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Historicizing Whiteness and White Supremacy

By Anthony Soliman

Abstract

From the end of the eighteenth century to the mid twentieth century, demographic changes reformulated the ideal American citizen to be a white landowning American man. My historiographical paper covers the works of four authors, discussing the centrality of race in their works. In my paper, I cover several themes that are present throughout these disparate works, such as the role of space, citizenship, and race on the peripheries of settlement, and the highly mutable nature of whiteness regarding labor and nationality. By critiquing some of the anachronistic tendencies and omissions of contingency by some historians, I display the ways in which historians could create more complete histories centered around whiteness and white supremacy.

From the end of the eighteenth century to the mid twentieth century, demographic changes reformulated the ideal American citizen to be a white landowning American man. Nationality alone did not determine citizenship, however, as whiteness was in many cases a prerequisite to citizenship, and they became inextricably linked together after the Civil War. By surveying works that focus on labor, race, and citizenship in western spaces of the United States, whiteness as a prerequisite for inclusion in the nation becomes evident. Though the works this paper surveys are varied, the themes of whiteness, citizenship, and the linkage of race to labor are present throughout, and thus worthy of study together. The works range in scope, period, and methodology, and taken together these create a greater picture of how scholars write about and historicize ethnicity in the United States. I will trace the themes that are present throughout these works to argue that white supremacy and racism are mutable entities which adapt to circumstances that challenge American hegemony. By reviewing books on subjects from Choctaw removal in the nineteenth century, to the twentieth century conceptions of identity for poor white agricultural laborers in Texas, this paper will argue that whiteness and white supremacy adjust to their circumstances to maintain racial hierarchy in the United States.

The role of useful space as being necessary for acting out notions of racial difference is ubiquitous in these works. In the early republic period, when the United States was expanding westward into lands that were the domain of southern native nations, space and land were necessary to fulfill Thomas Jefferson's idea of "yeoman republicanism." This idea stated that white citizens should be self-sufficient farmers who settled in Native American lands. Historian Donna Akers challenged the historiography of westward expansion in her book *Living in the Land of Death: The Choctaw Nation, 1830-1860*. Akers explains the centrality of land ownership for white Americans looking to establish cotton plantations: "Land was wealth in the early republic, and native claims and rights formed a barrier to white demands for land."¹ Akers further explains that while white Americans could tolerate other white people owning land, the idea that the racialized Native person could own land was unacceptable. If land ownership translated into citizenship and whiteness, then the inverse must be true. This means that those who did not own land could not claim whiteness. Neil Foley's *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* argues a similar line of reasoning, calling land ownership and the supplemental benefits "agrarian whiteness."² The idea of agrarian whiteness has a gendered dimension to it as well, as Foley explains that the "agrarian ideology of Thomas Jefferson eloquently addressed the virtues of farm life for white men."³ Foley continues to explain that the supposed independence of the white yeoman farmer also excluded women, and of course African Americans, from this identity. Akers explains that this exclusion also applied to the Choctaw, who could only find work picking cotton for white Americans without any of the legal benefits of American citizenship. Although the locations and periods these works cover span one hundred years, the persistence of agrarian whiteness throughout makes a comparison possible.

1 Donna Akers, *Living in the Land of Death: The Choctaw Nation, 1830-1860* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004), 25.

2 Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 141.

3 Foley, 142.

Another recurring theme in the historiography on rural white identity is that it almost always takes shape in the borderlands, or on the periphery of settlement. In Akers' study, the Choctaw lands white Americans desired for farmland happened in spaces that were far west of Anglo-American communities in the south during the early eighteenth century. For Foley, the agrarian whiteness in the central Texas cotton country existed far to the south of semi-industrial Dallas, and far to the west of Houston. In *Making the White Man's West: Whiteness and the Creation of the American West*, Jason Pierce explains that, combined with the ideas about independent yeomen, the thinly-populated frontier served as a space to act out fantasies of whiteness.⁴ The self-sufficient farmer as ideal citizen was indeed a fantasy, a person who represented settled civilization against transient, violent frontiersmen and Native Americans. Foley also describes how reality presented a contrast to this fictive small farmer in the case of Texas cotton production: "The idea of white yeoman farmers and their families tilling the soil, depending only on themselves...was never really the reality in the cotton belt of the southern states, where owners, tenants, and sharecroppers—whites, blacks, and Mexicans...made a mockery of yeoman independence and self-reliance."⁵

Since the west was never homogenous, an exclusively white space had to be physically constructed. Starting in the 1850s, railroad companies actively advertised and sought out Northern Europeans to assist in their migration to western North America. The railroad companies' policies had a profound impact in shaping the demographics of the western states, and in making the idea of a white west a reality.⁶ The aforementioned authors show how personal and larger geopolitical forces constructed the emergence of thinking about, and identifying with, whiteness. Fantasy emerging from

4 Jason E. Pierce, *Making the White Man's West: Whiteness and the Creation of the American West* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2016), 32.

5 Foley, 183.

6 Pierce, 154-5.

the reality of American incursions into the territories of Native nations was the impetus for thoughts about whiteness in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as Americans attempted to displace Native Americans through removal policies. Pierce explains how the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory in 1803 offered the possibility of relocating the native inhabitants east of the Mississippi to lands west of the river, while allowing for sparse white settlement, an attractive choice for Jefferson.⁷ This was put into practice with the signing of the Treaty of Doak's Stand, where the United States acquired six million acres of Choctaw land in exchange for thirteen million acres in the Arkansas Territory. Akers explains how the majority of Choctaw viewed this as insurance of land if white Americans took their homes in Mississippi, a sign of the contingency that characterized this period, something that historians need to keep in mind when studying this subject.⁸ Of course, the final blow to Native American sovereignty happened with the Indian Removal Act of 1831, which solidified the segregation of white citizen space against Native otherized space.

The idea of agrarian whiteness based on mythology is an important theme in the historiography. In the periods covered it was not possible nor practical to be an independent farmer, but this fiction manifested itself across space and time. The period in which Jefferson was writing, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was arguably the only time when agrarian whiteness can be attained. Everything else after that is a hearkening back to a fictive past that may never have existed. This is especially true for central Texas, as agrarian whiteness ideals were unrealistic when considering the reality of factory farms and plantations dotting the landscape.⁹ The demographics in this part of Texas also contributed to the separation and racialization of laborers, as Foley describes how the "rhetoric of landlords suggested that white tenants were inherently flawed and

7 Pierce, 32.

8 Akers, 32.

9 Foley, 184.

lacked certain qualities of whiteness.”¹⁰ Laziness and vagrancy were qualities that supposedly belonged only to Mexicans. Lazy white tenants were seen as less white, a rung below in the racial hierarchy. For early opponents of Anglo-American settlement in the West, even the climate determined character, as “a salubrious climate could be detrimental to racial vigor... early Anglo-American visitors saw proof of dangers of a pleasant climate in the allegedly lazy Indians of California and the Southwest.”¹¹

This highly mutable quality of whiteness led to struggles to reaffirm white identity as reactions to external stimuli, often the threat of superiority being undermined. The reactions against the possible threat result in a reaffirmation of the core ideas of white manhood. Local events that threatened to upend the status quo during Reconstruction in Louisiana bolstered ideas about white normativity and authentic citizenship. In his book *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation*, Moon-Ho Jung alludes to the “historical fiction” of the idea of a purely white race in Louisiana, and its’ “postwar regeneration,” which “rested fundamentally on its antebellum roots and local crises.”¹² These crises could be as varied as the crusade that Hinton Rowan Helper he engaged. The hierarchy of labor that privileged planters dashed nonslaveholding whites’ dreams of economic independence.¹³ Jung describes the mood and sentiments present at the 1864 constitutional convention in Louisiana at which anti-Chinese immigration arguments took on a purely racial tone, as movement to attract settlers and laborers came to the fore. Jung explains: “By directing their ire downward against Asian coolies more than upward against rapacious planters, however, the simultaneous movement against coolies and for immigrants ultimately justified the consolidation of capital in sugar production and prolonged the phan-

10 Foley, 70.

11 Pierce, 52.

12 Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 147.

13 Jung, 146.

tasmal life of the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal.”¹⁴ In these cases, the realities of industrial capitalism and the need for multiracial labor served as the initiations for a rebranding of white supremacy in these spaces. In these cases of restoration of the fictive past for white manhood, the impetus was encounters with other ethnic groups that possibly challenged white American hegemony. Material demands were prioritized over the ideological foundations of racist logic. Jung expands on this idea as he explains how “local wartime developments, themselves shaping and shaped by events near and far, drove former American ex-slaveholders to seek coolie labor after the [Civil] war.”¹⁵ Expressions of reaffirmed whiteness as reactionary measures add to the understanding of how this ideology responded and reappeared when challenged.

Historical research elucidating the way that whiteness was manufactured and diffused must also stress contingency. Historians must consider the means by which the federal government facilitated the maintenance of an exclusively white citizenry. The idea of West as an exclusively white space was dependent on the outcome of wars with Native nations and the successful encouragement of whites to relocate to the West. Because of the unfair legislation that denied rights to non-white residents, it is impossible to ignore the government’s role in ensuring the white west of the popular imagination.¹⁶ Relationships of power between Native peoples and white Americans can be characterized by contingency, since permanent Anglo-American settlement was far from a foregone conclusion until well into the nineteenth century. Historians must acknowledge the many attempts to limit the instability intrinsic to these conflicts. Historians still present the outcome on to past events, as if an Anglo-American west was inevitable, leading to a limited understanding of historical events. For example, throughout her work even Akers consistently mentions the differences between Choctaw society in the early nineteenth century and the

14 Jung, 147.

15 Jung, 40.

16 Akers, 92-3.

“dominant white society.”¹⁷ This term is an anachronism, since the major coercive treaties that categorized the 1830 interactions with the Choctaw were still being carried out. It would not be anachronistic to acknowledge the imperial aspirations of the United States in the early nineteenth century, and to address how the federal government attempted to facilitate the peopling of the western lands with white citizens.

Akers consistently mentions the fact that historians refuse to acknowledge the genocidal policies the US practiced against the southeastern Native nations, and the refusal to treat white supremacy as a decisive factor in policy. It would not be difficult to historicize this, as it is an important category of analysis, and if historians can identify where these ideas manifest in other places, it can make for fruitful avenues to study domestic and foreign policy. Jung argues that the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the Supreme Court’s Decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* came from the shared experiences of segregation and exclusion of both African Americans and Chinese laborers in the post-emancipation years.¹⁸ Several Democrats in all levels of government ran on anti-Chinese immigration policies, mostly in opposition to the undesirable effects that they believed these immigrants would have on their society.¹⁹ Evident in this example is one common characteristic of white supremacy: its contradictory nature. The supposedly racially inferior people posed a threat to labor and society, even when competing with allegedly physically and intellectually stronger people. Racial anxiety like this was present in the exclusion of Chinese in American society in the late nineteenth century, but again, white supremacy as a fluid ideology can adapt to different circumstances contingent on specific time and place. Depictions of white supremacy stronger than an immigrant labor force was popular in the early twentieth century “shatterbelt” of Texas (an area where Anglo-American, African-American, and Mexican families resided

17 Akers, 34.

18 Jung, 219.

19 Jung, 217-8.

as cotton laborers). Foley describes how white nativist arguments that defended unchecked Mexican immigration into Texas rested on the belief of the racial inferiority of Mexicans, that there was no way that Mexicans could dominate the countryside and “colonize” the United States.²⁰ On the other hand, anti-immigration nativists and especially eugenicists believed that safeguarding white women from Mexicans would preserve the purity of Nordic civilization in North America, part of the racial anxiety discussed earlier. Arguments for and against immigration among the polity reflected the popular sentiments, but the sole control of the actual legislation lay in the hands of the government, which decided that labor needs of agribusiness and industry were more important than racial logic. The United States lifted restrictions of Mexican immigration in the early twentieth century. However, the United States refused to lift immigration restrictions for immigrants coming from Asia or Europe.

The current state of the field makes Akers’s declaration that historians refuse to treat white supremacy as a factor in policy seem out of touch. Certain historians have in fact treated white supremacy as central to policy formation. The expulsion of Native Americans to designated lands is an example of the ways in which the federal government actively tried to ensure white spheres of settlement separate from Native Americans. In instances where the federal government placed prohibitions on ethnic groups moving to the United States, the intellectual foundation of Anglo-American industrious whiteness preceded these policies. Pierce explores this idea as he discusses how the passage of the 1862 Homestead Act, which banned slavery in the western territories, actually ensured that these spaces would have limited African American populations. The idea was that free African Americans lacked the means to move to the western territories, so their population in the West would always be low.²¹ The Treaty of Doak’s Stand forty years earlier similarly segregated different peoples. Indigenous Americans’ rele-

20 Foley, 57.

21 Pierce, 124.

gation to “Indian Territory” acted to delineate citizens from non-citizens, or those who could be part of the American polity, and those whose interests disagreed with American policies. The intellectual framework of white settlement was becoming fixed in the popular imagination, and treaties like this only helped to bring reality to the fiction.

Race was the determining factor in deciding citizenship, but Native peoples’ distance from whiteness was not simply about complexion. Indian commissioners’ official rhetoric promised the Choctaw full citizenship and absorption into the American polity if they became educated. Historians believe the concession to whiteness was a thinly-veiled argument against racist policies and removal. Akers contends that those who believed this rhetoric “deluded” themselves into thinking that obtaining a Euro-American education and conforming to ideals of civility would lead to citizenship.²² This was the case in the Southeast during the eighteenth century. By the nineteenth century, the Native inhabitants of North America were seen as more authentic people than not, for their connection to nature. For writers Charles Lummis and Frank Linderman of the late 1880s, famous for their romanticization of the West, the threat to white civilization in the West was not Native Americans but southern and eastern European immigrants in the East.²³ The authors’ romantic vision of the West was based on the notion of the frontier, a space that was preindustrial, lost in time, much like its inhabitants. The intermixing of races in eastern cities in turn formulated western values as antithetical to diversity. For Lummis and Linderman, the West was racially homogenous and romantically empty, save for a few noble, savage “Indians.” In this way, white supremacy took the form of preservation of a space that was conducive to the recreation of ideals of Anglo-American whiteness against the forces of corrupting influences of immigrants. It also served to bolster the idea that Native people posed no serious threat to white society, due to their supposed weakness and

22 Akers, 26.

23 Pierce, 96.

infantile minds. The anti-modern West, complete with non-modern Native people, also served to facilitate the anachronistic agrarian whiteness ideal that runs throughout conceptions of the West as a white space subject to “civilizing influences.”

The labor question is another eminent theme in works about the west and American citizenship. Agricultural labor was responsible for the demographics of the South, and it determined who counted as white. Harkening back to the agrarian ideal of Jefferson, agricultural industriousness was a fixed category of whiteness: if tenacity was lost, an individuals’ whiteness also came into question. Foley describes how labor in Texas became racialized, as a result of their multiracial society. According to Foley: “Poor whites who competed with blacks and Mexicans as sharecroppers came to be racially marked as inferior whites whose reproductive fecundity threatened the vigor of Nordic whiteness.”²⁴ In this example, the lines between white and other are permeable, depending on the qualities associated with the type of work.

The treatment of Mexicans as historical subjects is not the only time that labor and race meet to complicate hierarchy. Jung explores the role of “coolies,” or Chinese laborers, in the South, and how their presence during Reconstruction led to the creation of the United States as a “nation of white immigrants.” Jung explains how these laborers occupied a nebulous position in society, being neither black nor white, slave nor free.²⁵ In the case of a labor class like “coolies,” whiteness was also highly mutable, especially regarding the type and means of labor of individuals. As mentioned before, the realities of agricultural labor made race synonymous with nationality, the decisive factor in determining citizenship and degree of proximity to whiteness. According to Foley: “In rupturing the black-white polarity of southern race relations, the presence of Mexicans in central Texas raises

24 Foley, 35.

25 Jung, 6.

some interesting questions about the way in which ‘whiteness’ itself fissured along race and class lines.”²⁶ Thinking about whiteness outside strictly biological terms is helpful for historians, since race is a socially constructed identity. By analyzing whiteness in spaces like these, historians can trace the intellectual tracks of class and race thought. In the South, the existing black-white binary has dominated popular perceptions and scholarship, but two historians have challenged this idea, as laborers defied this simplistic categorization. Foley states that within Texas existed a hybrid culture that came from its place as both a western and southern state, one in which the practice of sharecropping made populations transgress the racialized boundaries that delineated society in this space. Foley then states how Mexicans’ ethnic composition posed challenges for simple categorization and placement in the southern racial hierarchy. Foley states, “As a racially mixed group, Mexicans, like Indians and Asians, lived in a black-and-white nation that regarded them neither as black nor white.”²⁷ This way of thinking mirrors Jung’s analysis of Chinese laborers in antebellum Louisiana, as their presence disrupted the existing rank of humanity.

Lastly, the ever-present fear of ethnic solidarity between non-white people in these spaces, and of possible revolt, led to measures that attempted to undermine any possibility of cohesion. As stated before, “whiteness” was not entirely the result of skin color, but class as well; in the case of central Texas, poor whites were among those who tried to form a coalition against predatory landlords and absentee owners. In Texas, a Socialist leader’s racist beliefs erased hopes for a unified front against landlordism and capitalist agriculture. Tom Hickey, the Irish-born Texas Socialist who founded and edited *The Rebel*, was a proponent of strictly economic equality between the two races. He believed that social equality for African Americans only existed under the capitalist yoke.²⁸ In the case of post-emancipation Loui-

26 Foley, 5.

27 Foley, 5.

28 Foley, 93.

siana, Democrats such as Daniel Dennett (also a member of the Knights of the White Camelia, a KKK affiliate) argued that land monopolies weakened white alliances against Asians and African Americans. According to Jung:

With the consolidation of property killing old agrarian dreams in Louisiana, Dennett and his allies launched an ideological offensive against planters who would import coolies, resuscitate slavery, and thereby exacerbate class divisions among whites. The arrival of coolies, they imputed, would steer their beloved region back to antebellum relations (slavery) and forward to the industrial capitalist relations (class conflict), a singularly pernicious combination that would eviscerate their newfound struggle for racial solidarity to overthrow multiracial democracy.²⁹

The reaction of these two men against the capitalist labor structures of their respective spaces drove them to conclusions that at once needed these racial groups to create white alliance, while excluding them from any benefits of non-capitalist society. Even though it is impossible to understand Hickey's white supremacist logic, one can surmise that it comes from a newfound Southern white identity. The strictly Anglocentric society that he experienced in Europe was nonexistent in the American South. This is not to excuse his beliefs; rather, it is an explanation based on what we know about relations between groups of white ethnicities in the modern era.

Although the works reviewed ranged in scope, period, and methodology, all of these create a greater picture of the construction and contemporary discourse surrounding whiteness. Class, race, and labor all existed as contributors to, or victims of, ideology about whiteness and white supremacy. Historicizing whiteness means that historians look at how institutions or individuals facilitated the growth of whiteness discourse. Similarly, when historicizing white supremacy, historians need to understand that it is

29 Jung, 169.

impossible to separate this from whiteness, and that the two travelled in lockstep in the United States. If historians understand the historical context of these ideologies, then we can better understand contemporary forms of whiteness and white supremacy.

Bibliography

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