

Investigating Whiteness: A Dive into its Cultural, Literary and Political History in the United States and Lessons for our Future

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If black is the absence of color, then what is white? We know white reflects color, but scientifically, it's the combination of the whole color spectrum. Writers have dedicated a great many pages to the color, which, despite its inclusion of all others, is innately associated with purity. In Herman Melville's American classic *Moby Dick*, Ishmael, a crew member on a the whale-bound boat, pontificates on the eerie nature of the "whiteness" of the whale, which causes man to be so obsessed with its downfall, for a whole chapter. While Ishmael acknowledges the positive connotations associated with the color, whether white man's supremacy over nature or the robes of a priest, he presses on that the underlying nature of white strikes a fear into men's hearts. Ishmael gestures to white water and vast, snowy expanses of the Arctic Ocean, which so terrify the crew members, as proof of the color's duplicitous nature. White, he says, "calls up a peculiar apparition to the soul" of all peoples because of its inclusion of all colors, and conversely its seeming exclusion of all colors, conjures up human fear of nonexistence and thus atheism. In the blankness of white, people see the vast unknown.

Similarly, Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* uses the biblical term the "whited sepulcher" to imprint the reader with a sense of the deceitful nature of white. First used in the Book of Matthew, the whited sepulcher most nearly means something which appears good and holy from the outside, but within is rotten and dark. Conrad uses this parable to examine the foremost conquest of whiteness: second-wave imperialism. Conrad claims that just like the whited sepulchre, this wave of imperialism, conducted under the guise of the white man's burden, lasting into the 20th century and superficially appearing as a European attempt to "civilize" the backward bits of the Earth, was at its core a disgusting example of the worst in exploitation. In the final bleached and hairless frontal lobe of the demonic white 'god,' Kurtz, Marlow -- with Conrad of course -- recognizes that the curse lies not in the darkness, but in the light.

Likewise, in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, whiteness is depicted in a starkly American context: the blonde-haired, blue-eyed white idol is the supreme beauty to strive for, more of an idea than even a color. In the book, a young black girl, Pecola, sees blue eyes, and whiteness with it, as the remedy to all travails. She tries all her life to achieve those blue eyes and hence legitimacy in the white world. This separation of blue eyes from literal whiteness come to represent the elevated and pure association of whiteness, which is wholly unassociated with color. Hence, not all things which are white embody its real meaning, and the idea of the color is more flexible, though possibly more selective, than the literal color. This is the American context of the definition of whiteness: a non-literal definition which people strive for. This definition allows people to change their condition of whiteness. If one looks at American history, this trend can be seen clearly reflected. In fact, American history has been a constant struggle over what constitutes whiteness and changing nature of its definition as millions have yearned to be included in it. Even the great Frederick Douglass used a degree of whiteness to "pass," and make his way out of slavery.

Near the very inception of the United States, The Naturalization Act of 1790 set out a clear definition for anyone who wanted to become an American citizen: they had to be "a free white person." With a clear legal definition, which most nearly meant non-slave Europeans as whites, the cultural connotation of whiteness was never so simple. America was settled by Anglo-Saxon Protestants; the definitions of whiteness that have followed have largely been about these initial settlers holding onto power by fighting new immigrant groups, but then being forced to accept them into the fold of white culture.

In the 1840s, the potato famine struck Europe, and in a matter of ten years halved the population of Ireland. A fleet of about 5,000 ships exported 1.7 million Irishmen to the United States between 1840 and 1860. This exportation of nation to American shores left a class of people hanging in racial limbo. The overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon Protestant population of America by no means included Irishmen in their definition of whiteness. To these Americans, whiteness was about temperament and Protestant values, which they felt uplifted man from the savagery of hunter-gathers or papism both. The Irish were referred to as "lazy, clannish, unclean, drunken brawlers who wallowed in crime and bred like rats." Waves of Irish Catholics threatened established Protestant political power as immigrants were granted the right to vote almost immediately in local elections. So estranged from the Protestant white establishment, Irish immigrants were referred to as "negroes turned inside out" and blacks conversely as "smoked Irish." The term "mulatto" first appeared on the 1850 U.S. Census because of growing intermarriage between Irish and African Americans. The two groups were racial outcasts in a white-Protestant society.

Irish fate soon changed, however, through a betrayal. As soon as 1843, an Englishman, John Finch, on a trip to America, noted that the Irish "are greater enemies to the Negro population, and greater advocates for the continuance of Negro slavery, than any portion of the population in the free States." In 1844, Irish mobs in Philadelphia rioted, attacking African American homes, business, and churches, and as the Irish became increasingly politically prominent, they suppressed abolitionism where they could. The Irish had learned that the key to their own inclusion in the white establishment was to prove there was a status even below them. The definition of whiteness grew and thus by the turn of the century the Irish were included in its new definition. This change was underscored by streams of new Eastern, Central, and Southern Europeans who flooded into America -- approximately 13 million of them -- between 1886 and 1925. This new definition of what it meant to be white was dominated by the word "Nordic," a vague, misused reference to ancestry in Northern and selective portions of Western Europe. This new definition included the Irish and excluded these millions of new, "non-Nordic," yet white in skin, Europeans. These new peoples were referred to as "Slavic" or "Mediterranean," but decidedly were not white in the American sense of inclusion. However, one sociologist, Henry Pratt Fairchild, generously suggested in 1911 that "if [non-Nordic immigrants] could prove [themselves] a man, and... acquire wealth and clean [themselves] up" they might receive the distinction of whiteness "in a generation or two." Thereby, a new distinction of whiteness was established: it was not a skin tone but a distinction of hierarchy.

However, beyond wealth or "cleaning themselves up," Italian, Greek, Polish, and Russian immigrants soon learned that the quickest way to whiteness in America was to stay the hell away

from blacks. Standing on racial middle ground, these new immigrants could have formed an interest group with black Americans, but as one Serbian immigrant simply put it, “You soon know something about this country. . . . Negroes never get a fair chance.” Therefore, these groups quickly distanced themselves from black America, just as the Irish had. The Irish even tried to help the newer immigrants learn. In 1919, Irish gangs donned blackface and rioted in Polish neighborhoods in an attempt to rally the Polish community against influxes of black immigration from the South.

Quickly, new immigrants learned that their power lay in their usefulness to the Nordic establishment’s reactionary racism, as waves of new black immigrants arrived in Northern cities at the same time as waves of non-Nordic immigrants. Soon the morose pondering of, and the subtle identification with, the black cause ended, and yet another immigrant group engaged in the American tradition of white supremacy. This new prevailing attitude was summed up by a Slovakian woman eager to show that she too was upset by rising black migration to northern cities: “I always tell my children not to play with the nigger people’s children. . . . This place now is all spoiled. . . . because the niggers they come and live here with the decent white people.” The ranks of new immigrants were needed in Northern cities by established white interests, as immigrants, generally a more motivated crowd, were disproportionately property owners. The white establishment needed these property owners to help keep neighborhoods segregated and to keep new black migrants out of their neighborhoods. They enlisted these “ethnic” whites, as the new Europeans were known, into their political ranks, together establishing practices most severely seen in formal red-lining to cut blacks out of large swaths of urban America. The effect of this exclusion was so significant that ethnic whites, who had actually been less integrated into white neighborhoods than blacks in 1900, reversed this very statistic by 1950. Living among whites, the distinction between Northerners, or Nordics, and other Europeans slowly began to fade as their common non-blackness drew them together. Famed black intellectual James Baldwin described yet another definition of whiteness forming in the mid- 20th century, saying that it was through the “debasement and definition of black people, [that whites] debased and defined themselves”, suggesting that debasement was, perhaps, the only thing connecting white to one another. Whereas fifty or one hundred years ago common faith or ancestry had distinguished white from nonwhite, now only a shared anti-black politics did.

Today, the definition of whiteness is poised for yet another change. Like the Irish, Italian, Greek, Polish, and Russian communities, a new wave of immigration is challenging the racial hierarchy of the United States: Hispanics. The swelling ranks of Hispanics are even expected to push the United States over the threshold into what has been dubbed a majority-minority nation, meaning that whites will no longer represent a demographic majority of the American population. This threshold is expected to be reached in 2043. However, trends, if not history, suggest that the seemingly inevitable fate of a minority white America isn’t so inevitable. As you should now be acquainted, the definition of what it meant to be white has broadened before. Therefore, it seems likely that it will be broadened yet again, as Hispanics seem to fill the only real remaining component which has come to dominate the definition of whiteness: they’re not black. When given the option between white, black, or other on the 2010 American Census, only 2.5% of Latinos said they were black, and a majority, 53%, said they were white. This eligibility for, and association with, whiteness is only growing for Latino Americans. Between the 2000 and the 2010 Census, 2.5 million Latino individuals actively changed their racial affiliation from other to

white. It seems that, just as other immigrants groups have, the longer Latinos stay in the United States, the more likely they are to claim whiteness. Second and third-generation Latinos are more likely to state that they're white than their first generation parents or grandparents were. To anticipate what future Latino generations may do, one need look no further than Puerto Rican Americans, who immigrated, on average, earlier than most other groups of Latinos; 80% of Puerto Rican Americans consider themselves white, compared to 53% of mainland Puerto Ricans. Why is this happening? It could be that just as the Irish and the Poles learned that they'd be strong in a political coalition with established white America, so too are Hispanics. Many assume that Hispanics, who have been discriminated against, will align with black Americans against racial discrimination, but considering that the level of discrimination against Latino Americans more closely resembles that of previous immigrant groups than the more ingrained racism towards African Americans, it seems likely that Latinos, too, will be compelled into maintaining a white political coalition's control, which stands against an aggressive reckoning with this country's racial history.

This does seem to be happening. Second- and third- generation Hispanics are more likely than their parents to be registered Republicans, a party that won whites by a 21-point margin in the last election, and that has consistently stood against social redistribution policies meant to ameliorate the circumstances caused by racial injustice. It also seems that Henry Pratt Fairchild's 1911 definition of whiteness as primarily a function of wealth stands up: the wealthier second- and third-generation Hispanic immigrants are more likely to identify as white and vote Republican, and each generation after the landing immigrant one, on average, is richer than the last. The definition of whiteness in America has come to be little more than the condition of sitting at the top of the cultural hierarchy. That apex is something achieved through a certain political affiliation opposing racial equity, a degree of wealth, and finally, the belief that while one need not be alabaster-skinned, one must not be black.

The implications of this three-part definition to whiteness are broad ranging and, perhaps, devastating. Those bent on an American reckoning with its racial past being made unavoidable by a minority-majority nation, and racial justice resultantly following, should not blindly accept that Latino Americans will identify with black political interests. As Latino Americans continue to assimilate, move towards income parity with whites, and not be black, all things which have evaded African Americans, they will be increasingly in association with white interests. Like immigrants before them, Latino Americans are no strangers to bigotry. Let us not forget that George Zimmerman, the man responsible for killing 17-year old Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black kid, was himself Latino. Thus, over time Latinos could in chunks, or as a whole, disassociate themselves from the loose minority coalition, discovering that their interests and those of black Americans are not aligned. As the definition of whiteness expands to include a growing population of middle-class, decreasingly Democratic, third- and fourth-generation Latino Americans, the United States may never become a minority-majority country in practice. White America will continue to dominate American politics and culture into the foreseeable future, just as it always has, and no one should expect a true American reckoning with racial justice. Once again, it seems likely that the definition of whiteness will broaden and indoctrinate more into the time-honored American tradition of white supremacy.

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