



Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race

By Matthew Frye Jacobson

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America's racial odyssey is the subject of this remarkable work of historical imagination. **Matthew Frye Jacobson** argues that race resides not in nature but in the contingencies of politics and culture. In ever-changing racial categories we glimpse the competing theories of history and collective destiny by which power has been organized and contested in the United States. Capturing the excitement of the new field of "whiteness studies" and linking it to traditional historical inquiry, Jacobson shows that in this nation of immigrants "race" has been at the core of civic assimilation: ethnic minorities in becoming American were re-racialized to become Caucasian. He provides a counter-history of how nationality groups such as the Irish or Greeks became Americans as racial groups like Celts or Mediterraneans became Caucasian. Jacobson tracks race as a conception and perception, emphasizing the importance of knowing not only how we label one another but also how we see one another, and how that racialized vision has largely been transformed in this century. The stages of racial formation?race as formed in conquest, enslavement, imperialism, segregation, and labor migration?are all part of the complex, and now counterintuitive, history of race. *Whiteness of a Different Color* traces the fluidity of racial categories from an immense body of research in literature, popular culture, politics, society, ethnology, anthropology, cartoons, and legal history, including sensational trials like the Leo Frank case and the Draft Riots of 1863.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

When we speak of race, we tend to categorize nonwhite people into rigid classifications--but how is whiteness itself determined? Yale American Studies professor Matthew Frye Jacobson looks at the American construction of whiteness out of its polyglot European immigrant population. In 1790, United States naturalization law granted citizenship to "free white persons"--which meant, mostly, those of Anglo-Saxon descent. Thus, Celtic-descended Irish immigrants were discriminated against. As the U.S. population became more culturally mixed beginning in the 1820s, with an increase in immigration from non-Anglo Europe, the nation experienced "a fracturing of whiteness into a hierarchy of plural and scientifically determined white races."

In other words, people who came from Poland, Germany, Italy, and Greece, as well as Jews from many nations, all became, by virtue of the "melting pot" ethic, "Caucasian" whites. But, as the graphically racist cartoons reproduced in the book show, the creation of whiteness was--and is--by no means an easy, continuous process. Jacobson details the political assault on white racism that culminated in the civil rights movement and cites the contemporary "revival and denial of white privilege" in the United States. Although he expresses doubt that a dismissal of white privilege will happen anytime soon, he does hope that in "recognizing the historical fabrication, the changeability, and the contingencies of whiteness, we might begin to look in a new way upon race, the power relations it generates, and the social havoc it wreaks." --*Eugene Holley Jr.*

Review

Whiteness of a Different Color offers an unanswerable demonstration that the historical whitening of European immigrants intensified 'race' as the marker of a white/black divide. Jacobson challenges at once the revival of the Caucasian racial category and the real inequalities to which it points. (Michael Rogin, Robson Professor of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley)

In this fascinating book, Jacobson traces the development of racial identity in America. Between the 1840s and the 1920s, racial differences and hierarchy between Anglo-Saxons and other white ethnic groups were given great significance. "White ethnics" were generally considered as distinct and inferior to the original Anglo Saxon immigrants...[*Whiteness of a Different Color*] explodes the myth of the American melting pot. Jacobson demonstrates how white racial inclusion was inextricably linked with the exclusion of non-whites and, interestingly, how their widely-recognised whiteness is partly due to the presence of non-white groups...This is a thought-provoking account of an often overlooked topic. (Claire Xanthos *The Voice*)

Whiteness of a Different Color tells us about the varying, and inevitably failing, attempts to come to terms with the concept of "whiteness", which, despite its vicissitude and inconclusiveness, was, and still is, one of the most important notions in American political culture...True to his "identities" as historian and American Studies scholar, Jacobson's sources are tremendously varied, ranging from novels, films, print journals, to legal records, colonial charters, and state constitutions...The book's argument is most convincing. (Christiane Harzig *International Review of Social History*)

[Matthew Frye Jacobson's] analysis of the European immigrant experiences, American racial classifications and "their fluidity over time" is a valuable addition to the flourishing genre of "whiteness studies" in the fields of labour and working-class history...Racial categories and perceptions, Jacobson argues, are cultural

and political fabrications, reflections of power relationships in a society that has periodically needed to construct (and reconstruct) an "American" and "white" identity out of an increasingly polyglot European immigrant population...*Whiteness of a Different Color* is a subtle and sensitive exegesis and deconstruction of the immigrant experience in American culture. (John White *Times Higher Education Supplement*)

Jacobson builds a history of how the category of "whiteness" plays in American history...His goal is to demystify, and the tone he takes does exactly that. Wry and often sarcastic, his bite is sharpened by his ability to pick out the dark, unintentional humor from his sources. (Willoughby Mariano *New Haven Advocate*)

Jacobson's important book helps to fill an important gap in the literature about the history of European immigrants assuming different racial identities in the United States...Because of its broad sweep of history, Jacobson is able to reveal previously ignored ways in which anti-racism coalitions have succeeded without yielding to assimilationist ideology. (Louis Anthes *H-Net Reviews*)

Jacobson has written a provocative, nuanced account of American race formation and especially of the way in which many American immigrants from Europe were cast initially as "nonwhites" in the late 19th century...Using a variety of sources, including film and fiction, Jacobson concludes that whiteness is clearly a socially constructed category infinitely malleable as a political tool. This historical survey is highly recommended for all libraries. (Anthony O. Edmonds *Library Journal*)

This groundbreaking book advances the study of white identity (both as category and as consciousness) significantly. It takes intellectual chances and makes the risks pay off. (David Roediger, author of *The Wages of Whiteness*)

Whiteness of a Different Color is nothing less than a powerful synthesis of American history. Viewing the U.S. through the prism of race, Matthew Frye Jacobson re-writes 'immigrant history' and, in the process, discovers the key to America's past and future. (Robin D.G. Kelley, author of *Race Rebels*)

From the Back Cover

Jacobson traces 'the political history of whiteness.'...This is a book full of fascinating historical twists and turns.-Mary Carroll, Booklist

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Hazel Fletcher:

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