

BOOK REVIEWS

## Making a White Middle Class

**Jewell, Joseph O. *White Man's Work: Race and Middle-Class Mobility into the Progressive Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023. 210 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4696-7349-3.**

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It is well known that white men came to dominate middle-class professions by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. Less understood is *how* middle-class work became racialized. That process is the focus of historical sociologist Joseph O. Jewell's *White Man's Work: Race and Middle-Class Mobility into the Progressive Era*, which explores how white politicians, journalists, and laypeople responded to non-white actors' attempts to gain and maintain middle-class professions in fin de siècle Atlanta, San Antonio, and San Francisco. Through three engaging case studies drawn largely from newspaper reports and court filings, Jewell shows us that white people in each of those localities responded to Black, Tejano, and Chinese Americans' successful entry into the middle class by creating widely publicized narratives that linked non-whites with immorality, violence, and criminality. Once in the ether, those negative racial associations justified non-whites' removal from coveted middle-class positions and, as Jewell explains, "brightened" racial divides between whites and non-whites, whether they were Black, Tejano, or Chinese American (9–10).

Jewell's slim volume—only 137 pages of text—has two main objectives. Observing that scholars have given substantial attention to race-class stereotypes of European immigrants, the author sets his sights on lesser-known stories about upwardly-mobile African Americans, Latines, and Asian Americans whose presence in urbanizing centers generated similar stereotypes and resistance to their entrance into the middle class. The staying power and violence of those racialized narratives are at the heart of the book's second goal, which is to highlight how ordinary people sustained racial hierarchies in "meso-level" spaces, such as turn-of-the-century workplaces, rather than through explicit state action (5). By exploring white Americans' hostility toward Black, Tejano, and Chinese Americans' attempts to climb the social ladder through middle-class roles—whether in the form of fire-brandishing mobs, lynchings, or newspaper reports of professional scandal filled with racialized tropes—Jewell argues public-sector workplaces were "crucial sites"

where people developed, refined, and deployed ideas about race, masculinity, and white supremacy (30).

Jewell's first chapter sets the scene for readers by exploring the race-class nexus of what he calls non-white actors' "troubling gentility" in the Gilded Age (16). Addressing the period's rapid urbanization and subsequent boom in middling, well-paid occupations, he describes how white Americans came to see non-whites' professional appointments as an affront to their own opportunity for social mobility. Understanding non-white middle class employment as a zero-sum game, they sought to displace those individuals from well-paying, respectable jobs and claim the spots as their own. In the process of demarcating middle-class work as "white man's work," Jewell argues, white Americans shored up lines of racial difference between themselves and non-white Americans and contributed to the growing presumption or naturalization of white supremacy.

Chapter two explores the finer details of such a process in late nineteenth-century Atlanta, where a number of Black Americans hoped to attain middle-class status through employment as federal postal workers. Presuming lucrative employment belonged to white men, white Atlantans were chagrined to find African Americans in those positions at all and rallied to portray Black postal workers as unfit for the job. Relying on tropes of Black criminality and violence—especially sexual violence—white postal workers, press agents, politicians, and ordinary citizens united to rhetorically malign Black mail carriers by 1910 as dangerous and, therefore, ineligible for middle-class roles. In other cases, the press underscored how improved educational opportunities after the Civil War had "corrupted" Black middle-class men by fostering resistance to racial deference (59). White Atlantans' concern about "white men's work" was a matter of preserving white supremacy.

Chapter three's narrative arc is more unexpected. Centered on Tejano policemen in San Antonio between 1880 and 1910, this segment reveals how changing demographics affected the formation and reformation of race-class narratives. It shows how, in the 1880s, Anglos conditionally accepted Tejanos—Texas-born Spanish creoles—as semi, "off-[w]hite" persons capable of legitimate law enforcement (63). But as race-class prejudice toward non-white Mexicans crept in from the burgeoning Jim Crow South in the 1890s alongside Anglo migrants to Texas from across the nation, that logic started to fail. Though Tejanos resisted media characterizations of themselves and Mexicans as innately violent criminals, the narrative stuck. Just as it had in Atlanta, racial lines between whites and non-whites were drawn more firmly as the century ended and the racial lines between gradations of non-white persons were blurred.

Moving west to San Francisco, Jewell's fourth chapter examines corruption trials of a handful of Chinese American men who found employment as language interpreters in the city's Chinese Bureau between 1896 and 1907. Though their language skills made them uniquely equipped for that professional role, the Chinese American men who held those jobs faced charges of crime, corruption, and vice spun by jealous white contemporaries who considered non-white social mobility a threat to their own. In sensationalized newspaper accounts of their trials, Jewell explains, white readers were taught to think of Americanized Chinese as dangerous figures, and immigrant smuggling, drug peddling, and forced prostitution as uniquely "Chinese" crimes (124).

Taken together, Jewell's three case studies offer useful insight into how middle-class work came to be equated with whiteness in the American South and West. At the same time, further study is warranted with regard to *why* the narratives were so compelling to white audiences. Beyond the obvious threat of economic competition, it seems important to consider the growing popularity of race science at the time. Those ideas are lurking

behind many of the claims Jewell's white actors make but are not highlighted. Neither are non-white press sources or accounts included in the narrative, which begs the question: how did Black, Tejano, and Chinese American writers and thinkers respond to the narrowing of middle-class work into "white men's" work?

While scholars of the period will find little here that is surprising, the book is highly readable and would inspire good discussion in upper-level undergraduate or graduate seminars. Students of race, labor history, and communication will also be interested in Jewell's use of contemporary press accounts and court documentation. Finally, the comparative nature of the book's case studies make it a useful starting point for conversations about regional and national trends and divergences.

## Excavating Archaeology's Diverse Past

**Lee, John W. I. *The First Black Archaeologist: A Life of John Wesley Gilbert*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. xxviii + 418 pp. \$38.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-1975-7899-5.**

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For more than a decade, John Wesley Gilbert has been acknowledged by the Society of Black Archaeologists as the first American scholar of color to overcome the barriers of late nineteenth-century racism and receive professional training in archaeological field-work. Yet until the publication of John W. I. Lee's *The First Black Archaeologist: A Life of John Wesley Gilbert*, no single book documented the full range of Gilbert's life or recognized his involvement in the field of archaeology. This book not only corrects that lacuna, but also delivers a thoughtful reflection on the possibilities and limitations of writing histories of individuals whose primary archival materials have not been preserved.

Enslaved at birth, Gilbert grew up in Reconstruction-era Georgia and later gained prominence not as an archaeologist but as a vocal advocate of interracial cooperation. Several major life experiences—studying and teaching at the Paine Institute in Augusta, Georgia; enrolling in and graduating from Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island; and undertaking a missionary expedition with Bishop Walter Russell Lambuth in the Belgian Congo—shaped his thinking on this subject, as previous biographers have emphasized. Lee gives these episodes due attention and writes about the spaces Gilbert navigated and how they possibly impacted his thinking. What other works have failed to appreciate, though, is how Gilbert's six-month residence in Greece, examining classical texts and exploring Hellenic ruins alongside white colleagues, contributed to his world-view and transformed him into a pioneer in the discipline of archaeology.

Gilbert's claim to being "the first black archaeologist" rested on his experience studying at the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, the first American