Assessing Whiteness Scholarship: A Response to James Barrett, David Brody, Barbara Fields, Eric Foner, Victoria Hattam, and Adolph Reed

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The valuable and thoughtful responses to my essay, "Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination," illustrate the existence of a wide range of opinions on the emergence, claims, and methodologies of the whiteness genre in US and US labor history. Like Eric Foner, it is my hope that this scholarly controversy will mark the beginning of a much longer discussion that will draw in many more participants from history, American Studies, political science, and other disciplines. This is a debate that I believe is long overdue. While David Brody is certainly correct to note that readers have not been so "dazzled" that they could not be critical of whiteness scholarship, serious historiographical assessments of the genre's strengths and weaknesses have been scarce. This scholarly controversy, which aims at providing such an assessment, will not and should not be the final word on the subject. In this response, I welcome the opportunity to address a fraction of the many important issues raised by James Barrett, David Brody, Barbara Fields, Eric Foner, Victoria Hattam, and Adolph Reed.

My purpose in "Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination" was not to run what Brody calls the "latest instance of charismatic history to ground." As I note in my essay, I believe that racial identity is "too important a subject to receive nothing less than the most rigorous treatment at historians' hands."[1] I would not go as far as Brody does when he suggests that whiteness is an "interesting" but "unsustainable idea" that should have been "allowed to die a natural death." Indeed, while I find many of the genre's assumptions, modes of argument, and methodologies problematic, I left the door slightly open for the retention of whiteness as a critical concept for historians if they engage in a methodological and conceptual overhaul that, thus far, they seem reluctant to undertake.[2]

While the social and political sources of academic interest in whiteness were not a principal concern of my essay, the "origins" question is an interesting one that, I hope, will receive greater attention. My brief remarks on the initial whiteness turn in historical scholarship derived from the afterword to the second edition of David Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness* (New York, 1999). There, Roediger makes clear the roots of his book: It was written "in reaction to the appalling extent to which white male workers voted for Reaganism in the 1980s."[3] Foner's account matches Roediger's: The "emergence of historians' concern with whiteness cannot be separated from perceived white working-class conservatism from Wallace voters of the 1960s to Reagan Democrats," he writes. In this light, I am perplexed by Barrett's conclusion that it is "difficult to see how

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either" Roediger's personal politics (a subject I did not address) or scholarly work betray a deep cynicism about the role of white labor. In puncturing what they see as the unjustified celebratory tone of the new labor history, historians of working-class whiteness have focused almost exclusively on the inability of white workers to surmount their racial identities and interests. For the so-called romanticism of preceding studies, they have substituted a fairly bleak picture of white labor's past. Roediger's writings on the radical labor tradition of the Industrial Workers of the World or the Haymarket Martyrs notwithstanding, little in his writings on whiteness permit any different conclusion than one of disillusionment with the overall trajectory of white working-class mobilization.

In his contribution, Adolph Reed has offered a compelling account, much more extensive and nuanced than mine, of the rise of whiteness studies. Academic trends "can move not unlike fads," he argues, which develop a devoted "constituency" invested in the trend along the way. These trends are the effect of the "conditions of intellectual speedup" and the "increasing market-sensitivity of academic presses and the proliferation of self-consciously interdisciplinary fields of inquiry." And, as I think Foner, Brody, and Barrett imply, they can capture and build upon a mood. "There was a palpable restiveness with the celebratory bent of the pioneering generation" of new labor history, Brody reminds us. If Reed is critical of academic fads and the mechanisms that promote them, he is more sympathetic to the political impulses he sees underlying the appeal of the whiteness genre. The rightward shift in American politics and public discourse has had strong echoes in the academy (particular in the social sciences); labor history's "substantive counterweight" to that shift has been dampened by the field's marginal position in the university. "Part of the impetus driving the scholarly tendency seeking to problematize whiteness is reaction against these intellectual and ideological currents," a motivation that "should be noted and applauded," Reed argues. I accept Reed's assessment, but would add an important caveat: Followers of an intellectual trend or fad, no matter how politically noble, can undermine their own broader purpose if the scholarship they produces is faulty by its own disciplinary standards and if the concepts they rely upon are themselves problematic. If such scholarship cannot stand up to rigorous examination of its methodologies, concepts, and sources from those who share, at least partially, its political sensibilities, it will be highly vulnerable to challenges and dismissal from those whose politics it seeks to subvert.

How do we assess the actual contribution of whiteness scholarship over the past decade? It should be clear that I differ with a number of the commentators on this question. Barrett argues that Roediger and other whiteness historians have "directed our attention to the historical quality of racism"; Hattam insists that the whiteness scholars' contribution lies in "the way in which they have brought race to the center of American history" and that race, for whiteness scholars, "is no longer a discrete piece of American politics and history that can be relegated to sub-fields within our various academic disciplines." Brody, while more critical of whiteness historians than Barrett or Hattam, believes that I "do not adequately credit Roediger for his achievements." Roediger's *Wages of*

Whiteness, he argues, made whiteness "hot in fields utterly remote from labor history" and provoked "a stampede" among people in a variety of other disciplines.[4] So where do I part company with these assessments?

Let me be clear: I would not for a moment question either the observation that whiteness scholarship has created tremendous interest in the academy or the importance of the study of race in the academy. I am not convinced, however, that whiteness studies by themselves have made race so central a topic of intellectual discussion. Long before Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 1992) and Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness* stirred their audiences, long before "'social construction' became a buzz-word," (in Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper's phrase),[5] American historians *had* made race central to many of their narratives, not merely as an "add and stir" but as something quite fundamental. Indeed, it was the centrality of race in American historical scholarship—represented by the works of Edmund Morgan, Nell Irvin Painter, Eric Foner, Leon Litwack, John Blassingame, George Fredrickson, Herbert Gutman, and so many others—that drew me (and many others) to graduate school in the first place over two decades ago.[6] Long before the whiteness genre came into vogue, I learned about the social construction of race in the pages of works by Winthrop Jordan, George Fredrickson, Barbara Fields, and Reginald Horsman (even if they did not all use that precise phrase). Labor history was slower to integrate race into its analyses, but over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, numerous scholars were building on the older research tradition of Herbert Gutman in carefully reconstructing the "local worlds" of black and white workers, making race more central to the writing of new labor history. As Reed has observed, "labor historians in particular have produced a voluminous literature examining the complex, contradictory, and often unpredictable workings of racial stratification and racial ideologies." Is this the same literature that, according to Hattam, has rarely "made the link from . . . carefully grounded histories to the centrality of race to American society as a whole?" To accentuate the prominence of race in American and in labor historiography is not to tout the "wonders of the old" or return to the "status quo ante, as if nothing had changed" (Hattam). It is, rather, to argue for the recognition of historiographical polygenesis, or, if one prefers, historiographical monogenesis leading to the branching off into distinct evolutionary trajectories of whiteness studies and other academic approaches to race in the 1980s and 1990s.

I confess that I have some difficulty in assessing what several of the commentators believe the actual contribution of the whiteness scholarship has been. Hattam, for instance, tells us that the new immigration, race and labor, and African-American labor histories have "their limits and might be productively rethought in light of the theoretical moves taken by whiteness scholars." She neglects, however, to mention any particular works, specify their limits, or tell us just what needs to be rethought. In the category of "class and identification," she offers no examples of those positive moves other than to state that whiteness historians have broken with lingering materialism, something I still consider a straw

man. Inclined to agree with portions of my critique of psychohistory, she insists on the importance of "theorizing identification," arguing that Roediger et al. have placed this "squarely on the table." Hattam neither defines what she means by "identification" nor explains why "theorizing identification" is something that is even needed. Hattam believes that a great contribution of the whiteness literature is its attention to "changes in racial classification *over time"* and to the "importance of historicizing our notions of race." Since Hattam disparages my claims that this is nothing new, my repeating the point that a *generation* of historians have made this a central issue in American history is unlikely to persuade her. Acknowledging that discussions of how the Irish became white are often "too vague and inexact, and pay too little attention to questions of agency and counter discourses," she believes that "these limitations ought not lead us to set aside the project as a whole." Hattam here only gets my argument half right: In addition to noting the problems just mentioned, I conclude that the claim that the Irish *became* white is dead wrong. The Irish, I argue, were not considered "non-white," and hence did not "*become* white"; they were already white, a point with which Foner concurs. In this instance, the very question posed by whiteness scholars is based upon a false premise.

Foner finds my essay "needlessly dismissive of better examples of the use of whiteness in historical analysis," but does not mention any such examples. "For all its weaknesses and exaggerations," he continues, whiteness scholarship has had some "salutary effects on our understanding of the American past." Those effects include (1) throwing into question "romantic accounts of cross-racial working-class alliances too uncritically featured in labor history produced by both Old and New Left scholars"; and (2) making clear that race is "socially constructed"—something his students find "quite new." With regard to Foner's first point, I admit to some bafflement. What "romantic accounts" by the old or new Left? Philip Foner wrote extensively about black workers and white unions' racist practices—no romanticism there. As for the new labor history, I am hard pressed to locate those romantic accounts in the works of, say, Peter Rachleff, Leon Fink, or Melton McLaurin in the 1980s or, in the following decade, that of Michael Honey, Joe William Trotter, Jr., Rick Halpern, Roger Horowitz, Tera Hunter, Kimberley Phillips, Bruce Nelson, Daniel Letwin, Karin Shapiro, Alan Draper, or myself—a truly eclectic group. There *has* been debate over whether Herbert Gutman's essay on Richard Davis portrayed an interracial alliance in falsely romantic terms, with Herbert Hill and Nick Salvatore, among others, charging yes, and myself, Dan Letwin, and Brian Kelly saying no.[7] Even if Foner accepts without reservation the perspective of Hill about Gutman's essay, does it really take an entirely new body of literature to refute a single article, especially since the scholarship that has followed has effectively portrayed cross-racial working-class alliances as a complex, not romantic, phenomenon?

Foner's second point on social construction is on somewhat more solid ground than his first. He is absolutely correct—along with Reed—to credit whiteness scholars with not only exploring the social construction of race in general but with problematizing the social construction of whites. The former, I still

maintain, *is* old hat; the fact that Foner's students, and mine, find it new merely reveals their unfamiliarity with an earlier scholarship, not the novelty of newer studies. But Foner is correct when he states that whiteness scholarship has exposed the unstated assumption that "'white' is Americans' normal condition and that 'race' is something that applies only to non-white minorities," as Foner puts it. Reed, too, finds value in whiteness scholarship for highlighting the point that "racial and class status, identity and politics have been fundamentally, and inextricably, linked in the American experience." I accept these assessments. But then what? Having established a point about white not being the default option or the unstated norm, how is history transformed or rewritten, beyond simply calling attention to "white" as a changing racial category or identity?

More skeptically than Foner or Reed, Fields would agree that the "'unmarked, unnamed status'" and "'structured invisibility'" of "those who are not designated black" is the "datum that whiteness literature seeks to extinguish." But she sees little positive effect on the writing of history. "Rather than explore what the absence of a mark or name means," Fields argues, "whiteness scholarship mulishly insists upon inserting the mark and name, officiously making good the failure of people in the past to do it themselves." I would add that notwithstanding their endorsement of the notion that race applies to whites, Foner, Reed, and the historians of whiteness have not successfully linked this contemporary political revelation to the actual reconceptualization of the American past.

Let me now turn to individual comments and offer responses to a number of specific issues. On one point I would disagree with Brody: I would not draw a sharp distinction between *Wages of Whiteness* as a foundational text and "what followed" in the "flood of emulators." The multiple meanings attached to whiteness—the very plasticity the concept exhibits—are, in fact, present in *Wages* and in Roediger's subsequent works. I would agree that path-breaking books like *Wages* should be cut some slack as new concepts are worked out without benefit of prior theoretical discussion. But much of what I find problematic about whiteness scholarship in history—its reliance on keywords, psychohistorical thrust, disregard for primary research, and highly selective readings of competing discourses—were present at the creation and were not just unfortunate products of overly enthusiastic followers who jumped on the bandwagon.

There remains the question, raised indirectly by Barrett, of where to locate whiteness scholarship historiographically. Barrett declares that I wrongly equate "Roediger's criticisms with Herbert Hill's far more expansive attack on labor history for its 'race' problem." I do not. In fact, I explicitly exclude Hill from any consideration in the essay on the grounds that his work, with its focus on white racist practices, not white racial identity, does not fit within the whiteness genre; elsewhere I treat the contributions of Hill as being quite distinct from those of Roediger. I differ sharply with Barrett again on his claim that Roediger writes from "well within the Thompsonian traditions of the new labor history." True, Roediger shares with Thompson and many new labor historians a belief in working-class agency; in whiteness scholarship, white workers are accorded an

agency (in many cases, an almost exclusive agency) in adopting and acting on racial beliefs. But the resemblance stops there. Thompson, and on this side of the Atlantic Ocean Herbert Gutman, David Montgomery, and countless others, grounded their studies in a bedrock of research and evidence; they constructed, from the bottom up and often in meticulous detail, the local worlds of American workers, even if they slighted gender and race before the 1980s and 1990s. Roediger's own studies assume the form of the provocative essay—in Brody's apt words, "charismatic history"—building heavily on secondary scholarship. They cast virtually no new light on the "local worlds" of white workers, instead offering up only their putative racial identities from selective slices of time. Thus far, whiteness scholars—with the notable exception of Bruce Nelson's recently published *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (Princeton, 2001)—have produced no comparable works grounded in empirical and archival research.

Since the issues of "Marxism lite" and lingering materialism were raised in several commentaries, a few words of clarification are in order. Unlike Hattam, I do not see the specter of a passé materialism hanging over American labor history in the early twenty-first century, or even a "lingering" version pervading the field.[8] Rather, I concur with Reed that the "whiteness literature often seems animated by dissent from a straw construction of Marxism," or, I might add, of labor history. Nor do I see many labor historians overly or overtly concerned with the dated notion of the "logic of solidarity." Many whiteness scholars, like other labor historians, would reject the notion that solidarity "inexorably follows from economic conditions or the social relations of production," as Hattam has put it. But iron laws or logic aside, the old "theory of laboring class unity," as W. E. B. Du Bois put it, floats not far from the surface of the some whiteness texts, prompting whiteness historians to seek the roots of the failure of the white working class to play the role they hoped it would play. For some—Roediger, Noel Ignatiev, and Bruce Nelson in particular—whiteness and its myriad advantages provide one compelling answer. It is the vague expectation of (or perhaps just wishful thinking about) unity and the need to explain its absence that I call "Marxism lite," not any hardcore notion of materialism. As for Barrett's charge that I have little tolerance for "any departure from a rather narrow materialist path," I plead not guilty, since I hardly conceive of myself as a materialist (whatever he means by the term). Here, I think, Barrett conflates materialism with empiricism. My impatience is with those historians who would advance bold or implausible conclusions without feeling obliged to ground their findings in an adequate empirical base.[9]

Barrett also regrets that my essay "defines out or ignores some of the most influential work" on whiteness, namely that of Alexander Saxton and Michael Rogin. My purpose was not to be encyclopedic, for the essay was long enough as it was. But neither Saxton nor Rogin are among the "most influential" scholars of whiteness; like David Brody, I would not even place Saxton in the whiteness school at all. I have drawn upon Saxton in an earlier essay, in particular his persuasive and blistering criticism of psychohistory in explorations of race in

American history. That critique, I argued in *Reviews in American History,* can be fruitfully applied to recent whiteness historians' own embrace of psychohistory, theories of projection or identification, and the like (for which Barrett and Hattam offer a mild defense). Whiteness scholars' desire to appropriate Saxton as a direct progenitor requires a selective reading of his work that screens out one of Saxton's most important contributions.

Barrett also reads too much into my passing remarks about his and Roediger's characterization of new immigrants' "abstention from whiteness" shortly after World War One. I was hardly "concerned" that the concept of whiteness is "sufficiently elastic as to resist any effort to give it formal or permanent shape." Rather, my reading in the genre led me to conclude descriptively, if mildly critically, that "some definitions of whiteness are overly expansive or metaphorically grounded" while "others are radically restricted." That scholars in diverse disciplines would define the term in different ways is not surprising, since the term is a relatively new one—the creation of the modern academy—and not one developed or deployed by the subjects of history. But its shifting meanings in academic discourse do not reflect the "changing and confusing historical usage of the term 'white," as Barrett would have it. It is one thing for historians to chart the historically specific meanings that contemporaries invested in the word "white"; it is quite another for historians to invest arbitrary, floating, and creative meanings in the term "whiteness," and then anachronistically apply the term to their subjects in a way that suggests that those subjects would have subscribed to, or even understood, the historians' meanings.

Barrett and I have no disagreement over a number of issues raised in his commentary. The notion that racism consists of a "learned set of values and behavior" and the absence of recent Slavic immigrants in Chicago's racial violence in 1919 (and their eventual participation in racial conflicts over housing just decades later) are matters that are well established in the historiography. Barrett, not I, concludes that the phrase "abstention from whiteness" is a clumsy one. I would agree with him but would go further—the phrase is not merely clumsy but should be considered misleading and unrevealing, at least by the standards of whiteness scholars who have shown that the racial identity of whiteness is not the same thing as engaging in racist violence. The phrase does little to explain how and why Chicago's newly arrived Slavic immigrants did not participate fully in the racial violence in the red summer of 1919. Indeed, the argument is tautological.

Barrett misunderstands the nature of my critique of his and Roediger's "In-between Peoples: Race, Nationality and the 'New Immigrant' Working Class" (*Journal of American Ethnic History* 16 [1997]: 3–44), and reiterates points that I continue to dispute. I agree that Barrett and Roediger do provide considerable evidence that employers, government officials, union officials, and others viewed new immigrants as racially and culturally inferior. But my critique of the passive voice applies here in one major regard: I contend that Barrett, Roediger, and other scholars who argue for the "non-white status" of so many new immigrants have not demonstrated convincingly that the very agents named above viewed

them as non-white. Notions of racial and cultural inferiority and notions of non-whiteness are two distinct things, as Foner notes. Historians of immigrant non-whiteness have offered only scant evidence for their argument while ignoring plentiful alternative evidence. As a matter of method, I would hold that it is impossible to establish the "non-whiteness" of entire groups on the basis of a handful of selective quotations from contemporaries, just as it is misleading to define whiteness as "contingent upon what occupations immigrant workers assumed, where they lived, where their families . . . were located . . . and whether they were persistent or transient," as one recent study has put it.[10]

Hattam's charge that my critique falls "prey" to my "own inattention to the changing languages of race" is based on a misreading of the relevant passages in my essay. I do not claim, as Hattam states, that the "overwhelming distinction among workers was not between native-born American 'whites' and immigrant 'non-whites' but between the 'Americans' and the 'foreigners.'" Rather, that statement applied only to the language employed in a *single* volume by investigators looking into the 1919 steel strike—the investigators, not me, drew those distinctions. The "sources and events from 1910 and 1919" that I draw upon highlight the variety of terms and classification schemes utilized to describe immigrant workers. My purpose was simply to contrast this linguistic variety (in which whiteness/non-whiteness was not an operative binary) to what I saw as "keyword literalism" at work in whiteness scholarship, in which the utterances of a miniscule number of people differentiating whites from presumably non-white immigrants are treated as definitive or even hegemonic. I certainly agree with Hattam that terms such as "foreigner" and "alien" were "not transhistorical terms used to describe all immigrants," but instead circulated widely and were applied with few exceptions to immigrants from eastern and southern Europe in the early twentieth century.

A final thought on what Hattam sees as my unfortunate and "evasive distinction between theory . . . and rigorous empirical research." I plead guilty to the charge that I believe in the indispensability of empirical research in archives and repositories for historical scholarship. (I make no such claims about the work of literary critics or philosophers, whose disciplinary tasks and contributions are obviously distinct from those of historians.) But I never drew a distinction, much less an "evasive" one, between theory and research. I completely agree with Hattam that "all of our work is infused with a set of theoretical underpinnings." How could it be otherwise? It is a commonplace that even the dullest and least theoretically explicit historical scholarship is itself structured around assumptions about evidence, language, causality, and the like. And, contrary to Hattam's claims, even the scholarship on race in labor history outside of the whiteness genre offers theoretical claims and insights. If there is an "evasive distinction" posited between theory and research, it lies not in my "hailing the wonders of archival research," but in the implicit disregard of archival work by many whiteness scholars who pursue more fashionable theory. Of course, the choice is "not between theory and history," but neither is it merely a "question of what kinds of relationships and categories . . . we bring to our empirical

work." Categories and methodology matter. By evading the critical issue of methodology even while they occasionally concede the shortcomings of whiteness scholarship, Hattam and Barrett only offer the advice that we not "return to history as usual" or promise that the "most important stage in our experiment with whiteness is just around the corner."

Of all of the commentaries on my essay, that of Barbara Fields is the most sweeping and most dismissive of the whiteness project. Her observations on the "vagueness" and "grammatical ambiguity" of the project's terms are compelling, as is her critique of its definitional circularity: "as an organizing concept," she writes persuasively, "whiteness leads to no conclusions it does not begin with as assumptions. Whiteness is a racial identity; therefore, white people have a racial identity. Whiteness equals white supremacy; therefore, European immigrants become white by adopting white supremacy. Whiteness entails material benefits; therefore, the material benefits white people receive are a reward for whiteness." On several points, however, I believe she misconstrues the thrust of the literature. Whiteness scholars do not wholly substitute "race for racism" or "collapse racism . . . into racial identity," as if such a maneuver absolves historical agents and institutions of responsibility for racist actions. Fields' assessment misses the political and moral fervor with which whiteness scholars deploy their terms. Such fervor often assumes the form of implicit and explicit condemnations of both discourses and actions perpetrated by "whites" against "non-whites."

Fields' denunciation of the notion of "racialialization" and her application of my critique of passive voice constructions to the term are more problematic. First, her apt definition of racism as the "assignment of people to an inferior category and the determination of their social, economic, civic, and human standing on that basis" is one that applies precisely to the notion of "racialization," with the emphasis being not just on "category" but on the act of "assignment." What we have, then, is a semantic, not substantive, difference between the terms "racism" and "racialization." Second, her rejection of the term racialization for its failure to "denote a precise action"—a rejection that might similarly apply to her definition of racism—is easily overcome by recognizing that the verb "to racialize" is not meant to carry the freight she has loaded upon it; rather, it merely connotes the "assignment of people to an inferior category." Who does the assigning—scientists, immigration officials, cartoonists, whoever—and how, precisely, they do the assigning are different (and necessary) questions. To be sure, invoking "racialization" or "whiteness" in a passive mode—that is, without attending to the agents performing specific actions—does "obscure subject and action," as Fields states. But my critique rested also on another point: What whiteness scholarship often mistakenly claims is the assignment of new immigrants to the category of non-white is, in fact, the assignment of those immigrants to an inferior racial category. The latter (racialization) is not the equivalent of the former (whiteness/non-whiteness).

While Reed shares much of my criticism of the whiteness genre—the "lack of care and nuance in interpretation, too sweeping claims, anachronistic and

murky arguments, bold proclamations of commonplaces and hyperbolic judgements," among other things—he offers a sensible path forward to advocates of whiteness scholarship. "The potential of the sensibility from which the whiteness trope has emerged lies in the extent to which it grounds itself on and builds from" the extensive body of historical literature on race in the United States. (To this I would add, yes, a return to the archives!) My goal in these pages is not to prematurely bury whiteness scholarship but to challenge its practitioners and proponents to undertake an intense reexamination of the genre's methodological problems and political assumptions. I agree with Jim Barrett when he writes that the "precision of whiteness as a category of analysis has yet to be fully established on the basis of rigorous studies of particular workplaces, unions, and communities." Barrett concludes that it is "far too early to discard the concept," while Foner recommends that rather than abandon the category of whiteness, a "better approach would be to refine and historicize it." Perhaps the genre can attend to its methodological and conceptual flaws, commit itself to a modicum of archival research, and generate the kind of rigorous studies that Barrett and Foner recommend. Perhaps it can address what Fields sees as the consequence of its emphasis on "identity and agency"—the "displacing [of] questions of political, economic, and social power," which "offers us endless variations on the theme of race that, reproducing their assumptions as conclusions, invariably end where they started." Perhaps the whiteness idea can become more than an "anachronistic, catch-all category that hovers above historical context and political economy," functioning "as an independent variable," as Reed charges. When—and only when—it does, will the study of whiteness have something important to offer the study of American history. To date, the jury remains out.

NOTES

1. In a provocative essay that deserves to be read and engaged by historians of race, labor, and whiteness in the United States, Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper have argued for the retirement of the term "identity," which, they argue, "tends to mean too much (when understood in a strong sense), too little (when understood in a weak sense), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity." The "conceptual and theoretical work 'identity' is supposed to do . . . might be done better by other terms, less ambiguous, and unencumbered by the reifying connotations of 'identity.'" In place of identity, they recommend the following substitutes: "identification," a term which "invites us to specify the agents that do the identifying" and which itself can be divided between "self-identification and the identification and categorization of oneself by others"; "self-understanding," a "dispositional term that designates what might be called 'situated subjectivity': one's sense of who one is, of one's social location, and of how (given the first two) one is prepared to act"; and finally, "categorical commonality and relational connectedness." Brubaker and Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" *Theory and Society 2*9 (2000):2, 14–5, 17, 20. This essay came to my attention too late to inform the writing of "Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination." Here, I would briefly suggest that Brubaker and Cooper's insistence on conceptual rigor and their reflections on the problems of reified, overly broad terms that saddle "us with a blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary" can be fruitfully applied to the concept of whiteness in American historiography.

2. In "Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination," I briefly discussed John Hartigan, Jr.'s *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit* (Princeton, 1999) as one work whose use of the concept of whiteness is historically and contextually grounded and which is based upon impressive research; it is a theoretically informed yet empirically rich ethnograph-

ic study that might serve as as something of a model for historians of whiteness (history's disciplinary differences with anthropology notwithstanding). Barrett discounts this book, charging that Hartigan offers "no discussion of the racialized politics in Detroit's workplaces or unions." This point echoes almost identically the one made by Roediger in his review of Hartigan. "Given the emphasis in the subtitle on 'class,'" Roediger writes, it is "surprising that work experiences are almost never considered as a source of racial identity. (The United Auto Workers, remarkably, does not appear in the index.)" Roediger, review of Hartigan, *Racial Situations,* in *Journal of American Ethnic History* 20 (2000):93. An anthropologist-ethnographer by trade, Hartigan lived in Detroit neighborhoods but did not work in Detroit automobile factories, rendering him incapable of offering ethnographic observations from the shop floor. But since none of the people he studied worked in automobile factories or were members of the United Auto Workers, one can hardly blame him. A more astute analysis is offered by Robert Self, who finds *Racial Situations* to be an "important book" that "takes a tradition of urban sociology and anthropology, the neighborhood study . . . and refreshes it with the new theoretical work on race and whiteness." Robert Self, "Writing Landscapes of Class, Power, and Racial Division: The Problem of (Sub)Urban Space and Place in Postwar America," *Journal of Urban History* 27 (2001):242.

3. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991; revised edition, New York, 1999), 188.

4. I would take exception to Brody's attribution of such cross-disciplinary influence and power to the *Wages of Whiteness.* Unquestionably, *Wages* inspired many scholars in labor history and other fields. But it did not single-handedly make whiteness "hot" almost "overnight" in fields utterly "remote from labor history." Scholars in literature, geography, and sociology were already studying and publishing on whiteness. Here one thinks of not just Toni Morrison but Richard Dyer, as well as Ruth Frankenberg, whose doctoral research was conducted in the 1980s and whose dissertation was published as *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis, 1993). *Wages of Whiteness,* then, greatly contributed to the enthusiastic growth of interest in whiteness, but it hardly launched it.

5. Brubaker and Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" 29.

6. The phrase "the centrality of race" speaks only to the importance of a concept, not to how, precisely, "race" is defined or to how it actually functions in historians' analyses. Making race "central" hardly yields conclusions identical across the works of a generation or two of historians or across the span of American history.

7. Eric Arnesen, "Up From Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History," *Reviews in American History* 26 (1998):148–50; Daniel Letwin, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878–1921* (Chapel Hill, 1998); Daniel Letwin, "Labor Relations in the Industrializing South," in *Blackwell Companion to the American South,* ed. John B. Boles (forthcoming 2001); Brian Kelly, *Race, Class, and Power in the Alabama Coalfields, 1909–21* (Urbana, 2001).

8. Hattam cites William H. Sewell, Jr.'s essay, "Toward a Post-materialist Rhetoric for Labor History," in *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis,* ed. Lenard R. Berlanstein (Urbana, 1993). That essay, I would suggest, addresses a very different literature than the one Hattam suggests, namely European, and particularly avowedly Marxist labor history. The applicability of Sewell's essay to US labor history is by no means established. But if Hattam were to insist upon its relevance, I would then add that Sewell's "theoretical critique and reformulation" might as easily apply to much of the scholarship of working-class whiteness, despite its fixation on keywords.

9. That is precisely what gets Roediger into trouble when he declares that the New York Irish dockers attempted to classify "Germans as of a different color." Barrett argues that my suggestion that some whiteness research has been "sloppy" is "off the mark," and blames Iver Bernstein, the author of an excellent study of the New York City draft riot of 1863, as the root of the problem, not Roediger's use of Bernstein's book. But I did not leave the "impression that Roediger has manufactured both the Irish call for an 'all-white waterfront' and the attempt to exclude the Germans"; I untangled the source of the confusion in footnote 98 of "Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination." Bernstein's formulation is far more ambiguous that Roediger would have it, and I maintain that nothing in Bernstein's book supports the claim that the Irish classified Germans "as of a different color." Regardless of the specific origin of the error, my larger point is that a plea of not guilty by reason of faulty secondary sources is not sufficient when a grand, eyebrow-raising claim such as Roediger's is advanced.

10. Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North*

American West, 1880–1930 (New York, 2000), 166. In his fine study of immigrant workers in the US and Canadian West, Peck grafts onto his impressive reconstruction of immigrant workers' experiences the problematic definitions of whiteness derived directly from the writings of David Roediger, Noel Ignatiev, and Neil Foley. He too invokes but a few contemporaries' words to establish the non-whiteness of Greeks, Italians, and Austrians in North America. Sarah Deutsch also adopts with little pause problematic definitions of whiteness. For her, the category of white refers to "those privileged to belong as full members of the polity." She suggests that the designation of Irish-American women as "'Americans,' in distinction to 'foreigners,'" by the head of the Boston telephone company's training school in the 1910s might have been the "Irish female's version of becoming 'white,' even though the language of 'whiteness' is not in evidence." Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870–1940* (New York, 2000), 87, 191–92, 210–11.