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Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America

Peter Kolchin

Suddenly whiteness studies are everywhere. The rapid proliferation of a genre that appears to have come out of nowhere is little short of astonishing: a recent keyword search on my university library's electronic catalog yielded fifty-one books containing the word "whiteness" in their titles, almost all published in the past decade and most published in the past five years.¹ All around us, American historians and scholars in related disciplines from sociology and law to cultural studies and education are writing books with titles such as *The White Scourge*, *How the Irish Became White*, *Making Whiteness*, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, and *Critical White Studies*.² Although the term "whiteness studies" might at first glance suggest works that *promote* white identity or constitute part of a racist backlash against multiculturalism and "political correctness," virtually all the whiteness studies authors seek to confront white privilege—that is, racism—and virtually all identify at some level with the political Left. Most of them see a close link between their scholarly efforts and the goal of creating a more humane social order.

Whiteness studies authors manifest a wide variety of approaches. In many of the disciplines outside history, prescriptive policy goals assume a central position; writing on whiteness in education, for example, Nelson M. Rodriguez calls for the creation of "'pedagogies of whiteness' as a counterhegemonic act" predicated on the need to "refigure whiteness in antiracist, antihomophobic, and antisexist ways."³ Although

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¹ DELCAT search, <<http://www.lib.udel.edu/databases/delcat.html>> (Sept. 26, 2001). Of the 51 titles, 3 have publication dates before 1990, 3 from 1990 to 1993, 12 from 1994 to 1997, and 33 from 1998 to September 2001. The figures do not represent a precise and all-inclusive total of whiteness studies books: a few, including the oldest (a 1943 work on visual perception), are unrelated to the field, and other whiteness studies books are not on the list because the word "whiteness" does not appear in their titles. Whiteness *articles* are vastly more numerous: an online search of Expanded Academic ASAP (published by Gale Group) yielded 373 references to works published since 1985 containing "whiteness" in their titles, citations, or abstracts.

² Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley, 1997); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, 1995); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York, 1998); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, 1998); Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, eds., *Critical White Studies: Looking behind the Mirror* (Philadelphia, 1997).

³ Nelson M. Rodriguez, "Emptying the Content of Whiteness: Toward an Understanding of the Relation

such didacticism is far from absent in the work of whiteness studies historians, their focus has been on the *construction* of whiteness—how diverse groups in the United States came to identify, and be identified by others, as white—and what that has meant for the social order. Starting from the now widely shared premise that race is an ideological or social construct rather than a biological fact, they have at least partially shifted attention from how Americans have looked at blacks to how they have looked at whites, and to whiteness as a central component of Americans' racial ideology. In doing so, they have already had a substantial impact on historians whose work does not fall fully within the rubric of whiteness studies but who have borrowed some of the field's insights, concerns, and language.⁴

This essay represents an effort by a sympathetic but critical outsider to come to grips with this burgeoning field. I will deal primarily with historical literature, although I will refer to works in other disciplines, and I will pay particular attention to two books that are among the best and most influential of the whiteness studies works: David R. Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* and Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color*.⁵ Because the two books differ from each other in important respects, they reveal both the diversity within and the common assumptions behind whiteness studies, and they suggest some of the insights and potential pitfalls of the genre. My aim is to produce not so much a final evaluation of a finished project as a tentative progress report on a literature still very much in evolution.⁶

One of the earliest of the historical whiteness works, *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991) focuses on how white workers in the antebellum United States came to identify as white. Roediger's essential starting point is that because the white working class in the United States emerged in a slaveholding republic, its members came to define themselves by what they were not: slaves and blacks. Building on Alexander Saxton's analysis of the "ambivalent stance" of white workers in a racist society, Roediger pays particular attention to the efforts of Irish immigrants—who faced such extreme prejudice that "it was by no means clear that the[y] were white"—to differentiate them-

between Whiteness and Pedagogy," in *White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America*, ed. Joe L. Kincheloe et al. (New York, 1998), 33.

⁴ See, for example, Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1996); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999); Ariela J. Gross, *Double Character: Slavery and Mastery in the Antebellum Southern Courtroom* (Princeton, 2000); and Bruce Nelson, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (Princeton, 2001).

⁵ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York, 1991); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998). See also the revised edition of Roediger's *Wages*, which reprints the original edition with the original pagination, adding an "Afterword" and a list of "Selected Critical Writings": David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York, 1999), 185–89, 190.

⁶ Extensive scholarly commentary on the whiteness studies literature is just beginning to appear. A symposium that appeared too late to consult in preparation for this article includes a sharply critical essay by Eric Arnesen with responses (also mostly critical) by six historians: "Scholarly Controversy: Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination," *International Labor and Working-Class History* (no. 60, Fall 2001), 1–92. For a perceptive evaluation that focuses on works by nonhistorians, see Margaret L. Andersen, "Whitewashing Race: A Critical Review Essay on 'Whiteness,'" in *Deconstructing Whiteness, Deconstructing White Supremacy*, ed. Woody Doane and Eduardo Boinilla-Silva (New York, forthcoming).

selves from black slaves, establish their own whiteness, and thereby prove their Americanness. (This argument receives further elaboration in Noel Ignatiev's suggestively titled book, *How the Irish Became White*.)⁷

Roediger combines the emphasis on class that one would expect of a labor historian with some decidedly nontraditional—postmodern—touches. He displays a particular sensitivity to the significance of language, from metaphorical attacks on British “slavery” by American revolutionaries to use of the terms “wage slavery” and especially “white slavery” to describe the condition of free white workers; in rejecting the word “servant” in favor of “hand” or “help,” he suggests, “farm and household workers . . . were becoming *white workers* who identified their freedom and their dignity in work as being suited to those who were ‘not slaves’ and ‘not negurs.’” He also provides an intriguing if highly speculative psychological argument that as the country industrialized, the increasingly controlled and disciplined white population came to view blacks as their former, uninhibited selves, a perception highlighted in the “acting out” evident in the newly popular blackface and minstrelsy, in which participants could “both display and reject the ‘natural self.’” And, in a practice he shares with many other whiteness studies authors—especially those working in disciplines other than history—Roediger foregrounds himself and his subjective reaction to his subject, beginning the book with a personal narrative of his own route from a racist past.⁸

Although Matthew Frye Jacobson's overall subject is the same as Roediger's—how people came to “be” white—his subjects are European immigrants to the United States over the long period from 1790 to 1965, and his focus is on how other Americans perceived those immigrants, not on their self-perception. Jacobson's broad scope enables him to depart from a binary (black/white) view of race and to explore the close, troubling, and troublesome relationship among race, ethnicity, and nationality.⁹ Revealing the extraordinary malleability of American conceptualizations of race, Jacobson outlines a three-stage chronological progression of racial categorization. From the 1790s to the 1840s, in an era of relatively few immigrants, Americans saw people as either white or black. Between the 1840s and the 1920s, a period of massive foreign immigration and pervasive prejudice against various immigrant groups, there emerged a pattern of “variegated whiteness” in which some groups appeared better—whiter—than others. Finally, beginning in the 1920s, with immigration restriction, color again triumphed as a badge of race, and Americans came to see—and celebrate the diversity of—a “Caucasian” race that encompassed diverse nationalities previously deemed racially deficient. “To trace the process by which Celts or

⁷ Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 134; Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1990); Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*.

⁸ Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 49, 116, 3–5.

⁹ Another book moves beyond a binary treatment of race by focusing on the interaction among whites, blacks, and Mexicans in central Texas: see Foley, *White Scourge*. For the suggestion that “adding Indians to the picture changes our view of the history of race in the South,” see Ariela Gross, “Beyond Black and White: Cultural Approaches to Race and Slavery,” *Columbia Law Review*, 101 (April 2001), 681. Roediger has recently praised the effort to move beyond the black/white racial framework of *The Wages of Whiteness*; see David R. Roediger, “The Pursuit of Whiteness: Property, Terror, and Expansion, 1790–1860,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 19 (Winter 1999), esp. 592–600.

Slavs became Caucasians,” Jacobson writes, “is to recognize race as an ideological, political deployment rather than as a neutral, biologically determined element of nature.”¹⁰

Although sharing Roediger’s interest in the construction of race, his didactic goal in exposing that construction, and his belief in the centrality of race—and racism—to American history, Jacobson differs from Roediger in approaching the past almost entirely in cultural terms. Indeed, he suggests that in focusing too heavily on “class and economics,” Roediger is overly deterministic and misses “the full complexity of whiteness in its vicissitudes.” Dealing principally with perceptions of immigrants rather than with the immigrants themselves, Jacobson is more concerned with images and representations than with actual social relations. (This “American studies” approach is even more pronounced in Grace Elizabeth Hale’s book *Making Whiteness*, which delineates the emergence of a southern “culture of segregation” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.) Nevertheless, the difference between Jacobson’s approach and Roediger’s is more one of degree than of essence: despite his focus on the working class, Roediger pays careful attention to cultural manifestations and is hardly an economic determinist. Indeed, as I will suggest below, if both Roediger and Jacobson start from the premise that race is artificial, constructed, and without inherent meaning, in some ways Roediger appears even less inclined than Jacobson to see race as a function of concrete—class—relationships.¹¹

One’s first reaction to Roediger’s and Jacobson’s books—and to the field of whiteness studies in general—is likely to be excitement. Indeed, even after repeated readings of these books (in conjunction with using them in graduate seminars), I still find myself sharing in the students’ typical feelings of discovery and delight in a promising new way to look at history. But a vague yet persistent sense of unease is also a predictable response. Although the precise nature of the unease may emerge only gradually, it centers on the elusive, undefined nature of whiteness and on concern about overreliance on whiteness in explaining the American past.

In approaching both the excitement and the unease generated by whiteness studies, it is useful to begin with an understanding that underlies the entire genre. Whiteness studies authors build on what is now a historical (and biological and anthropological) commonplace: race is a “construct” rather than an objective way of explaining differences among human beings. There are varying versions of this process: historians typically refer to either the “social,” “historical,” or “ideological” construction of race; according to the anthropologist Edgar T. Thompson, “races are made in culture, not found in nature”; the biologist Stephen Jay Gould rebuts what he terms “biological determinism”—the belief that “shared behavioral norms . . . arise from inherited, inborn distinctions.” But all the versions mean essentially the

¹⁰ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18; Hale, *Making Whiteness*. In criticizing Roediger for focusing too heavily on economics, Jacobson also targets Theodore W. Allen’s account of the rise of white racial consciousness in the English mainland American colonies. See Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race* (2 vols., New York, 1994–1997).

same thing: race is “made” by humans; how humans have assigned people to one race or another has varied dramatically over time and space; and racial categorizations have no intrinsic meaning or validity aside from the particular social circumstances that engender them.¹²

An almost infinite number of examples illustrate the constructed nature of race—and of whiteness in particular. Although the well-known “one-drop rule” dictates that in the United States anyone with the slightest bit of black “blood” be categorized as black, there is no particular logic to labeling people black who are part white and part black, and in some places they are not so labeled. Two possibly apocryphal stories drive home the arbitrary character of such racial categorization. According to one, the Haitian dictator Papa Doc Duvalier insisted that the Haitian population was 98 percent white. Asked by a puzzled American how this could be, he responded with a question: “How do you define black in your country?” “Receiving the explanation that in the United States anyone with any black blood was considered black, Duvalier nodded and said, ‘Well, that’s the way we define white in my country.’” Equally telling is a story about the Mexican War: “When Americans marched into the Mexican city of Saltillo in 1847, they were greeted by a woman from New Jersey, who worked in a Mexican textile mill. ‘Americans I am glad to see you,’ she exclaimed. ‘I have seen but one white man in eight months, a negro from New Orleans.’”¹³

But perhaps the most striking example of the arbitrary and changing nature of race, cited by Jacobson, is to be found in Benjamin Franklin’s remarkable classification of the world’s population in 1751:

All Africa is black or tawny; Asia chiefly tawny; America (exclusive of the newcomers [that is, the English]) wholly so. And in Europe, the Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians, and Swedes are generally of what we call a swarthy complexion; as are the Germans also, the Saxons only excepted, who, with the English, make the principal body of white people on the face of the earth.

What clearer evidence could current Americans need of the subjectivity of race than Franklin’s insistence that Germans and Swedes were nonwhite?¹⁴

Whereas the immediate excitement about whiteness studies stems from their new way of underscoring the subjectivity of race, the accompanying unease relates to the version of that subjectivity that the whiteness studies authors propound. The seminal historical statement on the construction of race, of which the construction of white-

¹² Edgar T. Thompson, *Plantation Societies, Race Relations, and the South: The Regimentation of Populations* (Durham, 1975), 325; Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York, 1981), 20. See also Joseph L. Graves Jr., *The Emperor’s New Clothes: Biological Theories of Race at the Millennium* (New Brunswick, 2001). For a prominent historian’s recent assertion that “historical construction” of race is more accurate than “social construction,” see Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 1.

¹³ For the first story, see Barbara J. Fields, “Ideology and Race in American History,” in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York, 1982), 146; for the second, see David Montgomery, “Empire, Race, and Working-Class Mobilizations,” in *Racializing Class, Classifying Race: Labour and Difference in Britain, the USA, and Africa*, ed. Peter Alexander and Rick Halpern (Houndsmill, Eng., 2000), 15.

¹⁴ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 40.

ness is a variant, is to be found in Barbara J. Fields's influential essay "Ideology and Race in American History" (1982). Noting that "ideas about color, like ideas about anything else, derive their importance, indeed their very definition, from their context," Fields warned against reifying racial "attitudes," which have no meaning aside from their concrete historical setting. "An understanding of how groups of people see other groups in relation to themselves must begin by analyzing the pattern of their social relation," she explained, "—not by enumerating 'attitudes' which, endowed with independent life, are supposed to act upon the historical process from outside." Suggesting that there can be no such thing as a generalized "white" attitude toward "blacks" (or, one might add, toward "whites"), she argued that race is shaped by concrete human interactions, particularly by class relations. Because race is a subjective ideological construct whereas class "can assert itself independently of people's consciousness"—that is, class can be an objective category—"class and race are concepts of a different order; they do not occupy the same analytical space, and thus cannot constitute explanatory alternatives to each other."¹⁵

Fields's formulation of the construction of race frames a set of tricky problems centering on the reality, pervasiveness, and permanence of whiteness and especially its relationship to concrete historical conditions. Scholars approach the problems in different ways. Some explain whiteness as a direct function of dominant economic interests. According to the historian Theodore W. Allen, for example, the "white race" was invented by the "plantation bourgeoisie" in order to facilitate its oppression of African slaves. Similarly, the anthropologist Karen Brodtkin maintains that in the United States Jews were treated as racially different so that they could be exploited as industrial laborers. "Initially invented to justify a brutal but profitable regime of slave labor," she explains, "race became the way America organized labor and the explanation it used to justify it as natural."¹⁶

Leery of an approach that they see as overly deterministic, Jacobson and Roediger—along with many other whiteness studies authors—go to the other extreme, not only denying that race is a direct function of dominant class interest, but coming close to portraying race as a ubiquitous and unchanging transhistorical force rather than a shifting and contingent "construction." Reflecting a broad-based, ongoing shift in the historical profession from social to cultural history, they are more comfortable discussing "tropes" than actual social relations, and they display notable unease about coming to grips with class, interest, and power. Jacobson explains that class has received enough attention from others and that he will therefore emphasize "other areas." Hale, in her delineation of the "culture of segregation," almost totally ignores class—indeed, power relations of any sort—speaking broadly of the attitudes of "whites," "southerners," and "Americans" as if these had generalized meaning divorced from their specific environment. Even Roediger, who identifies himself as a Marxist, firmly rejects the view that race is superstructural. Specifically contesting Fields's assertion that whereas race is entirely constructed, class has both objective

¹⁵ Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," 146, 149, 150.

¹⁶ Allen, *Invention of the White Race*, II, 97; Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, 1998), 75. See also Saxton, *Rise and Fall of the White Republic*.

and subjective components, he maintains that neither race nor class has meaning aside from people's consciousness of them. Roediger recognizes the problem: "To set race within social formations is absolutely necessary," he writes, "but to reduce race to class is damaging." True enough, but in positing race and class as equal—and equally constructed—he backs away from examining race "within social formations" and implies that it has intrinsic meaning apart from specific relations of power.¹⁷

In short, there is a persistent dualism evident in the work of the best whiteness studies authors. At times, race—and more specifically, whiteness—is treated as an artificial construct with no real meaning aside from its particular social setting; at other times it becomes not only real, but omnipresent and unchanging, deserving attention as an independent force. Race appears as both real and unreal, transitory and permanent, ubiquitous and invisible, everywhere and nowhere, everything and nothing. Many of the whiteness studies authors are aware of this dualism and see it as a reflection of a similar dualism in whiteness itself. "Whiteness is everywhere in U.S. culture," notes one, "but it is very hard to see"; "no one at this point really knows exactly what whiteness is," assert two others, even while discussing its pervasiveness. Observing that the white women she interviewed in California did not feel white so much as "normal" or "regular," the sociologist Ruth Frankenberg calls whiteness "an unmarked marker of others' differentness"; just as many people consider their own speech—unlike the accents they hear all around them—standard, whiteness, even while omnipresent, appears unrecognized except as that which is normal. Jacobson apologizes for not putting "race," "white," and other racial "fabrications" in quotation marks but then asserts that "race and races are American history . . . ; to write about race in American culture is to exclude virtually nothing." The all-and-nothing character of race challenges all the whiteness studies authors, who must decide whether race is—and explains—everything or nothing.¹⁸

The central question one must confront in evaluating whiteness studies is the salience of whiteness as an explanation for exploitation, injustice, and, more generally, the American past. In addressing that question, the matter of context becomes crucial. Simply put, in making whiteness omnipresent, whiteness studies authors risk losing sight of contextual variations and thereby undermining the very understanding of race and whiteness as socially constructed.

¹⁷ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 21; Hale, *Making Whiteness*; Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 8. For Roediger's discomfort with Barbara J. Fields's formulation of the relationship between race and class, see David R. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (New York, 1994), 25–27. Iver Bernstein has suggested that Roediger's approach "takes its cue from the recent critical writings of George M. Fredrickson urging greater consideration of race as an independent psychological category of analysis and, like Fredrickson's work, calls to mind W. E. B. Du Bois's dissatisfaction with the materialist treatment of race by American Marxists during the 1930s"; Iver Bernstein, review of *The Wages of Whiteness* by David R. Roediger, *Journal of American History*, 79 (Dec. 1992), 1120.

¹⁸ Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 1; Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg, "Addressing the Crisis of Whiteness: Reconfiguring White Identity in a Pedagogy of Whiteness," in *White Reign*, ed. Kincheloe et al., 4; Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis, 1993), 198; Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, ix–x, 11. One of the first whiteness studies works to note this "everything-and-nothing quality" was an analysis of film; see Richard Dyer, "White," *Screen*, 29 (Autumn 1988), 64.

Nonhistorians are particularly prone to deprive whiteness of historical context. As Roediger notes in pointing to “tensions” within the field of whiteness studies, “much cultural studies work in the area lacks historical grounding and ignores or misconceives the emphasis on class relations common among historians of whiteness.” In *Scenes of Subjection*, for example, the literary scholar Saidiya V. Hartman portrays white racism as a constant unaffected by any change in the social order, including “the nonevent of emancipation,” and sees virtually everything done to or for African Americans as an expression of that racism. A similar inattention to context underlies Brodtkin’s attribution of American prejudice against Jews (their “temporary darkening”) to the desire to exploit them as industrial laborers, without bothering to place that prejudice in the framework of the long European history of anti-Semitism—an anti-Semitism that was not always rooted in economic interest and did not always require that Jews be seen as nonwhite. Writing as if racism were a uniquely American illness, the American studies scholar George Lipsitz muses that “it must be the content of our character.”¹⁹

But inattention to context bedevils many of the historians as well. In *White Women’s Rights*, for example, one of the few historical works to examine the way whiteness shaped the experiences and behavior of *women*, Louise Michele Newman too often strays from her intriguing exploration of the impact on feminism of a particular form of evolutionary racism and generalizes about the views of “white women,” who resisted patriarchy for themselves but sought to impose it on “inferior” races. Pushing far beyond the sensible observation that most white feminists shared the racial prejudices common among whites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, she understates the range and complexity of feminist thought and argues that racism was “an integral, constitutive element” of feminism itself, or as she puts it, “feminism developed . . . as a racialized theory of gender oppression.”²⁰

Such overgeneralization is especially prevalent among historians who rely heavily on image, representation, and literary depiction. Grace Elizabeth Hale’s densely written but fascinating book, *Making Whiteness*, has the rare advantage among whiteness studies works of dealing with that part of the country where race has most pervasively shaped social relations: the South. But Hale loses much of that advantage by paying virtually no attention to social relations and confusing what is southern with what is more generally American until the reader is unsure whether she is describing southern whiteness or American whiteness, or whether she thinks that it does not make any difference. The South, she concludes, “lies not south of anywhere but inside us.” Never really explaining what she means by “whiteness” (which at times she equates

¹⁹ Roediger, “Pursuit of Whiteness,” 580; Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1997), 116; Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 76; Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 213. “Some Europeans who believed in race classified Jews as whites or even Aryans, even if for the most part they were considered the enemy,” according to George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (New York, 1978), xii. In discussing “tensions” within whiteness studies, Roediger also points to historians who “disdain cultural studies approaches, and even inquiries into race and cultural representation more generally, as ethereal and frivolous.” See Roediger, “Pursuit of Whiteness,” 580.

²⁰ Louise Michele Newman, *White Women’s Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (New York, 1999), esp. 8, 183, 21.

with segregation) or whose interests it served, she is on equally slippery ground in confronting *chronological* context. “Whites [all? most? some?] created the culture of segregation,” she proclaims, “in large part to counter black success.” This thesis is perfectly plausible, if undemonstrated. But in arguing that the myths of the happy slave and of criminal Reconstruction were products of the late-nineteenth-century imagination, Hale largely ignores earlier versions of those myths propounded by protagonists in the struggles over slavery and Reconstruction; the arguments that she treats as new were appropriations and modifications of arguments previously forged in real social relations. Indiscriminately mixing fiction and nonfiction as documentation, she confuses description (at which she is very good) with explanation and almost totally ignores interest and politics in her delineation of the “making” of whiteness.²¹

Although Jacobson pays more attention to contextual variation, he too can paint with a very broad brush, in the process placing a heavy explanatory burden—I believe too heavy—on whiteness. His focus on image and representation makes it difficult to judge the *prevalence* of particular ideas, because in quoting extensively from racist stereotypes, he makes no effort to give equal time to the opponents of such views. Brilliantly exploring racial depictions of diverse immigrant groups that Americans would later consider ethnic rather than racial and thereby showing the subjective character of race, he too often blurs a crucial distinction between “race” on the one hand and “nation,” “nationality,” and “ethnicity” on the other. For if both race and nation are constructed (imagined) communities, they are *differently* constructed: whereas race implies inherent, immutable characteristics, national and ethnic identity *can* be conceived of as inherent but need not be. Throughout much of American history, Americans have promiscuously combined racial and nonracial thinking in differentiating among groups; sometimes they assumed that differences were inherent, sometimes not, and often they failed to articulate clear positions on the question (no doubt because they had not formulated such positions). Jacobson himself notes in passing that discrimination was not always based on color or race—“The loudest voices in the organized nativism of the 1840s and 1850s harped upon matters of Catholicism and economics, not race”—but he tends to assume the biological nature of arguments that could as easily be interpreted as cultural. (See, for example, his citation of the assertion in the 1911 publication *A Dictionary of Races or Peoples* that “the savage manners of the last century are still met with amongst some Serbo-Croatians of to-day” as evidence for emphasis on the “physical properties” of race.)²²

²¹ Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 295, 21, 43–84, *passim*. For a study that approaches the making of segregation and whiteness in a southern state *historically*, see Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 2000), esp. 132–54. See also Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill, 1996).

²² Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 69, 79. For a persuasive distinction between a “civic” American nationalism rooted in equality and universalism and a “racial” nationalism that assumes inherent national characteristics, see Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and the Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 2001). For nation as “imagined community,” see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, 1991). On the close historical links between race and nation (and between racism and nationalism), see also Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge,

The role of whiteness in this process of distinguishing among groups remains murky. On one hand, Jacobson portrays the 1840s–1920s as a period of “variegated whiteness” in which white Americans saw some whites as whiter than others, warns us not to “reify a monolithic whiteness,” and speaks of a “system of ‘difference’ by which one might be both white *and* racially distinct from other whites.” On the other, he speaks of the “process by which Celts or Slavs became Caucasians.” The unresolved issue here is the extent to which Americans conceived of *whiteness* (rather than other criteria such as religion, culture, ethnicity, and class) as the main ingredient separating the civilized from the uncivilized.²³

There can be no doubt, for example, that many antebellum Americans viewed the Irish as a degraded and savage people, but whether they saw lack of whiteness as the key source of this inferior status is dubious; to most Americans, for whom Protestantism went hand in hand with both republicanism and Americanism, the Irish immigrants’ Catholicism was far more alarming than their color. Indeed, some abolitionists managed to combine a passionate belief in the goodness and intellectual potential of *black* people with an equally passionate conviction of the unworthiness of the Irish, and in the 1850s many nativists saw little difficulty in moving from the anti-Irish Know-Nothing party into the antislavery Republican party, a trajectory that would have been truly remarkable had their dominant perception of the Irish been that they were nonwhite. And as Jacobson points out, the 1790 law that limited naturalization to “free white persons” “allowed Irish immigrants entrance as ‘white persons’”; in what sense, then, should one speak of their subsequently “becoming” white? This can make sense if whiteness is to be understood metaphorically, meaning “acceptable,” but Jacobson and other whiteness studies authors clearly intend the term to serve as more than a metaphor; indeed, if it is understood *only* metaphorically, much of their analysis collapses.²⁴

The overworking of whiteness is especially noteworthy in the work of David Roediger, for he professes greater interest in specific social relations than many whiteness studies authors. Nevertheless, his argument too often depends on blurring important distinctions among whites, thereby belying the commonality of the “wages of whiteness” he outlines. His starting point is promising: living in a slaveholding republic, white workers in the (northern) United States increasingly defined themselves by

Mass., 2000), 41–56; Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, eds., *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London, 1991); and Gross, “Beyond Black and White,” 681. For an interesting synthetic study of American attitudes toward foreigners that recognizes but at times fudges the distinction between racial and culture “difference” arguments, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876–1917* (New York, 2000). The promiscuous mixture of racial and nonracial depictions of “nationalities” has a parallel in the mixture of racial and nonracial arguments in defense of slavery; see Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619–1877* (New York, 1993), 184–97.

²³ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 6, 14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 51. On the anti-Catholic heart of American nativism, see Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800–1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York, 1938). On the “Paddy” stereotype, see Dale T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America* (Middletown, 1986). On the lives of Irish immigrants, see Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York, 1985); and Oscar Handlin, *Boston’s Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation* (1941; Cambridge, Mass., 1991). On the antislavery character of northern Know-Nothingism, see Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York, 1992).

what they were *not*—blacks, slaves. But defining oneself as not-black and as not-slave are not at all the same, and Roediger's fudging on that crucial point is especially striking coming from someone who usually pays such careful attention to language. The "not-slave" formulation led to the elaboration of a "free-labor" ideology that combined an emphasis on the dignity of labor with a condemnation of chattel slavery as the antithesis of free, republican (that is, American) values; the "not-black" variation led to a racist denigration of nonwhites and the insistence that the United States was a "white man's country." The two views could go together, but often they did not, and Roediger's argument that whiteness was an essential element of free-labor ideology is unpersuasive. If some labor radicals took what amounted to the proslavery position that slaves in the South were better off than "free" white workers in the North, others did not, and the argument in any case rested less on the degree of whiteness than on the degree of exploitation. Similarly, Roediger's thesis that in rejecting the term "servant" in favor of "hired hand" and "help," workingmen were "becoming" white conflates two very different forms of resistance to dependence that could be, but were not always, combined. The uppity domestics who tormented Frances Trollope in Cincinnati expressed little or no concern for *whiteness* as they asserted their American equality, and they contrasted their rights, not with *black* dependence, but with that stemming from *English* hierarchy. Responding disdainfully to Trollope's expectation that she would eat in the kitchen, one servant typically "turned up her pretty lip, and said, 'I guess that's 'cause you don't think I'm good enough to eat with you. You'll find that won't do here.'"²⁵

The question is not whether white racism was pervasive in antebellum America—it was—but whether it explains as much as Roediger and others maintain. In an argument further developed by Ignatiev, Roediger asserts that "it was by no means clear that the Irish were white." They present little evidence, however, that most Americans viewed the Irish as *nonwhite*. (To establish this point one would have to analyze the "racial" thought of Americans about the Irish, a task that neither Roediger nor Ignatiev undertakes.) Indeed, the whiteness studies authors often display a notable lack of precision in asserting the nonwhite status of despised groups. Roediger suggests that Irish whiteness was "by no means clear"; Ignatiev speaks of "strong tendencies . . . to consign the Irish, if not to the black race, then to an intermediate race located between white and black"; Neil Foley, in discussing prejudice against poor whites in central Texas, proclaims that "not all whites . . . were equally white" and suggests that landlords felt that their tenants "lacked certain qualities of whiteness"; Brodtkin states that "for almost half a century, [Jews] were treated as racially not-quite-white." What is at issue is not the widespread hostility to and discrimination against the Irish, Jews, poor whites, and multiple other groups, but the salience of whiteness in either explaining or describing such hostility and discrimination. The status of southern poor whites is especially telling, for despite persistent "racial" stereotypes of them as shiftless, slovenly, and degraded, such stereotypes did not usu-

²⁵ Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 49; Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, ed. John Lauritz Larson (1832; St. James, N.Y., 1993), 33. The essential starting point on free-labor thought is Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1970).

ally include denials of their whiteness. Americans have had many ways of looking down on people without questioning their whiteness.²⁶

A brief consideration of the ideology of four prominent nineteenth-century Americans—the Confederate vice president Alexander H. Stephens, Illinois's Democratic senator Stephen A. Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and Ohio's Republican senator Benjamin F. Wade—illustrates the risk of overemphasizing whiteness. Like most white Americans, all four were in some sense committed to whiteness. In his famous speech hailing the secession of the southern states, Stephens boldly identified as the “cornerstone” of the new government “the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and moral condition.” In the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, Douglas mercilessly denounced his Republican challenger as a supporter of black equality and boasted that “this government was made on the white basis. . . . It was made by white men, for the benefit of white men and their posterity for ever, and I am in favor of confining citizenship to white men.” Lincoln responded that he did not favor “political and social equality between the white and black races”; noting the “physical difference” between the races, he proclaimed that “inasmuch as it becomes a necessity that there must be a difference, I, as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong, having the superior position.” Upon his arrival in Washington, D.C., in 1851, Wade complained that “the Nigger smell I cannot bear,” adding that the food was “all cooked by Niggers until I can smell and taste the Nigger.”²⁷

Yet any treatment of those four men that stopped at their common commitment to whiteness would be so incomplete as to be totally misleading. Stephens was an ardent Confederate whereas the other three were committed Unionists. Their differences on slavery and black rights were even more notable. Stephens was a defender of slavery and black racial subordination. Douglas saw slavery as a minor issue whose fate should be left to local (white) control. Lincoln believed that slavery was morally wrong as well as socially degrading, eschewed the race-baiting that Douglas and many other white Americans took for granted, and in his debate with Douglas immediately qualified his support for white supremacy with the ringing assertion that whether or not “the negro” was equal in all respects, “in the right to eat the bread, without leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, *he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man.*” Wade was an ardent opponent of slavery, who became one of the most enthusiastic proponents of a radical Reconstruction policy designed to remake the South and provide equal rights for the former

²⁶ Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 134; Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 76; Foley, *White Scourge*, 5, 70; Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 56. For an antebellum view of poor whites, see D. R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (New York, 1860); for a historical study, see Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham, 1994). A powerful English “racial” prejudice against the Irish existed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in a world far removed from a slaveholding republic; see Nicholas P. Canny, “The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 30 (Oct. 1973), 575–98; and Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*, 33–37.

²⁷ William E. Gienapp, ed., *The Civil War and Reconstruction: A Documentary Collection* (New York, 2001), 71–72; Andrew Delbanco, ed., *The Portable Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1992), 107, 115; H. L. Trefousse, *Benjamin Franklin Wade: Radical Republican from Ohio* (New York, 1963), 311.

slaves, as well as a sturdy champion of the rights of women and of labor. In short, what is most significant about the careers of the four men lies, not in their shared expressions of whiteness, but in the sharply divergent positions they took on the major issues of their era. Whiteness turns out to be a blunt instrument for dissecting the nuances—or even the major outlines—of their political ideology and behavior.²⁸

One of the most striking features of many whiteness studies works is their subjective character, their postmodern accentuation of self. Often the authors supplement analysis and prescriptive proposals with personal anecdotes, recollections, and ruminations—sometimes, but by no means always, confined to an introduction or conclusion. George Lipsitz, for example, provides a long personal account beginning with his reaction as a child living in New Jersey to the murder of a civil rights worker in 1963 and moving on to his current determination, as an adult in California, to resist “racist attacks on communities of color” abetted by “the mendacity and meanness of Governor Pete Wilson.” Ruth Frankenberg begins her book with an autobiographical discussion of how as a white feminist she struggled with charges of racism. In detailing how Jews became white, Karen Brodtkin not only discusses her own childhood and the question of Jewishness in an autobiographical introduction, but throughout the volume writes explicitly as a Jew (noting, for example, that “prevailing classifications . . . have sometimes assigned us to the white race”). Roediger begins *The Wages of Whiteness* with an account of how he came to reject the racism he had taken for granted as a child. “Until very recently,” he observes, “I would have skipped all this autobiographical material, sure that my ideas on race and the white working class grew out of conscious reflection based on historical research. But much of that reflection led back to what my early years might have taught me. . . . My own youthful experiences . . . could have given me the central themes of this book.”²⁹

Even when they do not engage in such autobiographical exercises—and historians are usually the most reticent of the whiteness studies authors in this regard—virtually all of these authors display a highly didactic tone and a tendency to blend policy proposals with historical analysis. Of course, they are hardly alone in producing present-minded or partisan work; as Peter Novick and others have shown, even the most avowedly “objective” works of history have been ideologically laden. Few historians have been so eager openly to mix scholarly analysis with prescriptive advice, however, or to proclaim their political goals so bluntly as those engaged in the study of whiteness. Thus, Jacobson, the most restrained of the authors under review, suggests that “perhaps the most far-reaching ambition” of *Whiteness of a Different Color* is “to help loosen the grip of race,” and Hale, asserting that “integration . . . is our only future,”

²⁸ Delbanco, ed., *Portable Abraham Lincoln*, 115. For a nuanced view of the antebellum Republicans and race, see Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 261–300.

²⁹ Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, viii–xx, esp. xviii; Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*, 2–5; Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 1; Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 3–5, esp. 5. For highly personal autobiographical musings, see Maurice Berger, *White Lies: Race and the Myths of Whiteness* (New York, 1999). See also Foley, *White Scourge*, xiii–xiv; many of the essays in Chris J. Cuomo and Kim Q. Hall, eds., *Whiteness: Feminist Philosophical Reflections* (Lanham, 1999); and those in Kincheloe et al., eds., *White Reign*.

proposes “a newly imagined integration [that] would incorporate black autonomy, authority, and subjectivity.” Ending *The Invention of the White Race* with a hope for the future, Allen declares that “perhaps in the impending renewal of the struggle of the ‘common people’ and the ‘Titans,’ the Great Safety Valve of white-skin privileges may finally come to be seen and rejected by laboring-class European-Americans as the incubus that for three centuries has paralyzed their will in defense of their class interests *vis-à-vis* those of the ruling class.” These authors wear their hearts on their sleeves.³⁰

Those present-minded concerns help explain why it is in the 1990s that there has been such an explosion of work on whiteness. As in other fields, that work is in part self-propelling: once a significant body of scholarship on a topic appears, it acquires a life of its own. But underlying the new interest in white power, privilege, and identity there is evident an intense discouragement over the persistence of racism, the unexpected renewal of nationalism, and the collapse of progressive movements for social change that characterize the current era. Jacobson points to the “ethnic revival” in America among groups that deny white privilege and see *themselves* as victims and concludes that “racism now appears not anomalous to the working of American democracy, but fundamental to it.” Noting the “chastened and dispirited mood of contemporary American liberalism,” Roediger observes that “the absence of a liberal labor vote—both because so few workers are now organized and because a majority of those in white households containing a union member have voted for Reagan and Bush over the last three elections—makes prospects for an ongoing mildly progressive, class-based alliance inauspicious.” A sense of political disillusionment and a conviction that class-based efforts to remake the world have been tried and found wanting link Roediger’s perception of the bleak current situation with his understanding of the past: “the historical record of antiracist achievements of coalitions for economic reform,” he laments, “is quite modest.” In whiteness, Roediger and other authors see the latest answer to the old question (and its more modern variants) posed by Werner Sombart in 1906, “Why is there no socialism in the United States?” Only through a confrontation with whiteness, they suggest, can a revitalized American Left emerge.³¹

Because their work is so heavily prescriptive, important clues to the whiteness studies authors’ understanding of whiteness emerge from what they suggest should be done about it. Pushing the logic of its constructed nature to its ultimate conclusion are those, Roediger and Ignatiev foremost, who call for the “abolition” of whiteness. Asserting that “whiteness, like royalty, threatens to arrange human society by the rules of animal breeding,” Ignatiev and John Garvey, who since 1992 have served as coeditors of the journal *Race Traitor*, proclaim that “the key to solving the social problems of our age is to abolish the white race. . . . *Treason to whiteness is loyalty to*

³⁰ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 10; Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 11, 296; Allen, *Invention of the White Race*, II, 259. See Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, Eng., 1988).

³¹ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 12; Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness*, 7–8; Werner Sombart, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?*, trans. Patricia M. Hocking and C. T. Husbands (1906; White Plains, 1976).

humanity.” Central to this abolitionist goal is belief in the moral emptiness of whiteness: “There is Italian culture . . . but there is no ‘white culture’—unless you mean Wonderbread and television game shows,” pronounces *Race Traitor*. “Whiteness is nothing but the expression of race privilege.” Distinguishing sharply between whiteness and blackness—he capitalizes “Black” and “Blackness” but not “white” and “whiteness”—Roediger agrees with Ignatiev on the emptiness of whiteness: “It is not merely that whiteness is oppressive and false,” he explains; “it is that whiteness is *nothing but* oppressive and false.” Noting that “we speak of African American culture and community, and rightly so,” Roediger exhibits some momentary unease at celebrating “Blackness” while condemning “whiteness”—“neither whiteness nor Blackness is a scientific (or natural) racial category”—but in the end insists that “the former is infinitely more false, and precisely because of that falsity, more dangerous, than the latter.” As a result, even though all race is socially constructed, the overriding need is “to attack *whiteness* as a destructive ideology rather than to attack the concept of race abstractly.” Hale agrees. “Would America be American without its white people?” she asks at the end of *Making Whiteness*. “No. It would be something better, the fulfillment of what we postpone by calling a dream.”³²

Precisely what “abolishing whiteness” means is open to question, however, in part because the meaning of “whiteness” is similarly open. Ignatiev argues that the word “racism” is “useless” because it has too many meanings, but one could suggest that there is also a hierarchy of meanings for abolishing whiteness (based on a hierarchy of meanings for whiteness itself) from rejecting white privilege (or racism), to rejecting white “identity” (that it matters whether one is white), to claiming that there is no such thing as being white, to seeing whiteness as an evil to be combated. On a practical level, there is a need to be clear on what one is being asked to reject.³³

There is also a practical political issue that, given the policy concerns of so many of the whiteness studies authors, demands consideration. In the revised version of *The Wages of Whiteness*, Roediger expresses dismay at charges that he is “down on white people” and counters that “there is, of course, not the slightest animosity toward people who are categorized as white in *Wages of Whiteness*.” True enough, but there is a thin line between saying that whiteness is evil and saying that whites are evil, and it is easy to see how Roediger and Ignatiev can be misunderstood on this score. They make a legitimate distinction between black and white as nonparallel terms, pointing out that there is a black (and an Asian American and an Italian American) culture but not a white culture. This argument holds, but only up to a point: there is no *one* black (or Asian American) culture, not every black person is culturally “black,” and as Jacobson shows, the distinction between cultural and racial definitions of ethnic identity is so tenuous that at times it appears nonexistent. Equally important, there is a serious political problem with first proclaiming that race is arbitrary and then arguing that to identify as white is reprehensible but to identify as black is virtuous.

³² Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, eds., *Race Traitor* (New York, 1996), 2, 10, 288–89. This volume reprints *Race Traitor*’s first five issues, dating from 1992 to 1996. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness*, 13, 12, 3; Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 296.

³³ Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 178.

Indeed, such an argument is less likely to dampen white racism than to fuel a sense of white ethnic identity—and victimhood—of the type that the journalist Tony Horwitz describes so graphically in his recent book, *Confederates in the Attic*.³⁴

The most obvious solution to this problem is to challenge the desirability of *any* racial identification, black as well as white. The British sociologist Paul Gilroy suggests that it is time to abolish “race” itself, not just whiteness, and the historian Mia Bay, raising the question of “anti-racist racism,” suggests that “the concept of race is virtually inseparable from the idea of a hierarchy among the races.”³⁵ Many of the nonhistorian whiteness studies authors, however, reject the notion of abolishing whiteness in favor, not of a more general abolition of racial identification, but of the substitution of a new, “good” whiteness for the old racist version. “If whiteness is emptied of any content other than that which is associated with racism or capitalism,” suggests Frankenberg, “this leaves progressive whites apparently without a genealogy.” George Yúdice, who teaches cultural studies, agrees that whites need some form of white ethnic identification. Suggesting that the abolitionist position “seems more wishful thinking than carefully thought-out strategy,” he argues that “declaring nonwhiteness . . . is not really an option for many whites in precarious positions” and proposes instead “a rearticulation of whiteness” based on “imagining nonracist and nonnormativist ways of being white.” Warning of conservative efforts to capitalize on feelings of white victimhood, Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg, scholars whose interests span education and cultural studies, assert “the necessity of creating a positive, proud, attractive, antiracist white identity.”³⁶

If it is easy to see why many of these scholars are uneasy about asking whites to renounce their whiteness while celebrating everyone else’s multicultural ethnic diversity, there are reasons why encouraging people to identify with a reconfigured “good” whiteness seems even more problematical. To begin with, this approach implies that racism stems primarily from misunderstanding and ignorance, and that the solution to it therefore lies more in changing minds than in confronting interests. Equally important, because positing the goal of creating a new and better whiteness implicitly accepts the legitimacy of racial identification, it comes close to vitiating race’s constructed character itself. And finally, since, as Bay points out, every racial identification implies a negative judgment of outsiders—feeling that it is “good” to be white (or black or Asian) inevitably implies there is something less good about being non-

³⁴ Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 186; Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (New York, 1998).

³⁵ Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000); Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830–1925* (New York, 2000), 224, 225. Thomas C. Holt, by contrast, calls on African Americans both to embrace and to transcend their blackness, noting that “there is a difference between being nourished by our history and being consumed by it”; Holt, *Problem of Race in the Twenty-First Century*, 122.

³⁶ Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*, 232; George Yúdice, “Neither Impugning nor Disavowing Whiteness Does a Viable Politics Make: The Limits of Identity Politics,” in *After Political Correctness: The Humanities and Society in the 1990s*, ed. Christopher Newfield and Ronald Strickland (Boulder, 1995), 271, 261, 259; Kincheloe and Steinberg, “Addressing the Crisis of Whiteness,” 12. Nelson M. Rodriguez notes that it is “difficult” to say “what would constitute a [positive] pedagogy of whiteness” but warns that “asking white students to renounce their whiteness in some total sense is doomed for failure”; Rodriguez, “Emptying the Content of Whiteness,” 33, 34.

white (or nonblack or non-Asian)—encouraging a renewed sense of whiteness is unlikely to promote a more equitable or harmonious social order. In short, neither the goal of abolishing whiteness alone nor that of promoting a more positive whiteness seems especially promising. The different meanings of whiteness and its abolition are once again pertinent. Repudiating white *privilege* is one thing, but it is hard to imagine a successful assault on whiteness in the sense of people's self-identification as white except within the broader context of breaking down racial identification in general.

Because the whiteness literature is so diverse, summing up its contributions is by no means easy. Nevertheless, several conclusions seem justified. First, this rapidly growing body of works has provided insights that collectively help us refine our interpretation of race in America and at large. These works have built on and solidified our understanding of how race is constructed. At their best, they have underscored the historical process of racial construction, showing how assumptions about race and races have changed over time and exploring human agency in the making of race. They have reminded us that race making applies to whites as well as nonwhites; in Neil Foley's words, "whites are raced."³⁷ They have demonstrated that racial categories are not always constructed as binary opposites, although that insight is partially obscured in the effort to portray nonprivileged groups as of necessity nonwhite—that is, to fit complex racial thought into a binary mold and make whiteness alone the defining racial concept. And perhaps most important, they have found a new way to emphasize the absurdity—and oppressiveness—of race as a system for categorizing humans.

The contribution of whiteness studies to our understanding of actual social relations is less clear. In viewing whiteness as an independent category, many whiteness studies authors come close to reifying it and thereby losing sight of its constructed nature; in assigning whiteness such all-encompassing power, they tend to ignore other forms of oppression, exploitation, and inequality; and in focusing so heavily on representations of whiteness, they too often ignore the lived experiences—as well as the perceptions—of those perceived as nonwhite or "not quite" white. In moving beyond a binary treatment of race, it is important to keep in mind that African Americans' experience of race differed qualitatively from that of other ethnic groups because of the involuntary nature of their immigration, their enslavement, and the unparalleled virulence of the racism directed against them. Applied properly, a multi-racial approach can underscore the distinctiveness of African Americans' racial history, but without attention to concrete social conditions that distinctiveness is more likely to be obscured than clarified.

In short, we are back to the question of context. One of the most striking features of the whiteness studies works is their assumption—sometimes asserted and sometimes unspoken—that the racism they describe is uniquely American and that Amer-

³⁷ Foley, *White Scourge*, 11.

ican whiteness can be understood in isolation, without considering anything abroad. In this respect, they differ markedly from the best of the “old” works on race; in *Race* (1963), for example, Thomas F. Gossett placed American racial thought in European context and portrayed American racism as a particular manifestation of a broader intellectual phenomenon. Despite Roediger’s persuasive argument that the virulence of white racial identification stemmed from the particular circumstances of living in a slaveholding republic, white racism has by no means been a peculiarly American phenomenon, and grounding the study of American whiteness in broader international context can help accentuate the particular nature and features of race making in the United States. In an account that should sound familiar to students of the nineteenth-century United States, Sue Peabody argues that eighteenth-century France produced antislavery sentiment *and* racism—both “derived from the same ideological origin: the tension between colonial slavery and the cult of liberty in France.” The current debate over the European experience of empire and the role of race in constructing the colonial “other” and work on race and racism in places as diverse as modern England, eighteenth-century France, and twentieth-century French West Africa are surely pertinent to the study of whiteness in America, as is the long European history of racial thought and anti-Semitism.³⁸

Historical works on whiteness could also benefit from more *historiographical* context. Before whiteness studies, historians of race debated the emergence and evolution of white racism in the southern colonies, suggested that the American Revolution promoted a sharp increase in white racial consciousness, and studied the rise of segregation in the post-Civil War South.³⁹ They, too, argued that racial understanding and categorization evolved—that is, that race was “constructed” (although they did not use the term)—and noted, in a manner foreshadowing Jacobson’s treatment, the rise of racial prejudice against immigrants in the second half of the nineteenth century. “By a little judicious tampering, the historians and political scientists could adapt racial theory to the needs of the moment,” noted Gossett. “The fact that race has no precise meaning has made it a powerful tool for the most diverse pur-

³⁸ Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (1963; New York, 1997); Sue Peabody, “There Are No Slaves in France”: *The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (New York, 1996), 71; Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978); David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (New York, 2001); Paul Gilroy, “There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack”: *The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (1987; Chicago, 1991); Owen White, *Children of the French Empire: Miscegenation and Colonial Society in French West Africa, 1895–1960* (Oxford, Eng., 1999), esp. 93–123; Alexander and Halpern, eds., *Racializing Class, Classifying Race*; Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution*.

³⁹ See, *inter alia*, Oscar Handlin and Mary F. Handlin, “Origins of the Southern Labor System,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 7 (April 1950), 199–222; Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968); T. H. Breen, “A Changing Labor Force and Race Relations in Virginia, 1660–1710,” *Journal of Social History*, 7 (Fall 1973), 3–25; Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975); Alden T. Vaughan, “The Origins Debate: Slavery and Racism in Seventeenth-Century Virginia,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 97 (July 1989), 311–54; Donald L. Robinson, *Slavery in the Structure of American Politics, 1765–1820* (New York, 1971); Duncan J. MacLeod, *Slavery, Race, and the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Eng., 1975); William Stanton, *The Leopard’s Spots: Scientific Attitudes toward Race in America, 1815–59* (Chicago, 1960); George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York, 1971); C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York, 1955); Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865–1890* (New York, 1978); and Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York, 1984).

poses.⁴⁰ In some ways, what is newest in the historical works on whiteness is a new language, a new way of saying something that is not all that different from what many historians have been saying for some time. Indeed, despite appearances, whiteness studies represent less a radical new departure than an evolution of a historical scholarship that has long been preoccupied with the changing ways of making race. The focus on whiteness represents a new way of addressing old questions, but the central concern of the new scholarship—how, under diverse conditions, Americans conceptualized and reconceptualized race—is very much in line with the historical literature of the past four decades.⁴¹

As it builds on the old history of race, the field of whiteness studies has—despite its current limitations—considerable unfulfilled potential. It is not surprising that authors in the field have sometimes claimed more for whiteness than the evidence will support or that their work is often characterized more by boldness than by finesse, for such is typically the nature of new disciplines or approaches. Many of the same strengths and weaknesses can be noted in works that burst upon the historical profession in the 1970s emphasizing “the” slave community and “the” sisterhood of women.⁴² Indeed, just as later historians built upon and refined those exciting but overargued works, one might suggest that whiteness studies authors in the future will reach in new directions even as they continue to fill in and revise the outlines set by their predecessors. Although it would be presumptuous to predict the exact nature of this future scholarship, I would hope its characteristics would include greater attention to historical and geographical context, more precision in delineating the multiple meanings of “whiteness,” continued effort to move beyond a strictly binary approach to race even while emphasizing the distinctive ways African Americans experienced race and racism, continued exploration of the complex relationship between race and nation, closer consideration of the South’s role in shaping American notions of race, more sustained treatment of actual lived relations, and more inclusive examination of the way nonwhites and whites-in-the-making have perceived whiteness (and nonwhiteness).⁴³ In its prescriptive mode, whiteness studies scholar-

⁴⁰ Gossett, *Race*, 118.

⁴¹ I am not the first to make this suggestion. See David A. Gerber, review of *Whiteness of a Different Color* by Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Reviews in American History*, 27 (Sept. 1999), 436; and David W. Stowe, review of *Whiteness of a Different Color* by Matthew Frye Jacobson and *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* by George Lipsitz, *Journal of American History*, 86 (Dec. 1999), 1359.

⁴² For historiographical treatment of these subjects, see Peter Kolchin, “Reevaluating the Antebellum Slave Community: A Comparative Perspective,” *Journal of American History*, 70 (Dec. 1983), 579–601; Peter Kolchin, “American Historians and Antebellum Southern Slavery, 1959–1984,” in *A Master’s Due: Essays in Honor of David Herbert Donald*, ed. William J. Cooper Jr., Michael F. Holt, and John McCardell (Baton Rouge, 1985), 87–111; Peter J. Parish, *Slavery: History and Historians* (New York, 1989), esp. 64–96; Nancy A. Hewitt, “Beyond the Search for Sisterhood: American Women’s History in the 1980s,” *Social History*, 10 (Oct. 1985), 299–321; Linda K. Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Women’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *Journal of American History*, 75 (June 1988), 9–39; and Joanne Meyerowitz, “American Women’s History: The Fall of Women’s Culture,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* (special issue 1, 1992), 27–52.

⁴³ For writings by African Americans on whites and whiteness, see David R. Roediger, ed., *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White* (New York, 1998). There is considerable disagreement over black perceptions of whiteness. The poet bell hooks, for example, generalizes (on the basis of childhood recollections) that “white people were regarded as terrorists,” whereas the historian Mia Bay, noting that “black folk culture challenged racial stereotypes rather than reversing them,” suggests that the black masses rejected racial categorization and recognized white variability far more than intellectuals did. bell hooks, “Representing Whiteness in the Black

ship will need to confront the disagreements dividing those who would abolish whiteness, those who would reconfigure whiteness, and those who would abolish race in general and to confront whether in making pronouncements about such goals they are not—like King Canute commanding the waters to stop—considerably overestimating their own influence.

The accelerating pace of publications on whiteness suggests that we will be seeing a great deal more work in this area over the coming years. Perhaps it is not too much to hope that ten years from now, we will be able to conclude that it was in their second decade that whiteness studies really came of age.