

FEARFUL SYMMETRY: THE UNHISTORICAL SELF OF WHITENESS STUDIES

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In the years following Bacon's Rebellion of 1676, the rich planters of colonial Virginia hit upon a New World expedient that would be fateful for the entire history of race in America. Edmund Morgan tells the story memorably in *American Slavery, American Freedom*.¹ Having narrowly evaded death and devastation at the hands of the former indentured servants who comprised the region's lower classes, and still faced with a chronic shortage of labor, the planters began to import African slaves to work the tobacco crops on which their wealth depended. They weren't the first in the New World to try this approach. West Indian sugar planters had already successfully organized the labor on their large plantations along these "racial" lines, and there was sufficient precedent in Western culture at large for associating "blackness" with evil to defuse moral alarm at the practice.² Where previously the Virginia planters seem not to have made race-based distinctions in the status of their servants—a variety of Britons with an admixture of Africans—they now began, however prompted, to institute a starkly "racial" legal boundary that would in time reach into every corner of colonial society. As more and more Africans were shipped in during the last three decades of the seventeenth century, the Virginia Assembly issued a grim sequence of statutes that equated racial "blackness" with permanent hereditary chattel servitude, and prohibited social or sexual mixture between the "races."

The new laws solved the colony's labor and class problems, Morgan wryly notes, at a stroke. Disoriented by their forced relocation and prodded by the whip, "blacks" proved physically capable of performing the grueling agricultural tasks at hand well enough to generate enormous profits for their owners. And a

¹ Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York, 1975).

² Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black* (Chapel Hill, 1968).

new bond of “whiteness” between rich and poor Anglo settlers served to defuse the class tensions which had recently threatened to tear the colony apart. The planters now successfully enlisted their former class antagonists—poor “whites”—in the common “racial” cause of systematically subjugating enslaved “blacks.” Millions more African slaves were imported or “bred” over the next 170 years as Virginia’s spectacularly profitable system spread throughout the American South.³ The “white-over-black” racial binary became foundational not only to the southern regional economy but also to colonial society as a whole, and then to the newly formed United States after 1776, even as the new nation’s founding document famously proclaimed universal human freedom. And, as ever, economics and culture intertwined. The racial binary cut not only into black American skin, but also into both black and white minds, at a cost of suffering, lost potential and moral–political contradiction well-nigh immeasurable.

But perhaps not entirely immeasurable. At least since the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, an impressive and still growing group of American historians have sought to take the measure of this cruel system and its long-lasting psychic and social effects.⁴ Indeed, the post-civil-rights historiography of slavery and its afterlives forms a significant chapter of modern American intellectual history. And more recently, starting in the early 1990s, the practitioners of “whiteness studies” have sought to add a page to this important self-reckoning by opening up another dimension of the historical analysis of American race and racism. Scholars such as David Roediger, Theodore Allen, Noel Ignatiev, Eric Lott, Karen Brodtkin, and Matthew Frye Jacobson have directed attention to the “white” side of America’s foundational racial binary. They ask how this artificial, spurious but nonetheless enormously potent social category shaped the identities and experience not of its black victims but rather of some of its proudest claimants, especially the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigrant working classes. This work has generated considerable excitement, as evidenced by the publication of a torrent of “whiteness” titles over the past two and a half decades in a wide range of scholarly fields, from history, law, and literature to political science, sociology, and anthropology. It has also received some rather stringent criticism from a formidable array of leading American historians.⁵ Since the two books here under review—Jack Turner’s *Awakening*

³ In 1860 there were approximately 4 million African-American slaves in the South.

⁴ Scholars such as Kenneth Stampp, John Hope Franklin, Herbert Aptheker, Winthrop Jordan, Eugene Genovese, Lawrence Levine, Stanley Elkins, Peter Kolchin, Edmund Morgan, Orlando Patterson, David Brion Davis, and Ira Berlin, to name just a prominent few.

⁵ As detailed later in the essay: Eric Arnesen, Eric Foner, Adolph L. Reed Jr, Barbara J. Fields, Peter Kolchin.

to *Race* and David Leverenz's *Honor Bound*—both explicitly offer themselves as contributions to this still burgeoning field, I will assess them in relation to this larger body of antecedent work, starting with a brief look back at the small group of books generally seen as foundational.⁶

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Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom* may be said to have paved the way for whiteness studies insofar as it painstakingly established what would come to be one of the new field's enabling premises. As sketched above, Morgan showed in detail that the American black/white racial binary was not based on an inherent transhistorical biological fact. It was rather a legal–historical construction with a specifiable class provenance in late seventeenth-century Virginia. The construct initially served narrow exploitative ends, but grew over time to become the quasi-metaphysical basis of an entire cultural system.⁷

Alexander Saxton's *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic* then provided a model for whiteness studies proper.⁸ Focused on the class-based political uses of racism in the emergent American nation as a whole throughout the nineteenth century, Saxton's influential book powerfully established several of the characteristic emphases and methods of what came to be a new field. Most prominent among them were (1) a conviction of the near-ubiquity of racism in American society and politics; (2) a special interest in how racism was influenced by social class; (3) extensive attention given to works of expressive culture—highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow—as vehicles of class- and race-based political agendas; and (4) as its title indicates, a presumption that a racially inflected form of classical republicanism rather than Lockean liberalism was the foundational and prevailing political philosophy governing American society.

The founding group of whiteness scholars in the 1990s generally acknowledged an important debt to Morgan and, especially, to Saxton. But they were not content just to add evidence to Morgan's or Saxton's sobering histories of American legal–political racism. The central distinguishing characteristic of this work was its effort to raise the moral-psychological stakes in the study of race in American life by focusing not only on racism itself but on white racial *identity*. These scholars set out to investigate not just a legally reinforced structure of exploitative

⁶ Jack Turner, *Awakening to Race* (Chicago, 2012); David Leverenz, *Honor Bound* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2012).

⁷ Morgan emphasizes a stark profit motive as slavery's original driving force; Eugene Genovese, for one distinguished example of a different approach, pays more attention to the role played by quasi-aristocratic paternalism in the evolving history of the institution.

⁸ Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (London, 1990).

social relationships, but rather a more open and uncertain inner terrain of self-construction. Perhaps most distinctively—and problematically—they sought to describe racial “whiteness” as a matter of collective moral choice. By emphasizing the degree to which white racial identity was historically constructed and, in their view, collectively chosen, these scholar–activists also prepared themselves to advocate for its deconstruction and refusal.

The central case-study for no fewer than four of these scholars was the nineteenth-century Irish immigrant working class.⁹ Much of the latter half of Roediger’s *Wages of Whiteness* focuses on the Irish, and it is in this portion of the book that Roediger first develops the racial-identity narrative that came to define whiteness studies throughout the 1990s. Roediger presumes that Irish-Americans’ consciousness of their own people’s long and brutal subjugation in Ireland should have predisposed them to solidarity with the plight of African-Americans. This categorical subaltern bond should then have been further strengthened, he suggests, by sheer propinquity: the two groups often lived and worked at close quarters in the slums of the nineteenth-century urban North. Indeed, Roediger points out that blacks and Irish were often directly if hatefully linked in the public mind by similarly demeaning racist caricature and epithet: cartoonists drew both groups with exaggeratedly simian features, and the Irish were labeled “nigger[s] inside out”¹⁰ or “white niggers.”¹¹ But the Irish denied these incipient bonds at what Roediger describes as a pivotal moment of collective racial choice.

In 1842 Daniel O’Connell, the revered “great emancipator” of Ireland’s Catholic masses, issued a widely disseminated public “appeal” to the American Irish, exhorting them to join forces with the emerging abolitionist movement. The “appeal” holds great importance for Roediger, and for subsequent studies of the American Irish from the “whiteness” point of view, where the story of its publication and reception is twice retold. Roediger maintains that so seasoned and effective a politician as O’Connell would not have made such a dramatic public appeal if there were not some realistic chance of its success. Indeed, for Roediger the mere fact that O’Connell made the gambit confirms from a potentially emancipatory perspective what racist caricatures in American print

⁹ In addition to the works by Roediger, Ignatiev, and Allen which I discuss immediately following, Eric Lott’s *Love and Theft* (New York, 1993) also concerns the Irish as both performers and chief audience of blackface minstrelsy. But as I suggest later in the essay, Lott’s marvelous book distinguishes itself from these others by the nuance, historical specificity, and psychological subtlety of its account of Irish–black relations as mediated by the minstrel stage. Among other points, Lott implicitly acknowledges the official legal impossibility of choosing blackness by emphasizing the sublimation of any such illicit wishes into blackface performances.

¹⁰ Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* (New York: 1991) 133–4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 49–50.

media had been implying from a repressive one—that there was a sociological kinship between blacks and Irish, that Irish-American racial identity, and thus Irish-American racial allegiances, were not yet fixed. At this relatively early moment in their assimilation to American culture, Roediger asserts, the Irish could well have followed O’Connell’s lead and opted for abolitionism. But they chose “whiteness” instead. “Irish-Americans treasured their whiteness,” he regretfully summarizes, “as entitling them to both political rights and to jobs.”¹² And just so, as Noel Ignatiev subsequently put it (with due acknowledgment of Roediger) in a remarkably catchy book title, “the Irish became white.”¹³

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The same overarching narrative pattern holds in Ignatiev’s book, and in Theodore W. Allen’s two-volume *The Invention of the White Race*. By all three accounts everything in Ireland’s history and much of early Irish experience in nineteenth-century America should have predisposed them to identification with African-Americans. Yet the Irish nonetheless tragically declined the historical opportunity to come to African-Americans’ support. Indeed, as Ignatiev plangently details, the Irish not only refused to try to help the African-Americans they lived among; they also actively tried to dissociate themselves from these least of their brethren by seizing every occasion to violently express their hatred in riots and other mob actions. Thus were the Irish all too willingly interpellated into the American racial binary. Thus, these scholars argue, in denial of their “true national heritage,”¹⁴ the Irish “enter[ed] the white race [as] a strategy to secure an advantage in a competitive society.”¹⁵

Karen Brodtkin tells a twentieth-century Jewish-American version of the same story in *How Jews Became White Folks*. Mixing her personal family history with sociology, literary commentary, and no little political polemic, Brodtkin recasts the narrative of successful Jewish-American assimilation in terms of a morally problematic choice of whiteness. Her family climbed up the socioeconomic ladder in three generations—from immigrant garment workers living on the Lower East Side, to schoolteachers living on Long Island, to her own tenured professorship at UCLA. By most lights this would seem to be an inspiring story of cross-generational white ethnic immigrant upward mobility, and all the more liberating because it moves towards exceptional accomplishment and prestigious professional status for a woman in the third generation. But looking through the

¹² Ibid., 136.

¹³ Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, 1995).

¹⁴ Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 2 vols. (New York, 1994–7), 1: 186.

¹⁵ Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 2.

lens of “whiteness” leaves Brodtkin uncertain. She characterizes her grandparents and parents as “Jewish,” herself as “Jewish and white,” and her two sons as “white.”¹⁶ And she confesses that she feels not only cultural loss but serious moral–political ambivalence about this progression.

With Jewish whiteness, Brodtkin argues, came an attenuation of the sense of subaltern solidarity within their own minority community, and decreased empathy with other such groups. She holds up postwar Jewish neoconservatives as representative in this regard. Nathan Glazer comes in for sharpest criticism for suggesting that Jews earned their success by education, hard work, self-discipline, and deferred gratification, while African-Americans contributed to their own continuing marginality by failing to cultivate such virtues. For Brodtkin such rhetoric bears comparison with nineteenth-century Irish-American attacks on African-Americans: it taps into the nation’s charged racial binary in an effort to bolster the relative standing of an “in-between” ethnicity. She argues that in thus seeking to secure their whiteness at the rhetorical expense of another historically victimized group, postwar American Jews, like the Irish before them, enacted a denial of their own painful history. She sees this neoconservative turn as representative of a broader embrace of whiteness in postwar American Judaism—a tendency to which she counsels resistance in the form of a more culturally appropriate and authentic racial “ambivalence.”¹⁷

In *Whiteness of a different color* Matthew Frye Jacobson wrote yet another version of the “becoming-white” thesis across the entire history of American immigration from the mass arrival of the Irish in the 1840s to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. He sought to “recast the saga of Europeans’ immigration and assimilation as a racial odyssey”¹⁸—to retell the formerly “pretty story”¹⁹ of American welcome as a process of unlovely initiation into a harsh racial “system of differences.”²⁰ But for Jacobson, unlike for Roediger *et al.*, the decisive episodes in the odyssey were moments of large-scale public discursive shifts rather than of collective ethnic choice.

The most important of these for Jacobson’s purposes was the “fracturing” of American whiteness from the early cascade of Irish in the 1840s to the restrictive Immigration Act of 1924. This period was marked by the arrival in very large numbers not only of Irish and Germans, but later of a remarkable

¹⁶ Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1998), 5–6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁸ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigration and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

variety of European peoples—Italians, Jews, Slavs, Poles, Greeks, Czechs, Ruthenians, Slovenians, etc. A complex and unstable discourse of “variegated”²¹ and hierarchical whiteness thus arose—including terms such as “Celts,” “Slavs,” “Iberics,” “Hebrews,” “Teutons,” “Mediterraneans,” etc.—according to which these peoples were understood to be at once white and yet racially distinct both from Anglo-Saxons and from one another. This phase was then followed by the ironic recrudescence of the nation’s original race binary with the popularization of the category of “Caucasian” in the middle and later decades of the twentieth century. At this stage the formerly numerous European racial subcategories such as Celt, Slav, and Hebrew were absorbed into the umbrella category of “Caucasian.” With the gradual emergence of the civil rights movement “blacks” and “Caucasians” were increasingly seen as the only two significant national groupings. Thus “becoming Caucasian” had the effect, Jacobson argues, of strongly solidifying non-Anglo-Saxon European ethnic claims to cultural legitimacy, and of thus allowing these groups to disown more particularizing racial identifications altogether in favor of “vanishing into whiteness.”²²

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Jack Turner’s *Awakening to Race* and David Leverenz’s *Honor Bound* carry forward several of the main emphases of whiteness studies as established in the 1990s while each seeks also to open up an additional dimension. Like all the whiteness scholars starting with Saxton, both Turner and Leverenz are centrally concerned with what they see as pervasive racism in American history and in contemporary American society. And like the post-Saxton group starting with Roediger, they also seek, at least in principle, to go beyond the historical description of racist ideology and behavior. Indeed, neither is a historian strictly speaking: Turner is a political scientist, while Leverenz is a scholar of American literature. Rather than compiling and interpreting new empirical data, Turner and Leverenz consider a very broad range of discourses and social phenomena, especially works of expressive culture, as the basis of an essentially moral-psychological inquiry and critique. They generalize the “becoming-white” thesis beyond any specific ethnic groups, and turn their attention to how “white people” as a whole might go about reversing or at least undoing what they see as a broadly American “choice” of whiteness.²³

²¹ Ibid., 10.

²² Ibid., 258.

²³ Turner, *Awakening to Race*, 102. For the idea of a “choice” of whiteness he here cites James Baldwin’s “Black English: A Dishonest Argument” in Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption* (New York, 2010), 125–30, 128.

Turner's book makes a potentially valuable innovation by bringing American individualism within the purview of whiteness studies. As I noted above, one of the persistent features of whiteness scholarship in general has been its tacit dismissal of the salience of liberal individualism as a significant American political discourse. It is perhaps not surprising that an approach focused on the ubiquity of racism in American society should downplay the pertinence of a founding philosophy committed in principle—and often in belated practice—to the anti-racist idea of natural rights. But it is nonetheless a significant, even glaring, omission, and Turner's book promises a necessary correction in centering on a group of antiracist writers—Emerson, Thoreau, Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin—who may all also be accurately characterized to differing degrees as liberal individualists. Turner seeks to forge an ethnically and conceptually hybrid tradition blending what he sees as an Emersonian conception of democratic individualism with an African-American emphasis on substantive justice and equality for *all*.

Turner sets up his synthesis by positing from the beginning a distinction between what he calls “atomistic” and “democratic” individualism. The former, he asserts, is centered entirely on the negative libertarian conception of rights as essentially defensive principles which serve mainly to protect the individual from undue interference by society and the state. Turner rather too quickly disposes of this view by asserting that it was accurately characterized by Tocqueville as socially enervating and alienating—inevitably conducive, in Turner's paraphrases of the Frenchman, to moral “self-deception”²⁴ and “systematized self-delusion.”²⁵ Emerson, Turner asserts, is mistakenly believed to have committed himself to this benighted view in individualistic essays such as “Self-Reliance.”

“Democratic individualism,” by contrast, is more “sociologically savvy.”²⁶ It is informed by the awareness that each individual is dependent upon, and shaped by, a complex and far-reaching web of others who make his/her individual self-realization(s) possible. Turner argues that this conception better characterizes Emerson's thought as a whole, wherein the negative libertarian emphasis of “Self-Reliance” is counterbalanced by more socially attuned works such as “Man the Reformer,” the antislavery speeches, and “Fate.” In these works, Turner asserts, Emerson developed an exacting conception of moral-social “complicity” to go along with his libertarian idea of “self-reliance,” and the two ideas together became the basis for an ongoing “democratic individualist” tradition: “To Emerson, Thoreau, Douglass, Ellison, and James Baldwin, personal responsibility entailed at minimum (1) a refusal to be complicit in injustice, (2) a commitment

²⁴ Turner, *Awakening to Race*, 20.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

to examine oneself for complicity, and (3) a willingness to overcome whatever complicity one finds.”²⁷

For Turner, the primary injustice in American life was slavery and pervasive racism, the latter of which remains to this day. Radical moral and political transformation is required, Turner argues, for white Americans to overcome their complicity in these phenomena. On the moral level Turner taps into Thoreauvian and Baldwinian rhetoric and preaches “awakening” from a collective “moral slumber.”²⁸ His book as a whole is rhetorically structured by the long-standing American race binary, but with “inside” and “outside” positions reversed. “White people,” Turner declares repeatedly, have been and remain “asleep,”²⁹ not “awake to reality,”³⁰ likely to be “self-deluded moral failures” with deep “defects of mind” and “vices of heart,”³¹ “morally obtuse,”³² subject to “systematic self-delusion,”³³ “willfully ignorant,”³⁴ “psychotic,”³⁵ “taking for granted their own good character,”³⁶ “neither democratic nor civilized,”³⁷ “pathological,”³⁸ “innocents,”³⁹ in a “spiritual coma,”⁴⁰ and “morally insular and callous.”⁴¹ Black people, by contrast, are characterized only by “dazzling emanations of humanity.”⁴² To shake off their long-sustained false consciousness, Turner argues, white people must instead cultivate what he calls “race consciousness”—an awareness not only of their complicity in evils done to blacks by whites over the course of American history but also of the fact that whites inhabit a constructed (white) racial identity no less than blacks, one which in the case of whiteness affords unacknowledged privileges. Like many scholars of whiteness studies Turner thus contends against what he sees as a long-ingrained hegemonic structure according to which white people remain racially unmarked. On the political level whites “awakened” to “race consciousness” must then be prepared

²⁷ Ibid., 2.

²⁸ Ibid., 89.

²⁹ Ibid., 5.

³⁰ Ibid., 5.

³¹ Ibid., 16.

³² Ibid., 16.

³³ Ibid., 25.

³⁴ Ibid., 33.

³⁵ Ibid., 72, 73.

³⁶ Ibid., 79.

³⁷ Ibid., 93.

³⁸ Ibid., 94.

³⁹ Ibid., 108.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 110.

⁴¹ Ibid., 116.

⁴² Ibid., 66.

to remedy the negative effects of their long moral failure by rediscovering the virtues of “relinquishment.” Turner proposes a detailed public procedure for the inducement of this moral-psychological transformation which I will describe later in this essay.

David Leverenz’s *Honor Bound* delves farther into the moral psychology of American racism by linking it to the inner dynamics of honor and shame—a deep affective structure of human solidarity with archaic roots. Leverenz claims not merely that racism and notions of honor have often overlapped in American culture—as in the familiar case of so-called “southern honor”—but that in fact these two social formations are essentially conjoined. And he ventures a hope that the already visible decline of honor in American society, helped along by critiques such as his own, will hasten the end of racism. “[I]f racism depends on being honor-bound,” as he puts it, “then racism will decline as white people start to detach themselves from the imperatives of group honor.”⁴³

Leverenz establishes his terms by reference to a chilling anecdote about the rock singer Bo Diddley:

In 1959 Bo Diddley experienced what he later recalled as the most humiliating moment in his life. When he and his band were playing in Las Vegas at the Showboat Casino, one afternoon they jumped into the hotel’s swimming pool. Immediately all the white people climbed out, and an attendant put up a sign saying “Contaminated Water.”⁴⁴

For Leverenz this incident is representative of a pervasive pattern of racist behavior in American life in which “white people,” linked in solidarity by a shared code of race-based honor, conspire to bring intense shame upon African-Americans or other people of color. Leverenz calls such activity “racial shaming,” and finds it overtly or covertly performed in a historically far-flung array of American settings and situations. He sees it in epochal social occurrences—slavery itself, the Jim Crow regime, lynching (“shaming turned violent”), and the strategies of opposition to Barack Obama during the 2008 presidential election. He locates it equally in minor incidents such as the 1783–1815 War against Barbary Pirates, Joe Wilson’s outburst—“You lie!”—during President Obama’s 2009 address to a joint session of the US Congress, and an episode of the political talk show *Hardball*. Leverenz also sees racial shaming as an underlying cause of most American wars, especially the Iraq War. And he finds white honor and racial shaming to be crucial themes in American literary classics *The Scarlet Letter*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Lolita*.

⁴³ David Leverenz, *Honor Bound* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2012), 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

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To read all this work together (as well as a great deal more that the limitations of space preclude mentioning here) is to be pulled in two directions. On one hand, it is hard to deny the potential importance of whiteness as a topic. Human beings create culture by imposing boundaries on the world in order to make it more intelligible, meaningful, and, for good or ill, tractable. Surely few such impositions have shaped American culture more fundamentally than the racial boundary first instituted by the Virginia gentry at the turn of the eighteenth century. The significance of this boundary is only enhanced by its stark incompatibility with another of America's foundational cultural boundaries—the one drawn in principle around each individual by the Declaration of Independence and the liberal doctrine of natural rights. A significant part of American history is a story of conflict between these two boundaries and the respective cultural systems they underwrite: one is thus grateful for scholarship that sheds light on either boundary or on their many bloody intersections, psychic and social-historical. From the point of view of the still evolving liberal-democratic culture of the Declaration of Independence, scholarship in whiteness studies from Saxton to Turner and Leverenz thus continues to compel interest. This work extends the effort of liberal-democratic civil society to provide corrective self-reflection upon the long and flagrant violation of its own most basic boundary of justice. And it takes an important step in directing this critique at intimate levels of American self-construction.

But even as whiteness scholars develop a subject of undeniable importance, no attentive reader can fail to perceive that this body of scholarship, past and present, is also beset by a broad range of fundamental conceptual and methodological problems which significantly diminish its moral-political force. A decade after its initial emergence the whiteness-studies approach came under severe criticism on this count. Labor historian Eric Arnesen published a thoroughgoing and stinging critique in the fall 2001 issue of *International Labor and Working-Class History*.⁴⁵ “Too much of the historical scholarship on whiteness,” Arnesen summarized, “has disregarded scholarly standards, employed sloppy methodology, generated new buzzwords and jargon, and, at times, provided an erroneous history.”⁴⁶ Three out of five very distinguished responders—Eric Foner, Barbara J. Fields, and Adolph Reed Jr—then substantially amplified Arnesen's concerns in the process of concurring with his assessment.⁴⁷ “[L]ack of care and nuance in

⁴⁵ Eric Arnesen, “Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 60 (Fall 2001), 3–32.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁷ Eric Foner, “Response to Eric Arnesen,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 60 (Fall, 2001), 57–60; Barbara J. Fields, “Whiteness, Racism, & Identity,” *ibid.*, 48–56;

interpretation,” Reed wrote, “too sweeping claims, anachronistic and murky arguments, bold proclamations of commonplaces, and hyperbolic judgments—all beset the whiteness literature.”⁴⁸ And a year later Peter Kolchin published an evenhanded but no less damning critique in the *Journal of American History*.⁴⁹ “[O]vergeneralization . . . and inattention to context bedevil” this field, Kolchin wrote.⁵⁰ But even as these senior historians detailed their criticisms, most agreed that whiteness scholars had energetically initiated an important investigation. The field needed only time and further refinement, most concurred, to fulfill its considerable promise. Taking Turner and Leverenz as samples of the field another decade later, however, one can no longer be so sure of the long-term prospects. The intellectual energy, the intense moral conviction, and the importance of the topic persist, but unfortunately so also do many of the serious methodological and conceptual problems, which time seems to have exacerbated rather than corrected.

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Two interrelated problems stand out among many as most fundamental and persistent. The first is a quixotic and historically implausible conception of collective racial “choice.” And the second is an increasingly imprecise and historically untethered core conception of the meaning of “whiteness.” This latter problem has multiple dimensions which I will explore over the course of the rest of the essay. But all of these are undergirded by the first problem, which may be quickly characterized.

As Eric Foner pointed out in 2001, there was never really a question of any European immigrant group *choosing* to “become white.” By edict of American constitutional law all Europeans were “white on arrival.”⁵¹ Above all, this meant that by contrast to African-Americans, American Indians, and Asians, European immigrants were accorded all the rights of citizenship—especially the right to

Adolph Reed Jr, “Response to Eric Arnesen”, *ibid.*, 69–80. James Barrett and Victoria Hattam dissented. James R. Barrett, “Whiteness Studies: Anything Here for Historians of the Working Class?”, *ibid.*, 33–42; Victoria C. Hattam, “Whiteness: Theorizing Race, Eliding Ethnicity”, *ibid.*, 61–68.

⁴⁸ Reed, “Response to Eric Arnesen”, 76.

⁴⁹ Peter Kolchin, “Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America”, *Journal of American History*, 89 (June, 2002), 154–73.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁵¹ I take the phrase “white on arrival” from the title of Thomas A. Guglielmo’s excellent book on Italian immigrants: *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago 1890–1945* (New York, 2003), which offers a valuable corrective to whiteness studies on this topic.

vote.⁵² Such legal clarity did not prevent the “whiteness” of various groups from being called into question on multiple secondary discursive and symbolic levels in the culture at large. As noted above, Roediger *et al.* cite the fact that the Irish were sometimes popularly referred to as “white niggers” while both groups were visually caricatured as simian. And Jacobson traces the development of elaborate academic taxonomies to classify the many non-Anglo-Saxon “new immigrants” from Europe. Indeed, whiteness scholarship in general tends to open the identity of legally unmoored subjects to the symbolic buffetings of a very large range of public conversations and representations whose relative authority or pertinence is never established.⁵³ But it is an all too easily overlooked principle of liberal culture that the law trumps all other discourses. And naturalization law was unambiguous on the point of pan-European whiteness. For no group was the significance of this discursive hierarchy more evident than for the Irish—the one group most singled out by the “becoming-white” thesis. Regardless of how often other discourses called the Irish “white niggers” or the like, with the law on its side this impoverished, widely despised, and religiously alien group was enabled to assimilate and to assert itself politically and culturally in a remarkably short time. And variants of this pattern held for all those white by law, regardless of competing discourses.

And the decisive authority of the law cut two ways. The same stroke of the late eighteenth-century pen that made Irish, Jews, Ruthenians, etc. white made it impossible for them to become black. While it is now clear to twenty-first-century readers that race was a historical construction, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was seen as a metaphysical truth—one upon which entire social orders rested. The American racial code was thus as strict and clear with regard to blackness as naturalization law was with regard to whiteness: any legal crossing over by a “white” person into “black” status was made impossible because it would have undermined the spurious racial basis of the entire structure.⁵⁴ Even excessive

⁵² Foner, “Response to Eric Arnesen”, 57–8, makes the point as follows: “in terms of legal and political rights, European immigrants never had to ‘become’ white. The men who wrote these laws and constitutions subsumed these immigrants from the outset within the category of whiteness.”

⁵³ Arnesen, “Whiteness and the Historians’ Imagination,” 20, raises the crucial question on this point: “Even if whiteness scholars managed to produce some convincing evidence that some Americans—manufacturers, professionals, or other elites—somehow doubted the full whiteness of new immigrant groups in the 30’s and 40’s, on what grounds do these historians single out these views, declare them hegemonic, and ignore all countervailing opinion, no matter how great? This raises the question of whose discourse counts.”

⁵⁴ Lawrence M. Friedman, *The History of American Law* 3rd edn (New York, 2001; first published 1973) 161: “In southern eyes, black was black. Whether the person was slave or free was almost incidental. The free black was a dangerous person. The free black threatened

“fraternization” by whites with blacks was punishable by whipping.⁵⁵ On a purely psychological level it is highly implausible that any European immigrant group would have taken the trouble to extract itself from centuries of class-ascribed or religiously ascribed subjugation in Europe only to volunteer for more of the same on a racial basis in America by proclaiming itself something other than white. But even if a given European group had somehow quixotically chosen to attempt to forgo its own liberal-democratic emancipation by American law, the same legal system would not have permitted it. No European immigrant to America ever chose to “become white” in part because it was impossible to choose in any legally significant way to “become black.”⁵⁶ To suggest otherwise is to fail to grasp the authority of law in liberal culture, and to trivialize the murderous distinctiveness of the black–white legal barrier. Brodtkin especially risks this by loosely claiming nonwhiteness for Jewish immigrants. It does not make light of the Old World horrors or New World persistence of anti-Semitism to point out that by all decisive legal measures Jews were not regarded as black, American Indian, or Asian, and were therefore also white on arrival.

the whole caste system.” By the same logic a “white” person claiming “blackness” would have been not only incomprehensible but unacceptable.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 160: “White fraternizers were highly unwelcome. By 1834 in South Carolina, a white man who gambled with a black, slave or free, was liable to be whipped ‘not exceeding thirty-nine lashes.’”

⁵⁶ John Stauffer’s *The Black Hearts of Men* (Cambridge, MA, 2002) would seem to present a counterexample insofar as it describes, among other things, the extraordinary efforts of white men Gerritt Smith (for a time) and John Brown (unto his death), to acquire “black hearts”—to “view the world as if they were black” (at 1). The book movingly evokes the degree to which in the 1850s under the influence of distinctive strains of millenarian Protestantism both men temporarily succeeded in achieving subjective inward identification with their despised black brethren. But to its credit the book also candidly registers the extent to which in the long run this noble subjective aspiration was shattered by the overwhelming objective force of racist codes of law and convention. The fact that both Brown and Smith came to believe that violence was necessary to bridge the subjective and the objective in this sense shows clearly that becoming black by simple choice was impossible under the established (racist) legal code. And even for these prophets the price was very high: Brown, as is well known, paid with his life—and the lives of many others; Smith paid for a time with his sanity, after which some of the society’s racist norms resumed their claim upon him. The extremely difficult prophetic–heroic nature of the self-transformations Stauffer thus describes helps to illustrate why it is unreasonable for historians to expect similar action from an entire group of hundreds of thousands of mostly very poor, uneducated, and marginalized people such as the antebellum immigrant Irish.

* * *

The detaching of European immigrants from a deep and often transformative link to the American legal system in this respect is not only historically distorting in its own right; it is symptomatic of a larger historical untethering of white selfhood that increasingly characterizes whiteness studies past and present. At the inception of whiteness studies in *The Wages of Whiteness* and in subsequent statements David Roediger was emphatic that his concern was not mainly white racism but rather historically particular forms of racial identity and consciousness. “Making whiteness, rather than simply white racism, the focus of study,” he wrote, “throws into sharp relief the ways that whites think of themselves, of power, of pleasure, and of gender.”⁵⁷ He followed up on this in *The Wages of Whiteness* by focusing on the ways in which the language of whiteness reflected the complex social and economic situations of specific groups. He showed how terms such as “freeman” or “hireling” or “white slavery” were charged with racial meaning when used by pre-Revolutionary carters, or founding-era artisan republicans, or working-class Irish immigrant Jacksonians. Not long thereafter, however, whiteness scholars, including Roediger himself, began reflexively to use the term “whiteness” as if it were simply synonymous with racial hatred or a political program of white supremacy, often seeming to be principally engaged in cataloguing examples thereof.⁵⁸ All of the 2001–2 reviewers again noted this slippage. Regarding “whiteness” and white supremacy Eric Arnesen declared flatly that the two concepts “are hardly equivalents . . . One can possess all the privileges and pleasures of ‘whiteness’, and hold to political opinions that formally oppose slavery, black subordination, and the like.”⁵⁹

Ten years later the distinction between “whiteness” and racism has been almost entirely lost. Jack Turner’s rhetoric seems to suggest that with regard to race he regards all “white people” who have not yet been “democratically reconstituted” as

⁵⁷ Quoted by Arnesen, “Whiteness and the Historians’ Imagination,” 4, from David Roediger, “Race and the Working-Class Past in the United States: Multiple Identities and the Future of Labor History,” *International Review of Social History*, 38 (1993), 127–43, 132.

⁵⁸ Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 19–92. Arnesen, “Whiteness and the Historians’ Imagination,” 23, cites for one example when Roediger (and James Barrett) note rank-and-file Eastern European immigrants’ lack of participation in Irish gang violence in post-World War I Chicago as an “abstention from whiteness.” Jacobson, similarly, “suggests that in attacking blacks in the Draft Riots in 1863, the Irish insisted on ‘whiteness’. With these and other words Jacobson treats whiteness and racist beliefs and actions as virtual synonyms, substituting the former for the latter and presenting a maneuver for a novel interpretation.”

⁵⁹ Arnesen, “Whiteness and the Historians’ Imagination,” 15; Foner, “Response to Eric Arnesen,” 58, strongly seconds Arnesen: “Too often, as Arnesen notes, whiteness has been invoked as a synonym for an all-pervasive, never-changing system of racial supremacy.”

equally “self-deluded,” “defective,” “morally obtuse,” “psychotic,” “uncivilized,” devoid of a “sense of reality,” etc. He makes no differentiation among white people on the basis of region, religion, class (with a few exceptions), expressed or enacted political opinions, date of birth, or date of family arrival in the United States. In Turner’s book whiteness has been reduced entirely to racism or “complicity” therein—attitudes culpable and actionable, as we will see, in his democratically reconstituted state. Leverenz similarly conflates whiteness, racism, and white supremacy. He ranges widely and glancingly across all of American history and geography, frequently speaking of “white people” as one vast and unified racist bloc, who react and generally feel in a monolithic way.

Such looseness may be partly an effect of another aspect of increasing conceptual drift in whiteness studies—the falling out of social class as a central concern and as an empirical constraint. In the early days, Saxton, Roediger, and Lott were quite clear that race and social class were inextricably entangled in American life and in the phenomenology of whiteness. American racial domination, they argued along with Morgan, arose and persisted within a larger context of class exploitation, of which it was a species, and it was best interpreted in this connection. So to begin to comprehend Irish-American immigrant racism, for example, it was necessary to consider what might have been the psychic effects of Irish class position as displaced peasants for whom the traumas of uprooting were multiplied by then being forced into compliance with emerging capitalist workplace discipline. Lott’s *Love and Theft* (New York, 1993) was exemplary in this regard—acutely attuned to the psychology of working-class social subordination as a fertile field for the strange and fecund growths of blackface minstrelsy: “the blackface body,” he wrote in one of many fine formulations, “figured the traditional ‘preindustrial’ joys that social and economic pressures had begun to marginalize.”⁶⁰

But by 2001 and 2002 Arnesen *et al.* were already regretting the separation of class from race during the first decade of whiteness work. “Despite the conceptual flaws and incompleteness of [Roediger’s] account” in *The Wages of Whiteness*, Reed wrote, “it located the whiteness idea within a matrix of social relations.” But, “As an academic subspecialty congealed around this account’s central trope, the whiteness idea has become an anachronistic catch-all category that hovers above historical context and political economy.”⁶¹

In 2012 concern with class disappears almost entirely. Leverenz refers to it only in passing, acknowledging that lower-class status can be a source of shame,⁶² and suggesting that “what class meant in England, race came to mean in the

⁶⁰ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft* (New York, 1993), 148.

⁶¹ Reed Jr, “Response to Eric Arnesen”, 79.

⁶² David Leverenz, *Honor Bound*, 26.

United States.”⁶³ There is an important element of truth in this, but Leverenz never pursues the connection, proceeding as if race entirely supplanted class in the United States, so that class is never a factor in the honor–shame dynamic he sees as crucial to American racism. More remarkably, Jack Turner, in a book which preaches “socioeconomic realism”⁶⁴ and which contemplates at length the “surrender”⁶⁵ of property to rectify past racial injustice, never considers social class as a factor in his blanket judgments of “white people.” He never refers to the topic until his conclusion, where he grudgingly allows that if “class disadvantage outstrips racial advantage,” then “the class-disadvantaged should not have to bear a disproportionate burden of sacrifice in the effort to achieve racial justice.”⁶⁶ But how should such relative disadvantage be measured? It is certainly true that many white people have derived clear economic benefit from their whiteness—such as in profits and property directly based on slavery or in federally backed mortgage guarantees largely denied to African-Americans after the Second World War.⁶⁷ But it is also true that many white people have themselves been the victims of class-based exploitation and marginalization— an experience of subjugation that may well have contributed in turn to their readiness to victimize the next group down on the ladder. To presume that class and race may be neatly distinguished and the relative disadvantages somehow precisely balanced is just the sort of oversimplification of these intermeshed categories that whiteness studies at first commendably sought to avoid.

Religion is yet another important dimension of white people’s social identity almost entirely neglected by whiteness scholars. This was already a troubling omission in the 1990s, noted by both Arnesen⁶⁸ and Kolchin. It is very difficult, for example, to understand and assess Irish-Americans’ rejection of O’Connell’s appeal without considering the religio-cultural context of this event. In the face of overt and sometimes violent hostility towards Roman Catholicism by the Anglo-American mainstream, most nineteenth-century Irish Catholic Americans, regardless of their personal piety, felt strong cultural loyalty to their inherited religious tradition. They thus regarded the often militantly Protestant abolitionists as cultural adversaries akin to the nativist Know-Nothings—with

⁶³ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁴ Turner, *Awakening to Race*, 113.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 101. Turner uses this word twice in describing a “thought-experiment” which entails Americans’ large-scale forfeiting of property.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 121.

⁶⁷ This economic benefit is the principal focus of George Lipsitz’s *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Benefit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, 2006; first published 1998).

⁶⁸ Arnesen, “Whiteness and the Historians’ Imagination”, 13: “religion . . . virtually vanishes in the considerations of the whiteness scholars.”

whom many antislavery activists did join forces in the nascent Republican Party.⁶⁹ Indeed, where Roediger *et al.* argue that loyalty to their own historical tradition should have dictated Irish-American support of abolitionism, an awareness of the decisive religio-cultural factor indicates precisely the opposite: for the Irish to have supported abolitionism would have been for them to align themselves with an Anglo-Protestant political-cultural formation which they blamed, not inaccurately, for many of their historical sorrows. Indeed, for an Irish Catholic American to have supported a Whig or Republican agenda in the middle decades of the nineteenth century would have been like an African-American voting Democrat in the latter decades—a symbolic betrayal of his people and their history. As O’Connell’s belated backpedaling made clear, his distant vantage point in Ireland had prevented him from grasping these complexities and constraints of the American scene. Reliance on a totalizing conception of race to the exclusion of all other social-historical categories leads Roediger, Ignatiev, and Allen to a similarly distant and moralistic misreading.

And the other side of the Catholic-Protestant divide would seem even more important to an understanding of nineteenth-century American whiteness. Exceptional cases such as John Brown or Gerritt Smith notwithstanding,⁷⁰ it was not by and large out of any desire to renounce their own “whiteness” that most abolitionists and many nineteenth-century Republicans opposed slavery. It was rather at the prompting of an aspect of their identity—radical Protestant Christianity—that most of them would have seen as essentially constitutive of their whiteness as they understood it. As David Brion Davis has illustrated at length, the nineteenth-century antislavery movement, spearheaded by English evangelicals and Quakers, was made intellectually possible in part by a distinctively Anglo-Protestant adaptation of Christian millenarianism.⁷¹ This is to say, ironically, that abolitionism and one important historical dimension

⁶⁹ Kolchin, “Whiteness Studies,” 163: “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.”

⁷⁰ See again Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men*.

⁷¹ See David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, NY, 1966); Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770–1823* (New York, 1999; first published Ithaca, 1975); Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York, 1984); Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York, 2014). Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men*, also emphasizes the Protestant and millenarian sources of abolitionism.

of Anglo-Protestant whiteness went hand in hand. This is also to say that in neglecting religion scholars of whiteness studies fail to consider the full historical context not only of American racism, but also of one admirable and culturally potent strain of antiracism.

And a similar point may be made, finally, regarding liberalism. We have noted that in characterizing America's founding ideology, whiteness scholars generally follow Saxton and sharply downplay liberalism in favor of what they see as a racially inflected version of classical republicanism. This allows them to avoid reckoning with the universalizing and implicitly antiracist strain of natural-rights liberalism as a crucial part of the larger American intellectual-historical landscape—and as a portion, however much resisted in some cases, of every American's historical identity. Indeed, Saxton, Roediger, *et al.* write as if American intellectual and political history has never had even a fleeting brush with the liberal-ethical universal which Lincoln among many others so often invoked, and which Habermas sees as the context-shattering angel of modernity. But if not prescriptively confined to racism, a full and accurate description of hegemonic nineteenth-century Anglo-American whiteness would be bound to entail commitments both to Protestantism and to classical liberalism, including their universalizing moral energies. These emancipatory moral commitments were of course often held right alongside many variants of racism. But in such inner contradiction lies full humanity, and full historical interest, and it begs a fuller account.

* * *

Both Leverenz's *Honor Bound* and Turner's *Awakening to Race* contain promise of a fuller engagement with liberalism from the whiteness point of view, but both fall short in different ways.

Leverenz, to start with, in critiquing honor, takes up an old and important topic in the history of liberal civilization. From Cervantes to Faulkner to *The Godfather* to Peter Berger's essay on "The Obsolescence of the Concept of Honour," the advance of a modern, legalistic, rights-based, commercial culture has been understood, with more or less nostalgia, to go hand in hand with the decay of honor as a social value.⁷² There is thus a long-standing consensus to support Leverenz's contention that devotion to honor and the continuing advance of equal

⁷² Berger puts it succinctly: "The age that saw the decline of honour also saw the rise of new moralities and of a new humanism, and most specifically of a historically unprecedented concern for the dignity and rights of the individual." Peter L. Berger, "The Obsolescence of the Concept of Honour," in Michael J. Sandel, ed., *Liberalism and Its Critics* (New York, 1984), 149–58, 150.

rights for African-Americans are to some extent at odds. Traditional honor-based systems confer recognition on select persons on the basis of their maintenance of specific values or norms understood to be exclusive to a given group—a group which can be and often has been racially or ethnically characterized. The modern liberal system of rights, by contrast, affords recognition in principle to all human beings on the abstract and anonymous basis of their humanity per se. There is little debate as to which of these is preferable as the moral–legal basis for modern societies. But there remains a long-standing debate about whether a modern liberal society can get along altogether without honor as a subsidiary and compensatory communal value. Berger’s articulation is again helpful: “the demise of honour has been a very costly price to pay for whatever liberations modern man may have achieved.”⁷³ Leverenz argues in effect that in modern America the price is well worth paying: we must learn to get along without honor because it is inherently linked to racism.

It is certainly true that honor-based societies and slavery have often gone hand in hand: “wherever slavery became structurally important,” Orlando Patterson observes in his global historical study *Slavery and Social Death*, “the whole tone of the slaveholders’ culture tended to be highly honorific.”⁷⁴ And the association between slaveholding, racism, and a volatile sense of honor in the culture of the American South is well known. But is it true to argue, as Leverenz does, that the one “depends upon” the other? Patterson acknowledges the frequent association between slavery and honor, but he is also careful to state that there is no essential link between the two, citing Moses Finley’s example of Homeric Greece as a strongly honor-based society in which slavery was not widely practiced.

It is not even clear that dishonor and shame were the principal sources of pain in the Bo Diddley story Leverenz recounts or in the many similarly painful incidents related in his book. Honor is an intra-group phenomenon—an affective mechanism for maintaining norms and values among the distinctive members of a mutually acknowledged social collective. It presumes an original condition of special shared recognition whose loss will be marked by feelings of shame. In the Bo Diddley anecdote above, however, we are present at the assertion of a more primary and fundamental boundary. What is at stake there is not so much honor or shame, both of which presume an underlying recognition of group membership, but rather the eligibility for such membership or such recognition per se. The categorical denial thereof performed by all the white swimmers in the pool was not so much an act of shaming as it was a symbolic re-enactment of the race-based social murder on which American slavery was founded. Similarly, perhaps needless to say, shame was surely the least of the

⁷³ Ibid., 157.

⁷⁴ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA, 1982) 79.

negative feelings experienced by the victims of the lynchings and massacres that Leverenz cites.

As it is not evident that slavery and honor per se were mutually dependent, it is not safe to assume that American antiblack racism, historically rooted in America's race-based slave system, is inextricable from America's numerous and various honor-based subcultures. Honor remains, for example, an essential cultural ligament of a now racially diverse and thoroughly integrated American military. It is also important in the racially mixed world of American professional sports. It plays a vital role in both East Asian-American and Latino ethnic subcultures, in neither of which antiblack racism is unusually prominent. And it has long been a crucial value in Native American tribal life. Leverenz himself seems to acknowledge that honor well deployed has a place when he speaks approvingly of what he calls the "chiasmus" achieved by Martin Luther King's nonviolent protests. A national balance of shame and honor began to be realigned with liberal justice, Leverenz interestingly observes, when millions of Americans watched dogs and fire hoses turned on peaceful marchers and children. Such a reflexive sense of liberal rights-based honor might be an example of the sort of nonbinary solidarity that American liberal culture needs. If in fact honor and racism are two essentially distinct formations whose connection has been incidental, might it not be better to try to distinguish them rather than to somehow extirpate a cohesive value that remains deeply and variously embedded? If we do not thereby risk more racism, do we really desire our politicians or bankers or corporate executives or celebrities to have even *less* of a sense of honor?

Turner's *Awakening to Race* also directly engages liberalism and liberal culture in its effort to construct an antiracist tradition founded upon the writing of America's pre-eminent nineteenth-century liberal—Ralph Waldo Emerson. But the book seriously mistakes the central thrust of Emerson's liberalism by reconstructing him as a moralist of "complicity" rather than as a celebrant of negative liberty,⁷⁵ and by aligning him on this basis with

⁷⁵ This is not to suggest that Emerson did not have a "positive" conception of human flourishing, but rather that he did not see coercive institutions of political power as the best way to bring about such flourishing. In the liberal view that Emerson shared with the American founders, the long history of abuses of political power dictated that the first step towards human flourishing would be to limit the coercive reach of government. With these limits firmly established in the form of rights, a society could and should then reflect and debate and move freely, democratically, and self-critically towards the most felicitous and fulfilling collective arrangements. In this manner, as Emerson put it in "American Scholar," "The dread of man and the love of man shall be a wall of defence [*sic*] and a wreath of joy around all." The sentence elegantly conjoins the "negative" (Enlightenment) and "positive" (Romantic) dimensions of Emerson's liberalism.

a decidedly illiberal concluding proposal for the “surrender” of the right to property.

“One becomes *complicit* in injustice,” Turner explains, “by either explicitly authoring it or tacitly supporting it through one’s civil, social, and economic actions (and inactions).”⁷⁶ Self-reliance and complicity, Turner asserts, were directly counterposed in Emerson’s thinking: to the extent that one was complicit in wrongdoing or injustice one could not be truly self-reliant. Turner bases this claim about Emerson’s work as a whole on quotations from five works—“Man the Reformer” (1844), “An Address . . . on . . . the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies” (1844), “The Fugitive Slave Law” (1854), “Lecture on Slavery” (1855), and “Fate” (1860). It bears noting that three of these are antislavery speeches, which, magnificent as they are, Emerson himself explicitly regarded as tangential to his main concerns. “Man the Reformer” is a minor address and ambiguous with respect to Emerson’s wish to instill in his readers a sense of complicity with the evils of trade—an ambiguity reflective of his own ambivalences about this matter. While it is true that Emerson held deep reservations about the reifying tendencies of capitalist culture, he also believed throughout his life that, in the largest view, commerce was an emancipating force in human history, instrumental in moving humankind away from ethnocentrism, slavery, and the valorization of warfare. He thus preferred to celebrate high culture as a source of compensatory aesthetic values in commercial society rather than to pronounce moral judgment on the moral uncleanness of the marketplace, though he sometimes allowed himself the latter. And the cosmic complicities evoked in his great late essay “Fate” are so absolute as to render moral compunctions almost impertinent. Turner acknowledges many of these concerns, but offers no countering explanation as to why we should take these few works, of which only “Fate” is generally regarded as a major statement, as expressive of a central premise of an enormous *oeuvre* which includes not only the substantial body of published books but also thousands of pages of journal writing and many volumes of unpublished sermons, lectures, and addresses.

In my reading, the opus as a whole reveals no such systematic link between self-reliance and a generalized notion of complicity,⁷⁷ and I am not aware of any other Emerson scholar making this suggestion. On the contrary, Emerson’s entire opus, including his journals, is pitched pointedly against one of the most robust

⁷⁶ Turner, *Awakening to Race*, 27, italics mine.

⁷⁷ Emerson took the problem of exploitation seriously: he recognized the importance of not deriving one’s freedom and flourishing from the subjugation of others. But for all its imperfections in this regard he generally saw free trade as diminishing the exploitations on which feudal–aristocratic society was built. See Neal Dolan, *Emerson’s Liberalism* (Madison, WI, 2009), for a discussion of liberal themes in Emerson’s work as a whole.

concepts of generalized complicity ever visited upon human consciousness—the Calvinist Christian idea of ineradicable original sin. In one variant or another, this idea had held powerful sway over New England life for nearly two hundred years before Emerson’s birth. Emerson himself was indoctrinated into a relatively mild version of it, but even this seemed excessive and cruel to him, and he spent much of his adult life preaching a conception of the empowered but nonetheless ethical individual directly opposed to it. Indeed, with Calvinism in mind, it would be more accurate to speak of Emerson as a thinker of the limits of complicity. And Turner’s conception of complicity is sufficiently general, all-encompassing, and inheritable as to seem very much like a secularized and politicized version of precisely the notion of original sin which Emerson sought to circumscribe: nonactions are included; “wrongdoing and injustice” in a world of inequality are well-nigh ubiquitous; and a given individual’s agency in bringing about injustice is not relevant—if s/he benefits even indirectly in any way, such as being born white in a white-dominated society, s/he is guilty.⁷⁸

Setting limits to such generalized and inescapable guilt was precisely the point of many crucial passages in a work—“Self-Reliance”—whose main emphases remained prominent in all of Emerson’s writing throughout his career. How can we read the apparent stinginess of “Are they *my* poor?”⁷⁹ for example, if not as an effort to insist that an individual must find and assert the limits of his complicity with the world’s countless injustices? “I do not wish to expiate, but to live”⁸⁰ aims to draw the same existential limit. To say that “[t]he doctrine of hatred must be preached as the counteraction of the doctrine of love when that pules and whines”⁸¹ is also meant precisely to counter the enervating sense of social guilt that Emerson saw in some of his utopian-minded friends. “Why should we assume the faults of our friend, or wife, or father, or child, because they sit around our hearth,” he writes in the same vein, “or are said to have the same blood?”⁸² “Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world.”⁸³ Even the vexing passage in which Emerson proclaims that “if I am the Devil’s child, I will live then from the Devil”⁸⁴ may be read as a deliberate flouting of the repressive conventional late Calvinist notion of imminent complicity in favor of a trust in

⁷⁸ Kolchin, “Whiteness Studies,” 160, also found this diffuse, all-pervasive, unlimited quality in the whiteness scholars’ conception of race: “Race appears as both real and unreal, transitory and permanent, ubiquitous and invisible, everywhere and nowhere, everything and nothing.”

⁷⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York, 1983), 262, original emphasis.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 273.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 262.

the spontaneous affirmative energies of the self. And perhaps the most profound expression of this pervasive emphasis in Emerson's work is found, again in "Self-Reliance," when he revises the Old Testament by proposing to write "Whim" on the lintels of the door-post.⁸⁵ In one swift impulsive syllable Emerson thus proclaims his will to be free from all bloody symbolisms of inherited, ascribed complicity.

The concern here is more than interpretive validity, though this is very important. The full political stakes of Turner's highly idiosyncratic reading of Emerson become clear in the chapter on James Baldwin and in the book's conclusion. Here, on the basis of all Americans' "complicity" in racial and economic injustice, Turner suggests by way of what he calls a Baldwinian "thought experiment" that every twenty years or so all Americans should "surrender" their property for more "just" and "considerate" redistribution:

In contemporary American society, homes, vehicles, and money afford a large measure of security against the vagaries of capitalism and the claims of the hungry and the desperate. Risking everything, daring everything, means surrendering that security in pursuit of more just arrangements, which means surrendering our claims to our homes, vehicles, and money as we know them. This does not mean that we will not reacquire homes, vehicles, and money under new arrangements. We should each receive a just portion. It all depends on how considerate and imaginative we are in the work of democratic reconstitution . . .⁸⁶

In a book which does not hesitate to charge white Americans as a whole with lacking "a sense of reality," the naivety and potentially cataclysmic impracticality of this suggestion is striking. The prospect of a twenty-yearly surrender of all Americans' property would bring the global economy to an abrupt halt, causing devastating hardship to hundreds of millions of people, especially the most vulnerable. Even merely as an academic "thought experiment" this suggestion is hermeneutically implausible as the culmination of a proposed tradition of thought initiated by Emerson and concluding with James Baldwin. Emerson held a lifelong, foundational, and philosophically expansive commitment to the liberal right to property, while Baldwin was deeply distrustful of utopian ideologies and schemes of every kind. And Turner's "Baldwinian" suggestion for how to deal with those who might resist surrendering their property to the state for the purposes of belated racial restitution is hardly reassuring:

White citizens must also prepare themselves for an event that is out of the American "order of nature": the event of black citizens revealing white citizens to themselves. "Nobody else knows white Americans except black Americans," Baldwin insists . . . Cross-racial

⁸⁵ Ibid., 262.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 102.

conversation will often be tough, for it must spurn false civility for honest expressions of anger, outrage, and resentment . . . White citizens must accustom themselves to hearing blacks' imperative voice—modes of address resembling Baldwin's meditation on history in "The White Man's Guilt" (1965): "White man, hear me!" . . . Facing themselves in the "disagreeable mirror" of black testimony, white citizens must credit the testimony as they would the testimony of their most beloved . . .⁸⁷

Limits of space require that I merely point out that the "conversation" here goes only in one racial direction. The ominous Maoist resonances of the larger fantasy of political re-education speak for themselves. To have somehow derived these ideas from a tradition putatively beginning and ending with such skeptical and state-wary individualists as Emerson and James Baldwin is an extreme case of the historically untethered interpretive and conceptual license that characterizes too much whiteness studies scholarship.

* * *

Social class, religion, the legacy of American rights liberalism, recourse to law, honor, self-reliance, property itself: in this scholarship all attributes of European-American selfhood have vanished into an unhistorical whiteness without qualities. It is startling to find that from the early 1990s to the present the field has increasingly operated with a conception of whiteness emptied out of all specific social-historical content except for an implausible "choice" of race and a concomitant white supremacy or "complicity" therein. The arc of the scholarship thus gives a meaning that Jacobson did not intend to his phrase "vanish[ing] into whiteness." But perhaps in the largest view the effacement is not surprising. In a sense this erasure of European-American selves is a precise repetition in words of what was done in fact to the culturally variegated Africans who were forcibly carried to American shores in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and locked into an identity permanently emptied of all human content except for an invented "race." There is perhaps some vicarious vengeful satisfaction in attempting to demonstrate that, as Roediger puts it in *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness*, "whiteness is infinitely more false" than blackness,⁸⁸ or that blacks are "more human" than whites.⁸⁹ It belatedly imposes reductive symmetry on a historical situation the essence of which was, as Barbara J. Fields pointed out in her corroboration of Arnesen, its asymmetry:

⁸⁷ Ibid., 104.

⁸⁸ David R. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (New York, 1994), 12.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 67.

For purposes of defining kinship or social belonging or of asserting or enforcing group solidarity, European immigrants might think of themselves, and be thought of by society at large, in many ways—as Finns, Scots, Fenians, Knights of Columbus, *paesani*, *Turnverein* members, Forty-Eighters, or (as Professor Arnesen acutely reminds us) Democrats or Roman Catholics—without these designations’ automatically reducing to race. But not African Americans. Any individual or group self-definition or self-understanding that persons of African descent have developed while attempting to oppose or survive enslavement or demand freedom and citizenship has become race when translated into the American idiom.⁹⁰

By denying to whites any dimensions of social selfhood not reducible to racism, scholars of whiteness studies have, perhaps unconsciously, sought precisely to turn the tables. Given the magnitude of the historical injustice involved, the compulsion is understandable, perhaps even inevitable. But even on the purely discursive—symbolic level, as several of Turner’s and Leverenz’s authors—Emerson, Hawthorne, Ellison, and Baldwin—spent much of their lives trying to teach, revenge is not justice, and repetition is unfreedom.

⁹⁰ Fields, “Whiteness, Racism, and Identity,” 50.