Becoming caucasian: Vicissitudes of whiteness in American politics and culture

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We perceive "race" as a feature of the natural landscape, fixed in the unchanging realities of biology, but racial categories change markedly in response to shifting political, economic, and social circumstances across historical time. In the United States conceptions of "race" function as idioms of power, mediating the conflicting imperatives of a capitalist economy and a porous, democratic political culture: where labor demands generate demographic diversity, "race" is deployed to describe the civic virtues or shortcomings of the many peoples on the American scene. The racialization and reracialization of European immigrants across three periods in U.S. history (1790-1840s; 1840s-1920s; and 1920s-1960s) demonstrates the mutability of racial constructions and their political character. The racial languages and logics of Laura Z. Hobson's 1947 novel Gentleman's Agreement demonstrate the instability of "whiteness" as a monolithic category and the unevenness in racial "certainty" as one regime of racial knowledge gives way to the next.

Key Words: Race, Racialization, Race Relations, Whiteness, Immigration

Hardly two [scientists] agree as to the number and composition of the races. Thus one scholar makes an elaborate classification of twenty-nine races; another tells us there are six; Huxley gives us four; Kroeber, three; Goldenweiser, five; and Boas inclines to two, while his colleague, Linton,
Matthew Frye Jacobson says there are twelve or fifteen. Even my dullest students sometimes note this apparent contradiction.

Brewton Berry, "A Southerner Learns About Race" (1942)

We tend to think of race as being indisputable, real. It frames our notions of kinship and descent; it influences our movements in the social world; we see it plainly on one another’s faces. It seems a product not of the social imagination, but of biology. But scholars in several disciplines have recently shaken faith in this biological certainty. The conventions by which “race mixing” is understood, they point out, is one site where the unreality of race comes into view. Why is it that in the United States a white woman can have black children but a black woman can’t have white children? Doesn’t this bespeak a degree of arbitrariness—that is to say, social imagination—in this business of affixing racial labels?

The fluid history of racial classification over time is a second such site: entire races have disappeared from view, from public discussion, and from modern memory, though their flesh-and-blood members still walk the earth. What has become of the nineteenth century’s Celts and Slavs, for instance? Its Hebrews, Iberics, Mediterranean, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons? This essay addresses the historical processes by which these races—these public fictions—rose and fell in American social consciousness, and the processes by which the twentieth century’s Caucasians emerged to take their place.

In Philp Roth’s novel The Counterlife a gentile woman comments that she seldom gets involved with Jewish men “because there are enough politics in sex without racial politics coming into it.” “We’re not a race,” objects her Jewish listener. The ensuing exchange cuts to the very heart of “difference” and the epistemology of race.

“It is a racial matter,” she insisted.

“No, we’re the same race. You’re thinking of Eskimos. We are not the same race. Not according to anthropologists, or whoever measures these things. There’s Caucasian, Semitic—there are about five different groups. Don’t look at me like that. I can’t help it. Some nasty superstitions always tend to crop up when people talk about a Jewish ‘race.’” “... all I can tell you is that you are a different race. We’re supposed to be closer to Indians than to Jews, actually;—I’m talking about Caucasians.” “But I am Caucasian, kiddo. In the U.S. census I am, for good or bad, counted as Caucasian.” “Are you? Am I wrong? ...” (Roth 1988:79).
This passage beautifully conveys the seemingly natural but finally unstable logic of race. The debate over Jews’ racial identity begins merely as a matter of conflicting classification: at the outset stable, meaningful categories are assumed, and the question is simply where a particular group belongs—which pigeonhole do Jews fit into, Caucasian or Semite? But the question itself points to a more profound epistemological crisis: if he is certain that he is a Caucasian, and she is certain that he is not, then what does it mean to call a person a Caucasian in the first place—and where does all this certainty come from?

Once the two characters recognize the slippage in what they had each thought an uncompromising natural fact, both scramble to appeal to some higher authority in order to uphold their initial views. She invokes science (“according to anthropologists…”); he invokes the state (“in the U.S. census…”). They thus identify what, historically, have been two key actors in the creation and enforcement of these public fictions called races. (Not incidentally, the narratives and images of popular culture—like Roth’s bestseller itself—represent another.) Caucasians are not born, these combatants now seem to understand; they are somehow made. The question is, who does the making?

Roth himself is most interested here in the idea of Jewishness; and certainly the notion of racial Jewishness, like anti-Semitism, has an independent history of its own (1988: 260). But the changeability of Jewish whiteness is intimately related to the racial odysseys of myriad other groups—the Irish, Armenians, Italians, Poles, Syrians, Greeks, Ruthenians, Sicilians, Finns, and a host of others—who came ashore in the United States as “free white persons” under the terms of reigning naturalization law, yet whose racial credentials were not equivalent to those of the Anglo-Saxon “old stock” who laid proprietary claim to the nation’s founding documents and hence to its stewardship. All of these groups became Caucasians only over time; and all of them, like Roth’s fictional Caucasian/Semite, faced certain challenges to their racial pedigrees along the way.

What follows, then, is a two-part analysis of this racial “becoming”: an historical sketch of the salient patterns of these groups’ racialization and re-racialization across a rather broad sweep of American history; and a close reading of a single cultural artifact, Laura Z. Hobson’s 1947 novel Gentleman’s Agreement, whose contradictions and instabilities have much to reveal about both the processes and the politics involved in these uneven developments.
I should pause here to underscore the two major premises guiding my approach to these questions. The first is that race resides not in nature, but in the contingencies of politics and culture. Racialized perceptions not only shift over time, but they shift for particular reasons. To trace the process by which Celts or Slavs become Caucasians is to recognize race as an ideological, political deployment rather than as a neutral, biologically determined element of nature. And my second premise, following from this, is that race turns out to be absolutely central to the history of European immigration and settlement.

HISTORY, POWER, AND THE MUTABILITY OF RACE

White privilege in various forms has been a constant in American political culture since colonial times, but whiteness itself has been subject to all kinds of contests and has gone through a series of historical vicissitudes. In the case of Rollins v. Alabama (1922), for instance, an Alabama Circuit Court of Appeals reversed the conviction of one Jim Rollins, a black man convicted of the crime of miscegenation, on the grounds that the state had produced “no competent evidence to show that the woman in question, Edith Labue, was a white woman…” Edith Labue was a Sicilian immigrant, a fact which, this court held, “can in no sense be taken as conclusive that she was therefore a white woman…” While it is important to underscore that this court did not find that a Sicilian was necessarily non-white, its finding that a Sicilian was inconclusively white does speak volumes about whiteness in 1920s Alabama. If the court left room for the possibility that Edith Labue may have been white, the ruling also made clear that she was not the sort of white woman whose purity was to be “protected” by that bulwark of white supremacism, the miscegenation statute.

This ruling is not an oddity of the Alabama courts, but is part of a much broader pattern of racial thinking throughout the United States between the mid-nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth. The racially inflected caricatures of the Irish at mid-century are well-known, but in the 1890s even Irish novelist John Brennan could write that the Irishness of the emigrants’ assimilated children showed in their “physiognomy, or the color of their countenances…” (Brennan 1892: 263). When in 1891 a Detroit News reporter asked a Negro washer whether or not he worked with any white men, the laborer answered, “No, there’s no white men. There’s some Polacks, but dey ain’t white men, you know” (Katzman 1973: 166). In his 1908 study,
Becoming Caucasian

Race or Mongrel?, Alfred Schultz lamented in unambiguously biological language that,

The opinion is advanced that the public schools change the children of all races into Americans. Put a Scandinavian, a German, and a Magyar boy in at one end, and they will come out Americans at the other end. Which is like saying, let a pointer, a setter, and a pug enter one end of a tunnel and they will come out three greyhounds at the other end.

(Among Schultz’s many other racial judgments: “The modern Sicilian who is known the world over is the product of... race confusion. The mongrel is worthless everywhere.” Or again, “Civilization does not owe one thought, one suggestion... to the Magyars” [Schultz 1908: 111, 144, 261, 319].)

In The Sheik (1921), Italian immigrant Rudolph Valentino traded on his physiognomical ability to be both the exotic, racial Other and the acceptable, chivalric European—first, as a “savage” Arab, kidnapping Agnes Ayers, and later (safely revealed to be of English and Spanish descent) rescuing her from an even darker African foe (Douglass 1995: 78; Hansen 1991: 254–268). When Porgy and Bess appeared (1935) critics broadly attributed George Gershwin’s talent for “American-Negroid music” to the “common Oriental ancestry in both Negro and Jew” (Melnick 1999: ch. 3).

The contest over whiteness—its definition, its internal hierarchies, and its proper boundaries—has been critical to American culture throughout the nation’s history, and it has been a fairly untidy affair. Conflicting or overlapping racial designations such as white, Caucasian, and Celt may operate in popular perception and discussion simultaneously, despite their contradictions—the Irish simians of Thomas Nast’s cartoons were “white” according to naturalization law, they proclaimed themselves “Caucasians” in various political organizations called “Caucasian clubs,” and they were degraded “Celts” in the patrician lexicon of proud Anglo-Saxons. Such usages have had regional valences as well: it is one of the compelling circumstances of American cultural history that an Irish immigrant in 1877 could be a despised Celt in Boston—representing a threat to the republic—and yet could be a solid member of The Order of Caucasians for the Extermination of the Chinaman in San Francisco, gallantly defending U.S. shores from an invasion of “Mongolians” (Saxton 1971: 28–29, 37–40).

Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant assert that the contending forces of class-formation and racial-formation in American
political culture produced “a racial order that drew a color line around rather than within Europe” (Omi and Winant 1987: 65). True enough. But between the 1840s and the 1920s it was not altogether clear just where that line ultimately would be drawn. Just as it is crucial to recognize the legal whiteness undergirding the status of the white races in the United States, so is it crucial to reckon seriously with the racial othering that overlaid that whiteness. One way of doing that is to examine the relationship among competing, colliding, mutually complicating ideas such as white, Caucasian, Nordic, Anglo-Saxon, Celt, Slav, Alpine, Hebrew, Mediterranean, Iberic, Latin, and so on.

As Alexander Saxton writes, race is “fundamentally a theory of history” (1990: 14). It is a theory of who is who, of who belongs and who does not, of who deserves what and who is capable of what. By looking at racial categories and their fluidity over time, we glimpse the competing theories of history that inform the society and define its internal struggles. The patterns in literary, legal, political, and graphic evidence suggest that it was not just an archaic meaning of the word “race,” but rather an archaic perception of “difference” by which Emma Lazarus could write of the “Oriental blood” of the Jew or John Brennan could describe the distinct physiognomy and skin color of the Celt (1987: 20). In looking at the history of European immigration, we must admit of a system of “difference” by which one might be both white and racially distinct from other whites.

If racial whiteness is indeed changeable, under what circumstances does it change? What have been the historical patterns that characterize whiteness and its mutations? What does the racial history of European immigration look like across the chronological sweep of U.S. history? The contending forces that have fashioned and refashioned whiteness in the United States across time are capitalism on the one hand (with its insatiable appetite for cheap labor) and republican government on the other (with its imperatives of responsible citizenship—hence, of responsible, “fit” citizens). Citizenship was a racially inscribed concept at the outset of the new nation: by an act of the first Congress, only “free white” immigrants could be naturalized. Yet as immigration soared in the second half of the nineteenth century, incoming “white” peasants and laborers from unanticipated regions of Europe aroused doubts about this unquestioned connection between “whiteness” and “fitness for self government.” Over the latter half of the nineteenth century a new regime of racial understanding emerged in response, cataloguing the newcomers as
racial types, pronouncing upon their innate, biological distance from the nation's "original stock," and speculating as to their "fitness for self-government." This regime culminated in the racially-based and highly restrictive immigration legislation of 1924, which in its turn laid the way for yet another racial regime. The period from the 1920s to the 1960s saw a dramatic decline in the perceived differences among these white Others, again in response to shifting demographic conditions. Reduced immigration (the "solution" to the immigration crisis) paired with internal black migrations altered the nation's racial alchemy and redrew the racial configuration along strict, white/black binary lines, in effect creating "Caucasians" where before had been so many Celts, Hebrews, Teutons, Slavs, and the like. To track racial whiteness across historical time, then, is to depict American political culture in its major adjustments, as shifting demographics have grated against the more rigid imperatives of this fragile experiment in self-governance.

The political history of whiteness in the United States, then, is divisible into three great epochs. The nation's first naturalization law of 1790 (limiting naturalized citizenship to "free white persons") demonstrates the republican convergence of race and "fitness for self-government;" the law's wording denotes an unconflicted view of the presumed character and unambiguous boundaries of whiteness. Why did the first congress include whiteness among the qualifications for citizenship in the first place? From a practical point of view, and certainly by traditions established during the colonial period, the chief tasks of a "citizen" in this settler society included the possible participation in securing the frontier against Indians, or in putting down slave rebellions. Securing "domestic tranquility," in the cosmology of the colonial period and early republic, was largely a racialized notion in and of itself (Jacobson 1998: ch. 1; Higginbotham 1978; Berkofer 1978; Drinnon 1980; Slotkin 1976).

And from a more philosophical point of view, secondly, as scholars like Ronald Takaki and Benjamin Ringer have argued, the American Revolution radically altered the lines of authority from the Crown to "the people," but it left untouched various Enlightenment assumptions about who "the people" properly ought to be. This experiment in republican government demanded an extraordinary moral character in the people—it called for a polity that was disciplined, virtuous, self-sacrificing, productive, far-seeing, wise—traits that were all racially inscribed in eighteenth century Euro-American thought. (For example, the definition of the word "Negro" in an
encyclopedia published in Philadelphia in 1790 included "idleness, treachery, revenge, debauchery, nastiness, and intemperance..." [White 1991: 71].) And so to the framers of the nation's first naturalization law, the linking of citizenship to "whiteness" came quite effortlessly. And this rather uncomplicated view of a monolithic whiteness reigned until about the 1840s.

But then, beginning with the massive influx of highly undesirable but nonetheless "white" persons from Ireland, whiteness was subject to new interpretations. The period of mass European immigration, from the 1840s to the restrictive legislation of 1924, witnessed a fracturing of whiteness into a hierarchy of plural and scientifically determined white races. Between the 1840s and the 1920s tens of millions of immigrants dragged themselves ashore, most of them from sending countries that the framers had never anticipated when they penned the word "white" in the late eighteenth century. Vigorous debate ensued over which of these was truly "fit for self-government" in the good old Anglo-Saxon sense. (The history of American nativism, from the 1850s to the 1920s, is largely a history of re-racialization, a massive revision of the perception of and meanings attached to whiteness.) In this period, Anglo-Saxon supremacism replaced simple white supremacism in many (though not all) contexts.

And finally, in the 1920s and after, partly because the crisis of overinclusive whiteness had been solved by restrictive legislation and partly in response to a new racial alchemy generated by African-American migrations to the North and West, whiteness was reconsolidated: the late nineteenth century's probationary white groups were now remade and granted the scientific stamp of authenticity as the unitary Caucasian race—an earlier era's Celts, Slavs, Hebrews, Iberics, and Saracens, among others, had become the Caucasians so familiar to our own visual economy and racial lexicon. In 1960 the election of John F. Kennedy—a Celt whose "Papist" allegiances were questioned, but whose racial character never was—marked the ascendance and utter hegemony of this third paradigm. The crossing over of the scientific appellation "Caucasian" into the vernacular toward the mid-twentieth century marks a profound readjustment in popular thinking as to the relationship among the immigrant white races.

It was the racial appellation "white persons" in naturalization law that allowed the migrations from Europe in the first place; the problem that this immigration posed to the polity was increasingly cast in terms of racial difference and assimilability; the most significant
revision of immigration policy, the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, was founded upon a racial logic borrowed from biology and eugenics; and, consequently, the civic story of assimilation (the process by which the Irish, Russian Jews, Poles, or Greeks became Americans) is inseparable from the cultural story of racial alchemy (the process by which Celts, Hebrews, Slavs, or Mediterraneans became Caucasians). The European immigrants' experience was decisively shaped by their entering an arena where whiteness was among the most important possessions one could lay claim to. It was their whiteness that opened the Golden Door. And yet, for those who arrived between 1840 and 1924, their New World experience was also stamped by their entering an arena where race was the prevailing idiom for discussing citizenship and for assessing the relative merits of the world's peoples. Thus their whiteness was unstable and in question until well into the twentieth century.

None of this is to argue that race is freighted the same way from one case to the next. No one who has looked into this country's maze of segregation statutes, miscegenation codes, housing covenants, slavery laws, or civil rights debates could ever suppose that being a "Celt," say, was tantamount to being some kind of European "Negro." My point here is not to equate one racial experience with another, but rather to demonstrate the inadequacy of reigning notions of "ethnicity" in rendering the history of whiteness in American social and political life. Ultimately, I would argue, this treatment of the racial history of European immigration counters any facile comparisons between the African-American experience and the white immigrant experience: it is not just that various white immigrant groups' economic successes have come at the expense of non-whites; further, it is in part to these non-white groups that they owe their now stabilized and broadly recognized whiteness.

And so the history of whiteness and its fluidity is very much a history of power and its disposition. But there is a second dimension worth exploring here: race is not just a conception; it is also a perception. The problem is not merely how races are comprehended or defined, but how they are seen. In her 1943 obituary of Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict recounted how Boas the physicist, having gone to the Arctic to study the properties of water, became Boas the anthropologist upon discovering that his observations did not at all match those of the Eskimos whom he encountered. Remarked Benedict, "He returned with an abiding conviction that if we are ever to understand human behavior we must know as much about the eye that sees as
about the object seen. And he had understood once and for all that the eye that sees is not a mere physical organ but a means of perception conditioned by the tradition in which its possessor has been reared” (Benedict 1943).

If this passage sums up Boas’ understanding of the power of culture, it also nicely sums up the properties of race itself. In racial matters above all else, the eye that sees is “a means of perception conditioned by the tradition in which its possessor has been reared.” The American eye sees a certain person as black whom Haitian or Brazilian eyes might see as white. Similarly, an earlier generation of Americans saw Celtic, Hebrew, Anglo-Saxon, or Mediterranean physiognomies where today we see only subtly varying shades of a mostly undifferentiated whiteness. (If pressed, we might come to a consensus on the physiognomical properties of Irishness; but at a glance it certainly does not strike most Americans with anything like the perceptible force that it did a century ago, or that live racial distinctions do today.) The awesome power of race as an ideology resides precisely in its ability to pass as a feature of the natural landscape.

A CASE STUDY: LAURA Z. HOBSON’S GENTLEMEN’S AGREEMENT

Now I want to explore this question of visuality (especially as it pertains to the last of the three racial epochs I have outlined here, the reconsolidation of whiteness) by examining the last leg of the historic racial odyssey for American Jews: their re-racialization from “Semitic” or “Hebrew” to “Caucasian” in the twentieth century. Laura Z. Hobson’s 1947 novel, Gentlemen’s Agreement, provides an apt lens. The novel at once furnishes evidence of the vicissitudes of whiteness and illustrates the processes and stakes involved in racialization and re-racialization. Hobson was more interested in anti-Semitism than in “Jewishness,” per se, but she could not write about the one without coming to some kind of understanding of the other; and in 1947 this meant taking up Jewishness as a “race” question. The novel is thus intricately laced through with the twin themes of “looking Jewish” and “seeing Jews.”

For those who are unfamiliar with the novel (or the 1947 film of the same title), the plot is easily summarized: a gentle journalist named Philip Green (played in the movie by Gregory Peck) is assigned a series on American anti-Semitism for a major news magazine. Groping
for a fresh angle he hits upon the idea of posing as a Jew—passing—and then writing an exposé of American anti-Semitism based on his own experience. "I Was a Jew for Eight Weeks," this tour de force will be called. He actually does pull this off, and he finds out many interesting things along the way (not the least of which is that most everyone he knows, including his fiancée, is anti-Semitic).

On its face, the novel is unequivocal in its erasure of Jewish "racial" difference; indeed, whatever statement the novel seeks to make about Jewishness, and, finally, about justice, derives entirely from the central idea of interchangability: Phil Green can experience anti-Semitism first hand because he can pass as a Jew; and he can pass because, at bottom, there is no "difference" between Jews and gentiles. This is what is so absurd about anti-Semitism, Hobson will have us conclude. What does it mean that a non-Jew can be the victim of Jew-hatred?

I want to highlight three aspects in particular of the way in which "sameness" and "difference" work within the novel. First, by way of situating Hobson's work, I want to review the racialized conceptions of Jewishness that prevailed in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, and point up the significance of Hobson's ideological move toward re-racialization. Second, I will pause to consider some of the troubling implications of the novel's politics of justice, based as it is upon literal sameness. And finally, moving from the intended to the unintended in the novel, I will suggest that Hobson never really did expunge the "racial" basis of Jewish difference after all. The text is at war with itself in a way that wonderfully demonstrates the character of "racial" categorization itself as ideology deeply entrenched.

Hobson's novel offers a unique snapshot of the contest in the mid-twentieth century between a waning racial order that identified Jews as "Semites" or "Hebrews," and the waxing order by which their status as "Caucasians" would become more salient. Though clearly connected to a deeper, transnational history of Jewishness and anti-Semitism (it is no accident that the novel appears in the wake of the Holocaust), this contest nonetheless bears witness to shifting paradigms of "race" particular to the American context—shifts that at certain historical junctures have also produced questions regarding the "racial" identity of "Celts," "Slavs," "Mediterraneans," "Iberics," "Seracens," "Levantines," "Scandinavians," or "Alpines"—categories that have faded from our visual lexicon as well as from our racial vocabulary.
The pivotal moment in Hobson's political project is when Green first decides that he could indeed pass as a Jew—that Jews and Gentiles are essentially interchangeable. In the movie, Gregory Peck runs over and checks himself out in the mirror and decides, "Yeah, I could be Jewish!" In the novel the scene is narrated this way:

He checked on himself in his mind's eye—tall, lanky; sure so was Dave Goldman, his Jewish friend, so were a hell of a lot of guys who were Jewish. He had no accent or mannerisms that were Jewish—neither did lots of Jews, and anti-Semitism was hitting them just the same. His nose was straight—so was Dave's, so were a lot of other guys'. He had dark eyes, dark hair, a kind of sensitive look... Brother, it was a cinch (1947:64).

But Hobson goes out of her way to articulate the theme of reracialization even beyond the notions of passing and interchangeability that drive the plot. She mentions the (non-fictional) anthropologist Ernest Hooton, for instance, and his work on "the balderdash of race and types." Or again, in a passage in which Green's anti-Semitic fiancée slips and uses the phrase "Jewish race," she quickly corrects herself: "She knew perfectly well that the three great divisions of mankind were the Caucasian race, the Mongoloid, the Negroid. She remembered [Phil's] finger pointing out a phrase in a pamphlet written by leading anthropologists. 'There is no Jewish race'" (1947: 101—102, 196).

It bears emphasizing here what a significant revision of prevailing notions of Jewishness this represents. Throughout the 1930s Franz Boas had tried to stir the indignation of the scientific community about state policy toward the Jewish race in Nazi Germany, only to be told again and again—on both sides of the Atlantic—that the use which the German state was making of ethnological findings was lamentable, but the findings themselves were scientifically sound (see Barkan 1992). In the 1910s Yiddish writers like Morris Winchevsky could glorify Jews' "historic physiognomy" and boast that the Jewish "race" was far too strong to melt into the American melting-pot; in the 1890s Abraham Cahan's novella, Yekl, demonstrated the unassimilability of the Jew, whose "Semitic" features would ever betray any aspiration to be a real "Yankee feller" (see Jacobson 1995: chs. 3, 5). (Cahan was applauded by William Dean Howells for so compellingly bringing the "Hebrew race" before an "Anglo-Saxon" audience.) In 1877, when Joseph Seligman was refused lodging by the Hilton Hotel in Saratoga, the New York Tribune noted that the "natural affinities between the Hebrew and the Anglo-Saxon were
extremely weak.” And, indeed, according to Johann Blumenbach’s *Natural Varieties of Mankind* way back in the 1790s (Blumenbach 1969: 234), the principle of stable racial types was illustrated “above all [by] the nation of the Jews, who, under every climate, remain the same as far as the fundamental configuration of face goes, remarkable for a racial character almost universal, which can be distinguished at the first glance even by those little skilled in physiognomy…” Examples of racialized Jewishness could be multiplied indefinitely; they can be discovered in scientific and social scientific literature, in popular culture, in political rhetoric, in the visual economy of the arts and graphics, and, as I said, in Yiddish and Hebrew literature as well.7 I offer this litany only to point out what a recent invention deracinated Jewishness really is, and to suggest that Hobson’s subversion of prevailing notions of Jewishness-as-difference was no slight undertaking on her part.

In a context like the United States, however, there are some highly problematic features of a politics of justice that is based upon literal “sameness.” The ideological move entailed by this re-racialization of Jewishness is fraught with implications for other racialized groups. The broadest, most sweeping stakes of Philip Green’s project (and hence of Laura Z. Hobson’s project) is summed up when Green poses the rhetorical question, “What the hell chance have we of getting decent with thirteen million Negroes if we can’t lick the much easier business of anti-Semitism?” (Hobson 1947: 184) Here, by a kind of vicious circular comment, the novel demonstrates its own political limitations: there is no chance of “getting decent” with everyone in the nation of nations that is the U.S. if decency is predicated upon literal “sameness.” And yet “sameness” itself is both constructed and arbitrary. The thing that makes anti-Semitism an “easier business” is Hobson’s own willful act of re-racialization, her decision to challenge the perceived “difference” dividing Anglo-Saxon from Hebrew while leaving intact that which divides “Caucasian” from “Negroid” from “Mongoloid.” What makes anti-Semitism an “easier business,” in short, is Hobson’s endorsement of the color-line. Indeed, a conversation between Green and his mother about his boyhood friend, Petey Alamacho (who was Mexican), overtly suggests that there are levels of “difference” whose bridging is much more iffy than in the case of the (presumably) consanguine gentiles and Jews (Hobson 1947: 35).

Although the phrase is meant to refer to restrictive housing covenants in places like New Canaan, Connecticut, the most portentous
“gentleman’s agreement” of the novel is this agreement to expose the constructedness of “racial” difference, then not to unthink it, but simply to rethink it as “color.” What you cannot learn from this book about restrictive housing covenants is that in 1946, the year before the novel appeared, in the single city of Chicago in the months of May and June alone there were over thirty residential bombings whose aim was not the expulsion of Jews by non-Jews, but the expulsion of “Negroes” by “Caucasians.” The point is not simply that, by her silence on this bit of social context, Hobson misses an opportunity to take her critique further. More than this, by the particular ways in which the novel frames questions of “difference” and justice, the novel provides no moral syntax for commenting upon anti-black racism at all (other than simply to say that anti-black racism is the “tougher business” to which anti-Semitism is the “easier business”). Anti-Semitism is incomprehensible primarily because Jewish “difference” is given the lie by an unreliable Jewish physicality. Wholly outside the novel’s moral compass are cases where questions of “difference” and justice cannot be resolved by an argument of “sameness” indicated by literal interchangability. Recast as biblical injunction, Gentleman’s Agreement reads something like, “Do unto others (who could pass for you) as you would have others do unto you (if you could pass for them).”

This fairly captures the central tendency in American political culture during the middle decades of the twentieth century: as “race” moved to the center of political discussion nationally, “difference” among the former “white races” was erased, “race” itself was recast as color, and race-as-difference was reified along the lines of what Hobson (after Hooten and Benedict and others) called the “three great divisions of mankind”—the Caucasian, the Negroid, and the Mongolid. American political life was this gentleman’s agreement writ large.

In the novel itself, however, there is a second, countervailing current. We now know that the paradigm of “racial” difference that reified “Caucasian” unity won out. The nineteenth century’s simianized caricatures of Celts strike us as oddities; phrases like “the Jewish race,” if not totally expunged from our popular political lexicon, are nonetheless likely to strike us, not as naturalized and invisible, but as noticeable and vaguely sinister. But as Hobson was writing in the 1940s, the residual scheme of distinct “white races” still had significant purchase on popular ideology and perception, and Hobson was ultimately unable to turn from it as freely as she might have
hoped. Is there such a thing as a "Jewish race"? Here is a rather dramatic and telling description from Gentleman’s Agreement: "Lieberman was plump as well as short, middleaged, with the face of a Jew in a Nazi cartoon, the beaked nose, the blue jowls, and the curling black hair. Phil saw all of it, and the fine candid eyes" (1947: 122).

Despite a plot that turns on the presumption of interchangability, it is this view—a view of Jewish "difference" marked by a distinct Jewish physicality—that silently gains the upper hand in the narrative, when all is said and done. Despite Hobson’s proposition of interchangeability, the remarkable fact is that in this novel, which is all about passing, the character who does all the passing never actually passes. That is, Phil Green’s “passing” as a Jew depends upon his telling everyone that he is a Jew, and getting the rumor mill started: everyone hears that he is a Jew, and believes it; but no one ever once (mis)takes him for one. The idea pivots on the same logic as a joke told of Michael Arlen, the Armenian actor, which is quoted in the novel: when asked if he was “really” Armenian, Arlen answered, “would anyone say he was Armenian if he wasn’t Armenian?” (1947: 67). In 1947 in the United States, would anyone say he was a Jew if he was not a Jew?—Phil Green’s “passing” is predicated on telling a lie too improbable to be a lie.

Not only do people not take him for Jewish until he announces that he is, but in fact they always comfortably—and correctly—assume that he is not: a cabdriver makes an anti-Semitic remark about the Jews on Park Avenue, comfortable in his assumption that Phil Green the passenger is not Jewish; a doctor makes an anti-Semitic remark about those Jewish doctors who always overcharge, comfortable in his assumption that Phil Green the patient is not Jewish. Even when Green experiments by checking in at a restricted hotel in the country, he is about to be admitted until he raises a fuss about whether or not the hotel is in fact restricted, thereby arousing suspicions (1947: 39, 96, 179–180). Green can volunteer to be outraged by anti-Semitism, in other words, but he cannot volunteer to be victimized by it.

The novel’s “real” Jews, meanwhile, never need to announce it; their physiognomy always announces it for them. Lieberman looks like a Jew in a Nazi cartoon. Phil Green’s friend Dave Goldman (who Green has decided he looks “just like”) is verbally assaulted at a bar by a drunken soldier who doesn’t like “yids”—precisely the kind of affront that Green is never subjected to in the course of his experimentation (1947: 138). And when Green inspects his new secretary,
Elaine Wales, "High cheekbones made her seem Scandinavian, Slavic, something foreign and interesting." She, of course, turns out to be not Elaine Wales, but Estelle Walovsky, a Jew who is "passing." Foreign indeed (1947: 99).

It is ultimately through Lieberman, a Jew distinctly marked by classically Jewish physicality, that Hobson attempts to resolve the question of racialized Jewishness. "I have no religion," remarks Lieberman,

so I am not Jewish by religion. Further, I am a scientist, so I must rely on science which tells me I am not Jewish by race since there's no such thing as a distinct Jewish race. As for ethnic group or Jewish type, we know I fit perfectly the Syrian or Turkish or Egyptian type—there's not even such a thing, anthropologically, as the Jewish type... I will go forth and state flatly, "I am not a Jew."... With this face that becomes not an evasion but a new principle (1947: 212).

Here is Hobson's attempt to bring the warring elements of the narrative together—to suture the politics of "interchangability" to her recognition of "difference" marked by Jewish physicality. There are two ways of looking at this "new principle" that Hobson is groping for: if the New Principle is a politics of justice based not upon sameness, but upon an acceptance of "difference," then it is a principle that the novel itself never adequately articulates; if the New Principle is a politics of unharrassed whiteness, the novel articulates it all too well, regardless of Hobson's nobler intentions.

CONCLUSION

My intent here is not simply to pillory Hobson. Rather, I focus on her because the dilemmas she sought to resolve and those she unwittingly generated point to a fundamental dynamic of America's racialized political culture. I earlier referred to Gentleman's Agreement as a cultural snapshot. It is better: it is a cultural videotape, in which the fluidity of "race" and the collision of "racial" categories are captured in motion. By the logic of its "politics of sameness," the novel indicates the white-supremacist dynamic that was historically written into the racial odyssey from Hebrew (or Celt or Slav or Iberian or Levantine) to "Caucasian." Hobson was scarcely alone in her tendency to expunge "racial difference" in one area in such a way as to leave it intact, unquestioned, unproblematic, and thus further naturalized elsewhere; this tacit, white-over-nonwhite dynamic in
Hobson's liberal effort to rethink "race" is also evident in the writings of social scientists of the period like Ruth Benedict and Ashley Montagu, political commentators like Carey McWilliams and Louis Adamic, and other novelists like Sinclair Lewis and Arthur Miller. The novel demonstrates the ideological, constructed basis of a conception like "Caucasian," and it indicates the social and political capital inherent in the category. And finally, it suggests how that capital is contingent upon the ideologically constructed category's seeming not to be ideologically constructed at all, but an irreducible "fact" of biology. Ultimately Hobson could not shake that conception of the Jew as racialized "Hebrew" which posed so convincingly as a biological fact. We in our turn, a half-century later, have trouble shaking the naturalized conception of a "Caucasian" race that has so convincingly taken its place.

To conclude, then, my intent here is to join scholars like David Roediger in moving race to the foreground of historiography on European immigration and assimilation. The saga of European immigration has long been held up as proof of the openness of American society, the benign and absorptive powers of American capitalism, and the robust health of American democracy. "Ethnic inclusion," "ethnic mobility," and "ethnic assimilation" on the European model set the standard upon which "America," as an ideal, is presumed to work; they provide the normative experience against which others are measured. But this pretty story suddenly fades once one recognizes how crucial Europeans' racial status as "free white persons" was to their gaining entrance in the first place; how profoundly dependent their racial inclusion was upon the racial exclusion of others; how racially accented the native resistance was even to their inclusion for something over half a century; and how completely intertwined were their prospects of becoming American and becoming Caucasian. Racism no longer appears anomalous to the working of American democracy, but fundamental to it. I focus on the historical contingency of Europeans' racial identities not so that so-called "white ethnics" can conveniently disassociate themselves from the historic legacies of systematic white privilege. On the contrary, recognizing how that privilege is constituted depends upon our first understanding how whiteness itself has been built and maintained. Recasting the saga of Europeans' immigration and assimilation in the United States as a racial odyssey is a first step in that direction.
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4. The most famous of the Nast images was the cover of Harper’s Weekly, December 9, 1876, depicting two hideously simianized figures, a Negro and a Celt, balancing in equipoise on the scales of civic merit: “The ignorant vote: The honors are easy.” Barbara Miller Solomon 1956 remains one of the most thorough treatments of “Celtic” political identity and status in New England. See also Matthew Frye Jacobson 1998: 2.

5. This discussion of the basis and the periodization of racial whiteness in U.S. political culture is condensed from Jacobson 1998: chs. 1–3.


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