

Whiteness 3.0



**An Introduction to
Critical White Studies**

Whiteness in America



- **Noel Ignatiev is a historian who explores how Irish-Americans became “white” in the U.S.**
 - **[“White Negroes and Smoked Irish”]**
- **Karen Brodtkin is a Professor of Anthropology & Women’s Studies who investigates her own family history to explain how Jews became “white” in the U.S.**
 - **[“How the Jews Became White”]**

The Possessive Investment in Whiteness



- George Lipsitz is a scholar of Critical Race Theory, Musicology, and American Popular Culture.
- He researched and exposed “the possessive investment in whiteness,” a concept that describes white material determinism, or interest convergence, in the U.S.

What is “whiteness?”



- A social construction that demarcates and confers privilege based on race, skin color, social class
- Institutionalized through the social history of U.S. public policy
 - Lipsitz explains how this history of whites creating social policies that benefit their own self-interest reflects what he calls “the possessive investment in whiteness.”

Historical Examples



■ The Homestead Act of 1862

- Established a precedent for poor whites to access property ownership, but denied this privilege to blacks.

■ Federal Housing Administration (FHA) home loans

- Federal policies privileged white home ownership over access to loans for blacks
- Legalized segregation limits where people of color can live.
- Restrictive Covenants also limit home ownership for people of color.

Another Example



- **Access to post-World War II G.I. Bill funds privileged whites over blacks**
 - **White veterans have privileged access to a college education**
 - **Access to post-graduate middle class home ownership and social mobility**
- **Overall, historically in the U.S., federal policies have privilege certain groups and disadvantage others. [whites over blacks]**

the possessive investment



- People in the U.S. who are identified as white have historically supported policies that benefitted themselves; to the exclusion and detriment of people of color.
 - collective group interest
 - Whites have had access to the means to achieve prosperity and accrue capital; people of color, especially African-Americans, have not had these opportunities.

Example: A Brief Survey of Irish-American History



- **impact of British colonialism on Ireland**
- **1600s: some brought to the U.S. as indentured servants**
- **1815-1920: mass exodus of Irish to U.S.**
- **exploited as labor and pitted against other ethnic groups**
 - **pitted against Chinese**
 - **compared to Blacks; pitted against Blacks**

Irish and Africans

- The Irish experience a subordinate social status in Ireland under British colonialism; like “slaves.”
- But “sympathy” for Africans disappears with the Atlantic crossing.
 - They arrive in the 13 colonies as competitors to African labor.
- 1600s-early 1700s: Irish and African both initially occupied the lower rungs of U.S. society.

Black & White in America



- There is an early history of race-mixing (miscegenation) in the colonies.
 - 1661: Maryland passes the first anti-miscegenation law
- By the late 17th Century, white indentured servitude gave way to chattel slavery in the U.S.
- Irish-Americans promote their “whiteness” or identity as “whites” to get opportunities over Blacks and other groups.

Irish-Americans Access Whiteness



- At one point, the Irish mixed with and identified with Black culture through minstrelsy [See Ignatiev].
- The Irish transform their identity by insisting on their own whiteness and supporting white supremacy.
- How do you become a “white” American?
 - Express racism against “Blacks.”
- The social pecking order is established.
 - Poor whites are made the overseers of Black slaves.
- The Irish turned on Blacks; the psychic purpose of racism
 - they were purposely pitted against Blacks by political parties, the plantation system, and the law

Irish social mobility & assimilation

- The Irish looked “white;” they spoke “English”
- The Irish settled in cities.
- As “white” immigrants they could become naturalized citizens of the U.S.
- As citizens, they had voting rights and could access property ownership.
- The Irish establish a privilege system for other Irish-Americans in skilled labor professions in cities.
 - the “ethnic” strategy
 - Police departments, fire departments, etc.
- These privileges facilitate their complete assimilation into the U.S. as “white” Americans.