

Study  
Center  
for the

of White American Culture, Inc.

**QUARTERLY  
NEWSLETTER**

*A multiracial organization*

**VOL. 2, NO. 3 SUMMER 1996**

# WHITE ETHNICITY



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IT  
HIDE  
RACE?**

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## It's been a year, and we're still here

We've reached a milestone with this issue of the newsletter, our fourth. The Center has now met its publishing goals for a full year. The next issue begins our second year in print.

Editorially, we feel very successful. In business terms, the situation is still a little more cloudy. Even though our goals are modest, we are having trouble meeting them. At this time we are still looking for our twentieth subscriber.

We have grown. After the first issue we had five subscribers. Following the second issue we had ten. Now we have nineteen, with the promise of one or two more before the printing and mailing of this issue is complete. Those familiar with the principle of compound growth can see a very positive trend here.

Still, we worry. Maybe that is the nature of the beast. We seem to do that a lot. At the Center we are engaged in several activities. We have an Internet web site. We are planning a conference. We are working on a bibliography. We answer requests for information and resources from students, religious organizations and other interested parties. We design and conduct workshops on white awareness.

All this takes time and money, scarce resources for any organization. But of all our activities, the newsletter is the most demanding of our time, costs the most money, and is the most challenging from a creative standpoint. It's our flagship. We're going to stay with it. To our subscribers, particularly those who will come up for renewal soon, we hope you stay with us.

In this issue we explore the theme of ethnicity, or more specifically, white ethnicity. With a topic so broad, we could only touch on a few points. As our cover suggests, white ethnicity is often used as a smoke-screen to hide the racial aspects of (white) American culture.

True, there are real issues of cultural identity attached to white ethnicity. We acknowledge that. It wouldn't be such a good smokescreen if that were not the case. We simply feel that the racial aspects of our culture and identity need to be explored as well.

So, enjoy. We'll be back soon with our next issue, to begin our second year in print.

## Center launches web site

We're on the web. Since May 23 the Center for Study has been a participant in the online world of the Internet. Operating under the name of [www.euroamerican.org](http://www.euroamerican.org), the web site has been visited over 800 times.

Visitors can read articles and editorials, letters from other viewers, and descriptions of Center activities. They can also visit other sites on the Internet that discuss white American culture through links provided at the Center's site.

The web site has been successful in attracting a wider public to the Center, and has even brought in four new subscribers to this newsletter. To those subscribers, we say welcome.

The web site and the newsletter, incidentally, provide separate publishing out-

lets. Though there is some overlap in material, most of the articles in the newsletter do not appear on the web site, and most of the material on the web site does not appear in the newsletter. We plan to continue this policy, so we encourage you to access both our online and our print publications.

In the meantime, the web site will be the cornerstone of the Center's publicity effort for our November conference. Planning and registration details will be posted at the site along with comments and responses from viewers. We plan to make extensive use of the Internet, so if you haven't gotten online yet, here's a reason to do so. Take a ride with us on the information highway. Of course, we'll continue to respond by phone and mail as well. But check it out if you can.

  
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**VOL. 2, NO. 3    SUMMER 1996**

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# November 8 & 9 firm for conference date

The date has been changed, but now it's firm. We've booked the site and we are ready to go. The Center for Study is proud to announce that its first annual conference on whiteness and white American culture will be held on November 8 and 9 at the historic Quaker Meetinghouse and Conference Center in Burlington, New Jersey.

To our knowledge the conference,

too, is historic, being the first and only conference to address whiteness and white American culture from a multi-cultural perspective. Beginning in August the Center will actively promote the conference among the many academic and professional disciplines that have begun to consider the impact of whiteness in American society.

These include, but are not limited to

educators, counselors, attorneys, social workers, clergy, literary critics, poets, historians, psychologists, sociologists, feminists, ethnic studies faculty, human resource trainers, and antiracism activists. Each of these groups has contributed to the growing body of published work on whiteness and white American culture.

The principle aims of the conference are to produce discussion, visibility, and support. The public examination of whiteness and white American culture is still in its infancy. While many people are working on approaches to the topic, they often work in relative isolation. Islands of scholars and activists are emerging in various disciplines, but still there is no general public recognition that a new social perspective is beginning to materialize.

So we remain isolated, those of us among the many professions who have begun this exploration. The Center hopes to address this isolation by providing people a forum and occasion for presenting their views and hearing the views of others. We hope to provide a means to validate the topics of whiteness and white American culture as deserving of attention, for if many serious people from many fields can assemble for discussion, the validity of the topic becomes harder for others to deny. Finally, in our combined presence we hope to provide a means of mutual support through personal networking and exchange of views and experiences. It's sometimes hard to carry the torch. Sometimes the torch bearers need to get together, just to acknowledge themselves.

And that's it. We will provide a structure. We are issuing a call for presentations. If you are interested, contact us for details and registration forms. We have no other agenda. If you have one, we encourage you to bring it, and to share it. That's what the conference is about.

## White Man, Tired\*

**White man, tired, closes his green eyes  
after another day of endless assaults  
on who he is and how many lives he's despised,  
women he's screwed over, Africans he's enslaved,**

**tawny-skinned Indians he's maimed and raped,  
land he's pillaged, levelled, turned to waste,  
water he's polluted, air he's deeply fouled,  
whole oceans he's thickened with muck,**

**animals he's slaughtered wholesale,  
species of birds he's made extinct,  
fruits and vegetables he's poisoned with lethal spray,  
countries he's invaded, cancers he's watered like plants.**

**White man, tired, groans under many day's weight,  
dreams of his white children, dancing in sunlight.**

\* We located this poem in an obscure corner of the Internet. The author identified himself or herself only by an America Online ID, which is now expired. Additional efforts to locate the author have been unsuccessful. Should anyone have information regarding the author's identity, please contact us - **Editor**.

# Personal Shades

by Jeff Hitchcock

There are two aspects to being white in America. First, there is the matter of how one is treated. Some people have tried to make white into a disadvantaged status, and indeed there may be local circumstances where it is. But on a broad scale, white people in America still have a disproportionate measure of power, resources, and control. However fair-minded we may imagine the process, we set the rules. This advantage that white people have is sometimes called "white privilege."

The second aspect of being white is whether one identifies as such. In other words, does a person say "I am white?" And if so, when? On a census form? For a medical history? When talking about how one identifies himself or herself in general? It is of this latter sense of white identity that I speak when I talk about the importance of being white.

White privilege and white identity are only incidentally related. This may seem an odd assertion at first. We are used to the image of the white supremacist, the KKK member, who asserts both identity and privilege as a single unified way of life. White is right.

Most white Americans reject white supremacy, or at least those aspects of it that are part of their conscious awareness. This rejection is itself a conscious act, taken as a moral stance. So much of our history has been bound up in white dominance of other American racial groups that the very notion of being white seems to be a statement of an egotistical, self-serving superiority. So they reject what they see as being white. This includes both a conscious claim to the privilege, and to the identity.

But it is entirely possible to have the priv-

ilege of being white without identifying oneself as such. Were it as simple a matter as self-identification then people of color could readily identify as white, indeed "act white" in an entirely convincing fashion. But, sadly, this has never been an effective strategy for overcoming the insidious nature of racial privilege. One can become a "good black" or even a "model minority" but one can not become white. It is the nature of white privilege that it is granted to people who appear white.

By the same token, a person who is white can not surrender their privilege. In my home state, New Jersey, the state police routinely stop dark-skinned people on major highways, looking for drugs. A recent newspaper report, citing evidence in a court case and from unrelated Federal studies, stated that nearly 75% of those stopped on one section of the New Jersey Turnpike were black and Latino, even though blacks and Latinos were 13.5% of the total drivers on the road. Do people of color do more drugs? An unrelated study of an area jail using random urine tests found white females the most frequent offenders. Do people of color speed excessively? Still another study found 75% of the cars on the Turnpike speed. Of these, 2% are driven by blacks.

My point is not so much that the New Jersey State Police are racist. I'll let the facts speak to that issue. Rather, the flip side of these statistics is that white people are not likely to be stopped. That is privilege, and it applies to me, to you if you are white, and to any white-looking person regardless of how they identify themselves racially. I can no more give away that piece of privilege than I could give away my own skin.

It makes me angry. It probably makes you angry, and it should. It wouldn't be hard to add some more facts about how white people harass, demean and harm people of color. Who would want to be part of a race like that? Is it any wonder many white people try to identify as anything but white? It certainly feels better at times. Like being more connected to humanity. I know. I've done it, too.

Still, there's that nagging little privilege thing. When I drive the Turnpike, I seldom

encounter anything to remind me I am white. If I want to believe I don't have a race, so be it. If someone on the radio talks about "white people," I can turn them off and say it's their obsession, not mine. But odds are a person of color driving a fancy car, no matter how "white" they can act, is some day going to get popped. After a while, the message becomes clear. You're in America, and you're black, you're Latino, you're anything but white.

When I talk about being white, about white culture and whiteness, I can almost guarantee that some white person will jump in and say something to the effect that "I'm not white, I'm (take your pick) "pink," "tan," "a member of the human race," "color blind" or some other thing that trivializes the whole issue of race. "Race is a fallacy," they'll tell me. "Everyone should get over it." And all the white people in the room are off the hook. Whew! Not only that, we get to move to a higher moral plane of racelessness. From there it is often a short step to looking down on the black people. They always bring up race.

The sad thing is, we're not all bad. There are some things about being white which I think can be appreciated outside of concepts of dominance and subordination. But these things aren't often discussed. They're sacrificed in the flight from white identity so many well-intentioned people take. But who can blame them. After all, that's their privilege.

In the meantime, I'll stay on the ground. I'll speak as a white person about my own culture. That's not my privilege necessarily, but it's my right. I'll continue to say with pride what we all too seldom hear in America. I am a white person. I have always been and will always be a white person, and I oppose racism. There is no contradiction here.

*Personal Shades is a forum for readers and other interested persons to offer their analysis of contemporary issues in white American culture. "Shades" can mean shades of opinion, or it can refer to shades of complexion. By either meaning, we hope to present a diverse group of contributors.*

# There's a whole lotta mixin' going on

Anyone listening to white Americans talk about their heritage in the 1990s might easily get the impression that every white American can trace their ancestry to a single European ethnic group. People speak with pride of being Irish, Italian, and Polish for example. It almost seems as if white Americans see themselves simply as transported Europeans, with a heritage unchanged and unadulterated by their residence here in the United States.

Just how accurate is this image? Can every white American trace her or his heritage to a single European nationality, or is the picture more mixed? One answer to these questions can be found in an informal survey conducted at a northeastern college among 81 sociology students and analyzed by the Center for Study. Students were simply asked to indicate their race and their ethnicity (country, or region, of origin).

Sixty-nine of the students reported their race as white. Four of these students claimed a multiracial heritage. Of these four, three claimed native American ancestry and one claimed Asian ancestry along with their European roots.

Five students reported their race as black. One student identified as Asian. Five other students identified themselves as Latin or Hispanic.

The remaining 65 students fit the contemporary profile of a "white American," i.e. a person descended from European immigrants with no intermixing from other racial groups. Other, more expansive, definitions of "white American" certainly exist. White Hispanics and multiracial persons with white heritage certainly might be counted as white Americans under a more inclusive definition. However, in its narrowest and most conservative

usage in current society, "white" refers to a person of unmixed European heritage.

Among the 65 single-race whites, 23 ethnicities were reported, including Italian (37); Irish (32); German (24); Polish (13); Dutch (4); English (4); French (3); Russian, Spanish, Ukrainian (2 each); and Armenian, Czech, Danish, French Canadian,

tifications among white Americans, so it was not surprising that they formed a large proportion of the students reporting a single ethnicity. But surprisingly, while five students reported being only-Irish and 13 students reported being only-Italian, 16 students reported being both Irish and Italian. Of the students claiming some Italian heritage, 65% reported an

## Ethnic heritage of individual white American students in terms of the number of ethnicities reported per student.

<b>Number of ethnicities reported by student</b>	<b>Number of students</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>One ethnicity</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>32.3%</b>
<b>Two ethnicities</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>33.8%</b>
<b>Three ethnicities</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>24.2%</b>
<b>Four ethnicities</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8.1%</b>
<b>Five ethnicities</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1.6%</b>

Greek, Norwegian, Scandinavian, Scottish, Swedish, Swiss, Welsh and Yugoslav (1 each).

Were there students whose heritage included a mixture of ethnicities? Indeed there were, and they were the rule, not the exception. Slightly less than a third of the white students (20) reported a single ethnicity. More than two-thirds of the white students (42) reported multiple ethnicities. The number of white students reporting three or more ethnicities (21) was greater than the number of similar students reporting only one ethnicity.

Three of the 65 white students reported their ethnicity as "mixed-European," "American," and "mutt." Since it was not possible to determine how many ethnicities entered into their makeup, these students could not be tallied in the overall figures. Not counting these three students, the remaining white Americans reported an average of 2.13 ethnicities per student.

Among the 20 students with only one ethnicity, 13 were Italian, 5 were Irish, and one each was Armenian and German. It's notable that of the 23 total European ethnicities reported, only four appeared in unmixed form.

The college where the survey was done draws students from urban and suburban areas which contain many second and third generation families. Italian ethnic communities are notably visible in the region, but other white ethnic communities also flourish.

Both Italian and Irish are prominent ethnic iden-

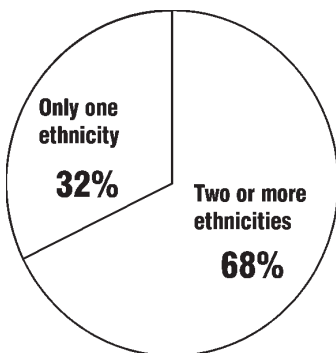
additional ethnicity. For students claiming Irish heritage, 86% acknowledge some additional mixture.

The intermixing seemed to come in all types. Students reporting German heritage, for instance, reported it in various combinations with seventeen other ethnicities.

While some studies have looked at relations between individual European ethnic groups, the present survey is the only one known to the Center for Study to have explored the question of ethnic mixing among the European American population at large. It raises questions about the current trend toward ethnic identification among white Americans. Do all white Americans identify strongly with their European roots? What does it mean when a person has three or more ethnic groups in their makeup? Does one arbitrarily pick a group to call one's own, forsaking the others?

Ethnicity, in actuality, is not something a person can try on and discard at will. It describes the basic culture in which one is raised, and it includes the customs and practices of the group doing the raising. Is it possible, for example, that there exists a coherent Irish-Italian culture in this country that fits this definition of ethnicity? It seems unlikely. What about a French-Danish-Polish one? It seems even less so.

Could there be a "white American culture" providing the foundation underneath all this mixing? It's a question that might be worth exploring.



**Percentage of white American students reporting only one ethnicity in their family heritage versus those reporting two or more ethnicities.**

# But we're all so

Mention the idea of white American culture to the typical white American and you are likely to be met with disbelief and denial that such a thing exists.

Some react in anger, claiming it is racist to make such an assertion. Others consider the idea calmly, but reject it nonetheless. Either way, they tend to reason that white American culture can not exist "because we are all so different."

Difference comes in many dimensions. Class, gender, sexual orientation, ableness, personal interests, religion all produce a great array of human variability. But when white Americans talk about how "we are so different," we usually are referring to ethnicity.

Ethnicity is intimately linked to the idea of culture, particularly culture as it refers to the shared customs, history, values, aspirations, expressions, knowledge, language, dress, music, art, food, social roles, kinship patterns and world views of an identifiable group of people. This is culture as the anthropologist knows it. Those who share a common culture belong to a common ethnic group.

Race refers to a means of classifying people with similar physical characteristics. Racial systems of classification differ in different parts of the world.

In the United States for more than 300 years we have understood black and white, as well as native American, to be racial categories. Ideas about other groups vary. Some view Asian as a race. Others distinguish different races within this group. Hispanics generally view themselves as multiracial, while blacks and whites sometimes view Hispanics as a separate race.

Native white Americans as recently as the 1920s viewed various European ethnic groups as separate races. The concept of ethnicity arose in reaction to the racial theories of that time, to explain difference in terms other than biological inferiority and superiority.

And different we were. Austrian, Bulgarian, Croat, Dutch, English, French, German, Hungarian, Irish and Italian, Jewish... For every letter of the alphabet there is a European ethnicity that has settled in

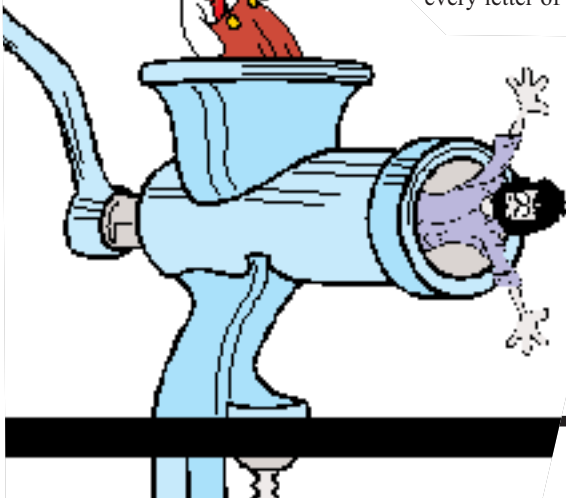
America.

Today many people would like to say that all is ethnicity. Some social scientists have gone as far as disavowing race, and doing studies in which "Black" and "White" groups are named as ethnicities. Race, they claim, is a social construct with little biological validity. But social constructs have their own reality. Religion and social class do not depend on biology. That does not make them any less real as points of human difference.

Other social scientists have wondered just how different white Americans really are. Certainly when immigrant groups arrived from Europe they were quite distinct from one another. But the melting pot story is a familiar one, and more than just a myth. One study found that among contemporary white Americans, only 10% lived in neighborhoods with their own ethnic group or had visited their ethnic homeland in the past five years. Less than 5% experienced discrimination based on ethnicity. No more than 2% had received help in business from fellow ethnic group members. Only 1% ate ethnic foods daily and virtually none were fluent in the language of their ethnic group.

Ethnicity, whether real or imagined, has from its inception been oriented to white European groups. Even as a construct of social scientists, ethnicity has not replaced the concept of racial minorities, and it never did. Many today have expanded their notion of ethnicity to view Jamaicans, Vietnamese, Haitians, Nigerians, Chinese, Asian Indians and other immigrant groups of color as ethnic groups, as they indeed are. But sometimes it seems the people most strongly advocating this expanded view, white Americans in particular, are using ethnicity not as a means of conceptualizing cultural difference, but rather of disguising their own cultural similarity.

During the 1960s cultural similarity was the "in thing" among white Americans. Not that we named ourselves as "white." We were simply Americans. The term "native American" had nothing to do with Indians. It meant you were a (white) person born here in contrast to an (European) immigrant. "Mixed marriages" were increasingly common. Polish married



# different!

Irish. English married Italian. German married Russian. Progressive people didn't even bat an eye when it happened. Diversity was something to overcome, not to celebrate.

Other groups did not fit the American mold. Blacks, Asians, American Indians, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans admittedly were here, but few among the self-defined (white) Americans knew exactly what to do with them, or cared.

The 1970s put an end to the monopoly white Americans held on the definition of Americanness, though habits die hard and even today whiteness and Americanness are closely linked in many people's minds. Still, with the advent of Civil Rights movements among various peoples of color—not just African Americans, but Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and native Americans—it became increasingly difficult to stake an exclusive claim to the American character as white. People of color were no longer to be ignored.

Soon our media began to become colorful. Commercials featured black, brown, yellow and red sprinkled among the white. Business began to catch on. There were markets here, self-conscious markets that sometimes organized against you if you weren't savvy enough to go along. Throughout the 1980s into the present we have seen an unfolding of a multicultural definition of America driven by demographics, immigration, and a historical rise in consciousness among people of color that is not simply a national, but also a worldwide reality.

All this took place in opposition to the existing definition of American as white, as mainstream, as the center of power, and as the oppressor.

Wait a minute. The oppressor, you say? How did we become the oppressor? It was surely confusing to many white Americans. My own people were oppressed, they echoed.

My grandparents struggled. They fled oppression in the old country only to meet it here. They lived in ghettos, worked in sweatshops, became the fodder for the capitalists' exploitation.

They fought the stereotypes. Viewed as intellectually inferior, morally unfit, and constitutionally mediocre, they battled the systemic forces of bigotry and finally rose above it. How could we be the oppressor? We earned the right to become "Americans."

American. That word again. As people aware of bigotry and oppression, how could we deny it to others, some of whom had been here far longer than us. True we were Americans, but so were they. Yet if we both are Americans, then who is oppressing whom? And so, driven by this dilemma, the collective consciousness of white Americans began to change.

First it retained the concept of American as an inclusive one. People of color were American. We all were. It felt so good, so affirming. In this regard we retained our collective sense of identity, without bothering to check too carefully whether Americans of color joined with us wholeheartedly. There was, and is, enough truth to this collective identity that it was a supportable concept. Americans of all colors have fought wars together, shared a political process, and developed a mainstream culture that at least superficially portrayed us sharing common values.

But when it got down to concepts of oppressor and oppression, things were different. Ask a white American how they feel about being white and they are likely to say, "I don't like labels. Don't put me in that box." Never mind that we are also men and women; Protestant, Catholic and Jewish; working class, middle class and upper class, all of which are boxes and labels for group identities. When it came to being white, we couldn't wait to jump out of the box.

So what was left? Only to recover our lost ethnicity. But what is there to recover? Those

mixed marriages of the 1950s and 1960s yielded fruit. Today the average white American has not one ethnicity, but many. Irish, yes. But also Russian, and maybe French and German, all within the same person. It is a rare white American that can claim to have retained the undiluted heritage of a single European ethnic group.

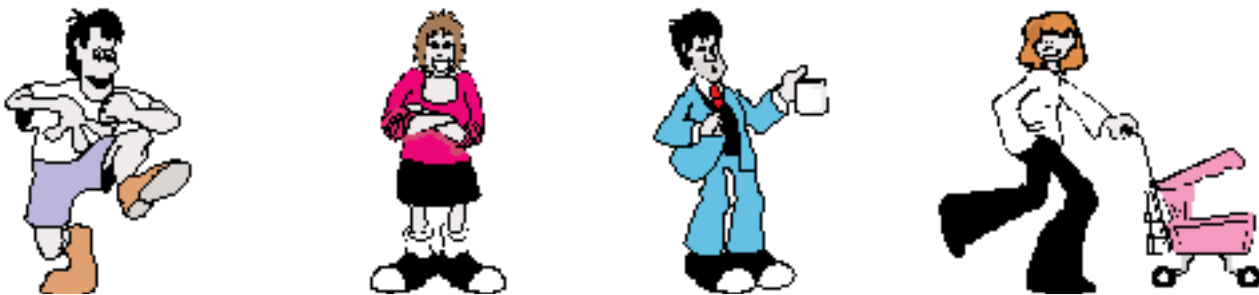
Consider, too, we have no trouble describing ourselves as having a common white identity in other contexts. Surveys look at white opinions. Schools and businesses count the percentage of whites in their organization. The music industry markets white music. And the term "mixed marriage," while still in use to describe difference, seldom describes a marriage between two white people.

As white Americans we've come increasingly to share common ground, right down to our selective avoidance of a collective identity. It works for us and who can tell us differently. It's our identity at stake here. If we choose to ignore it, who is to say we can't.

Only time. And the voice of other Americans for whom white American culture is not simply an abstraction but a force to be reckoned with. The most insidious effect of claiming separate ethnic identities is that we fail to open up a significant social process for discussion.

Sure it would take time. Certainly it would require emotional investment. Imagine if white Americans had to debate the meaning of whiteness in our lives, and the lives of others. Is a nonracist white identity possible? Is white a lifestyle as well as a race? Does the character of whiteness vary by region? Should multicultural education address concerns of white students, and what are those concerns? Are we really interested in integration? What price might we pay for it?

It's ironic that discussions like this take place all the time among black Americans, a group often viewed by white Americans as holding a rigid and somewhat unnecessary group identity. But only among white Americans, it seems, is there a rigid adherence to the absence of any self-reflective racial discussion, to an extent unmatched by any other racial group in America.



*The  
Irish, who, at  
home, readily sym-  
pathize with the  
oppressed everywhere,  
are instantly taught when  
they step upon our soil to  
hate and despise the  
Negro.... Sir, the Irish-  
American will one day  
find out his mistake.*

*Frederick  
Douglas,  
1853*

## MEMORIES OF OPPRESSION

Have things changed in the 143 years since Frederick Douglas commented upon the initiation of the Irish into American society? In order to find the answer to this and other questions, the Center for Study (CFS) interviewed Peggy O'Donoghue (P O'D), formerly of Limerick, Ireland and currently a modern day Irish immigrant and resident of the United States.

**CFS:** Could you tell me a little bit about your background?

**P O'D:** Alright, I guess. Well I grew up in Limerick, Ireland. I left when I was finished high school and I went to England. I had two sisters there. Growing up in Ireland you always think one day you're going to leave. Most people do leave. They come back but you're not going to get work there. So, it wasn't a major deal. I left and I worked in England for a year and I found the whole attitude to Irish people in Britain very tiring. I guess I felt like a second-class citizen.

**CFS:** How would you describe that attitude?

**P O'D:** Well, for instance, I took a job for something called Manpower where they send out temporary workers to low paid jobs. So one week I worked in Harrods, another week I worked in a kitchen cutting vegetables. And then another week I was in a travel agent's office. This was about 15 years ago. The guy who ran the place kept saying 'All these Irish travel agents just haven't a clue. They're all idiots.' And he would keep saying this all

day long to everybody in the office, like directing it at me. And that was not that unusual. You couldn't retaliate. At that time in Britain there was no such thing as pride in being Irish. There was a lot of embarrassment because a lot of the homeless in England were Irish. It felt like you weren't good enough and that you had to constantly prove yourself.

**CFS:** When did you come to this country?

**P O'D:** Well I came in 1984. After I was in England I went back and got a Bachelors degree in Dublin. When I was finished that I again couldn't find work. I knew somebody in Hoboken [New Jersey] and I thought I'd go and see what that's like. When I came, I eventually got a job as a waitress and did that for a number of years. I didn't intend to stay at that time either.

**CFS:** Did you find the same sort of attitude on the part of the...

**P O'D:** No, the opposite. It was like 'Oh you're Irish. My grandfather comes from

Ireland. My great grandfather came from Kerry...' or something. I just felt that much more like I was, again not an equal, but more like a mascot or something, the attitude I found a bit patronizing. 'You're a great little Irish girl.' But it was warm. I took a trip to England on my way home one Christmas from here and I felt it immediately. I got into a cab and my sister and I just didn't talk. It's almost like you didn't show your Irish accent whereas here I took every opportunity to show that I had an accent.

**CFS:** Because it would bring about a different response?

**P O'D:** Yeah. It was a much warmer response, but like I said, it was kind of irritating. It was very much like 'Well you're very naive because you come from Ireland and you really wanted to come here.' whereas I never had that feeling like I really wanted to come to America. I never had this urge that I really wanted to leave Ireland, but the attitude here I felt was this American egotism about all the countries of the world. When all the peoples of the world come and immigrate to



America. So it was kind of a patronizing thing. As waitress you didn't challenge it. You just used it to your own benefit.

**CFS:** Coming from a country outside of the United States you haven't grown up in the American culture. Taking that frame of reference, how did you find your contact with Americans, particularly in regard to race?

**P O'D:** I was really struck at the divisions, just in everything, in housing. It's like one section in town in Hoboken is all black. The projects were all black. Or even New York, you go from one section to another and within one street you cross over and it's a whole other ethnic mix, but they don't mix. I come from an all white country so I guess I was very curious about different cultures but I felt like I was warned off. Obviously the poverty struck me as being much more blatant even than Ireland. I'd never seen people going into bins for food. That kind of struck me as odd and then the vast wealth, that was very obvious. But I guess when I came, I socialized mostly with all white people. That's the milieu we were in. That was who was there. It was like I just found there's this vast gulf that you don't mix with the other side, even though it's not talked about.

**CFS:** How long did it take for you to develop a sense of this gulf?

**P O'D:** Pretty quickly.

**CFS:** Say a week?

**P O'D:** Yeah, sure. It was mostly Irish Americans, and I found Irish Americans very, very racist. The first year I came here, Miss America was, it was the first black Miss America, Vanessa Williams, and then she had to give up her crown for some reason. And I couldn't believe, like I went to visit some Irish American relatives of mine here and they said 'Oh this is typical. You give them something and they can't even hold on to it.' I was shocked that they would think that way. I guess in Ireland, in even the school, well especially when I did my undergraduate degree, we did a lot of Marxism and social stratifications and all these theories and so it was clear to me in every country you had a class and I thought in terms of class not in race at all. Even when I went to Hunter [College in New York City] and did the MSW [Masters in Social Work], I kept arguing that we didn't talk about class and everyone would look at me like I had two heads and just say 'Oh that's interesting' and move along. It always came down to race and I couldn't see it that way. Now I can, a lot more, but then I couldn't. Most of the people in the working class were minorities but it

was still a class system. I just found people here didn't want to look at this whole system in American, this whole, so-called democracy which doesn't exist at all. [I found Americans] not as self-critical. Because, I think Irish people are. We have whole histories of self-analysis and criticism and there's not too many social movements that call us together. Here there's this arrogance that this is a great country and this is the way things are and if you can't rise above it, then it's your own fault.

**CFS:** Now you say that within a week you developed a sense that you should not talk to African Americans. Did you sense that this boundary was one of color at that time?

**P O'D:** Yes. For instance the guys in the kitchen who were all Mexican. You know there was no way we were going to fraternize with them. We would all work together but there was no way you would go for a drink after work, whereas you would go for a drink with the bartender. And there even was a system with the customers. If an African American couple came in, you were told, the whole system was, 'Oh, they don't tip' so don't give them too much, you know, don't even bother going out of your way, they're not going to tip.' That's the way it was defined.

**CFS:** At this time you were involved with a group of Irish Americans. Were there boundaries between Irish Americans and other white ethnic groups? Say for instance, German Americans, Italian Americans, English Americans?

**P O'D:** No. I mean people would mention things about how there used to be signs about the Irish need not apply, but now we had arrived and everything was cool. In the beginning I thought it was kind of strange that people didn't relate back to a time when the Irish were looked down on. That don't you see there's a relationship between that and the way you now look at people of color. It's the same kind of system. Just felt like it was new to them. I did feel when I started dating Randy, 'Oh my god,' the shock horror and what have you done and that kind of thing.

**CFS:** How long have you and Randy been together?

**P O'D:** I guess we're married almost six years and we were dating about three.

**[Editor's note:** Peggy O'Donoghue's husband, Randy, is African American]

**CFS:** What were some of the reactions you ran into? You said it was kind of a shock.

**P O'D:** Well the Irish American relatives never saw me again, never invited me to anything. That was the end of me.

**CFS:** Until this day?

**P O'D:** Yes, never again. Well you know, I don't think they're as courageous as that. It's not as blatant as that. When my mother visits they'll show up and say oh they're very busy and all this stuff. But you know they've had weddings I haven't been invited to and I never actually see them. They never call. They never send cards at Christmas.

**CFS:** It's very common for people of Irish ancestry in the United States to proclaim their Irishness as a major point of their cultural and ethnic identification. How do you feel about that sort of identification.

**P O'D:** Right, well that's one of the things you know that strikes you at the beginning you know, these people telling you that their grandfather came from Ireland, and not knowing anything about Ireland. It's very bothering. It's very, (sighs) I believe people should have pride in their own culture, but they should base it on something. I find a lot of the young people that I met when I came over couldn't find Ireland on a map or didn't know any of the history or even the music. It was more, kind of like a feeling like, 'Oh I'm Irish,' and I think it was some embarrassment to them about the drunken Irish and all that stuff. I didn't feel their pride was based on any reality.

**CFS:** Did you find it was easy to distinguish an Irish American from...

**P O'D:** an Irish person?

**CFS:** From an Irish person on the one hand but also other white Americans of other ethnicities.

**P O'D:** I think so, yeah. What are the differences? Well for instance the Ancient Order of Hibernians, which is this great big organization for Irish Americans. It is very elitist; it is very chauvinist. They seem to have taken a lot of the old Irish attitudes which are not relevant to people who come from Ireland today. They've kind of entrenched themselves in this old '50s style. They don't allow women into the organization. I don't think that would happen in Ireland. At the Saint Patrick's Day parade, they don't allow gays to parade, but if you were in Dublin you could parade under a gay banner. I think they haven't kept pace with the things that have evolved. It's kind of a holding on to something I think that was passed down to them and they think it defines them. You wear green, or you have shillelaghs or you march

in the Saint Patrick's Day parade. The St. Patrick's Day parade here really bothers me; I've never attended it. It's like a drunken orgy. It's nothing to do with, the Irish writers you know. They don't celebrate the things that to me are what you are proud of in a culture. I just think it's a holding on to something that isn't relevant today. I don't know if other ethnic groups do that same thing. But I don't want to cast Irish Americans entirely in a negative light.

*"I used to laugh when I first came here, that if a white person talks about a black person, they always whisper. They always say, 'Did you see that woman? She's black.'"*

**CFS:** How is that?

**P O'D:** There's an ongoing debate in the Irish Voice about all these Irish Americans who fund the IRA and they don't know anything, and I don't think that's true necessarily. I think they have an insight in the same way I have an insight sometimes into American culture. They have an insight sometimes into Irish culture because they're not there. And so they can see things about Northern Ireland that if you lived in Ireland you wouldn't necessarily want to admit. Like the fact that there was a lot of murder going on in Ireland and the IRA evolved because of people who needed a protection force. They're people who come from the community. They're not people from outer space and they evolved in that situation and they were called on by their own as a protection force. I think probably at the time it was a necessarily thing, whereas when I grew up in Ireland we looked on the IRA as murderers. You kind of internalized the sort of stuff about how the British really were keeping peace even with this other evidence that they were shooting at people. It's like, okay, we were all upset about Bloody Sunday when the British shot on Irish marchers but that didn't translate into asking what do you do if you don't have people deflecting it. The civil rights situation had just come about. So I do think sometimes Irish people give Irish Americans a bad rap in that sense.

**CFS:** Do you think there is such a thing as white American culture?

**P O'D:** Yeah (laughs). I do, now. I can't say after all the years I've been here I didn't think 'Oh this is white America.' It's taken for granted that that is the social order, whereas if you're looking at it from the point of view of an immigrant... my famous example is working with the Board of Education in Manhattan in Harlem which is obviously mostly black, right. So the social workers in the guidance department of the board there, the social workers are the people who have got the best, usually more trained, and have better pay than say guidance teachers. And they're almost always white, the social workers. So we had a luncheon one time where all the social workers got together, all whites around the table and somebody said what school do you work in and she said whatever school it was and it's mostly white students, it's a very good school. The other person said, oh that must be great because I don't see a white face

from one end of the day to the other. I thought, My god, it's this feeling that it's terrible that I don't see a white. I'm deprived. And yet for most of the black kids here, it's like if they see another black face all day in a lot of areas that's a big thing. They see a black teacher and it's like manna from heaven. You know it strikes me a lot about the fear people have about being in situations where they're the only white person. That puts so much fear in people, whereas its not translated the other way around.

**CFS:** When you say its not translated the other way around, are you saying white people do not think being the only minority person in an all white situation is dangerous?

**P O'D:** No, not at all. They do not think that. First of all they do not think that it's dangerous and secondly, do not think it's unusual.

**CFS:** Whereas if you were that person of color, that might not be the way you perceived it?

**P O'D:** When I got together with Randy, I had to change my reference point for a lot of

things. For instance, growing up in Ireland we socialize in bars a lot, even if you don't drink. You would meet in a bar perhaps, or even after the movies you would go into a bar. I found with Randy he would not go into certain bars because he would say its going to be all white people. It never occurred to me to look at things that way before, because I guess I'm white. Whereas if I was in England I would definitely not go in certain places if I was Irish. So I kind of use that as my frame of what it feels like. I used to fight with him at the beginning, like 'Don't be ridiculous,' and after a while I realized he was right because when we walked in, especially when we walked into an Irish bar, the animosity was really there. I had a guy say to me once you know 'What, you can't get a nice Irish guy?' It was like the social order says you can't go to certain places. You can't go to certain towns. When his nieces and his nephews visit here it's so much more white than Newark and that's an issue for them.

**CFS:** How's that?

**P O'D:** It's uncomfortable to be around so many white people, just like it probably would be uncomfortable for me if I was living in an area where it was all black people.

**CFS:** So you do sense very strongly that there are different cultural groups? That it's more than just skin color in a sense. There are actual behavioral differences?

**P O'D:** Right. Yes, it's very, it's very, I mean it's so obvious. The example for me is I had to go and register my daughter for school and I had to decide what she was going to be, black or white. That was what the form said, so I put down that she was black and white, biracial. Anyway she couldn't get into the school that I wanted her to get into so of



course I was upset and I said to one of the neighbors, "Well, I wonder if she was classified as black and if it was a disadvantage in terms of the racial balance of the classroom." And this woman got so hot and bothered, she was like "Well I don't know, I don't know about that, I..." To me we were talking about a

**See O'Donoghue, page 15**

# The more things change...

...Passing history on to the present, under the guise of current views, white Americans fail to understand their own past.

"We are WASPs, my husband I, lifelong members of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority group, and some people say it is primarily our group who created and continue 'white racism' in America. [Previously] I would have denied this hotly. To me, my friends and I were thoroughly unprejudiced."

So begins a remarkable book, *The Education of a WASP*, by Lois Mark Stalvey. Stalvey began her "education" as a suburban housewife in Omaha. Her husband went to college on the G.I. Bill and became an advertising executive. They had three children.

Among the most interesting aspects of the book are the attitudes Stalvey reveals at the outset of her education. When criticized by a Jewish friend for living in an area that excluded Jews, Stalvey was reassured by a Jewish realtor that it was simply coincidence. She was further comforted by the fact that an African American undertaker lived on the edge of her housing development. Her Jewish friend, Stalvey decided, was bigoted against WASPs. Antisemitism, after all, had been eliminated with Hitler.

In grade school Stalvey never noticed who was not there. In high school she learned that Abraham Lincoln had solved the race problem, and that poor people had only themselves to blame if they couldn't make it in America.

Later she felt her black housekeeper's husband, who was reluctant to meet her socially, was prejudiced against white people. Why didn't he get a better job, thought Stalvey. When talking to a newly found black friend, Stalvey would continually try to reinterpret her friend's accounts of racial slights. Surely it couldn't be discrimination. Her friend was being too sensitive.

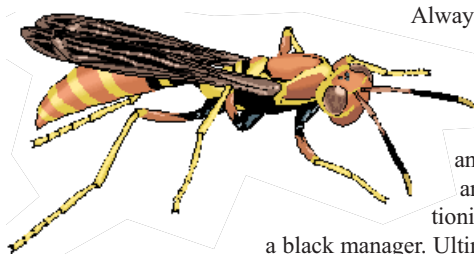
These experiences and beliefs are typical of "colorblind" white Americans today. Ironically, Stalvey was writing about her feelings in 1960, more than thirty-five years ago, before the incipient Civil Rights movement entered mainstream consciousness.

Truly an innocent soul who believed firmly in American values of equality, Stalvey was shaken from her complacency many times. Asking her African American friend to go to an amusement park, she was distressed to find the privately-owned park did not admit black people.

Later, though, Stalvey was troubled by the fact that black people had not made it in American like her European ancestors.

After all, "The only white prejudice we'd seen so far was the amusement park incident; humiliating, but hardly a serious handicap."

Most white Americans would stop there, content that racism was not the problem people of color claimed it to be. What made Stalvey unique was her willingness to remain true to her values regardless of the consequences. Asked to help her school hire a black teacher, and then to find suitable housing for a middle-class black couple, Stalvey begins to encounter institutional barriers she never knew existed.



Always willing to confront and acknowledge her own attitudes, Stalvey describes the visual shock of walking into an Urban League office and seeing a black receptionist, a black secretary and a black manager. Ultimately Stalvey's husband, who supports and shares her activism throughout, is fired from his job due to her activities. The couple moves to Philadelphia and develops a lifestyle more consistent with their beliefs.

In the 1990s racial politics have changed. Contact in schools and the workplace has increased. Structural barriers have been modified and attitudes have changed. Cries of "white racism" are sometimes rightly seen as an attempt to gain advantage as victim.

White Americans who say things have changed have a valid point, but as Stalvey's book indicates, it's not as simple as saying we no longer have separate facilities for black people in the South, or even saying that now Americans of color work side by side with white Americans.

White Americans should realize that the arguments and attitudes they use today to conceptualize (and often deny) racial inequality—colorblindness, the denial of unconscious attitudes, the failure of minorities to achieve the American dream like European immigrants, the denial of structural inequality, the notion that all racial discrimination is behind us, the claims of minorities being too sensitive, and

"me-too" claims of prejudice against whites—are really not new. They are part of our culture, and were mainstream even before Martin Luther King became a national figure over thirty years ago.

## New term for an old, but changing, identity

America has been described as racially polarized. At one end lies the African American, defined so purely by race in mainstream consciousness that no sense of ethnicity is permitted. At the other end lies the white Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP). Like the African American, the WASP is an identity constructed on race alone.

Allegedly including some hint of ethnicity by the term "Anglo Saxon," the WASP is actually an amalgam of many different ethnic groups from the British Isles and, depending of who's definition you follow, from Germanic regions of Europe as well. These regions include groups historically distinct, culturally separate, and sometimes openly antagonistic to one another. That they could be named as a single "ethnicity" could only happen in America. It is only the loss of distinct ethnicities through assimilation here in a foreign land that the term Anglo-Saxon could come to have any present day meaning for a single cultural group.

WASP is in fact a new name for what is an older "American" identity. The first printed use of the term occurred in 1957 and the term came into common usage in the 1960s. Then and today the term carries a derogatory connotation. It's doubtful anyone is actually raised to think of themselves as a WASP in the same way one might think of oneself as "French" or "Ukrainian" or some other ethnicity. Present day WASPs may have retained a sense of their original ethnicity, as English, Scottish, Dutch or German for example. More likely, they simply identify as "American."

Nonetheless, WASP describes a group that has formed the core of white ethnic assimilation in America. The original people who defined themselves as "white" in the 1680s were WASPs. Since that time, those European groups aspiring to inclusion in American society have molded themselves after the cultural patterns of this group.

This central group of white Americans is likely to undergo further changes in identity as the country's increasing racial diversity challenges the notion of the plain, vanilla American. Or is that chocolate, or strawberry, or mocha, or pineapple...

Jewish  
American



White  
American

Whiteness and Jewishness. How do they relate in America? It's

all too common to see swastikas appearing with "KKK," expressing the anti-Semitic hatred felt by white supremacist groups. Yet others claim Jewish Americans, the great majority of whom appear European, enjoy the privileges of whiteness here in North America.

There is no ultimate authority on "Who is white?" Whiteness, as well as blackness or any other ascribed racial status, is a product of a complex mix of social forces. Yet people form and express opinions, and Jewish Americans have been foremost among ethnic groups of European origin to examine their relation to whiteness in America. The following article summarizes the views of five Jewish American authors who have done so.

**Kivel, Paul. *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: New Society Publishers, 1996.**

Paul Kivel has written a comprehensive guide for white Americans who want to examine their own racism and act as allies with people of color. Unlike many otherwise white authors, Kivel speaks explicitly as a white person. He does not shy away from the issues, and thereby acknowledges both his complicity and responsibility for ameliorating the effects of whiteness.

In this context Kivel devotes a chapter to the meaning of Jewishness to him as an antiracism activist. He begins by expressing the ambivalence he feels when asked to identify as white in workshops, while knowing not all white people view him as such. He continues to detail the 2,000 year history of European anti-Semitism and its correlates in the United States. The chapter is worth-

## A contradiction in terms?

ferred. Some grew up among other Jews. Some grew up

while for this exposition alone. Kivel notes repeated periods of complacency interrupted by episodes of ruthless oppression. Jews lived in Germany, for instance, for 1,000 years while pogroms occurred in other European regions. Then came Hitler.

Kivel offers a comprehensive analysis of ways in which racism, anti-Semitism and whiteness intersect one another. In the end, he explains "I need non-Jewish people to recognize that my participation in the struggle against racism is part of my identity as a Jewish person fighting for justice, equality, and the end of exploitation and for my personal and group safety. To ask me to fight racism as a white person without recognizing my Jewish identity renders me invisible, at risk from further violence from white Christians and from non-Jewish people of color, and ultimately renders me ineffective."

**Frankenberg, Ruth. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.**

In her recent but now classic book, Ruth Frankenberg devotes most of her writing to examining the thoughts, feelings and consciousness of white women surrounding their whiteness. But at one point she turns to examining the experience of Ashkenazi Jewish women, i.e. those women whose "families emigrated to the United States from northern, eastern, and western Europe."

Noting that "Jewishness has more political salience in the present-day United States than any other white ethnicity," Frankenberg describes how white Jewish women experienced their Jewishness. On the one hand, it was flexible. Feelings and experiences dif-

ferences existed in the practices of attending temple, celebrating holidays (both Jewish and Christian), attitudes toward interfaith marriage, keeping a kosher household, and class and regional differences.

On the other hand, there is a boundedness to Jewishness that involves a shared set of "markers." Frankenberg offers the example that no one confused Jewishness with eating corned beef and cabbage on St. Patrick's Day. Equally important, "Jewish women mostly viewed their cultural identity as linked inextricably to being a target, or potential target, for oppression based on ethnicity."

Frankenberg acknowledges that some Ashkenazi Jews, having in the past been viewed as racial Others, and today still being a target of neo-Nazi groups, claim they are not white. None of the women in her study made that claim. However, by embedding a discussion of the particularities of Jewish women's identities in the larger context of her book on whiteness, Frankenberg illustrates the complicated interrelationships between the concepts of race and ethnicity.

**Sacks, Karen Brodtkin. "How Did Jews Become White Folks?" In Steven Gregory and Roger Sanjek (Eds.) *Race*, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994.**

Karen Brodtkin Sacks begins to examine the question of How Did Jews Become White Folks by reviewing the not so distant time in America when mainstream thought considered Jews to be another race, along with Poles, Italians, Russians, and many other European immigrant groups. During the 1920s, native white Americans espoused

theories of racial inferiority, devised IQ tests that "proved" them, and decried race-mixing and mongrelization between various European immigrants and native whites.

By the 1950s, Sacks was an adolescent in a suburban neighborhood where Jews "were simply one kind of white folks and where ethnicity meant little more to my generation than food and family heritage." Part of that heritage, Sacks notes, was the belief that Jews in America were special, the evidence being that they had pulled themselves up by their bootstraps from poverty to the middle class, in the face of structural and personal anti-Semitism.

Sacks tells the story of Jewish ascendancy to whiteness to illustrate a general process that extended to other white immigrant groups, but which excluded native black Americans. The turning point came after World War II with the GI Bill of Rights. Spurred by protests, shortages of skilled labor, and memories of militant activity by veterans following World War I, the government underwrote education, employment and housing opportunity for Euromales.

Women and people of color were left out of "the most massive affirmative action program in U.S. history." The FHA, the agency most responsible for the suburbs themselves, sent agents into the field to keep Negroes from buying houses, encouraged restricted covenants for African Americans even after they had been dropped for Jews and Catholics, and openly insisted in their underwriting manuals on racially homogenous neighborhoods.

Sacks offers similar details of racial barriers in education and employment. Her article is a useful source of information both about the earlier racial theories of European immigrants, and structural forces leading to the post-war inclusion of these same groups in white American culture.

**Dubowsky, Hadar. "White Jewish Female: What happens when I fit into more than one?" *Lilith*, July 31, 1993.**

Of all the works, Hadar Dubowsky's touches most deeply on the subjective experience of being white, Jewish, and for that matter, female, in contemporary America. She offers a brief but thought-provoking description of her experiences at a conference on racism and social change where her racial, ethnic/religious and gender roles became points of examination, of affirmation, and of concern.

As a racial being, Dubowsky expressed an interest in examining her racism and

◆ *Businesses* ◆ *religious organizations* ◆ *conference planners* ◆  
◆ *professional associations* ◆ *social service agencies* ◆  
◆ *student groups* ◆ *schools and universities* ◆

***If you care to make a difference in people's lives...  
If you share our concern for racial understanding...  
Then dare to explore white culture in America.***

**Find out what it takes to sponsor a white awareness workshop in your organization. Contact the Center for the Study of White American Culture at (908) 241-5439. Ask for Jeff Hitchcock.**

white privilege, but found she needed to "quiet that scared, mistrustful voice which carried the historical memory of an oppressed people."

As a Jew, Dubowsky felt drawn to the conference because the organizers made overtures that explicitly acknowledged Jewish identity and concerns, including participation by a Jewish activist group, kosher meals, and a workshop for Jewish Americans. Such acknowledgement, according to Dubowsky, had been rare in multicultural events.

One difficulty in articulating Jewish identity appeared when a speaker identified herself as a Jew and a lesbian, only to be criticized by a black woman for "ignoring" her whiteness. Another difficulty appeared later when Dubowsky felt angry at the organizers of a program between African American and Hassidic groups in Brooklyn that brought youth from each group together. All the speakers were male, as were program participants.

Yet at another point in the conference a speaker invited Jews to stand and identify themselves. In a crowd of more than 1000, nearly one out of three people stood. For many it was an emotional and affirming experience. Dubowsky notes that for some activists at the conference "it was the first time they had ever identified as Jews."

**Lerner, Michael. "Jews Are Not White." *The Village Voice*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 20, May 18, 1993, pp. 33-34.**

Of all five articles, Michael Lerner's is the only one that takes the stance that, as the title says, Jews Are Not White. Lerner is contemptuous of Jews who view themselves as white within multicultural circles in order

to "please their nonwhite colleagues who cannot find any other group of whites [sic] quite so guilt-ridden and quite so anxious to please." Jews, according to Lerner, are responding to a painful history of oppression by trying to assimilate. Freed by the presence of blacks from occupying the traditional role of being the 'target of choice,' Jews of an older generation sought refuge in whiteness, only to be criticized now by their children for their white privilege. Privilege, Lerner points out, is a strange term for a "people that had one out three of its members murdered in the past 50 years."

Lerner feels that Jewish identity has been shaped by the long term history of oppression, including the events of the Holocaust. He is not only critical of Jews-as-whites in multiculturalism, but also of Israel as oppressor of Palestinians. Each, he argues, is a reaction to oppression. In each case Jews have fled from an awful reality into structures that offer relief from the harshest effects of anti-Semitism. Seen as a haven, these structures nonetheless have other oppressive overtones that are difficult for Jews to see.

Jews, Lerner warns, have historically been used by oppressors to be the public face of that oppression. So, for instance, they have been used as tax collectors in Europe. This incurs the hatred of the oppressed, while offering little promise of safety from the oppressors in times of instability. Lerner urges Jews to abandon whiteness and to embrace only that multiculturalism which invites an explicitly Jewish, and not white, identity. He calls for an alliance of blacks, Chicanos, Jews, Irish, Italians, Poles and native Americans "based on a common experience of oppression and a common desire to escape it."

Here are the answers! Did you try the test? For the questions, see the back cover.

1. (D) Native Americans comprise about 1% of the United States population but are the most ethnically diverse. One study found native American tribes account for 50% of the identified ethnocultural groups in the country. In some ways native American identity parallels that of white Americans who identify ethnically, but not racially. Tribal membership usually forms the basis of identification, with native American or Indian identity being secondary.

There are 517 tribes recognized by the U.S. government, 365 recognized by individual states, and 52 self-identified groups. Despite their diversity, native American cultures do share a common worldview with values that "are collectivistic and encompass a harmony of the individual with the tribe, the tribe with the land, and the land with the Great Spirit." This might be contrasted with European American values of individualism, competition and aggression, nuclear family, and mastery over nature.

SOURCE: Herring, Roger. "Native American Indian Identity: A People of Many Peoples." In Elizabeth Pathy Salett and Diane R. Koslow (Eds.) *Race, Ethnicity and Self: Identity in Multicultural Perspective*, Washington, D.C.: NMCI Publications, 1994.

2. (A) In the 1800s the Irish were proud there had been no slaves in Ireland for 700 years. So it was on this matter that the Irish of Ireland petitioned the Irish of America. The petition read, in part:

Irishmen and Irishwomen! Treat the colored people as equals, as brethren. By your memories of Ireland, continue to love liberty—hate slavery—CLING BY THE ABOLITIONISTS—and in America you will do honor to the name of Ireland.

The petition was signed by Daniel O'Connell, the leading figure in the Irish movement to overthrow English domination. O'Connell, known for his work in Ireland as "the Liberator" said "God knows I speak for

the saddest people the sun sees; but may my right hand forget its cunning, and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if to save Ireland, even Ireland, I forget the negro one single hour!"

The petition was received by the Abolitionists in America who publicized it through public meetings and the press. Irish Americans were unimpressed and proclaimed their consternation at being singled out, for they felt they did "not form a distinct class of the community, but consider ourselves in every respect as CITIZENS of this great and glorious republic—that we look upon every attempt to address us, otherwise than as CITIZENS, upon the subject of the abolition of slavery, or any subject whatsoever, as base and iniquitous, no matter from what quarter it may proceed."

Economic competition between Irish Americans and both free and enslaved African Americans was fierce. Furthermore, in the racial theories of native white Americans at the time, the Irish were not understood to be white. Some considered them to be black. Thus Irish Americans, who remained Irish in their financial support of political freedom for Ireland, made a point of proclaiming their common citizenship with other white Americans on domestic issues. About the evils of slavery, they replied "the slaves of America partake of all the necessities and comforts of life in abundance. They are visited by no periodical famines,... and their slumbers are uninterrupted by the cries of their famishing children."

So complete was the rejection of this petition by Irish Americans that William Lloyd Garrison, the famous Abolitionist, wrote in July 1942 that "Even to this hour, not a single Irishman has come forward, either publicly or privately, to express his approval of the [petition], or to avow his determination to abide by its sentiments."

SOURCE: Ignatiev, Noel. *How the Irish became White*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

3. (D) In the 1600s there was a substantial presence of Europeans in the Thirteen Colonies, 210,000 total in 1689. But this number was almost certainly balanced against a greater native American population in the rest of the continental United States. From U.S. Census data (which begin in 1790) it is clear the period of 1940 to 1970 was the time when white Americans formed the greatest proportion of the population. The white population peaked at 89.8% in 1940. The 1990 percentage is 83.9, a figure which contains both Hispanic and Anglo whites. Estimates of Anglo whites alone range from

70% to 75%.

Immigration figures also support the notion that America reached its whitest point following World War II. White American culture is not something that Europeans import. It is learned from native born whites. Thus high immigration, even if from Europe, tends to reduce the "whiteness" of the population. In 1940 the immigration rate, at 1%, reached its lowest point ever in the period from 1830 to the present. By 1970 the percentage of foreign born in the population also reached a historic low of less than 5%. The increase in racial and cultural diversity we experience today still has not reached the historic levels of other periods.

SOURCE: Parrillo, Vincent. *Diversity in America*. Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge Press, 1996.

4. (C) Most people today will recognize the similarity of this description to the lives of many white suburbanites. The description applies equally well to Southern slaveholders. Contrary to popular opinion, the typical slaveholder was not the wealthy, aristocratic, settled owner of a large plantation but rather a small farmer or middle class professional like a doctor or lawyer. While wealthy planters held the majority of slaves, the planters were not by far the majority of slaveholders.

The typical slaveholder fit the other qualities of the description, being religious, driven to achieve material success and focused on their children's education. They seldom lived in the same area for more than ten years, leaving parents behind in a nuclear family style. They also disparaged the aristocracy and preferred to vote common folk into political office. Wealthy planters, on the other hand, rarely entered political life and were suspect when they did. Southern society on the white side of the color line was fiercely egalitarian and the opportunity for movement into the middle class was considered a crucial part of its character of "freedom." As far as saving for large ticket purchases, the modern white American will buy a car and house as a means of entry into the middle class. What did antebellum Southern white Americans buy? An enslaved American.

SOURCE: Oakes, James. *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1982.

SCORE: None correct - worse than guessing; 1 correct - keep trying; 2 correct - average; 3 correct - excellent; 4 correct - expert.

**O'Donoghue, from page 10**

factual thing, how this child is designated in the school system, and I'm not even talking about whether that's right or wrong. The fact is she was designated as black. White people here can't even talk about race. They can't even discuss it. I used to laugh when I first came here, that if a white person talks about a black person, they always whisper. They always say "Did you see that woman? [feigns whisper] She's black." It's almost like even the word becomes a moralistic stand, like you are deciding if someone is better or worse. You've obviously decided that black is bad if you have to whisper it. Why is it so hard to say the word out. What, is it a derogatory term, to say someone is black? I used to find that really funny. I would always scream out, "You mean she's black," and they would say (feigns defensiveness) "Yes, yes, yes." I don't understand what the fear is to even discuss it. With this woman it was so funny. The next time I met her I brought it up again because I wanted to see if I would have the same reaction.

**CFS:** And what was the reaction?

**P O'D:** Again, it was like, "Well that's, I don't know about that. Let's talk about something else." She has a baby the same age as my son. He has blond hair and blue eyes. We were in the park and I said they'd probably grow up close together if we stayed in this area. Isn't it funny the way they look in contrast, how dark my son is and how blond your son is. She said "But that doesn't mean, that doesn't mean anything, that does, I mean he, he may, his hair may change

brown." It was like, I'm not embarrassed. I'm not ashamed of my son's color. But in an instance she thought I was. To her anything to do with calling someone darker is making a moral stance. It's saying they are less instead of celebrating. I find my family now can make comments like that and they don't think it's a derogatory thing.

**CFS:** So they can name color, and speak in terms of skin color or hair color or racial characteristics?

**P O'D:** Right, or be much more inclined to ask because they don't know. They haven't been around many people of color. It's an all white country, so they'll ask me. I find it's easier to talk to them about it than it is here where every time I bring up the subject it's seen like I have to be calmed down, or "Oh, you shouldn't say things like that about your child," like making me feel better. Like that woman saying "It's okay. I'm sure he'll be okay." I will say when I talk to black people about these issues there's like an opening. They have like a sigh of relief that a white person is finally talking about this, just like an opposite reaction. I've found that even in my classes in college in the Ph.D. program. The class was silent as soon as I mentioned the word "race." They all go quiet and as soon as I talk about whiteness, it gets even quieter.

**CFS:** So you're not having a lot of luck in school. You started out talking about class...

**P O'D:** That's right.

**CFS:** ...and they told you it was race, and now that you're talking about race...

**P O'D:** They're saying what are you talking

about? What do you mean?

**CFS:** I guess you're talking about the wrong race.

**P O'D:** That's right, that's right. It's very funny. Naming something becomes very difficult.

**CFS:** Is there anything that we haven't touched on that you'd like to add or comment on?

**P O'D:** I guess just that having done a focus group with social work students I was really struck by how there is an emphasis now on discussing racial issues in the MSW programs, but the way it's done is very interesting. Again, it's looking at the other, and it's almost like if you get to know the little culture things then you know. For instance, one student kept telling me that if you're a black woman it's very hard to get makeup to fit your skin color. That if you know these little tidbits that you'll suddenly be all-knowing. And I feel like, it's like somebody when I first came here feeling like they knew little bits about Ireland, therefore they knew Irish culture. I feel you have to have grown up there. Like telling me Irish people spend a lot of time in the pubs. Well they do, but why is that? What are the issues around that? There's this, I'm looking for the right word, there's kind of an egotist idea that you know. As somebody who came here from another country I found it very irritating and upsetting that people would tell me that they knew this stuff about Ireland and they couldn't grab what it was really about.

**CFS:** Thank you.



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# Test Yourself:

*Four questions that will never appear on the SAT*

Answers appear on page 14.

1. Which of the following racial/cultural groups is the most ethnically diverse?

- a) Asian Americans
- b) black Americans
- c) Hispanic Americans
- d) native Americans
- e) white Americans

2. In 1841, the people of Ireland sent a petition with 60,000 signatures to the Irish in America asking them to:

- a) join the American Abolitionists in overthrowing the American system of slavery that held Africans and African Americans in bondage.
- b) send money to aid the newly formed movement for Irish independence from English domination.
- c) return to the land of their birth, no longer forsaking it for a new and untried country where they faced oppression as bad as any in the home country.
- d) create a haven in the new world where more Irish might escape from the ravages of famine and start a new life in a surrounding that kept the glorious traditions of Irish culture forever alive.

3. During what time period did the population in the area that now forms the contiguous 48 states of the United States reach its highest percentage of native-born white Americans?

- a) 1650-1670
- b) 1750-1770
- c) 1850-1870
- d) 1950-1970

4. The following description describes what group?

They are deeply religious, but driven by material ambition. They will spare no effort to assure the education and ability of their children to improve their station in life. They often move in an effort to improve their material standing in life, and despite close families ties, often find their children, once grown, depart their parents' home for distant areas in the same unending quest. They are fiercely egalitarian, viewing elevated status and noble ancestry as things to be suspected in a leader. When starting out, they often avoid frivolous expenses and save in order to purchase the large ticket goods that are the signs of entry into the middle class.

- a) contemporary white American suburbanites
- b) antebellum slaveholders in the South
- c) both a and b
- d) neither a or b

Center for the Study of White American Culture, Inc.

*A Multiracial Organization*

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