

CHAPTER 4

Contingent Whites and Inbetween People: Mexicans and Irish in the U.S.

In colonial North America, the plantation elite used law to create, impose, and enforce white people. The invention separated workers who were previously united in opposition to large landholders, and united people previously divided by starkly contrasting economic and social conditions. The divisions and allegiances that the invention of white people forged reorganized colonial society and, as we saw in the previous chapter, significantly organized the new republic. By the nineteenth century, new ideologies were promulgated that reasserted old tools, including whiteness, in the service of capitalist interests. One such ideology came to be called Manifest Destiny, and is integrally tied with U.S. expansionist efforts. Nativism was another, and was significant in shaping not only U.S. immigration policy, but the national political terrain.

In this chapter, we will examine U.S. expansionism and whiteness through the experience of Mexicans in the U.S. following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and nativism and whiteness through the experience of Irish Catholics in the mid-nineteenth century U.S. The two groups allow for an exploration of various not-really but sort-of-white statuses and, as such, expose the struggle over who defines white, and the very struggles and opportunities that whiteness presented.

Mexicans in the U.S. were determined to be white by law as a result of international treaties, and yet were repeatedly refused inclusion within and the benefits of this status. As a result they were rendered what I call “contingent whites,” because the only benefits

of whiteness received were those conferred explicitly by federal law that required the status white (i.e., naturalization law). The Irish who came in large numbers after the first quarter of the nineteenth century provide an example of what John Higham and Robert Ortis have called “inbetween peoples.” David Roediger explains this as the status of certain new immigrants to the U.S. who fell inbetween “hard racism and full inclusion – neither securely white nor nonwhite...”⁵⁶

As a matter of federal law, Mexicans were white and therefore could not be excluded from naturalizing. State law, however, was another matter. Almost every state with a significant Mexican population excluded them from the status “white” for the purposes of state laws with the exception of one area, antimiscegenation law. Rather than experiencing life in the U.S. as those who were understood to be white, Mexicans were rendered “unfree labor,” excluded from a “man’s wage,” blamed for low wages and poor working conditions, and excluded from almost every benefit of their federal legal status as white.

The history reviewed in chapters one and two suggests that law played a significant role in the invention of white people, not only in the assertion of the label and the group but also in the imposition and enforcement of its meanings. Why did being labeled white by virtue of international treaties fail to confer upon Mexicans and Mexican Americans the status as a matter of state law and general social practice? This question is pursued in this chapter.

Exclusion from citizenship via the white-only requirement in naturalization law was a key factor in the exclusion of Chinese and Japanese, among others, from many rights and opportunities available to whites. The means of exclusion from these rights and opportunities for Mexicans was different. Rather than being excluded from naturalizing because access to citizenship was rendered a white-only process and Chinese and then Japanese were rendered not white, Mexicans were given access to citizenship via a U.S. treaty with Mexico. However, neither access to formal citizenship nor the rendering of Mexicans white by virtue of federal law managed to secure this status and its benefits as a matter of social practice and even law in most states. The evidence reveals that Mexicans were instead interpreted to be not “really” white.

U.S. Expansionism and the Mexican-American War

Rodolfo F. Acuna locates the roots of the Mexican-American War back in 1767, when Benjamin Franklin identified Mexico and Cuba for future U.S. expansion (2007). Actions in furtherance of this desire began with the organization of white Americans to engage in insurrectionist activity through expeditions into Mexico (Texas) beginning in the 1790s. These efforts were fueled by a number of expansionist successes, including the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 and the Adam-Onis or Transcontinental Treaty of 1819, which followed the invasion by U.S. troops into Florida and resulted in Spain ceding that state to the U.S.⁵⁷

Expansionism was a pervasive idea in U.S. culture prior to the mid-nineteenth century. John O’Sullivan, editor of the *Democratic Review*, created the term “Manifest Destiny” and was influential in shaping public opinion and motivations for U.S. expansion. Manifest Destiny is a religious doctrine with Puritan roots that holds that the U.S. reflects the chosen people predestined for salvation. Newspapers and political speeches promoted expansion, as well as national intellectuals including Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and politicians including John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson. The newspaper editor O’Sullivan claimed that it was America’s “destiny to overspread the whole North American continent with an immense democratic population,” and that white Americans would spread democracy and freedom to lesser peoples in the process.⁵⁸

The desire for land backed by a moral directive to spread the principles of democracy and Protestant Christianity led the U.S. Congress to almost unanimous support of a declaration of war against Mexico in May of 1846. After the war, Mexico was forced to cede one-third of its territory, the northern part, to the United States for a sum of \$15 million. This vast expanse of land includes what are now the states of California, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Texas, and part of Colorado, and encompassed some 100,000 Mexican citizens, including a variety of native tribes such as Navajo, Apache, Pueblo, and Comanche.⁵⁹

Imagine how extraordinary this time must have been. Mexican citizens found themselves living within and owning land in a new nation

without having moved. How did the treaty affect their citizenship? How did it impact land grants? These were key features of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and areas of great concern to the Mexican leadership. The U.S. Senate ratified the treaty but deleted Article X, which dealt with explicit protection of Mexican land grants, specifically those in Texas. Only Articles VIII and IX remained with a promise of protection for private property. Article IX of the treaty provides in part:

Mexicans....shall be incorporated into the Union of the United States, and admitted at the proper time (to be judged of by the Congress of the United States) to the enjoyment of all the rights of citizens of the United States according to the principles of the Constitution; and in the mean time shall be maintained and protected in the free enjoyment of their liberty and property, and secured in the free exercise of their religion without restriction.⁶⁰

According to Article VIII, Mexicans who elect to remain in the U.S. may either "retain the title and rights of Mexican citizens, or acquire those of citizens of the United States." Those who failed to make the election to remain a Mexican citizen within one year, the Article provides, "shall be considered to have elected to become citizens of the United States." Article VIII goes on to provide that Mexican property shall be respected providing, "present owners, the heirs of these, and all Mexicans who may hereafter acquire said property by contract, shall enjoy with respect to it, guaranties equally ample as if the same belonged to citizens of the United States."⁶¹

Mexican opposition to ratification provides some international perspective with regard to existing racial hierarchies in the U.S. Mexican diplomat Manuel Crescion Rejon expressed his reservations about the impending treatment of Mexicans in the U.S., stating:

Our race, our unfortunate people will have to wander in search of hospitality in a strange land, only to be rejected later. Descendants of the Indians that we are, the North Americans hate us, their spokesmen depreciate us, even if they recognize the justice of our cause, and they consider us unworthy to form

with them one nation and one society, they clearly manifest that their future expansion begins with the territory that they take from us and pushing [sic] aside our citizens who inhabit the land.⁶²

Rejon's fears for Mexicans in the U.S. were proven to be valid. Violation of the treaty occurred almost immediately. Mexicans lost their land and many, including those who were members of native tribes, were denied the promise of U.S. citizenship.

The American legal system became an instrument by which Mexicans lost their land and were displaced. The U.S. landowning system is based upon legal title. In this system, land is individually owned and can be subdivided and sold without regard to heirs. The Mexican system of landowning was rooted in tradition and considered a patrimony, residing ownership in family lines, not individuals. In addition, it included communal land grants that provided rights of use such as for grazing or farming. These latter grants were not recognized under U.S. law, and the lands were simply taken and sold to white speculators and businessmen.⁶³

The transformation of the landowning system for Mexicans resulted in many native landowners losing land. In 1850 more than 60 percent of Mexican households owned land in the U.S. valued at more than one hundred dollars. Ten years later, that number declined to only 29 percent. Land commissions were set up in order to review claims to ownership by Mexicans. In California, the commission required even those holding perfected title to have ownership approved. In the process of trying to validate their claims to the land under U.S. law, many Mexican landowners lost land, not because of defective title but as a result of excessive legal fees to American lawyers. Those failing to bring their claim to ownership within a specified period of time were deemed to have abandoned their title. Others lost land through fraud, legal chicanery, land seizure due to failure to pay taxes, or through lynching and other violence. A few less than six hundred Mexicans were lynched in the United States between 1848 and 1928. Most were executed by mobs.⁶⁴

What was secured for Mexicans in the U.S., at least initially, was their status as white by virtue of federal law. The Treaty of Guadalupe

Hidalgo and other treaties designated Mexicans legally as white. This was confirmed by the naturalization case *In re Rodriguez*, wherein the court granted citizenship not because the Texas federal court believed a "pure-blood" Mexican was white, but because a series of treaties including the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) and the Transcontinental Treaty (1819) conferred citizenship on Mexicans and Spaniards (81 F. 337 (W.D. Tex. 1897) 349-354). The law imposed a white status, despite the perception of legal actors that this was not "true." The U.S. Department of Labor in the 1920s wrote, in reply to a request from those advocating a eugenics perspective and seeking to challenge the *Rodriguez* decision, that the U.S. "Government, in its relations with the Mexican people, has uniformly recognized them as belonging to the white race."⁶⁵

Mexicans were provided access to citizenship through the Treaty and were not blocked from naturalizing because of the white-only requirement, because naturalization law was and remains a process under the jurisdiction of the federal government, not the states. However, they were not white for purposes of much else. There were definite limits to the share in whiteness that Mexicans experienced, both as a matter of ideology and social structure. For example, Mexicans faced many of the exclusions experienced by those of African and Chinese descent in the U.S. Recalling that in 1850 California prohibited Chinese and Native Americans from testifying against whites, this law was later used to prohibit Mexicans as well. For example, Manuel Dominguez, a signatory to the first constitution of California and a wealthy landowner and county supervisor, had his testimony barred (*People v. Elyea*, 14 Cal 145 1859).⁶⁶

During the mid-nineteenth century, most whites made racial distinctions regarding Mexicans on the basis of class and appearance. Whites accepted the Spanish heritage of those with significant landholdings, thereby recognizing them as a type of white person. Here we see the meaning of white conflated with wealth. For the majority of Mexicans who were small farmers, herders, and workers, this was not the case. Instead, whites considered them variously as Indian, mestizo, or otherwise like black persons of African descent. These constructs of Mexicans placed them squarely in the category of

"unfree" labor and therefore "properly" excluded them from the full range of rights of American citizenship.⁶⁷

By the early twentieth century, even elite Mexicans began to be viewed as not white. "A Texas Congressman noted in 1920, 'We use the term Mexican to designate a race, not a citizen or subject of the nation.' When queried about the race of Mexicans, a Chicago Chamber of Commerce official responded: 'No they are not regarded as colored, but they are regarded as an inferior class. Are Mexicans regarded as white? Oh no!'" Evelyn Nakano Glenn explains the process of Mexican racialization as rooted within the struggles over Mexican labor and citizenship.⁶⁸ It should not be missed that those struggles arose in no insignificant part because of the white race – what it had come to represent and how it was enacted.

Many non-Mexican whites refused to recognize them as Americans entitled to political and civil rights. Mexicans were often denied entry to public facilities designated for "whites only." The denial of so many rights of citizenship rendered Mexicans cheap and dependant labor. For example, in 1908 Mexican miners were paid two dollars a day while white workers were paid three to five dollars a day. California growers preferred Mexicans to white workers precisely because they could pay them less. A grower noted that Mexicans should be paid only enough to sustain themselves, with a dollar or two to spend.⁶⁹

They were viewed as aliens whether born in the U.S. or Mexico. As a result, they were questioned as to their status as American citizens, especially when they sought to exercise political rights. In fact, by the late 1880s Populists and Republicans campaigned for stripping all Mexicans of the right to vote. While Populists challenged the expansion of agribusiness and sought reforms in government, they blamed Mexicans for the demise of small farms. This is, of course, is a pattern we have seen before – focus upon a not white or, in this case, not fully white group, as the cause of labor problems, rather than the social structures that condition the problems and the capitalists who control the conditions and wages of labor.⁷⁰

Being white by law permitted Mexican inclusion into whiteness for the purposes of antimiscegenation law. However, as we have seen, Mexicans were excluded from whiteness for the purpose of: testifying against a white person; the assignment of wages; inclusion within

“free white labor” and claims of a “man’s wage;” and the many other civil, political and social rights of citizenship. Treaties explain how Mexicans were viewed as white for the purpose of such federal laws as naturalization. What might explain the inclusion of Mexicans into the category white for the purpose of antimiscegenation that was state law, but for little if anything else as a matter of law in those very states?

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo between Mexico and the U.S. ensured that marriages recognized as legal in Mexico be recognized in the U.S. In addition, few Mexican men, whether rich or poor, married white women, who were in short supply. In contrast, many white men married Mexican women, especially those of significant wealth. According to Horace Bell, it was largely Mexican daughters of well-off families who married good-looking but lazy vagabond Americans whose object of marriage seems to have been to get rich without having to work. Many of these women were brought to ruin as a result (1930). According to Jayne Dysart, marrying white men was recognized by Mexican families who found themselves living in the U.S. as a means to protect their landholdings. Dysart notes that in San Antonio between 1837 and 1860, one daughter from almost every Mexican family holding land married a white American man.⁷¹

The inclusion of Mexicans within whiteness for the purposed of marriage served the economic interests of white men. The exclusion of Mexicans from whiteness for the purpose of testifying against whites, the assignment of wages and conditions of labor, and the many other civil, political and social rights of citizenship, were believed to serve the same interests. I say “believed” because it is possible, if not probable, that had laborers not allowed themselves to be divided or participated in the divisions among themselves (white, not white, male, female, etc...), they would have held more strength in unity when seeking improved conditions and wages.

The experience of Mexicans in the United States reveals the limits of inclusion within the category white conferred by law, without the pervasive constructive and enforcement efforts such as we saw in law following Bacon’s Rebellion (at least, when the status as white is contested). Being white by federal law was not without its advantages, including the ability to naturalize. It also resulted in few restrictions on

marital relations, though it is certainly possible that this would have been otherwise had these marriages not served the interests of white men so well. Being white by federal law failed to secure much else, and did little to advance the social acceptance of Mexicans as white. If the standard of measure from the colonial era of being sufficiently like the British continued, Mexicans were determined to be insufficiently so.

Naturalization was an area of law that worked to advance America as white. The value of being white within the U.S. was recognized internationally and reflected in the treaties the U.S. negotiated with Mexico and Spain. Rather than secure whiteness for Mexicans, this worked to render them white for purposes of some laws (specifically, antimiscegenation and naturalization), but not “really” white. As a result, Mexicans at this time were rendered “contingent whites.” Contingent, because their status depends upon the legal imposition of the label “white” and has little meaning for them outside of those areas of federal law that require the status white for the benefits the law secures. While Mexicans in North America may have been the first in this racial location, they certainly have not been the last.⁷²

It is helpful to consider T.S. Marshall’s three components of citizenship rights – civil, political, and social – in order to best capture the experience of Mexicans in the U.S. relative to full citizenship (1964). The civil rights component consists of those rights that enable individual freedom, and include the right to contract and to own property and the right to justice. These rights were not protected for Mexican people. Political rights of citizenship consist of the right to engage in the political process as a member or an elector of those who make up that representative body. This was perhaps the right of citizenship rendered most available, but was often threatened by Nativist activity. Social rights of citizenship were very limited for Mexicans, and consist of such things as a measure of economic welfare and security, to the right to fully participate in the social heritage, and to a civilized life as measured by the prevailing social standards. It is worth noting again that social rights of citizenship are required for the exercise of both civil and political rights. In other words, adequate economic and basic social resources including security are necessary in order to be able to vote or run for office or to experience individual

freedom. Marshall's full citizenship helps to identify how narrow the experience of citizenship was made for Mexicans in the U.S.⁷³

The experience of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in the U.S. following the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo reveals a democratization in the determination of who is white. This can be seen not only in the example of persons of Mexican descent but in the experience of the Irish and other immigrants who came in large numbers and faced tremendous resistance to their full inclusion in America. Full inclusion in the new republic required being viewed as white.

From Green to White

The Irish Catholics, who came in large numbers to U.S. shores during the nineteenth century, help to make visible the ways in which race shaped the society within which they sought, enacted, and eventually won status as white. Before 1830, most white immigrants to the U.S. were Protestants from England or other parts of Europe. Historian Kirby Miller notes that the Irish who came from 1815 through 1844 numbered between 800,000 and one million and reflected characteristics and qualities of many other immigrants to America during this period; the majority were not Catholic and they were not all poor (1985). In contrast, the 1.8 million Irish who came in the ten-year span between 1845 and 1855, many fleeing starvation in Ireland, were generally poorer than earlier arrivals to the U.S. and were largely Catholic. Between 43 percent and 47 percent of immigrants each year from 1820 to 1855 came from Ireland.⁷⁴

Large numbers of poor Irish lived in "trinity" houses, small alley houses erected between large streets, that were three stories high with one room on each floor, or in small lodging-houses in very difficult conditions where hunger, filth and poor health flourished. An 1853 report on living conditions in a heavily Irish district in Philadelphia provides the following description:

We will essay a description of a hovel we visited.... It is a two-story frame of quite a small size, but is nevertheless divided into a number of rooms which are about ten feet square. The bar room is in front on the ground floor. With

the exception of this apartment, no other part of the house contained a single article of furniture, except some damaged furnaces and miserable stoves. The walls were discolored by smoke and filth, the glass was broken from the windows, chinks in the frame work let in the cold air, and every thing was as wretchedly uncomfortable as it is possible to conceive. Yet in every one of these squalid apartments, including the cellar and the loft, men and women – blacks and whites by dozens – were huddled together promiscuously, squatting or lying upon bare floors, and keeping themselves from freezing by covering their bodies with such filthy rags as chance threw in their way.

The conditions they faced were particularly harsh in part because the famine Irish entered the U.S. workforce at the very bottom, competing only with free people of African descent in the north and, in the south, with slave labor. Upon arrival in the U.S., Irish Catholics were often lumped together with persons of African descent both at work and in neighborhoods.⁷⁵

At the time when large numbers of Irish Catholics arrived, the U.S. was itself increasingly divided between those invested in slavery and those who opposed its spread to the territories. Because such large numbers of Irish arrived in such a short period of time and because they were largely centralized in cities in the north, they became a significant political contingency that would impact the national debate. Where their allegiances would fall was by no means a foregone conclusion. It is in the struggle over the Irish and of the Irish that the constraints and possibilities within their adopted homeland become apparent, and that whiteness is revealed as central.

Irish Catholics in the U.S. were portrayed as anti-American, not full citizens, and as "white negroes." These portrayals came largely from nativist segments of the Whig party. In sharp contrast, the Irish were claimed as fellow whites by Democrats and portrayed as victims of "wage slavery." Before proceeding with the experience of the Irish in the U.S., it is helpful to note something of the national political landscape that significantly shaped their experience, as these portrayals suggest.

Political Landscape

American political party rivalries following the signing of the Constitution were represented by the Federalists and the Republicans. As the Federalists became increasingly pro-British and regional in the northeast, they faded after the War of 1812. The result was that Republicans enjoyed a decade of largely unchallenged dominance. It would be incorrect to view this period of a single party as one of national solidarity, however. Factionalism was present and building before it finally “erupted into rebellion against the last Republican administration, that of John Quincy Adams. Andrew Jackson’s victory over Adams in 1828 led to a renewal of overt party competition...” Jacksonians transformed into the *Democratic Party*. The supporters of Adams were *Republican*, *National Republican*, and eventually, *Whig*. These shifts reflected the struggle to create a sustainable coalition.⁷⁶

The merchant-landlord coalition was the base of the Republican Party, and likewise was the base of the Whig party when it emerged. This coalition was rendered difficult by more diversified economic growth since 1812, creating new fractures and challenges. These were only exacerbated by the crisis of 1819-1820, over whether Missouri would be admitted to the union as a free or slave state, and exposed a regional split in the coalition that led to the collapse of Jefferson’s party. At the same time, the crisis revealed to slaveholders the need for a new party to secure their interests within the Union. The man who would build this party was Martin Van Buren, and the Democratic Party was the party he built. Before examining the Democratic Party, I will discuss its primary opponent – the Whigs.

Whigs believed that power properly followed wealth, and therefore believed that those of the upper class were the only responsible men who could administer a republican form of government. Central to their idea of responsible government was a social order that was constituted by ownership of property. They emphasized education and moral sensibility derived from upper-class culture as critical to a nation, especially a new one. The Whigs consisted of a coalition of regional elites who were held together in their value of upper-class refinements and support of national development. However, the Whig

party evaporated in the south as the interests of slave-based commercial agriculture diverged from those of the merchant-landlord.⁷⁷

The Democratic Party that Van Buren built through the instrument of the man who would be the seventh president of the U.S., Andrew Jackson, succeeded in continuous Democratic rule from 1828-1860. It was the first party based upon popular constituencies, and enacted electoral reforms (removing the requirement of property ownership as a prerequisite to vote) resulting in the most democratic republic of its time and perhaps ever since. The Democratic Party combined the planters of the south and plain Republicans who were largely laborers and artisans of the north. What could hold these seemingly disparate groups together? What interests did they share?

The planters of the south, of course, were invested in the preservation of slavery. The workers of the north, a significant portion of who were Irish, were interested in the preservation of life and limb through the sale of their labor. They sought to defend their claims to citizenship, in part, through access to naturalization. Both were under attack by nativists. The Democratic Party appealed to immigrant laborers of the north, including the Irish, in part because the party rejected nativism. According to Ignatiev, “the need to gain the loyalty of the Irish explains why the Democratic Party, on the whole, rejected nativism.” Some southern planters and those loyal to them spoke against “wage slavery,” earning them the gratitude of some northern workers for exposing the conditions under which they labor. The Democratic Party also offered something all-American for the Irish to utilize and claim – white supremacy. “White unity,” promulgated by the Democratic Party, helped to silence questions about the qualifications of the Irish for citizenship, because their allegiance to the party asserted the Irish as white.⁷⁸

The polarized national political landscape, with Whigs and their strong nativist tendencies on the one hand, and Democrats who advocated white supremacy above all on the other, helps to capture the pressures and possibilities presented the Irish who ventured to American shores. This alone, however, does not capture the complete picture, because politics, labor, and virtually every other aspect of life was played out within a social environment that was thoroughly racialized. What this means is that everyone in the U.S. was assigned

a place on a race spectrum on which whites and blacks represented polar opposites.

The Racial Landscape

Black people had so thoroughly been defined as anathema to citizenship and as the direct opposite of that which was valued in America (i.e., freedom), while white people represented full citizenship and freedom and were presumed superior to all groups constructed as other-than-white. Regardless of an individual's education, skill, or qualities, racial categories were rendered pre-eminent in the award or denial of resources, opportunities, and social acceptance as a "full citizen" or "real American."

As a result, the surest route to success in America was in and through whiteness. This, of course, presented a challenge to a group who lived and worked within such close proximity to black people. Many Irish Catholics desperate for work faced treacherous conditions that placed them in regular contact with black laborers, and that sometimes placed them as less valuable than slave labor. Most Irish men worked at some point as canal, railroad, construction, or dock laborers, while Irish women often worked as domestic servants.

Sometimes Irish workers were preferred over black slaves because the latter had a higher economic value. An Alabama company official explaining "why Irish workers were employed on the docks: 'The niggers are worth too much to be risked here; if the Paddies are knocked over-board, or get their backs broke, nobody loses anything.' When the commissioner of the (New Orleans) New Basin Canal Corporation began building in 1831, they knew that the mortality rate among the laborers would be high; consequently they hired Irish." Irish in the U.S. were disproportionately laborers and servants. Many entered the labor force doing work that was relegated only to those of African descent, and offered to perform the work at wages below that which African Americans were previously hired. These conditions of labor rendered the Irish vulnerable to being linked with the wrong end of the racial hierarchy in the U.S., and helps explain the label "white negroes."⁷⁹

How is one's whiteness established in such a context? Since the founding of the U.S., white people included only those who performed

"white man's work." According to Ignatiev, "It was not enough for the Irish to have a competitive advantage over Afro-Americans in the labor market; in order for them to avoid a taint of blackness it was necessary that no Negro be allowed to work in occupations where Irish were to be found." Through the use and refusal of their labor, the Irish succeeded in taking the lowest of jobs and squeezing those of African descent out. This was accomplished by the refusal of white laborers to work with a black laborer. The *African Repository* reported in 1851:

In New York and other eastern cities, the influx of white laborers has expelled the Negro almost en masse from the exercise of the ordinary branches of labor. You no longer see him work upon buildings, and rarely is he allowed to drive a cart of public conveyance. White men will not work with him.⁸⁰

Through their refusal to work with black laborers, the Irish not only advanced their labor interests but worked to establish themselves as white.

Many native-born artisans linked unfavorable changes in their conditions of work and wages with the arrival of the Irish Catholics, and expressed this frustration and location of blame through anti-immigrant riots and anti-immigrant political movements (i.e., nativism). For the masses of Irish Catholics who lived and labored under conditions of incredible hardship, there were few resources to drawn upon in order to contest such assaults, other than that provided by their sheer numbers. It was not numbers alone, however, that gave power to the Irish. There were two critical factors: first was access to naturalization and therefore citizenship; the second was a racialized social context. Access to citizenship combined with the tendency of the Irish to amass in larger cities resulted in their becoming a political force in elections. In fact, by 1844 the Irish constituted the most impervious voting block in the country with the sole exception of free blacks, whose votes were cast in the opposite direction than those of the Irish. The racial landscape upon which all in the U.S. were required to navigate not only presented challenges, but opportunities. David

Roediger explains that by “casting job competition and neighborhood rivalries as racial,” rather than ethnic or religious, the Irish repeatedly asserted themselves as white people and pushed back against the nativist logic that portrayed foreign-born citizens as un-American, not “full citizens.”⁸¹

It is therefore not surprising that the Irish focused their labor competition upon free blacks in the north and upon Chinese on the west coast, rather than upon other groups. The racial landscape assisted them in this focus, since persons of African and Chinese descent in the U.S. were much less able to strike back. Therefore, they could more easily be marginalized and excluded, hated and harmed. Here, the racial landscape provided resources that could be exploited for the benefit of Irish in North America.

Black people were rendered more and more marginal to the assets and opportunities of America through exclusion, labor exploitation, and disenfranchisement at the very time when the vote was being advanced for white men during the Jacksonian period (1824-1848). Irish Catholic immigrants quickly learned that persons of African descent (and later the Chinese) in the U.S. could be hated and harmed with impunity. “If the Constitution did not formally guarantee to whites the right to engage in mob attacks on black people, that right was safeguarded in the Jacksonian age by the absence of anything like a modern state. The city relied on volunteers to defend public order.” While the Irish and all other immigrants of this period learned that black people in America represented the opposite of free, they also learned that the best way to defend jobs and claim rights in the U.S. was “as ‘white’ entitlements.”⁸²

Many have asked why the competition among Irish- and Afro-American laborers failed to lead to recognition of the need for unity. During Bacon’s Rebellion in 1678, laborers of British and African descent united against the landowning elite. Why not the Irish and free blacks in the 1840s? The answer, of course, is that competition between these two groups did not take place under normal circumstances of labor conflict.⁸³ Instead, it took place upon a playing field of white people and non-white people that gave unearned advantages to those seen as white and unearned disadvantages to those understood as not white. Upon this playing field, those seen as white people, those

viewed as fit for citizenship via naturalization, were being pressured by nativist sentiment to exclude large groups of recent arrivals, including the Irish.

The racial social context within which Irish competed for work can be seen most vividly in efforts to exclude by virtue of race. Arguably, the greatest competition to Irish labor came from other Irish immigrants, and then German immigrants, more than free blacks. The Irish quickly learned that race, specifically whiteness, was key to success in work and politics. For example, Irish dockworkers in New York tried to expel German longshoremen by claiming that they sought an all-white work force. As we know, they were not successful in labeling the Germans as other-than-white. There was, however, no contestation to the claim that persons of African descent were not white. Free blacks in the north and Chinese on the west coast *could* be marginalized. Their exclusion from whiteness opened that door. As a result, German immigrants rather than free blacks were more successful competitors over jobs, since they had access to citizenship as whites, could therefore seek to voice their interests at elections, and could claim both jobs and rights as white entitlements.⁸⁴

The Call to Abolition

It was within this national political environment and racialized context in the U.S. that some 60,000 Irish issued an address in 1841 to their compatriots in North America, imploring them to join with the abolitionists and oppose slavery upon the new soil they called home. Ireland had a long and violent past with invaders, namely the British, who sought to displace, control, and exploit its native people and natural resources. This experience shaped Ireland’s strong and early opposition to slavery. The tide of opposition to slavery out of Ireland, however, was short-lived and was likely connected to the charisma of Daniel O’Connell, a signatory to the address, who came to the U.S. to encourage support.⁸⁵

Response to the address was strong and immediate. A meeting of Irish miners in Pottsville, Pennsylvania put into question the authenticity of the address. The miners referenced themselves as *full citizens* of the U.S. and declared that they were not willing to look

upon black Africans as their "brethren." They noted that slavery was a legacy of British rule and argued that those abroad had no business critiquing or seeking to influence matters of national policy.⁸⁶

Arguably the most influential leader of Irish in America was the Catholic Bishop of New York, John J. Hughes. The Bishop responded to the address by questioning its authenticity and claiming that it was:

The duty of every naturalized Irishman to resist and repudiate the address with indignation. Not precisely because of the doctrines it contains, but because of their having emanated from a foreign source, and of their tendency to operate on questions of domestic and national policy. I am no friend of slavery, but I am still less friendly to any attempt of foreign origin to abolish.

The duty of naturalized Irishmen or others, I consider to be in no wise distinct or different from those of native born Americans....⁸⁷

At a meeting to address Irish Repeal and American Slavery held on November 18, 1843, in Philadelphia, a Mr. O'Brien stated that he personally was opposed to slavery but saw it as his duty to uphold American institutions, of which slavery is a significant and foundational one.⁸⁸

These responses by Irish in America to the address were the norm. They are best understood within the context of strong nativism and a racial landscape that permeated every aspect of society. Within the framework of naturalization law, the only access to citizenship for those born outside the U.S (and therefore not native to it), the claim of the miners that they are "full citizens" was simultaneously an assertion of a status as white. As we know, naturalization was rendered a white-only process. So for those not native born, claims to citizenship were simultaneously claims to whiteness, and claims to whiteness were simultaneously claims to being American.

The replies to the address must also be understood, in part, as a response to the strong nativist arguments that foreign-born U.S. citizens do not represent the best interests of America but are influenced instead by foreign concerns. For example, after the 1844 presidential election that placed Polk in the White House, the Whig

politician John Pendleton Kennedy attributed the Whig candidate's (Henry Clay) defeat to the foreign vote in a letter to the *New York Tribune*. Kennedy claimed that the voice of the true people of America was being outweighed by those un-Americans who do not know the difference between American and foreign interests.⁸⁹

In the face of accusations by native-born Americans that the sentiment of the Irish expressed at the ballot box in America is motivated by the best interests of Ireland, the responses to the address are not surprising. Bishop Hughes and the Pottsville miners rejected any appearance of foreign influence upon the Irish in America. The two areas wherein the Irish were most vulnerable to accusations of outside influence were both addressed by man at the Irish Repeal and American Slavery meeting in Philadelphia. He identified himself as vice-president of the Repeal Association in Boston and stated, to repeated cheers, that even if O'Connell (representing Ireland) and the Pope (representing Catholicism) were abolitionists, neither spoke for the Irish in the America.⁹⁰

Nativism in the Whig party and the racial landscape in the U.S. made it less likely that the Irish would recall their own struggles against slavery and exploitation by the British and join the abolitionist movement. The nativism of the Whigs all but determined that the newly arrived Irish would find refuge in the Democratic Party. As it turned out, they found much more. The party of white supremacy served up a resource that assisted the Irish in becoming white in America.

As we saw in chapters one and two, when white people were first invented and asserted as a group of humanity in the decades after Bacon's Rebellion, the invention functioned to divide laborers and unite whites. Here again, some one hundred and fifty years later, we see that the invention of white people served to divide those whose social position was most similar – Irish Catholics and free blacks – and unite those who shared far less: Irish Catholics and white Protestant slaveholders. The historical results are profound. Assimilation of the Irish into the white race allowed slavery to continue for at least fifteen years while the existence of a racialized society, consisting most generally of whites and nonwhites, allowed for that assimilation.

The pressures that nativism imposed and the "playing field" that racial constructs in the U.S. presented significantly shaped that which

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was possible for Irish Catholics in North America. However, the paths taken were not the only possibilities. The period in American history when so many downtrodden outsiders arrived upon her shores represents one of those moments when significant alteration from the status quo was possible. Enough pieces were present, including a people with a history of exploitation and enslavement who were outsiders upon arrival in Protestant America, and who constituted enough of a concentrated constituency to make an impact.

The experience of Mexicans in the U.S. after the Mexican-American War and that of Irish Catholics reveals not only the value that being white had come to represent, but the struggle to control the determination of those who were “really” white. We see through these groups that Mexicans were excluded from whiteness at the local level despite federal law, and that Irish were included through the exercise of white supremacy at the local level and by virtue of political allegiance. Becoming “really” white was fought out in the muddy waters of labor competition between and among laborers – the divisive purpose for the invention of white people in the first place. As such, history can only evaluate white people as a huge success.

Discussion Questions:

1. What factors likely played a role in the exclusion of Mexicans from being included as white for the purpose of everyday interactions?
2. What factors likely played a role in Mexicans counting as white for the purpose of antimiscegenation law?
3. When you consider the experience of Mexicans in the U.S. after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and compare it to that of the Irish Catholics, what factors worked to the advantage of the Irish?
4. What forces and pressures helped influence the masses of Irish Catholics to take an anti-abolition stance rather than support the abolition of slavery?