RACE TRAITOR

SUMMER 1993 $5

TREASON TO WHITENESS IS LOYALTY TO HUMANITY

RACE *TRAITOR*

TREASON TO WHITENESS IS LOYALTY TO HUMANITY

Number 2 Winter 1993

Editors: John Garvey, Noel Ignatiev

Contributing Editors: Abdul Alkalimat, Theodore W. Allen, John Bracey, Kingsley Clarke, Selwyn Cudjoe, Christopher Day, James W. Fraser, Carolyn L. Karcher, Robin D.G. Kelley, Louis Kushnick, Theresa Perry, Rev. Eugene Rivers, Philip Rubio, Vron Ware

Production Assistants: Brenda Coughlin, Emily Cousins, Christopher Day

cover: Frontispiece of the first American Edition of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1855

published at PO Box 603, Cambridge, Mass. 02140. Single copy: individuals $5. Subscription, four issues: individuals, $20; institutions, $40. 20% discount on orders of five or more.

IMMIGRANTS AND WHITES

BY NOEL IGNATIEV

At the turn of the century, an investigator into conditions in the steel industry, seeking employment on a blast furnace, was informed that "only Hunkies work on those jobs, they're too damn dirty and too damn hot for a 'white' man." Around the same time, a West Coast construction boss was asked, "You don't call an Italian a white man?" No, sir," came the reply, "an Italian is a dago." Odd though this usage may seem today, it was at one time fairly common. According to one historian, "in all sections native-born and northern European laborers called themselves 'white men' to distinguish themselves from the southern Europeans they worked beside."[1] I have even heard of a time when it was said in the Pacific Northwest logging industry that no whites worked in these woods, *just a bunch of Swedes.*

Eventually, as we know, Europeans of all national origins were accepted as "whites"; only rarely and in certain parts of the country is it any longer possible to hear the Jew or the Italian referred to as not white. The outcome is usually hailed as a mighty accomplishment of democratic assimilation. In this essay, I shall argue two points: first, that the racial status of the immigrants, far from being the natural outcome of a spontaneous process, grew out of choices made by the immigrants themselves and those receiving them; second, that it was in fact deeply tragic, because to the extent the immigrants became "white" they abandoned the possibility of becoming fully American. Finally, I shall speculate a bit on the future.

The general practice in the social sciences is to view race as a natural category. A representative example of this approach is the book by Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York, 1973). The authors declare the subject of their study to be the "white working class." As well-trained sociologists, they are careful to specify what they mean by "working class," but they do not find it necessary to define "white." *Of course everybody*

1 David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Non-Union Era* (New York, 1969), 120; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925* (New York, 1963), 66, 173.

knows what is "white." However, for some, including this writer, the inquiry becomes most necessary just at the point Sennett and Cobb take for granted.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to review the work showing the origins in the seventeenth century of "white" as a social category. The term came into common usage only in the latter part of the century, that is, after people from Africa and people from Europe had been living together for seven decades on the North American mainland.[2]

In an April 1984 essay in *Essence*, "On Being 'White'. . . And Other Lies," James Baldwin wrote that "No one was white before he/she came to America." Once here, Europeans became white "by deciding they were white. . . . White men—from Norway, for example, where they were *Norwegians*—became white: by slaughtering the cattle, poisoning the wells, torching the houses, massacring Native Americans, raping Black women."

Now it is some time since settlers from Norway have slaughtered any cattle, poisoned any wells, or massacred any Indians, and few Americans of any ethnic background take a direct hand in the denial of equality to people of color; yet the white race still exists as a social category. If it is not an inherited curse, whiteness must be reproduced in each generation. Although Sennett and Cobb treat it as a natural classification, they recount a story that reveals some of how it is re-created. One of the characters in their book is a man they call Ricca Kartides, who came to America from Greece, worked as a building janitor and, after a few years, "bought property *in a nearby suburb of Boston*" (emphasis added).

What social forces, what history framed the fearful symmetry of Mr. Kartides's choice of location? Was that the turning point in

2 Various scholars have explained the emergence of whiteness as a response to a problem of labor control in the seventeenth-century Chesapeake region. See especially Theodore Allen, "'. . . They Would Have Destroyed Me': Slavery and the Origins of Racism," *Radical America* IX (May-June 1975), 40-63, reissued as *Class Struggle and the Origins of Racial Slavery: The Invention of the White Race* (Hoboken, N.J., 1975). Lerone Bennett, Jr. *The Shaping of Black America* (Chicago, 1975) is a popular account. Alden T. Vaughan, "Slavery and Racism in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 9:3 (July 1989) 311-54 provides an introduction to the literature and debates on the relation between the appearance of slavery and the ideology of race. See also Richard Williams, *Hierarchical Structures and Social Value: The Creation of Black and Irish Identities in the United States* (New York, 1990).

his metamorphosis from a Greek immigrant into a white man? What alternative paths were open to him? How would his life, and his children's lives, have been different had he pursued them? There is a great deal of history subsumed (and lost) in the casual use of the term "white." Even in the narrowest terms, "white" is not a self-evident category. Barbara J. Fields recounts the apocryphal story of an American journalist who once asked Papa Doc Duvalier what portion of the Haitian people was white. Duvalier answered unhesitatingly, "Ninety-eight percent." The puzzled reporter asked Duvalier how he defined white. "How do you define black in your country?" asked Duvalier in turn. When the answer came back that in the U.S. anyone with any discernible African ancestry was considered black, Duvalier replied, "Well, that's the way we define white in my country."[3] Along the same lines, every character in Mark Twain's novel, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, black and white, is of predominantly European descent.

If whiteness is a historical product, then it must be transmitted. Like all knowledge, white consciousness does not come easily. In one case in a small town in Louisiana at the beginning of the century, five Sicilian storekeepers were lynched for violating the white man's code: they had dealt mainly with black people and associated with them on equal terms.[4] In her short story, "The Displaced Person," Flannery O'Connor describes how the immigrant is taught to be white. The story takes place shortly after World War II. A Polish immigrant comes to labor on a small southern farm. Among the other laborers are two black men. After he has been on the farm for a while, the Pole arranges to pay a fee to one of the black men to marry his cousin, who is in a DP camp in Europe, in order for her to gain residence in the U.S. When the farm owner, a traditional southern white lady, learns of the deal. she is horrified and undertakes to explain to the Pole the facts of life in America.

> "Mr. Guizac," she said, beginning slowly and then speaking faster until she ended breathless in the middle of a word, "that nigger cannot have a white wife from Europe. You can't talk to a nigger that way. You'll excite him and besides it can't be

3 "Ideology and Race in American History," in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, *Region, Race and Reconstruction* (New York, 1982).

4 Higham, op cit 169.

done. Maybe it can be done in Poland but it can't be done here. . ."

"She no care black," he said. "She in camp three year."

Mrs. McIntyre felt a peculiar weakness behind her knees. "Mr. Guizac," she said, "I don't want to have to speak to you about this again. If I do, you'll have to find another place yourself. Do you understand?"

The story ends tragically as a consequence of the Pole's failure to learn what is expected of him in America.

In what relation, then, does whiteness stand to Americanism? If adoption by the immigrant of prevailing racial attitudes is the key to adjusting successfully to the new country, does it then follow that to become white is to become American? The opposite is closer to the truth: for immigrants from Europe (and elsewhere, to the extent they have a choice), the adoption of a white identity is the most serious barrier to becoming fully American.[5]

Like Cuba, like Brazil, like other places in the New World in which slavery was important historically, the United States is an Afro-American country. In the first place, persons of African descent constituted a large portion of the population throughout the formative period (how large no one can say, but probably around one-fifth for most of the first two centuries). Second, people from Africa have been here longer than most of the immigrant groups—longer in fact than all groups except for the Indians, the "Spanish" of the Southwest (themselves a mixture of Spaniards, Africans, and Indians), and the descendants of early English settlers (who by now also include an African strain). Above all, the experience of people from Africa in the New World represents the distillation of the American experience, and this concentration of history finds its expression in the psychology, culture, and national character of the American people.

What is the distinctive element of the American experience? It is the shock of being torn from a familiar place and hurled into a new environment, compelled to develop a way of life and culture from the materials at hand. And who more embodies that experi-

5 From a *political* standpoint, the degree of cultural assimilation is largely irrelevant. The two least culturally assimilated groups in the country are the Amish of Lancaster County—the so-called Pennsylvania Dutch—and the Hasidic Jews; yet both enjoy all the rights of whites.

ence, is more the essential product of that experience, than the descendants of the people from Africa who visited these shores together with the first European explorers (and perhaps earlier, as recent researches have suggested), and whose first settlers were landed here a year before the Mayflower?

In *The Omni-Americans* (New York, 1970) Albert Murray discusses the American national character. He draws upon Constance Rourke, who saw the American as a composite, part Yankee, part backwoodsman (himself an adaptation of the Indian), and part Negro. "Something in the nature of each," wrote Rourke,

> induced an irresistible response. Each had been a wanderer over the lands, the Negro a forced and unwilling wanderer. Each in a fashion of his own had broken bonds, the Yankee in the initial revolt against the parent civilization, the backwoodsman in revolt against all civilization, the Negro in a revolt which was cryptic and submerged but which nonetheless made a perceptible outline.[6]

"It is all too true," writes Murray, "that Negroes unlike the Yankee and the backwoodsman were slaves. . . But it is also true—and as things have turned out even more significant—that they were slaves *who were living in the presence of more human freedom and individual opportunity than they or anybody else had ever seen before.*" Later he writes:

> The slaves who absconded to fight for the British during the Revolutionary War were no less inspired by *American* ideas than those who fought for the colonies: the liberation that the white people wanted from the British the black people wanted from white people. As for the tactics of the fugitive slaves, the Underground Railroad was not only an innovation, it was also an *extension* of the American quest for democracy brought to its highest level of epic heroism.

American culture, he argues, is *"incontestably mulatto."*

6 American Humor: A Study of National Character (New York, 1931), 98-

> After all, such is the process by which Americans are made that immigrants, for instance, need trace their roots no further back in either time or space than Ellis Island. *By the very act of arrival*, they emerge from the bottomless depths and enter the same stream of American tradition as those who landed at Plymouth. In the very act of making their way through customs, they begin the process of becoming, as Constance Rourke would put it, part Yankee, part backwoodsman and Indian—and part Negro!

It is very generous of Murray, as a descendant of old American stock, to welcome the newcomers so unreservedly. But what if their discovery, as he puts it, of the "social, political, and economic value in white skin" leads them to "become color-poisoned bigots?"

Their development into Americans is arrested. Like certain insects which, under unfavorable conditions, do not complete their metamorphosis and remain indefinitely at the larval stage, they halt their growth at whiteness.

John Langston Gwaltney wrote, in *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America* (New York, 1980), "The notion that black culture is some kind of backwater or tributary of an American 'mainstream' is well established in much popular as well as standard social science literature. To the prudent black American masses, however, core black culture *is* the mainstream." At issue is not, as many would have it, the degree to which black people have or have not been assimilated into the mainstream of American culture. Black people have never shown any reluctance to borrow from others when they thought it to their advantage. They adopted the English language—and transformed it. They adopted the Christian religion—and transformed it. They adopted the twelve-tone musical scale—and did things with it that Bach never dreamed of. In recent years they have adopted the game of basketball—and placed their own distinctive stamp on the style of play. And they have adopted spaghetti, okra, refried beans, noodle pudding, liver dumplings, and corned beef, and modified them and made them a part of ordinary "drylongso" cuisine.

It is not black people who have been prevented from drawing upon the full variety of experience which has gone into making up America. Rather, it is those who, in maddened pursuit of the white whale, have cut themselves off from human society, on sea and on

land, and locked themselves in a "masoned walled-town of exclusiveness."

All this is not to deny that whites in America have borrowed from black people. But they have done so shamefacedly, unwilling to acknowledge the sources of their appropriations, and the result has generally been inferior. The outstanding example of this process was Elvis Presley, who was anticipated by Sam Phillips's remark, "If I can find a white man who sings like a Negro, I'll make a million dollars." Other examples are Colonel Sanders's chicken and Bo Derek's curls. There are exceptions: Peggy Lee comes immediately to mind.

Can the stone be rolled back? If race, like class, is "something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships,"—to borrow the words of E.P. Thompson—then can it be made to unhappen? Can the white race be dissolved? Can "white" people cease to be?

I cite here two details which point to the possibility of the sort of mass shifts in popular consciousness that would be necessary to dissolve the white race. The first is the sudden and near-unanimous shift by Afro-Americans in the 1960s from the self-designation "Negro" to "black" or "Black." (Among prominent holdouts are Ralph Ellison and the Negro Ensemble Company.) The shift involved more than a preference for one term over another; although its precise implications were and still are unclear, and although much of its substance has disappeared or been reduced to mere symbol, there seems little doubt that the initial impulse for the change was a new view among black people of their relation to official society. "Black" stood in opposition to "white."

The second detail I cite was an apparently trivial incident I happened to witness. At Inland Steel Company's Indiana Harbor Works in East Chicago, there used to be a shuttle-bus system that operated at shift-change time, picking up workers at the main gate and delivering them to the various mills within the plant, which may be as much as a mile away. One morning, as the bus began to pull away from the gate, I saw, from my passenger's seat, a man running to catch it. He was in his early twenties, apparently white, and was dressed in the regulation steelworker's garb—steel-toed shoes, fire-resistant green jacket and pants, hard hat—underneath which could be seen shoulder-length hair, in the fashion of the time, the early 1970s. The driver pulled away and, as he did so, said over his shoul-

der, "I would have stopped for him if he'd had short hair."

That small incident brought home to me with great force some of the meaning of the revolution in style that swept so-called white youth in those years. At the time, many young people were breaking with the values that had guided their parents. In areas as seemingly unrelated as clothing and hair styles, musical tastes, attitudes toward a war, norms of sexual conduct, use of drugs, and feelings about racial prejudice, young people were creating a special community, which became known as the counterculture. In particular, long hair for males became the visible token of their identification with it. It was a badge of membership in a brotherhood cast out from official society—*exactly the function of color for Afro-Americans.* As that incident with the bus driver reveals, and as anyone who lived through those years can testify, it was perceived that way by participants and onlookers alike.

Granted that only a minority of eligible youth ever identified fully with the counterculture, that the commitment of most participants to it was not very deep, that few in it were aware of all its implications, that the whole movement did not last very long, and that its symbols were quickly taken up and marketed by official society—nevertheless, it contained the elements of a mass break with the conformity that preserves the white race.

Normally the discussion of immigrant assimilation is framed by efforts to estimate how much of the immigrants' traditional culture they lose in becoming American. Far more significant, however, than the choices between the old and the new is the choice between two identities which are both new to them: white and American.

This article, written in the spring of 1987, appeared in Konch, *Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter 1990) in a slightly different version, under the title "'Whiteness' and American Character." Noel Ignatiev is one of the editors of* Race Traitor.