly clear in its recognition of the need to ex-
plore the social construction of white identities, but her use of the
term *white ethnicity* introduces interesting complications with regard
to how white Americans have historically come to think of themselves

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- "white ethnics" written vertically.
- "white ethnics" written horizontally.
- "white ethnics" written horizontally.

as white. Fusco uses white ethnicity in the same sense as one might use *white racial identity*, illustrating a long tendency in US scholarship to conflate race and ethnicity. But *white ethnicity* has also meant, at least for the last forty years, the consciousness of a distinct identity among usually second- or third-generation immigrants who both see themselves and are seen as racially white and as belonging to definable ethnic groups. And the complications do not end there. As Barry Goldberg and Colin Greer have observed, this "white ethnicity," which gained force in major cities from the 1950s onwards in opposition to racial integration of neighborhoods, was not just a heading grouping together specific ethnic identities (Greek American, Polish American, Italian American, and so on) but a "pan-ethnic" ideology that "did not emphasize cultural distinction but the shared values of a white immigrant heritage." Thus it was possible to become more self-consciously "white ethnic," but less self-consciously Greek, Polish, or Italian at the same time.⁷

Though the phrase *white ethnic* trips off the tongue easily today, the relationship between whiteness and ethnicity is in no sense simple, not now and certainly not historically. This essay attempts to survey some of the historical complexities of the interplay of racial and ethnic consciousness among whites in the US. Its very preliminary nature qualifies it as less a survey of what we know about this understudied topic than as a survey of what we do not know. Although we badly need studies of how "nonwhite" ethnic groups became so defined – indeed, in effect became "races" – the focus here is on the process of "becoming white" with material on nonwhiteness largely included to illuminate that process.

The Not-Yet-White Ethnic

Alex Haley's epilogue to Malcolm X's *Autobiography* features a rivetting scene in which Malcolm admires European children newly arrived at a US airport and predicts that they are soon to use their first English word: *nigger*. The force of the passage lies in its dramatic rendering of the extent to which European immigrants became not just Americans but specifically *white* Americans and of the apparent ease with which they did so.⁸ As important as the telescoped, long-range historical

truth in the passage is, it also leads us to miss – as most historians have missed – the dramatic, tortuous subplots of immigration history via which, as James Baldwin has written, arriving Europeans "became white."⁹

The history of what John Bukowczyk has called the "not-yet-white ethnic" remains to be written. Its writing will sharply focus our attention on the fact that immigrants could be Irish, Italian, Hungarian, and Jewish, for example, without being white. Many groups now commonly termed part of the "white" or "white ethnic" population were in fact historically regarded as nonwhite, or of debatable racial heritage, by the host American citizenry. In the mid-nineteenth century, the racial status of Catholic Irish incomers became the object of fierce, extended debate. The "simian" and "savage" Irish only gradually fought, worked, and voted their ways into the white race in the US. Well into the twentieth century, Blacks were counted as "smoked Irishmen" in racist and anti-Irish US slang. Later, sometimes darker, migrants from Southern and Eastern Europe were similarly cast as nonwhite. The nativist folk wisdom that held that an Irishman was a Black, inside out, became transposed to the reckoning that the turning inside out of Jews produced "niggers." Factory managers spoke of employees distinctly as Jews and as "white men," though the "good Jew" was sometimes counted as white. Poorer Jews were slurred as Black with special frequency. Indeed a 1987 Supreme Court decision used the record of Jews having been seen as a distinct race in the nineteenth century as precedent to allow a Jewish group to sue under *racial* discrimination statutes. Stock anti-Black humor was pressed into service as anti-Semitic, anti-Czech, and, later, anti-Polish humor. Slavic "Hunkies" were nonwhite in steel towns. Among "white" miners defending their "American towns" in Arizona mining areas, not only the Chinese and Mexicans, but also Eastern and Southern Europeans, were termed nonwhite. As the leading scholar of nativism, John Higham, has observed, "In all sections [of the US] native-born and northern European laborers called themselves "white men" to distinguish themselves from the southern Europeans whom they worked beside."¹⁰

Of course none of this implies, as the modern white ethnics' historical memories and invented traditions often do, that the immigrant experience was parallel to that of African Americans, except for the more successful outcome, arising from determination and effort. Not-yet-white immigrants consistently had a more secure claim to citizenship,

to civil rights and political power, and a greater opportunity to choose to pass as whites, especially in seeking jobs. The duration of "not-yet-whiteness," as measured against that of racial oppression in the US, was quite short. In Joe Eszterhaus's much-better-than-the-movie labor novel, *E.I.S.T.*, set in and after the 1930s, the Afro-Polish freight-handler Lincoln Dombrowsky is plagued by a boss who "kept after him, hitting his buzzer. Calling him 'polack' as if he were saying 'nigger.'" ¹¹ Readers understand that the implied use of the latter term greatly added to the sting of the former. It is, as Lawrence Joseph's withering review of the recent collection *Devil's Night* by the Michigan-raised Israeli writer Ze'ev Chafets, maintains, "silly" for Chafets to portray himself as a "nonwhite" in writing about Detroit. Chafets's self-described "bad hair" and "swarthy skin" notwithstanding, Joseph argues, "In America, blacks cannot choose which racial side they're on; in America, Chafets can." ¹² To write the history of the whitening of the not-yet-white ethnic thus requires close attention to change over time. In reconstructing that history we may, for example, not only develop an appreciation for why the pioneer labor researcher David Saposs consistently referred to anti-Slavic and anti-Southern European prejudice as "race prejudice" as late as the 1920s but also a sense of the problems raised by his and others doing so. Further complexity arises when we cease to regard racial and ethnic identities as categories into which individuals simply are "slotted," as Williams's *Hierarchical Structures* has it, and begin to see whiteness as in part a category into which people place themselves. ¹³ James Baldwin's point that Europeans arrived in the US and became white – "by deciding they were white" – powerfully directs our attention to the fact that white ethnics, while they lived under conditions not of their own choosing, by and large chose whiteness, and even struggled to be recognized as white.

We urgently need studies of how and why this choice was made by specific immigrant groups. It is not strictly true that, as Baldwin argues, "no one was white before he or she came to America." In a few cities providing significant numbers of migrants, such as London, there was a significant Black population and a developing sense of whiteness within the working class before immigration. White Cuban immigrants brought to the US a sense of the importance of race, though one not nearly as finely honed as that present in the US. We need also to know far more about folk beliefs regarding Blacks in areas

like Ireland, Germany, and Slavic Europe. The extent to which, as Williams argues, English anti-Irish oppression was racism rather than ethnic prejudice – or to which anti-Sicilian oppression in Italy or anti-Gypsy and anti-Semitic oppression in Europe involved a kind of race-thinking – deserves consideration in accounting for the development of a sense of whiteness among immigrants to the US. Robbie McVeigh's astute comments on "anti-traveler" ideas as a source of racism in Ireland begin such studies penetratingly. Nonetheless, in its broad outline Baldwin's point is hardly assailable. Norwegians, for example, did not spend a great deal of time and energy in Norway thinking of themselves as white. As the great Irish nationalist and antiracist Daniel O'Connell thundered to Irish Americans who increasingly asserted their whiteness in the 1840s, "It was not in Ireland you learned this cruelty." ¹⁴

But neither was whiteness *immediately* learned in the United States. At times a strong sense of ethnic identity could cut *against* the development of a white identity. Thus Poles in the Chicago stockyards community initially saw the post-World War I race riots there as an affair between the whites and the Blacks, with Poles separate and uninvolved. The huge numbers of "birds of passage" – migrants working for a time in the US and then returning home – were probably less than consumed by a desire to build a white American identity. That the native population questioned their whiteness may also have led immigrants to a sense of apartness from white America and occasionally to a willingness to sympathize and fraternize with African Americans. The best-studied example of the dynamics of such solidarity and mixing is that of the Italian (and especially Sicilian) immigrant population in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially in Louisiana – a "not-yet-white" population both in the view of white Louisianans, and in its self-perception. Many Black Louisianans, according to Hodding Carter, Sr's *Southern Legacy*, "made unabashed distinctions between Dagoes and white folks and treated [Italians] with a friendly, first-name familiarity." White natives also made such distinctions, counting "black dagoes" as neither Black nor white. If Paola Giordano exaggerated in treating Italian Louisianans unequivocally as a group that "associated freely with the Blacks, going clearly against the accepted social order," he did so only slightly. The associations of Blacks and Italians took place at peddlers' carts, in the cane fields, in

the timber camps, and in the halls and bars where jazz was made.¹⁵ Italian-Black solidarity was also strikingly present, albeit alongside its opposite, in New York City and, from Buffalo to California, Italians suffered from racial typing and what Micaela di Leonardo calls "racist oppression."¹⁶

The Italian and Polish examples are far from isolated ones of mixing and solidarity. However vexed the record of relations between African Americans and Jews, the history record of solidarity with Black civil rights causes by radical and mainstream Jewish organizations and individuals is clear. The important Ukrainian American paper *Svoboda Cbob'* OAA included militant antilynching articles and even homages to John Brown. Roger Horowitz's work on interracial unionism in meatpacking identifies Croatian American workers in Kansas City as "among white packinghouse workers" the group most clearly committed to interracialism. He attributes this commitment to the Croats sharing oppression with Blacks as they worked "at the bottom end of the employment ladder [and] chafed under mistreatment by German foremen who called them 'Hunky' rather than their . . . name." Raymond Mohl's and Neil Betten's research on Gary, Indiana shows examples of positive Black-Greek associations. In Houston, such interracial contacts were not pronounced, as Greek Americans quickly learned Jim Crow. But the Greek community also long continued to differentiate itself from *i aspri* (that is, "the whites"), a term often used disparagingly. The Mississippi Chinese, whose racial status was the object of contention over decades but who arguably eventually became accepted as white, also frequently socially mixed with and married Blacks in the early years after migrating. Even some Irish were "not yet white" in their own eyes, and not just in the eyes of nativists, in the 1820s and 1830s and mixed considerably with free Blacks.

As the term *not-yet-white ethnic* implies, many of these patterns of association of immigrants and Blacks were ephemeral. Moreover, it was quite possible for immigrants and African Americans not to see their interactions in Black-white terms but nonetheless to regard each other with suspicion and even hatred, much as rival immigrant groups did at times. Still the patterns are important in that they signal that the "white ethnic" developed historically and that he or she was certainly not white because of his or her ethnicity. Indeed at times of great identification with homeland and ethnicity, immigrants' identification with whiteness was often minimal.

Americanization or Whitening?

Malcolm X therefore had a great deal of the story right when he argued that in the process of Americanizing European immigrants acquired a sense of whiteness and of white supremacy. As groups made the transition from Irish in America or Poles in America to Irish Americans or Polish Americans, they also became white Americans. In doing so they became white ethnics but also became less specifically ethnic, not only because they sought to assimilate into the broad category of American but also because they sought to be accepted as white rather than as Irish or Polish. In the Irish case this seeking of whiteness involved constructing a pan-white identity in which Irish Americans struggled to join even the *English* in the same racial category. In Ireland, it goes without saying, there was little talk of the common whiteness uniting Anglo-Saxon and Celtic peoples.

Nonetheless the precise relationships among Americanization, whiteness and loss of specific ethnicity are extremely complex. One complicating factor is that immigrants at times developed significant contacts with Black culture, and through those contacts maintained elements of their own ethnic cultures that resonated with Black culture, even as they embraced whiteness. The haunting example of the blacked-up Irish minstrel, singing songs of lost land and exile, is, as Leni Sloan has tellingly observed, an extreme case of the phenomenon. The essence of minstrelsy was the whiteness – not specific ethnicity – beneath the mask, but elements of Irish memory and culture were perversely maintained in blackface. Alexander Saxton's fine World War II labor novel *Bright Web in the Darkness* provides a more modest and modern example. Its hero, the young union militant Tom O'Regan, notices that his wife-to-be is standing with a Black student when he picks her up from a welding class. "So," O'Regan asks, "who's the smoked Irishman?" Sensing disapproval, he adds, "Oh, it's only a joke, Sally, don't act so huffy. After all, I'm an Irishman . . . like you're all the time telling me." Saxton here picks up on the combination of racism, defensiveness, and a certain desire to keep alive comparisons of Black and Irish that runs through Irish American retellings of "Paddy and the Slave" jokes.¹⁷ Still more recently, as Donald Tricarico has shown, the most self-consciously "proud because we're Italian" segment of New York City youth culture has "generously appropriated" African American styles in forming a

"guido" subculture. Deriding assimilationist "wannabes," Guidos, sometimes called B-boys, have adopted the anti-Italian slur "Guinea" – a term perfectly illustrative of the "not-yet-white" period of Italian American history – as their preferred form of address. They have become able hiphop musicians. Nonetheless, Tricarico adds, Guidos on other levels "resist identification with Black youth" and "bite the hand that feeds them style."¹⁸

Moreover, partial identification with African American culture cannot simply be connected to a defense of specific ethnicity against the cultural homogeneity or the emptiness of white American culture. It may well be that, as the music historian Ronald Morris has argued, Sicilians playing jazz in New Orleans embraced Black music because "Sicilians were like black people in seeing music as a highly personalized affair . . . born of collective experience." But in the playing, Sicilians not only retained this sensibility but contributed to creating a new American art form, though far from a white American one. Louis Prima, the second-generation Italian American jazz great, may have rebelled out of some sense of ethnic pride when forced to learn to play the violin in the classical tradition "as a means of cultural assimilation." But when he picked up the horn and discovered Louis Armstrong, he moved into a wide and great Black and American tradition in a career that took him to the most famous "white" clubs in New York City, to the Apollo in Harlem, the Howard in Washington, DC, and the palatial hotels of Las Vegas, but, out of principle, not to segregated Southern venues. The same might be said of Chicago's ethnic jazzmen, especially those in and around the Austin High Gang, who fled the homogenizing influences of suburban culture and assimilationism and preserved much of the best of immigrant resistance to routinization via an identification with African American culture, even as they helped innovate within an American music. The best modern example is undoubtedly Johnny Otis, the important bluesman and West Coast music promoter. Otis, born of Greek immigrant parents who ran small stores in Black neighborhoods, chose the vibrancy of African American life over what he saw as the relative stagnation of white American mass culture and then pioneered in forms of rock and roll, which much changed US culture and the world's.

The examples of Prima and Otis suggest that it was at least possible to become an American, rather than to become a white American, and

that through participation in an "incontestably mulatto" American culture a greater part of that which was vital in immigrant culture was capable of being preserved and developed than by assimilating to white Americanism. However, such glorious subplots in immigration history remain subplots. In particular, political mobilization around the claiming of white Americanism by immigrants was far more constant and powerful than the episodic claiming of a nonracial Americanism – as perhaps in the case of the early CIO or the Knights of Columbus's response to the resurgence of Anglo-Saxonism after World War I with the antiracist "Gifts of American peoples" initiatives. The very claiming of a place in the US legally involved, as the Asian Indian example shows, a claiming of whiteness.

But more than that, immigrants often were moved to struggle to equate whiteness with Americanism in order to turn arguments over immigration from the question of who was foreign to the question of who was white. Nativists frequently favorably compared the long-established Black population with the newcoming immigrant one as an argument to curtail the rights of the latter. Abolitionists made the same comparison to buttress the case for African American freedom. Blacks at times used their long-established tenure in America to argue that they should be protected against "invading" Italians or Chinese or at least placed on a par with the immigrants.

Immigrants could not win on the question of who was foreign. They lost as long as the issue was whether, as Jack London put it, "Japs" and "Dagoes" would usurp the jobs and privileges of "real Americans."¹⁹ The new immigrant was often viewed by the host population as a threat to "our [American] jobs." But if the issue somehow became defending "white man's jobs" or a "white man's government," the not-yet-white ethnic could gain space by deflecting debate from nativity, a hopeless issue, to race, an ambiguous one. The first dramatic example of this phenomenon was the embrace of Democratic Party appeals to an "American race" of "white men" by the huge masses of Catholic Irish arriving in the antebellum US. If whiteness made for Americanness and if the Irish could qualify as white, nativist arguments suffered greatly. It was even possible for the Irish to campaign for an Irish monopoly of New York City longshore jobs under the cover of agitation for an "all-white waterfront."²⁰ After the Civil War, the newcoming Irish would help lead the movement to bar the relatively established Chinese from

California, with their agitation for a "white man's government" serving to make race, and not nativity, the center of the debate and to prove the Irish white. "What business has the likes of him over here?" a recent Irish settler in California asked regarding resident Chinese. The question made sense only if whiteness conferred a right to settle. Sixty years later, the despised newcoming internal migrants, the "Okies," would similarly seek to establish their claims as more fit to be Californian than long-established Californians by turning to questions of race. One new arrival from Oklahoma asked, "Just who built California?" before misanswering his own question: "Certainly not the Chinese, Japanese, Hindus, etc."²¹

"Shared" Oppression and the Claiming of Whiteness

The process by which "not yet" and "not quite" white ethnics, whose own status as white Americans was sharply questioned, came to stress that their whiteness made them Americans shows how fraught with problems are those interpretations that posit that "shared" oppression should have caused new immigrants to ally with African Americans. It was not just that the oppression of new working-class immigrants differed from that of African Americans but that even very similar experiences of oppression could cause new immigrants to grasp for the whiteness at the margins of their experiences rather than concentrating on the ways in which they shared much in daily life with African Americans. It seems to me worth investigating whether the immigrant groups with sufficient numbers of small businessmen to be identified as "trading minorities" – for example, Jews, New Orleans Italians, Syrians, the Mississippi Chinese, and Greeks – had greater opportunity to develop a positive sense of nonwhite identity, and even to cross over into African American culture, than did more overwhelmingly proletarian new immigrant groups. Certainly, as the tragedy of African American relations with Korean merchants today suggests, trading minorities with businesses in the Black community often have developed a sense of distance from, or hostility towards, the neighborhoods in which they trade, and vice versa. But it is also precisely those "trading minorities" that have produced some of the nation's best transgressors of the color line and race traitors, from Louis Prima to Johnny Otis. Of course, proximity to

the Black community at his family's store mattered in the case of Otis, but more broadly the very distance between the ways trading minorities were stereotyped and the ways wageworking ethnic groups were stereotyped afforded a certain assurance that, however much they might be termed nonwhite, trading minorities were not in danger of being branded "niggers." As Carey McWilliams noted, the trading minority was usually seen as "not . . . lazy but . . . too industrious," as "not . . . incapable of learning but . . . too knowing."²² If members of such minorities (like the broader middle class today) often developed superficial or even exploitative relations with African American culture, they also may have been able to borrow more confidently from Blacks without fearing that they would be cast as "white niggers" and their jobs as "nigger work" – an anxiety that the white working poor seldom escaped.²³

Different dynamics characterized proletarian new immigrants' relations to African Americans, producing at once greater social proximity and a greater desire for distance. In his 1914 volume *The Old World and the New*, the nativist sociologist E. A. Ross approvingly quoted expert testimony from a physician who held that "the Slavs are immune to certain kinds of dirt. They can stand what would kill a white man." Slavs had excellent reasons to want out from under such a stereotype, which not only declared them nonwhite but gave free rein to employers hiring them as laborers (and to native-born skilled workers hiring them as helpers) to place them in the dirtiest and most unhealthy jobs. In such positions Slavic workers would be said to be "working like niggers" and would, like the most exploited Jews, Sicilians, or Louisiana creoles elsewhere, face further questioning of their whiteness based on the very fact of their hard and driven labor. Such sharing of oppression with Blacks doubtless made many Slavs question whether they wanted to be white Americans, but at the same time bitter knowledge of how Blacks fared made whiteness that much more attractive. In the case of working-class Italian Americans in and around Harlem, *proximity* of position, language, culture, and appearance made for an especially sharp need to establish that Puerto Rican migrants were of another race while cultural and color *differences* allowed for more tolerance toward Haitians, and even to the perception that Haitians were "not black."²⁴

Thus the logic of class propelled Slavs and other not-yet-white ethnics at once in both of the directions of appreciating that which they had in

common with African Americans *and* of denying the same. At times, it may simply have been that job competition made Slavs conscious of the potentialities of their possible whiteness. However, much more subtle processes could also be at play, as is illustrated by the rich testimony regarding both the possibility of rejecting whiteness and the attractions of claiming it from a Slovak woman from Bridgeport, Connecticut interviewed by the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s:

I always tell my children not [to] play with the nigger-people's children, but they always play with them just the same. I tell them that the nigger children are dirty and that they will get sick if they play. I tell them they could find some other friends that are Slovaks just the same. This place now is all spoiled, and all the people live like pigs because the niggers they come and live here with the decent white people and they want to raise up their children with our children. If we had some place for the children to play I'm sure that the white children they would not play with the nigger children. . . . All people are alike – that's what God says – but just the same it's no good to make our children play with the nigger children because they are too dirty.

Ivan Greenberg, whose fine dissertation includes this important passage, observes that the very “dirty” stereotype long used to abuse immigrants was turned by Slovak and Italian Bridgeport residents against Blacks and criticism of white ethnics was thus deflected if not defused.²⁵

It would of course be simplistic to suppose that whiteness and white supremacy were embraced and forwarded by not-yet-white ethnics simply as a public relations ploy to shore up their own group image. What gave force, poignancy, and pathos to the process of choosing whiteness was that it not only enabled the not-yet-white ethnics to live more easily with the white American population but to live more easily with themselves and with the vast changes industrial capitalist America required of them. I have argued this case in some detail with regard to Irish Americans in my book *Wages of Whiteness*, but other later-coming groups also came to grips with their own (forced) acceptance of time discipline, loss of contact with nature, and regimented work by projecting “primitive” values onto “carefree” African Americans. Thus a resident in the Italian-Slavic enclave studied by

Greenberg combined racism and envy in holding that Blacks had it easier than “white” workers:

the nigger people can stay up to 3 o'clock in the morning playing and dancing and they don't have to worry about going to work. . . . We [white] poor people can't even have a good time one time a week. . . . The nigger people have a holiday every day in the week.

The tremendously conflicted emotional decision of white ethnics to abandon urban neighborhoods – and, as Robert Orsi observes, often to abandon parents and grandparents in the city – was similarly softened by the development of a historical memory emphasizing that “black crime” moved white ethnics to the suburbs by “driving them out” of the center city, though the timing of mass suburbanization hardly fits such a pattern.²⁶

Other dimensions of the ways in which whiteness was constructed among immigrants remain so shrouded by mystery and inattention from historians as to be perfectly illustrative of the fact that at this stage we are much better placed to report on our ignorance rather than our knowledge of the history of white ethnic consciousness. In closing, it is worth evoking a particularly rich passage in William Attaway's great 1941 proletarian novel *Blood on the Forge*, which suggests not only how far we have to go in understanding that history but also how well worth the effort developing such an understanding can be. Attaway describes the reaction of Irish workers in a foundry after a Black worker, Big Mat, had knocked out a “hayseed” before he could hit an Irishman. Mat was “the hero of the morning” and drew praise for being both a model “colored worker” and for being more than Black. The boss melter, a “big Irishman” in charge of five furnaces, took the former line of praise: “Never had a colored helper work better on the hearth . . . do everythin' the melter tell him to do and take care of the work of a whole crew if he ain't held back.” Other Irish workers on the gang conferred the title “Black Irish” on Mat. One “grinned” that “Lots of black fellas have Irish guts.” Another added, “That black fella make a whole lot better Irisher than a hunky or a ginny. They been over here twenty years and still eatin' garlic like it's as good as stew meat and potatoes,” before “glanc[ing] sharply around to see if any of the foreigners had heard him.” But Big Mat did not celebrate his newfound acceptance. He made

no answer when called Black Irish but instead "full of savage pressure," took refuge in the "pleasant thought" of animals "tearing at each other" and hurried away to the dogfights.²⁷ Some of this arresting scene is familiar: the social construction of race; the question of whether "foreigners" merit inclusion over African Americans; the combination of a commitment to specific (Irish) ethnicity and a lack of reference to whiteness; and the importance of timing, in that the Irish are by now natives, not newcomers.

But much is also unsettling. There is little grandeur in the breaking down of race lines here, in part because the break is a superficial and momentary one, based on Mat's temporary status as model "colored worker." Moreover, the very thing that makes Mat such a model to the more privileged Irish workers and bosses – a supposed loyal willingness to do anything for his superiors if not "held back" – is bound to define him as a "nigger" in the eyes of the "hunkies and ginnies" on the gang. In this scene at least, Attaway shows us a workplace that does not bridge distinctions between African Americans and white ethnics but tragically recasts such distinctions. What should perhaps be most unsettling to us as historians is how little prepared we are to judge how typical this scene was at the shopfloor level and how it was experienced by the "colored workers," the not-yet-white ethnics, and the white ethnics who built America. Until we follow the example of the recent and brilliant work on Italian Americans by Robert Orsi and develop a history of American immigration that "puts the issues and contests of racial identity and difference at its center," we are likely to remain puzzled.²⁸

Notes

- 1 Barbara Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review*, no. 181 (May–June 1990), p. 99; Joan M. Jensen, *Passage from India: Asian Indian Immigrants in North America* (New Haven, CT, 1988), pp. 246–69.
- 2 Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880–1940* (New York, 1987).
- 3 On whiteness, see Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (London, 1992); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race*

and the Making of the American Working Class (London, 1991); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London, 1991). For prominent and otherwise useful studies continuing the conflation (and confusion) of race and ethnicity, see Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York, 1986), and Orlando Patterson, *Ethnic Chauvinism: The Reactionary Impulse* (New York, 1977).

- 4 Richard Williams, *Hierarchical Structures and Social Value: The Creation of Black and Irish Identities in the United States* (New York, 1990), p. 2.
- 5 William Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), p. 23.
- 6 Victor Greene, *The Slavic Community on Strike: Immigrant Labor in Pennsylvania Anthracite* (South Bend, IN, 1968); Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley, CA, 1991); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1990); Wayne Broehl, Jr., *The Molly Maguires* (London, 1968); Vicki L. Ruiz, *Cannery Workers. Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization and the California Processing Industry, 1930–1950* (Albuquerque, NM, 1987).
- 7 Coco Fusco, as quoted in bell hooks, "Representing Whiteness: Seeing Wings of Desire," *Z*, 2 (March 1989), p. 39.
- 8 Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York, 1984), p. 399.
- 9 James Baldwin, "On Being 'White' . . . And Other Lies," *Essence* (April, 1984), pp. 90, 92.
- 10 John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (New York, 1963), p. 173.
- 11 Joe Eszterhaus, *E.I.S.T.* (New York, 1978), p. 88.
- 12 Lawrence Joseph, "Can't Forget the Motor City," *Nation*, December 17, 1990, pp. 775–6.
- 13 Certainly many African Americans have chosen and choose to be Black as well, but in doing so they identify at least as much with African American national culture as with racial ideology. One would be hard pressed to find such a specifically white American culture. Indeed, in its extreme forms identification with whiteness represents a cutting off of oneself from what Albert Murray calls America's "incontestably mulatto" culture. In its production of identity through negation ("We are not Black"), and in the record of behavior it has called forth, whiteness in the US is best regarded as an absence of culture. In this it fundamentally differs from African Americanness and from specific "white" ethnicities. See Murray, *The Omni Americans* (New York, 1983), and Baldwin, "On Being 'White.'"

- 14 Quoted in George Potter, *To the Garden Door: The Story of the Irish in Ireland and America* (Boston, 1960), p. 372.
- 15 Carter, *Southern Legacy* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1950), pp. 105–6; Paola Giordano, "Italian Immigration in the State of Louisiana," *Italian Americana* (Fall–Winter 1977), p. 172; George Cunningham, "The Italian: A Hindrance to White Solidarity in Louisiana 1890–1893," *Journal of Negro History*, 50 (January 1965), esp. pp. 24–6; Jean Scarpaci and Garry Boulard, "Blacks, Italians and the Making of New Orleans Jazz," *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 16 (Spring 1988), pp. 53–66. Compare, however, Arnold Shankman, "This Menacing Influx: Afro Americans on Italian Immigration in the South, 1880–1915," *Mississippi Quarterly* (Winter 1977–8); 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 (September 1992), pp. 314–18 and 342 n. 3.
- 16 Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880–1930* (Ithaca, NY, 1971), pp. 113–14; Micaela di Leonardo, *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience* (Ithaca, NY, 1984), p. 24 n. 16.
- 17 "Irish Mornings and African Days on the Old Minstrel Stage: An Interview with Leni Sloan," *Callahan's Irish Quarterly*, 2 (Spring 1982), pp. 49–53.
- 18 Donald Tricarico, "Guido: Fashioning an Italian-American Youth Style," *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 19 (Spring 1991), esp. pp. 56–7. The portrayals of Italian Americans in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and *Jungle Fever* are fascinating in this regard. While in *Jungle Fever* love relationships between Italian Americans and African Americans are connected in part with desires on the part of members of the former group to escape confining aspects of Italian American culture, Lee also shows, with uncommon clarity and no romanticizing, the ways in which a sense of Italian Americanness depends, in inner New York City at least, on imitating African American culture and exploring ethnicity specifically in counterpoint to African Americanness.
- 19 London, as quoted in Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley, CA, 1971), p. 211.
- 20 See Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, pp. 140–4.
- 21 James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York, 1989), pp. 164–9, with the quote from p. 165.
- 22 Carey McWilliams, *A Mask for Privilege: Anti-Semitism in America* (Westport, CT, 1979 [1948]), pp. 163–9, esp. p. 164.
- 23 On nigger work and white niggers, see Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, pp. 129–30, and pp. 68 and 145 respectively.
- 24 Quoted in Stanley Lieberson, *A Piece of the Pie: Black and White Immigrants since 1880* (Berkeley, CA, 1980), p. 25.
- 25 Ivan Greenberg, "Class Culture and Generational Change: Immigrant Families in Two Connecticut Industrial Cities during the 1930s," Ph.D. dissertation, City University of New York, 1990, pp. 76–7, includes the quote.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 78 for the quote.
- 27 William Attaway, *Blood on the Forge* (New York, 1987 [1941]), pp. 122–3.
- 28 Orsi, "Inbetween People," p. 335.