WHITENESS

The analytical category of "whiteness" is useful for probing numerous facets of American culture and politics as they intersect with transnational and global concerns, from historical and contemporary interactions among different communities within the United States, to political engagement between the United States and other nations. As an ideologically laden category that has defined the limits of citizenship and national belonging, attention to ideas about and performances of whiteness helps to explain the complicated ways in which American subjectivity is inextricably tied to racial formation. Important concepts within American nationalistic discourse—including democracy, modernity, and freedom—have developed in tandem with ideas about whiteness and racial difference. Seemingly straightforward, the term nonetheless has multifarious connotations, its definition further complicated by the way its meaning has changed over time. The historical development of American culture and society has led to shifts in the meaning of whiteness from the founding of the United States through the present day. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, ideas about whiteness have continued to change, demonstrating its capacity to conform to and redefine new ideas about identity, belonging, and difference at both the local and global levels.

TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS

Whiteness, at its surface, seems to be a term that describes a particular skin tone, racial identity, or ethnicity. In common usage and on official documents and forms seeking demographic information, the term *white* is used as a category to denote one's light skin tone, "Caucasian" race or ethnicity, or European heritage. The US Census Bureau, for example, in accordance with 1997 Office of Management and Budget regulations, defines someone

who is "white" as "having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa." Thus, the term seems to primarily symbolize one's physical appearance, biological characteristics, or ancestry.

However, scholars engaged in the study of race and whiteness argue that there is no biological basis for whiteness or any other racial category. Rather than a neutral descriptor referring to a particular group of people, whiteness is instead an unstable conceptual container that bears numerous implications regarding the physical and nonphysical characteristics of individuals and groups. As with other racial terms, *whiteness* links seemingly physical, tangible attributes, such as phenotype, biology, and heritage, to a variety of intangible features, including intelligence, psychology, cultural practices, propensity to work, and spiritual capacity. Like the broader concept of "race," whiteness is mutable, multifaceted, constructed, and enacted; it is at once an ideology, a discourse, and a performance. Subjects shape notions of whiteness in different spheres—in public and in private, during day-to-day interactions, through the creation of cultural artifacts, and via official government policy.

Significantly, whiteness is a relative term, one that developed in a way that has served to sort individuals into different groups with unequal access to resources and power. More so than other racial categories, whiteness is tied to supremacy; the category of whiteness has historically afforded privilege to those who claim it. As with other racial categories, the fact that whiteness is a social construct does not mean that it is insignificant for understanding culture, history, and politics. Likewise, although whiteness itself is technically immaterial, effects of the ideology of whiteness are quite tangible as they have played out in political, social, and cultural spheres. Whiteness is thus also a form of capital, power, and domination. Actors may both draw on or perform whiteness in order to access resources and deny it—and the privileges it affords—to others (Lipsitz 1998).

THE CHANGING MEANING OF WHITENESS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

The concept of "whiteness" is salient for understanding a number of points in the history of the United States, from European exploration and settlement in the Americas to the birth and expansion of the country, and from the increase of immigration in the nineteenth century to the rise of the United States as a global power in the twentieth century. During each of these eras, the meaning of whiteness developed upon and beyond previous understandings. As a complex and contentious category, the origin of the concept of whiteness is itself subject to discussion; indeed, scholars have debated the provenance of the broader concept of "race." Some suggest that the concept of race only arose in the nineteenth century, with the advent of scientific or biological racism. Throughout the nineteenth century, white European and American anthropologists constructed a hierarchy of races and world cultures, drawing on accepted scientific theories of the day (Horsman 1991). Researchers rendered people of European descent as ideal human specimens, racially neutral and representing the highest stage of physical development. Furthermore, they tied the idea of whiteness as a supposedly pure or ideal biological form, heritage, or race to theories of cultural development. Scientists theorized that all human groups progressed along a scale of cultural evolution; they presented Euro-American culture as superior to that of other world cultures. Other branches of human sciences, from linguistics to the study of art, also drew on these theories of cultural development. In these ways, scholars constructed hierarchical notions of "white" language, culture, art, and biology and presented each as exemplary.

Some scholars have cautioned against using the more recent terms *race* and *whiteness* to describe interactions among different communities in earlier eras. Historical particularities are certainly important for understanding the development of racial terms; however, despite the more recent development of the term *race*, scholars indicate that a longer history of notions about essential differences formed a foundation for the development of a modern racial imaginary in Europe and the Americas. Before the modern era, notions of religious difference did play a role in notions of essential difference. For example, scholars have identified discourse on essential, inherited differences by early writers in the ancient Mediterranean world who articulated differences between Greeks and Persians and between Christians and Jews. From this early era, thinkers have identified physical characteristics and ancestry as markers of difference (Eliav-Feldon, Isaac, and Ziegler 2009).

Furthermore, interactions between empires and nations in and beyond Europe, including the periods of war between competing Christian and Muslim groups, shaped Europeans' interactions in the Americas. The motivations behind the Crusades, the *Reconquista*, and the Inquisition in part drew on ideas about essential differences. Theories about the purity of blood, which Spanish inquisitors put to test in the courts of the Inquisition, pointed to notions of essential, inherited difference that separated Christians, Muslims, Jews, and, when the Inquisition spread to the Americas, Indigenous Americans (Silverblatt 2004). These theories of difference influenced European interactions with Indigenous and African communities in the Americas. Thus, earlier ideas about essential differences—religious, cultural, and social—served as an important backdrop for the development of the notion of whiteness in the Americas and remerged at different points in American history (Kidd 2006; Boyarin

2009). Ideas about racial difference in the Americas emerged during historical moments marked by Europeans' genocide of Indigenous populations in the Americas and by the racialized system of European enslavement and subjugation of African people. Particular ideas about whiteness thus developed in the Americas, in part, due to a specific social and economic system legitimated by social and, eventually, scientific ideologies.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF WHITENESS STUDIES

Even as anthropologists sought to uphold whiteness in the nineteenth century, others noted and challenged assumptions about white biological and cultural supremacy. The development of the field of critical whiteness studies occurred over successive periods, as individuals occupying a variety of positions relative to whiteness commented on its nature and questioned its naturalness. African American and Native American thinkers—including abolitionist David Walker (1796–1830), scholar W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), and Indigenous activists Sarah Winnemucca (1844–1891) and Gertrude Bonnin (1876–1938)—engaged in critiques of whiteness during periods in which mainstream American growth, progress, and optimism privileged white citizens at the same time that racist laws and social practices targeted members of other communities. Throughout the twentieth century, writers such as James Baldwin (1924–1987) and Frantz Fanon (1925–1961) further developed this line of inquiry, offering critiques of a mainstream white citizenry and European and American imperialism that rendered nonwhite individuals as incapable of self-rule.

In the 1990s, the academic field of whiteness studies emerged within and alongside the broader fields of American and ethnic studies. Scholars have since explored the intersection of white racial politics with numerous other facets of identity, including gender, sexuality, ability, and class. David Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness* (1991) discussed the development of a white working class that positioned itself in opposition to freed African American slaves, launching a line of inquiry into the relationship between race and class. Scholars of gender and race, including Ruth Frankenberg (1993) and Gail Bederman (1995), have articulated the significance of gender and sexuality in the development of white identity. These thinkers note the co-constitution of race and other facets of individual subjectivity. Propelled by scholars such as Toni Morrison (1992), a conversation about whiteness and racial categories in literature and the arts has examined how white authors and artists have developed white and nonwhite characters in a way that has furthered distinctions between each.

In addition to discussing whiteness as it relates to other identity-related categories and outlining its cultivation through cultural forms, scholars of whiteness have examined its broader role in the modern American democratic project. The process of modernity, as imagined by philosophers such as Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), and Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929), has been a racial project. These thinkers' analyses of concepts such as liberty, freedom, democracy, and equality have privileged whiteness, describing it in opposition to other racial categories (Hesse 2007). The racial category of "whiteness" thus developed in tandem with notions about civilization, citizenship, and modernity. A particular racial economy placed more value on "whiteness" than other racial forms, constructed as its opposites. Whiteness was used to represent something normative, and held European culture, identity, and civilization as the highest level of culture and a model for other forms of culture. The United States has played a particular role in this process of shaping racialized notions of modernity via specific violent racialized projects that played an important role in the country's formation and expansion; these projects have included the extermination of Indigenous populations and the exploitation of African American, Asian, and Hispanic laborers (Limerick 1987). The notions of freedom and democracy, which many Americans see as central tenets of the country's national identity, have excluded these and other individuals and communities. Some argue that the violent targeting of particular nonwhite ethnic groups is not tangential to but a constitutive feature of democracy (Mann 2005).

THE BUREAUCRATIC CONSTRUCTION OF WHITENESS

While literature and the arts have been important arenas for the development of ideas about whiteness, historians have also sought to describe its construction via bureaucratic methods. A primary way in which the US government has shaped official ideas about whiteness has been through immigration regulations. Passed in 1790, the United States' first naturalization act restricted the granting of citizenship to "free white persons," language that was also present in the Constitution. A longer 1795 immigration act included the same wording of "free white persons"; in addition, the act described further characteristics necessary for naturalization. To be granted citizenship, an individual needed to be a "man of a good moral character, attached to the principles of the constitution of the United States, and well disposed to the good order and happiness of the same." These requirements linked physical characteristics with a predilection for order and compliance, suggesting that white individuals were

superior democratic citizens. Through the process of lawmaking with regard to immigration, the early federal government defined "white" identity of European immigrants in distinction to African-descended slaves and Native Americans, groups that white citizens saw as threats to the order of the early Republic (Jacobson 1998).

Although early immigration acts included the language of "whiteness," in this era the term did not include all individuals with European heritage, some of whom arrived on US soil as indentured servants. Scholars have noted that the general association of European ancestry with whiteness did not fully develop until the twentieth century. In earlier eras, whiteness was often tied to "Anglo-Saxon" identity, which according to the *Oxford American Dictionary*, specifically describes the "Germanic inhabitants of England from their arrival in the 5th century." More broadly, Anglo-Saxon describes those of English descent; throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Protestants of northwestern European descent were primarily considered white. Immigrants from other places, such as Italy, Ireland, and Eastern Europe, and with different religious heritages, such as Catholics and Jews, were set apart from the Anglo-Saxon majority culture (Ignatiev 1995; Guglielmo 2003; Goldstein 2006). National organizations, including the Know-Nothing party and proponents of the racist nativist movement, viewed these communities as threats to society and engaged in organized violence against them. Yet, by the mid-twentieth century, the notion of a broader "Caucasian" race, which included those with European heritage, had emerged, grouping into one category individuals with diverse European ethnic heritage that had previously been considered distinct racial communities (Painter 2010).

The gradual development of a "Caucasian" identity occurred even as other immigration policies sought to restrict workers from other parts of the world. As immigration increased after the Civil War (1861–1865), individual states began to set rules on immigration and naturalization. Many US industries in the North and South welcomed the immigration of laborers from different parts of the world. At this point, the US Supreme Court determined that the federal government would standardize these regulations and requirements. After this decision, the first immigration laws that were passed restricted the immigration of individuals from areas outside of Europe. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 limited the immigration of individuals from Asian countries. The Alien Labor Contract laws of 1885 and 1887 also targeted immigrants from Asia in restricting companies from helping to bring laborers from this region into the United States.

Throughout the early to mid-twentieth century, US immigration laws continued to impose racialized restrictions on immigration. These laws changed in the mid-twentieth century; from the 1950s onward, the United States saw an increase in immigrants from throughout the world. At this point, politicians and the mainstream public began to increasingly express concerns over "illegal aliens," which in popular usage often referred to immigrants from Latin American countries. Scholars have noted that the phrase "illegal alien" is generally racialized and serves to deny personhood to immigrants (Ngai 2004; Molina 2014). Despite the burgeoning discourse about diversity and multiculturalism within the United States, some contemporary visions still tie American identity to whiteness, in ways similar to the earlier nativist ideologies.

THE ROLE OF WHITENESS IN US FOREIGN POLICY

In addition to historical interactions between immigrants from different regions of the world that moved to the United States, the concept of whiteness has played a role in American foreign relations, including imperial expansion and war. In the late nineteenth century, the United States sought to expand its land base and influence, primarily targeting regions where inhabitants were not considered "white." The civilizing mission that propelled US empire, including interventions in Central and South America, was in part cultivated domestically as the federal government sought to reform and assimilate Native Americans and manage other nonwhite groups. Paragovernmental religious groups, such as the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, also played a role in this worldwide civilizing mission (Reynolds 2009).

The persistence of inequality during the mid-twentieth century raised questions about the commitment of the United States to social progress as the nation justified foreign interventions based on its role as a democratic nation that sought to spread freedom. During World War II (1939–1945), for example, black soldiers were segregated from white soldiers, and were frequently assigned to menial roles. Black soldiers demonstrated their commitment to the American armed services, and the participation of black soldiers abroad during the war years was significant for the development of civil rights in the United States. Even so, racialized systems of inequality persisted when soldiers returned after the war. Those who implemented the GI Bill, meant to help returning soldiers gain education and transition back into civilian life, discriminated against black soldiers, preventing them from fully benefitting from educational, financial, and job-related benefits (Self 2005).

After World War II, one can observe a connection between race relations in the United States and US foreign policy and interventions abroad (Borstelmann 2001).

During the Cold War, two primary opposing developments were at play regarding racial discrimination. On one hand, anticommunist fears cast suspicion on radical movements by people of color who sought to challenge racism. At the same time, global movements for independence brought heightened attention to the persistence of racism and white supremacy in the United States. In Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, citizens sought to overthrow colonial rule, challenge racist state practices, and reclaim sovereignty. Allies and opponents of the United States critiqued race relations within America (Dudziak 2000).

TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS

Notions of whiteness have continued to change in the twenty-first century. One of the most recent ways in which the idea of whiteness has developed has been the reassertion of religious difference and racial difference since September 11, 2001. In the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center, popular discourse has developed in the United States suggesting that Islam is an un-American religion. Despite the ethnic diversity of American Muslims, many non-Muslims assume Muslims are predominantly from the Middle East; according to the US census definition, those with Middle-Eastern heritage are considered "white." Yet popular and media discourse present American Muslims as racially "other" (Jamal and Naber 1998). These contemporary, popular conversations both collapse and obscure difference, further demonstrating the extent to which the category of whiteness is mutable, serves to define difference, upholds social hierarchies, and plays a role in determining the limits of American identity.

SEE ALSO *Anti-imperialism; Black Power Movement; Catholicism; Chinese Exclusion Act (1882); Decolonization; Ethnic Cleansing; Exceptionalism; Genocide; Harlem Renaissance/New Negro Movement; Immigration; Immigration Quotas; Imperialism; Judaism; Lynching; Middle East; Miscegenation; Moorish Science Temple; Nation of Islam; Nativism; Orientalism; Pan-Africanism; Pogrom; Protestantism; Religions; Said, Edward; United Nations; Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA); "The White Man's Burden" (Rudyard Kipling, 1899)*

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