Those wishing to identify the most significant trends in the writing of American history in the 1990s will rightly name that moment in intellectual time as the era when the concept of “whiteness” came, saw, and conquered. They might even be justified in labeling this the “whiteness era.” That decade launched some of the most important books in the field, some of which by the early 21st century have already been canonized with the adjective “classic,” particularly David Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991) and Matthew Frye Jacobson’s *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (1998), falling approximately at the beginning and the end of the ten years in which this theme blazed to prominence among scholars of American history. In between these two broad-brush works, which spanned nearly the entirety of American history, smaller studies appeared. Noel Ignatiev offered his take on *How the Irish Became White* (1995), while Karen Brodkin followed up in 2000 with her statement on the same process, but different group, in *How the Jews Became White Folks*.

These books, which made as their subject the process by which European immigrants to the United States and their children achieved the status of white people, represented merely the best known, most broadly read, and widely discussed of the genre. Numerous other books and an even greater compendium of articles included in their titles and in their subject matter the concepts “whiteness” and “whitening.” So, too, conference papers and symposia paid homage to the birth and triumph of these linked concepts. Within a few years of the first emergence in book form of the concept of whiteness as a historical process, the term began to appear in countless works, published and unpublished, written and oral. Scholars used whiteness as a way to explain a vast and complicated phenomenon, which involved simultaneously how European immigrants suffered the stigma of being considered by the larger American public as somehow akin to or like black people, and how those immigrants came to learn America’s racial rules and donned the trappings of whiteness by participating actively in anti-black behavior and rhetoric.

The use of the terms and concepts associated with whiteness studies became an academic vogue of the last years of the 20th century. Their invocation has become as standard as the employment of the last years of the 20th century. Their invocation with whiteness studies became an academic vogue of the 1990s and beyond does not mean that it conveyed the same meaning to all who used it. Historians used the terms of whiteness studies differently, and focused on different aspects of the process. They did not necessarily concur on when and how the European immigrants and their children became white. They differed among themselves as to whether becoming white involved the deliberate actions of the immigrants who clamored to exchange their less prestigious non-white status for the more entitled one of white, or if whitening flowed directly from the larger society, which decided when and where and upon which of the Europeans to bestow the privileges of whiteness. Yet scholars have all taken as given a few basic points, both conceptual and empirical.

They all work from an understanding that, first, white people have race, too. To refer to race does not exclude from consideration those with pale skin. Race, these scholars have importantly admonished others, should not *ipsa facto* be elided with the experience of those who had black skin, brown skin, or any other of the “darker” colors. To understand the history of the American people requires taking into consideration how women and men, defined by the law—and by themselves—as white, understood the meaning of their race position.

Second, the scholars who pioneered the concept of whiteness and those who have expanded it have all worked on the assumption of contingency and change over time. White people, one might say after reading these scholarly works, were not born but made. They had to learn and earn their whiteness. The solidly white racial profile of the descendents of the European immigrants at the end of the 20th century should not be confused with the racial position their forbears occupied earlier in the century, or in the 19th century. Nor should their drift from the late 1960s onward to the Republican Party and their general antipathy toward African-American demands be thought of as representing an inevitable historical trajectory.

Americans who identified with the Irish, Italians, Jewish, Slavic, Swedish and other ethnic collectivities of European origins, for example, in the late 20th century considered themselves to be white, and others viewed them as unmistakably such, according to the scholars of whiteness studies. But the immigrants did not, the scholars have asserted, always think this way nor did they automatically, upon stepping foot on American terrain, gain their coveted berth among the ranks of white people. Their whitening should not be considered natural, automatic, or assumed, and this outcome did not have to happen. Other scenarios might have happened and could be imagined. The immigrants and their descendants, and the larger American society, the white, Protestant, native-born elite that defined the mainstream, took the requisite steps to make all this come about.

All the histories that explore how various groups of Europeans became white tend to deemphasize the political and legal realms, putting the full weight of their analysis upon the cultural and the representational. Certainly if issues such as naturalization, citizenship, and the ability to participate in the civic realm, including voting, office holding, serving on juries, and participating in the apparatus of the political parties really mattered, then the whiteness discussion could not really take place. That is, from a political and legal perspective, no European immigrant had to become white. The law and political practice considered them white and imbued them with its bounties. But the histories of whiteness, particularly those inspired by David Roediger’s works, have tended to bracket the civic and legal realities that surrounded European immigration to the United States. They have put their emphasis instead on popular opinion, scientific studies, and ethnological research that either speculated on the racial position of Jews, Italians, Irish and Polish immigrants, and others or asserted for certain that these people represented distinct and decidedly inferior racial stocks.

The scholarly works that make up the whiteness corpus assume certain historical truths. The whiteness historians generally all believe that before the
various immigrants became white, a certain cosmopolitanism rather than narrow group chauvinism reigned within the various ethnic enclaves. In their earlier edenic pre-whiteness pasts, Italian, Jewish, Irish, and other immigrants identified with African Americans and other oppressed people of color, perceiving in their own difficulties, both economic and cultural, a common bond with all oppressed Americans, particularly blacks. The stigmatized European immigrants experienced workplace exploitation, violence, and cultural demonization, and by means of this suffering, they imagined the possibility of building meaningful working class solidarity. They in fact worked toward this end, which allowed them as newcomers to a pervasively racist land to stand aloof from the rest of American society.

In the whiteness paradigm, America functioned as a place of constant violence and hostility, where the immigrants heard the foul rhetoric hurled at them and perceived the lowliness of their status. The whiteness literature treats the immigration era as one of relentless xenophobia, which spilled over from ugly words to ugly deeds. Immigrants confronted physical brutality on a regular basis.

Whiteness scholars all take as true the fact that the United States taught the immigrants how to demonize others, particularly those whose skin colors and other phenotypic characteristics rendered them less than full Americans. The immigrants from Europe arrived on matters of race as nearly blank slates upon which the power of American racism left an indelible mark. They came to the United States and confronted the hostility all around them. For an all too brief moment they sought to forge bonds across the color line, but ultimately slipped over to the white side of the equation when the larger society offered them the privileges of whiteness. In doing so they either had to, or chose to, assume the racism of the society and direct their venom at African Americans, at times in excess of that of the society at large. They thus proved to their American hosts their white credentials.

Finally, the historians who have constructed the edifice of whiteness studies take America’s horrendous treatment of African Americans as the standard of oppression, the best measure by which to gauge and make sense of discrimination, violence, prejudice, and the obstacles that one group of human beings can put in the paths of others whom they define as different and inferior. So deep has the commitment of scholars of whiteness to this paradigm run, that they have even posited that people once white became non-white as they experienced impoverishment and the erosion of their previous economic autonomy. Probably the best of example of this is Neil Foley’s *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (1997). In the era when whiteness studies rode high, this book explained the decline in fortunes of small white cotton farmers in terms of their having lost their whiteness. The rise of large-scale corporate farming lowered their economic status and demolished their independence. Since the white farmers, Protestants, multiple-generation Americans, many of southern origins, came to resemble economically the poor blacks and Mexicans, they, according to Foley, lost their whiteness. Whiteness studies in essence did not allow for other ways to understand exploitation.

This tendency among whiteness studies to use America’s color conundrum as the prism by which to explain history profoundly skews, limits, and narrows the past. Foley’s employment of the concept of whiteness in reference to the white cotton farmers’ economic decline represents a case in point. Furthermore, none of the historical works that treat the whitening process have factored in the reality that in America, a land that elevated Protestantism to its universal state religion, Catholic immigrants, the Irish in particular, suffered their most vigorous attacks on the basis not of phenotype or their imputed proximity to black people, but due to matters of faith. From the 18th century into the early 20th century, America had little good to say about Catholicism and Catholics. The Know-Nothing Party, one of the country’s most successful third parties, derived its political strength and drew its rhetorical arsenal not from the perceived racial otherness of the Irish but from the fact that they adhered to a religious system that many Americans found obnoxious and incompatible with American ideas of liberty and individualism.

So, too, discussions of the discrimination and hostility faced by Jews have made no room for the deep and pervasive strains of anti-Judaism that dominated Western civilization for centuries. American Jewish men who faced political and civic restrictions, in the early national period in particular, did so because of their refusal to swear on a King James Bible or to take oaths professing belief in Christianity. Accusations hurled at Jews about their being “Christ killers” antedated any charges that Jews constituted a separate and inferior race and continued well into the 20th century. Conversely, Jewish converts to Christianity found doors opened to them that had theretofore been closed when they refused to pass over to the nation’s dominant faith tradition.

But those who have offered us the whiteness paradigm have posited the source of oppression for Jews, Irish, Italian, and other Catholic immigrants as flowing only from the nation’s racial obsession. They have taken no account of the religious side of the complicated history of how Americans dealt with the multitude of people who chose to immigrate to the United States. In a similar manner, the whiteness historians have made little attempt to deal with the reality that many of the peoples who made their way to America had encountered group oppression before leaving their homes. For Poles, the history of their colonization by Prussia and Russia and the suppression of Polish culture shaped much of how they defined politics and intergroup relations. So, too, the Irish who arrived in America from a colonized Ireland, a place where Catholics suffered civil disabilities at the hands of British Protestant overlords, engaged with that colonial legacy as they confronted American racial and political realities. And Jews, well acquainted with expulsions, massacres, forced conversions, ghettos, and exclusions, hardly needed white Americans to teach them what victimization meant. These people came to the United States as bearers of histories that informed their interactions with their new home.

Furthermore, the whiteness scholarship has stripped immigrants of any kind of agency. Reading these books that chronicle the vile language spewed at the immigrants, the violence meted out to them, and the discrimination they faced in America, one stops and wonders why they would have continued to stream into the United States. Why, if such vicious rhetoric resonated in America, if such intense physical violence awaited them, and so little economic opportunity actually existed, did they clamor to enter the United States?

These lapses in analysis seem particularly glaring in David Roediger’s *Working Toward Whiteness* (2005). He funnels all the extensive and wide-ranging material in this book through matters of color and race, and in the process loses sight of the fact that immigrants had a range of choices in front of them, knew much about America before embarking on their journeys, and very enthusiastically opted for the United States.

The immigrants who came from Europe to America and who people Roediger’s book came primarily as unskilled and semi-skilled workers, ready to endure the rigors of the American workplace, the low pay that they earned under arduous conditions in factories, mines, railroad crews, logging camps, and the like, precisely because they could make in the United States a salary unimaginable back home and achieve—with difficulty, but achieve it nonetheless—a standard of living that they could not have aspired to had they stayed put. They came with no illusions about the nature of the work and the difficulties they would face. The flow of information from friends and family already in the United States made it amply clear what they would find and what they could expect to get in return. No naifs, they also understood both the nature of America’s social and class structure, where they would fit into it, and after calculating the liabilities and benefits, cast their lot with the migration.

That some, maybe many, white, middle-class, native-born, Protestant Americans considered the various immigrants to be of inferior “stock,” and that they, maybe, constituted a variety of separate races,
had little impact upon the Europeans who sought out America. The vigor of the flow to the United States bore witness not to the ways in which Americans stigmatized the immigrants with negative racial imagery, but to the fact that enough of the immigrants fulfilled enough of their aspirations that they encouraged their friends and family to join them. That they could with relative ease achieve citizenship did not play an incidental role in furthering their quest to come to the United States.

That these immigrants engaged in a series of communal projects to learn to be American and to prove how well they mastered that task should come as no surprise to historians. Even among Italians who had a high rate of return migration, nearly two-thirds remained in the United States. They, the Irish among whom hardly any went back, and Eastern European Jews, also with few returns to the Czarist Empire and Habsburg Galicia, cast their lot permanently with America. They had few choices but to acquire American skills and American knowledge.

They also thought of themselves as members of separate and different groups, long before they learned directly about America and its racial etiquette. With, or without the vocabulary of racial science, Jews, Irish, Italians, and others considered themselves to be distinctive. They believed that they possessed something special that set them apart from others. They may or may not have used the English word “race” to describe that special thing, but each believed that their group possessed a distinctive character, soul, or spirit, manifested in language, religious practices, family structures, foodways, and the like. Their American project involved braiding these group characteristics with the demands of American mainstream culture.

None of the scholars whose work constitutes the literature on whiteness has made a compelling case for the possibility of interracial cooperation as a mass phenomenon in the 19th century or the 20th century. The historians may wish that the millions of new immigrants had embraced African Americans as fellow sufferers and together created an effective force to resist racism and economic exploitation. They, however, have no evidence that the masses of immigrants ever wanted to do so, even before “they became white,” or that had they wanted to create such a movement, it would have successfully overturned the racial status quo.

My catalog of the errors and problems with whiteness studies could go on. Nearly all the books that have been written in this mode abound with passive formulations, usually devoid of substantial evidence. Few whiteness studies engage with the primary sources written in the immigrants’ own languages, and few take any cognizance of the vast inner divisions within each of the immigrant groups. The phrases “becoming white” or “achieving whiteness” so quickly passed into the realm of jargon and buzzword, that if they ever had substance, they now lack any meaning. They tell us nothing about particular historic dramas or the inner struggles within immigrants, important service to the literature of American history. In response to their brash assertions, usually embedded in the flimsiest of empirical material, a number of fine, nuanced, and complicated works have demolished the major assertions of the whiteness school. Three of the most recent of these deserve commendation as exemplary studies that treat the racial identities, imposed and self-imposed, of European immigrants with depth, care, complexity, and fine writing. The first of these, Thomas Guglielmo’s White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945 (2003), sets the standard for intense empirical research and critical attention to the inner life of an ethnic enclave. For Guglielmo, the fact that European immigrants arrived with the possibility of obtaining the full rights of citizenship mattered greatly. Russell Kazal’s Becoming Old Stock: The Paradox of German-American Identity (2004) and Eric Goldstein’s The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity (2006) take the undeniably significant and defining American issues of color and race and place them in the fabric of two immigrant communities, tracing their workings beyond the experience of the arriving generation.

Goldstein and Kazal show that the categories “German” and “Jewish” must be analyzed in terms of the many inner divisions within these collectivities and that the reaction of immigrants and their children to African Americans represents an important, but not the only, context by which to understand the construction of ethnic identity.

These three books show clearly that immigrants learned American truths about color and race. But they learned those lessons as they dealt with and struggled over a series of other issues, most having nothing to do with the color question. All three books have restored political and legal realities to center stage, and all three treat the immigrants and their children as Americans (and Americans in the making) who reacted and responded to a multitude of issues beyond those of their racial placement. These three books, unlike the whiteness literature against which they have reacted, offer analyses that transcend buzzwords, and they do not reflect a desire for a past that never took place. Nor do they engage in condemnations of behaviors in the present.

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