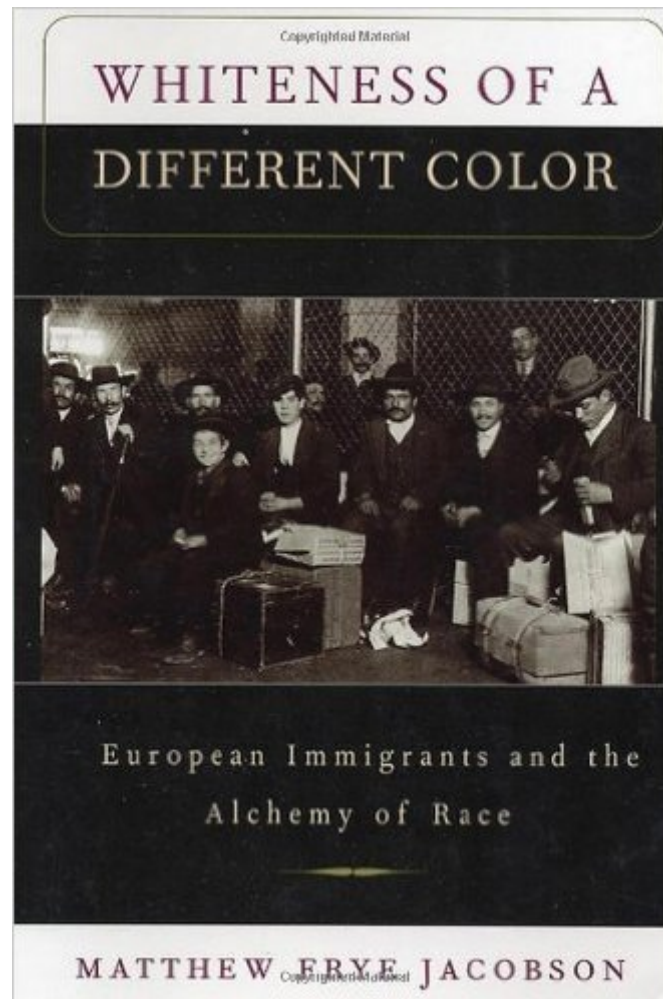


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# Whiteness Of A Different Color: European Immigrants And The Alchemy Of Race



## Synopsis

America's racial odyssey is the subject of this remarkable work of historical imagination. Matthew Frye Jacobson argues that race resides not in nature but in the contingencies of politics and culture. In ever-changing racial categories we glimpse the competing theories of history and collective destiny by which power has been organized and contested in the United States. Capturing the excitement of the new field of whiteness studies and linking it to traditional historical inquiry, Jacobson shows that in this nation of immigrants race has been at the core of civic assimilation: ethnic minorities in becoming American were re-racialized to become Caucasian. He provides a counter-history of how nationality groups such as the Irish or Greeks became Americans as racial groups like Celts or Mediterraneans became Caucasian. Jacobson tracks race as a conception and perception, emphasizing the importance of knowing not only how we label one another but also how we see one another, and how that racialized vision has largely been transformed in this century. The stages of racial formation—race as formed in conquest, enslavement, imperialism, segregation, and labor migration—are all part of the complex, and now counterintuitive, history of race. *Whiteness of a Different Color* traces the fluidity of racial categories from an immense body of research in literature, popular culture, politics, society, ethnology, anthropology, cartoons, and legal history, including sensational trials like the Leo Frank case and the Draft Riots of 1863.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

WHITE OF A DIFFERENT COLOR by Matthew Frye Jacobson is an excellent historical summary and deconstruction of the social construct called "the white race." Anthropologists, sociologists, demographers, and historians like Jacobson who study race and ethnicity have suggested over and over that even if race differences exist they are not fixed (the definition of white has changed over time and no consensus has been formed concerning its constituent parts). The biological sciences provide no evidence that race exists. Humans with different hair color, skin color, eye color, eye shape, and/or other "race" characteristics straddle all the "race" groups. Jacobson uses a variety of written sources to make his case --that "non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants and their children were perhaps the first beneficiaries of the modern civil rights movement." He has compiled evidence from many historical legal cases involving various individuals who attempted to establish evidence of "whiteness" in order to obtain U.S. citizenship or some other perk reserved for the "native white race." He points out that the legal evidence is conflicted. Are Armenians white or aren't they? How can Japanese with a white skin be nonwhite and Italians with a dark skin be white in one set of court proceedings and the reverse found in different courts on different days? Jacobson includes information from literature, news journals, and other written sources to illustrate that authors as diverse as Mark Twain and Joseph Conrad and Mr. Hearst of newspaper fame all offered an opinion about race at one time or another, and that while everyone started out assuming they knew what it meant to be white, most soon discovered the operational definition was another matter.

Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color* tells us all how we got in this mess. The book is subtitled *European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. "Alchemy" is correct. It means that the "base metal" of Nordic, Alpine, Mediterranean and even Western Asian "races" were turned into the "gold" of unadulterated white status. Jacobson explains how "whiteness" was created by colonial elites for the purpose of defending the state from Indian invasions and slave insurrections, and continued by the American republic in order to create a sense of unity in its polyglot European immigrant population. In 1790, United States naturalization law granted citizenship to "free white persons" -- which meant, mostly, those of Anglo-Saxon descent. As the U.S. population became more culturally mixed beginning in the 1840s, with an increase in immigration from non-Anglo Europe, the nation experienced "a fracturing of whiteness into a hierarchy of plural and scientifically determined white races." In other words, people who came from Ireland, Poland, Germany, Italy, Greece, and Jews from Russia and other Slavic nations all became, by virtue of the "melting pot" ethic, "Caucasian" whites. But, the creation of whiteness was - and still is - by no means an easy, continuous process. The Celtic, Nordic, Alpine and Mediterranean "races" were abolished in favor of

the myth of one homogenous "white" race (with the adoption of the "scientific" term "Caucasian" providing a new legitimacy to the honorific "racial" term "white." Jacobson contends that traditional historians have deliberately dismissed the "racial" distinctions of the 19th century and before as "misuses" of the word "race." Of course they didn't mean that Irish, Germans, Bohemians, Nordics, etc.

Every once in a while, a book comes along that changes both the direction and focus of historical scholarship. Matthew Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color* is one such work. For nearly a decade now, scholars and readers interested in understanding the history of the racial dynamic in the United States have turned almost exclusively to the history of the working class. David Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness* is clearly the best example of a working-class history of the social construction of race, and, indeed, is far superior to other, similarly-minded works, such as Noel Ignatiev's mixed offering, *How the Irish Became White*. Jacobson's work, however, shakes up the history of race, and illuminates a broader, shared history of difference, exclusion, and domination in American life. It is, in short, a truly *cultural* history of race in America. In clear and concise prose, Jacobson plots a long narrative history of race that reflects marked demographic, economic, and cultural changes. Building on the work of Roediger, Alexander Saxton, and others, he reveals the roots of the fragmentation of whiteness in the 1840s, and later demonstrates the forces responsible for the reconsolidation of whiteness in the mid-20th Century--for the near-complete assimilation of European immigrants into a singular "white race." There is, of course, much more here than a history of class-formation and race-consciousness, for *Whiteness of a Different Color* looks at this history of race in light of an abundance of sources drawn from every conceivable corner of American culture. Indeed, so powerful is Jacobson's argument, so forceful is his evidence, that one can only wonder why no one has put this all together before.

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