

the bearing of a certain Jewish merchant during the Charlotte race riot, Chesnutt muses, "A Jew—a God of Moses!—had so far forgotten twenty centuries of history as to join in the persecution of another oppressed race!" Although James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) is founded upon the unforgiving cultural (though not biological) dyad of black-white, Johnson nonetheless remarks, "In the discussion of the race question the diplomacy of the Jew was something to be admired." The Jew "knew that to sanction Negro oppression would be to sanction Jewish oppression." With an essentialist flourish typical for the period, he added, "Long traditions and business instincts told him when in Rome to act as a Roman." In 1903 John R. Dos Passos heralded the coming of "The Anglo-Saxon Century," and traces of this view of a hierarchy of white races informed his son's *U.S.A.* trilogy years later.<sup>107</sup>

In the decades bracketing the eugenic triumph of the 1924 immigration act such conceptions of the white races and their "difference" had surfaced in the lurid reformist writings of figures like Jacob Riis; in political debate over an Anglo-Saxon alliance of the United States and Great Britain; in reviews of the (alarming) popularity of the exotic Rudolph Valentino; in critical discussions of "mongrelized" Jews like Irving Berlin and George Gershwin in the business of making "Negro" music; in the language of metropolitan dailies and their account of urban criminality; and even in the nationalist discussions of many immigrant groups themselves.<sup>108</sup>

In a 1921 contribution to the immigration debate carried (appropriately) in *Good Housekeeping*, Calvin Coolidge had remarked, "Biological laws tell us that certain divergent people will not mix or blend. The Nordics propagate themselves successfully. With the other races, the outcome shows deterioration on both sides." In June 1924 Coolidge issued his proclamation setting the terms of the new, eugenic immigration law into effect that summer, thus closing the debate and presaging the end of the most fractious period in the political history of whiteness in the United States, the period that had begun with the massive influx of undesirable "white persons" from Ireland and Germany in the 1840s.<sup>109</sup> In the decades following the 1924 legislation, the problem posed to the United States by the non-Nordic races of Europe would lose salience in public concern, to the extent, finally, that their perceived "difference" would cease to register as *racial* at all.

She'd said something perfectly casual about "the Jewish race." Phil had explained once or twice that the phrase was based on misconceptions which were completely disproved by modern anthropologists. But she'd said it—it was just habit. She wasn't fighting the scientists when they said there was no such thing. She knew perfectly well that the three great divisions of mankind were the Caucasian Race, the Mongoloid, the Negroid.

—Laura Z. Hobson, *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947)

[The Negro's] African ancestry and physical characteristics are fixed to his person much more ineffaceably than the yellow star is fixed to the Jew during the Nazi regime in Germany.

—Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944)

## » 3

### *Becoming Caucasian, 1924–1965*

One San Francisco newspaper had argued in 1910 that Asian immigrants were taking the jobs of "Anglo-Saxons, Celts, Teutons, Slavs and members of other races who are part of the real population of the country."<sup>1</sup> The formulation is atypical. Most native comment that identified European groups as racially distinct Celts, Teutons, and Slavs did not number them among "the real population of the country"; and most native comment that did accept them as "the real population" depicted them not as racially distinct but as consanguine "whites."

In general a pattern of racially based, Anglo-Saxonist exclusivity dominated the years from 1840 to the 1920s, whereas a pattern of Caucasian unity gradually took its place in the 1920s and after. If "discrimination is a fool's economy," as *Education* declared in 1946, then certain coin became increasingly rare in the decades leading up to the electoral victory of the Celtic presidential hopeful John F. Kennedy.<sup>2</sup>

At the Second International Congress of Eugenics in 1924, Henry Fairfield Osborn had asserted that the motive of the eugenics movement was



to "discover the virtues and the values of the minor divisions of the human species, as well as the needs of the major divisions, known as the Caucasian, the Mongolian, and the Negroid."<sup>3</sup> Between the 1920s and the 1960s concerns of "the major divisions" would so overwhelm the national consciousness that the "minor divisions," which had so preoccupied Americans during the period of massive European immigration, would lose their salience in American culture and disappear altogether as racially based differences. By the election of 1960 a Celt could become president, and though his religion might have been cause for concern in some quarters, his race never was. That same year, writing of the earlier waves of European immigrants to the United States, the historian Maldwyn Allen Jones could announce with supreme confidence, "In the middle of the twentieth century ethnic distinctions might still persist. But they were less sharp, less conspicuous than before and they were fading rapidly from view." That Euro-Americans' racial distinctions had already faded from view was a development so complete that it went unnoted.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, between the mid-1920s and the end of World War II, "Caucasian" as a "natural" division of humanity became part of a popular national catechism. Scientists "apply the term 'race' only to the broadest subdivisions of mankind, Negro, Caucasian, Mongolian, Malayan, and Australian," explained a 1939 handbook for high school teachers. "ALL THESE SCIENTISTS AGREE THAT NO NATION CAN BE CALLED A RACE," the text emphasized, self-consciously undoing the notions of "Aryan" and "Semitic" integrity.<sup>5</sup> Even Harry Laughlin, distanced by ten years from the eugenic victory of the Johnson Act and its formula for staying the tide of undesirable Mediterraneans and Alpines, could coolly include in his "Specific Recommendations" to the Special Committee on Immigration and Alien Insane (1934): "That no immigrant be admitted, whether by quota or otherwise, who is not—First, a member of the white race"; and that, for the purposes of immigration law, "a white person be defined as one all of whose ancestors were members of the white or Caucasian race."<sup>6</sup>

By the 1930s and 1940s the logic and terminology of these "major divisions" had become part of the lexicon of both popular and high culture. The Los Angeles *Times* could write of "non-Caucasians" property rights, and a human interest piece in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* could casually describe kissing as "a Caucasian habit."<sup>7</sup> The term "Caucasian" would surface in a range of cultural productions, including James T. Farrell's *A World I Never Made*, Laura Z. Hobson's *Gentleman's*

*Agreement*, Sinclair Lewis's *Kingsblood Royal*, and Rogers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*. Betraying the prevailing understanding of "difference" even as it popularized a liberal view of racial "tolerance," *South Pacific* preached that prejudice does not come naturally; rather, one has to be taught to hate "people whose eyes are oddly made / or people whose skin is a different shade." The consolidation of a unified whiteness was complete when the category "Caucasian" leapt from actual police blotters to television cop shows like *Dragnet*. Jack Webb's authoritative assertion that "the suspect is a Caucasian male" now replaced the longstanding formula of earlier pulp genres, in which the criminal underground had been a dark social terrain of not-exactly-white Others—the "Levantine" Joel Cairo in *The Maltese Falcon*, for instance.<sup>8</sup>

Again, this shift did not take place overnight, and residual traces of the scheme that had reigned between the 1840s and the 1920s persisted into the mid-twentieth century. As *Common Ground* reported in 1944, the Bank of America's lending restrictions in Fresno, California, "prohibit Armenians among other Asiatic and Oriental nationality groups . . . to own or occupy property" in certain sections unless employed as servants. Such policies, said the journal, are "sowing the seeds of future race riots." A year later the same publication noted that "many large companies won't hire anyone who looks or sounds Irish."<sup>9</sup> In his study of race and the Catholic parishes of the urban North, John McGreevy finds distinct European races persisting in popular, street-level thinking into the 1930s—just as Michael Denning discovers these races lingering in the lexicon of various Popular Front cultural formations. Indeed, as noted at the very outset, even the characters in Philip Roth's *Counterlife* could, some six decades after the Johnson Act, engage in heated debate over whether or not Jews were really "Caucasian."<sup>10</sup>

Nineteen twenty-four may be the high-water mark of the regime of Anglo-Saxon or Nordic supremacy, in other words, and not its proper closing date. But in "solving" the immigration problem, the Johnson Act laid the way for a redrawing of racial lines, and so that year does mark the beginning of the ascent of monolithic whiteness. Whether the critical decade is the 1930s (according to John McGreevy) or the 1940s (according to Michael Denning), the general trend between the 1920s and the 1960s is unmistakable.<sup>11</sup> As one Minnesota congressman would couch it in a characteristic plea for "tolerance," "if we try to act justly, we will alter our attitude toward not only the Negroes and other racial groups but also toward Jewish members of the white race as well." Oliver Cox



was more systematic in articulating the distinction between anti-Semitism (an "unwillingness on the part of the dominant group to tolerate the beliefs or practices of a subordinate group") and race prejudice ("a social attitude propagated among the public by an exploiting class for the purpose of stigmatizing some group as inferior so the exploitation of either the group itself, or its resources, may be justified").<sup>12</sup> Such racial certainties—articulated on either side of the color line—tended more and more often to rest on some version of "the three great divisions of mankind . . . the Caucasian Race, the Mongoloid, the Negroid."<sup>13</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois would dream of a world beyond racism, and he would call it "transcaucasia"; George Schuyler would dedicate his scathing satire on the American color line, *Black No More* (1931), to "all Caucasians in the great republic who can trace their ancestry back ten generations and confidently assert that there are no Black leaves, twigs, limbs or branches on their family trees."<sup>14</sup>

What did "Caucasian" mean in the mid-twentieth century? What is the relationship between "white" on the one hand, and "Caucasian" on the other? Although the categories "white" and "Caucasian" may have overlapped almost entirely, the idea "Caucasian" did accomplish something that the more casual notion of whiteness could not: it brought the full authority of modern science to bear on white identity, and it did so in a way that challenged the scheme of hierarchically ordered white races which had itself been created and policed by the authority of modern science. The idea of a "Caucasian race" represents whiteness ratcheted up to a new epistemological realm of certainty. If the idea "white persons" has become so naturalized that we still speak of "whites" as if this grouping refers to a natural fact beyond dispute, then the idea "Caucasian" naturalizes both the grouping and the authority by which that grouping is comprehended. To speak of "Caucasians" is tacitly to footnote Blumenbach, Morton, Boas, Hooten, and Benedict. Among self-ascribed "Caucasians," the term not only lays claim to a consanguine whiteness, but evokes a scientific certainty regarding its boundaries and integrity. This was explicit in some of the early deployments of the term—in California's Order of Caucasians and Louisiana's Caucasian Clubs, for instance. It remains, though only implicitly, when the high scholarly diction of the "Caucasian race" crosses over into vernacular conversation. Among non-"Caucasians," by contrast, the term holds all whites—Mediterraneans, Celts, and Hebrews included—responsible for the reified social category created by and for white privilege. It was in this vein that Kelly

Miller decried the "haughty Caucasian," that William Monroe Trotter warned of "the Caucasian in our midst" after the Chicago riot of 1919, and that Rudolph Fisher noted the "Invasion of Harlem by the Caucasian" during the 1920s.<sup>15</sup>

When he found Jim Rollins not guilty of miscegenation because Rollins's Sicilian accomplice was inconclusively white, that Alabama judge in 1922 provided a good way of understanding racial distinctions such as "Mediterranean," "Hebrew," "Iberic," or "Slavic" as they operated through the early twentieth century. These groups represented a kind of provisional or probationary whiteness. To become "Caucasian" in the 1920s and after, then, was not simply to be "white" (in the way that Teague O'Regan, say, had been white in *Modern Chivalry*); it was to be *conclusively, certifiably, scientifically* white. "Caucasian" identity represents a whiteness discovered and apprehended by that regime of knowledge whose cultural authority is greatest.

Several circumstances conspired in the early and mid-twentieth century to heighten the premium on race as *color* and to erode the once-salient "differences" among the white races. Not least, the triumph of the eugenics movement in making the Johnson formula into law quickly reduced the threat posed by inferior white races to the body politic, and so decreased the political and social stakes that had kept such distinctions alive. With this dramatic decrease in the flow of new arrivals, moreover, the overall center of gravity of these immigrant populations shifted toward an American-born generation for whom the racial oppressions of the Old World—if significant grist for the plaintive songs and heroic stories of a group's subculture—were far less significant than American white privilege where immediate racial experience was concerned.<sup>16</sup>

The massive migrations of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban North and West between the 1910s and the 1940s, too, produced an entirely new racial alchemy in those sections. Mid-century civil rights agitation on the part of African-Americans—and particularly the protests against segregation in the military and discrimination in the defense industries around World War II—nationalized Jim Crow as *the* racial issue of American political discourse. Both the progressive and the regressive coalitions that formed around questions of segregation and desegregation solidified whiteness as a monolith of privilege; racial differences *within* the white community lost their salience, as they lost their reference to important power arrangements of the day. And finally, events in Nazi Germany, too, exerted a powerful influence on public opinion



regarding the dangers of race thinking. As if by collective fiat, race was willfully erased among the so-called minor divisions of humanity; the culture-based notion of "ethnicity" was urgently and decisively proposed in its place; and the racial characteristics of Jewishness or Irishness or Greekness were emphatically revised away as a matter of sober, war-chastened "tolerance."<sup>17</sup>

In 1936 Margaret Mitchell described Scarlett O'Hara, who was to become the most famous Irishwoman in American history, as possessing "magnolia-white skin—that skin so prized by Southern women and so carefully guarded with bonnets, veils and mittens against hot Georgia suns."<sup>18</sup> The notion that Irishness, like other "ethnic" whitenesses, was a cultural trait rather than a visual racial cue became deeply embedded in the nation's political culture between the 1920s and the 1960s. By the time the Kerner Commission reported in 1968 that the United States consisted of "two societies—one white, one black, separate and unequal," this understanding of the nation's racial make-up had long become part of popular consciousness.<sup>19</sup>

### The "Caucasian Family of Races"

The notion of a reforged, consanguine Caucasian race emerged even within the eugenic circles that had been so instrumental in policing the borders separating Nordics from non-Nordics in the years before 1924. Lothrop Stoddard's incendiary 1920 tract *The Rising Tide of Color against White World Supremacy* had predicted a war among the "primary" races of the world and had identified the "weakening" of the white race—through immigration and mongrelization, for example—as a bitter portent for this coming war. Stoddard's pan-white-supremacist logic proceeded, paradoxically, from a delineation of superior and inferior whites. He began by noting a decline in the Nordic population:

Our country, originally settled almost exclusively by the Nordics, was toward the close of the nineteenth century invaded by hordes of immigrant Alpines and Mediterraneans, not to mention Asiatic elements like Levantines and Jews. As a result, the Nordic native American has been crowded out with amazing rapidity by the swarming, prolific aliens, and after two short generations he has in many of our urban areas become almost extinct . . . The melting-pot may mix, but does not melt. Each race-type, formed ages ago . . . is a stub-

bornly persistent entity. Each type possesses a special set of characters: not merely the physical characters visible to the naked eye, but moral, intellectual, and spiritual characters as well.<sup>20</sup>

But despite the importance of these variegations in the "white race," whiteness itself is not without meaning—differences granted, there must be *some* sense of a shared race solidarity, pride, and destiny among Nordics, Alpines, and even Mediterraneans. Summing up the perils faced by the "white world" in the wake of the devastating "white civil war" that was World War I, Stoddard pronounced, "The prospect is not a brilliant one. Weakened and impoverished by Armageddon, handicapped by an unconstructive peace, and facing internal Bolshevik disaffection . . . the white world is ill-prepared to confront—the rising tide of color." The Great War was as nothing compared with the coming Apocalypse, when the "white" and "colored" worlds would collide, according to Stoddard. Amid the "deluge" of peoples of color against the "dikes" of white political control, "the white man, like King Canute, seats himself upon the tidal sands and bids the waves be stayed. He will be lucky if he escapes merely with wet shoes."<sup>21</sup>

The renown of Stoddard's views was at once noted and extended in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby* (1925), when Tom Buchanan ranted about the prospects for the white race: "Civilization is going to pieces . . . Have you read 'The Rise of the Coloured Empires' by this man Goddard?" (Here Fitzgerald conflates Stoddard with H. H. Goddard, the expert on race and intelligence.) "The idea is," Buchanan continues, "if we don't look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved." Although Stoddard, no less than Laughlin or Grant, held firmly to a biological ranking of the white races (in the plural), this is indeed the deepest consequence of his argument: the re-forging of an imperiled white *race* (in the singular). As Fitzgerald's Jordan Baker put it in response to another of Buchanan's impassioned racial tirades, this time on "intermarriage between black and white," "We're all white here." (Significantly, the "we" subsumed under "all white here" included the Hebrew Jimmy Gatz.)<sup>22</sup>

Stoddard's own refiguring of non-Nordics as fellow Caucasians became clearer still in *Reforging America* (1927). Once the Johnson Act had been passed, even so alarmist a thinker as Stoddard could take heart and reconsider the stakes of the non-Nordic presence. He remained optimistic despite "the serious consequences produced by [the 'new'] immigration,"



he now wrote, because "most of the immigrant stocks are racially not too remote for ultimate assimilation." Because the new immigrants represented an insignificant percentage of the nation's total "white" population, it now seemed likely that they could "be absorbed into the nation's blood" without altering America's "racial make-up" enough to "endanger the stability and continuity of our national life."

But what is thus true of European immigrants, most of whom belong to some branch of the white racial group, most emphatically does not apply to non-white immigrants, like the Chinese, Japanese, or Mexicans; neither does it apply to the large resident negro element which has been a tragic anomaly from our earliest times. Here, ethnic differences are so great that "assimilation" in the racial sense is impossible.<sup>23</sup>

From the vantage point of post-1924, suddenly it seemed that the new immigrants were "so basically like us in blood, culture, and outlook that their eventual assimilation is only a matter of time." Indeed, the very point of *Reforging America* is firmly to establish the nation's political and social life along the color line (with "new immigrants" unambiguously on the "white" side), much as the South had done since the collapse of Reconstruction. In the tract's pivotal chapter, "Bi-racialism: The Key to Social Peace," Stoddard argued the "very real advantages to be gained by a separate race-life"—that is, by Southern-style segregation.<sup>24</sup>

This signals the waning of the paradigm that had produced the Johnson Act, and the emergence and consolidation of a new, binary racial arrangement that would come to dominate American political culture for the balance of the twentieth century. It is not just that thinkers like Stoddard turned their attention more and more to questions of "color," nor even that eugenics itself gradually passed from fashion and then from view over the succeeding decades. The patterns of racial reorganization evident in Stoddard's *Reforging America* were reflected in the broader developments within anthropology and sociology as well.

The treatment of race in the sciences underwent two fundamental changes in the years between the eugenic triumph of 1924 and the post-World War II period: culture eclipsed biology as the prime determinant of the social behavior of races, and "race relations" displaced characterology as the major field of racial inquiry. Both of these trends significantly revised "the race concept" in general, and had especially profound impli-

cations for the notion of "difference" as it applied to the white races of Europe and the United States.

Strictly biological understandings of race as the key to the diversity of humanity gave way to cultural and environmental explanations. The historian Elazar Barkan has meticulously tracked this shift in the intellectual underpinnings of race, summing up the overall trend as a "retreat from scientific racialism," a paradigmatic shift "from race to ethnicity." This was exemplified most starkly in anthropology, where the Boasian vision of environmentalism, culture, and human changeability gained primacy; it was reflected as well in the decline of the eugenic movement, and, as the Nazis' eugenic policies came to light in Europe, in a scramble among scholars like Julian Huxley, Ashley Montagu, and Ruth Benedict to eradicate race altogether as a measure of human capacity and thus as an instrument of state policy. A spate of books revising racial thinking thus appeared in the 1930s and 1940s, ranging from provocative explorations like Benedict's *Race: Science and Politics* (1940) to more strident repudiations such as Montagu's *Race: Man's Most Dangerous Myth* (1942).

There was certainly a precedent for rethinking race along these lines—Boas had been pushing an environmentalist model since the early part of the century. (Indeed, he had contributed his findings on the changeability of European races in the United States to the Dillingham Commission back in 1910, but Congress at the time had been far more interested in the views of the eugenicists.) But in the 1930s and 1940s, for transparent but compelling political reasons, there was a willful intellectual reorientation on the question of race and its portents. At a trickle in response to the racist codes of fascist Italy and Germany, then in a torrent following revelations of the Nazi death camps, the academic community on both sides of the Atlantic produced feverish reevaluations of the race concept and its applications. In response to menacing trends in Germany and elsewhere, in *Patterns of Culture* (1934) Benedict declared, "The racial purist is a victim of mythology." Although she did not find race itself a baseless term, Benedict staunchly opposed any account of human "difference" that did not properly weigh the power of culture and environment.<sup>25</sup>

Written largely in response to the same developments in the fascist states of Europe, Huxley's *We Europeans* (1935) made an even stronger case for the eradication of race as an explanatory category. "One of the greatest enemies of science is pseudo-science," Huxley wrote. "A vast pseudo-science of 'racial biology' has been erected which serves to justify political



ambitions, economic ends, social grudges, class prejudices." "Racial problems' are among the urgent actualities of twentieth-century politics," he noted, later making direct reference to recent "pure Nordic" laws in Germany and other eugenic interventions of the state. But if one subjects the concept of race to cool analysis, "it turns out to be a pseudo-scientific rather than a scientific term . . . Its use implies an appeal to the accuracy and the prestige of science; but on investigation it turns out to have no precise or definable meaning." Huxley thus opted for the concept "ethnicity," which in his thinking combined the physical and genetic attributes of race with the environmental, social, cultural, and historical influences that accounted for the coherence and distinctness of human groups.<sup>26</sup>

Such politically driven revisions of "the race concept" became more urgent still as the fully horrific details of the fascist programs in Europe became known. In response to German and Italian state policies, for instance, a handbook for secondary school teachers (1939) pointed out that "Mussolini's effort to drive the Jews out of Italy is impossible, because not even the foremost anthropologist could tell exactly whose ancestry is free of Jewish blood."<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Benedict's popular pamphlet *The Races of Mankind* (1943) insisted, "Aryans, Jews, Italians are *not* races."<sup>28</sup>

A collection of Franz Boas's essays, *Race and Democratic Society* (1945), was emblematic of the self-conscious effort among social scientists to refashion the race concept, and to reverse the uses to which it was being put in behalf of rightist political agendas. As these collected works themselves attest, concern over the pernicious consequences of race thinking did not spring full blown out of nowhere in the Nazi period. Boas had been skeptically interrogating the race concept for several decades. This particular collection includes not only essays from the 1930s and early 1940s, but also some works published as far back as the 1900s in venues as diverse as *Forum*, the *Christian Register*, *Yale Quarterly Review*, *The Nation*, and the *New York Evening Post*. This reissue, however, does bear unmistakable marks of its production in the Nazi years. "A new duty arises," Boas announced in his introduction. "No longer can we keep the search for truth a privilege of the scientist." He spelled out his reasons in direct references to Nazism in essays such as "The 'Aryans'" (1934), and enumerated what this "truth" might be in "The Jews" (1923), "Race: What Is It?" (1925), and "Race: Prejudice" (1937). This last essay provides the keynote to the collection. Although the pieces range across a number of decades and hence track significant shifts in Boas's own think-

ing, here he offers his readers a bottom line: the biologist's assumption regarding the power of heredity "will not stand analysis"; mind, body, custom, and social behavior are all subject to the "plastic influence of environment," and therefore "man is a highly unstable animal." There is no foolproof way of "distinguishing one people as a whole from another people as a whole by mere physical appearance," yet "racial" thinking continues to hold sway—"the Nazis have driven this form of logic to its fanatical extreme," and "we are not free from these tendencies in the United States."<sup>29</sup>

Among those most set, with Boas, on overturning conventional race thinking in the United States was Ashley Montagu, the author of *Race: Man's Most Dangerous Myth* (1942). The very idea of race, he argued, had taken on "an exaggerated emotional content," and the very language that framed discussions of race lent them "a high emotional and a low rational, or reasonable, quality." Thus the term "race" ought to be dropped entirely, replaced by less loaded distinctions such as "divisions" for the major branches of mankind—Negroid, Australoid, Caucasian, and Mongoloid—and "ethnic group" for the minor divisions.<sup>30</sup>

Montagu developed this line tirelessly throughout the 1940s in a stream of essays for publications ranging from the *New York Times* to the *American Journal of Anthropology*. Typical was an essay for teachers, "What Every Child and Adult Should Know about 'Race,'" which appeared in a special "Race" issue of *Education* (1946). Here Montagu defined race as a mere "congeries of errors," an absolute misunderstanding of humanity and its diversity. And yet "the error of 'race' has already caused the death of millions of innocent human beings." Since children could only learn "the truth" about race by having adults explain it to them, Montagu interrogated common assumptions and presented his revision in a simple catechism. The conventional notion of race, he began, was that of a "prime determiner of all the important traits of body and soul, of character and personality," a "fixed and unchangeable part of the germ plasm." He went on to explain why this was unsound: conventional views assume inherited mental traits and ignore the power of environmental factors, for instance; just as individuals differ because of differing personal experience, "so will the members of ethnic groups differ from the members of other ethnic groups because of very real differences in social experience." In this context he makes his plea for a redefinition of "difference" itself, a revaluation of the currency of race:



Because the conventional stereotype of "race" is so erroneous, confusing, and productive of injustice and cruelties without number, and yet is so firmly established in the minds of most men, it were better to drop the term "race" altogether from the vocabulary. Some non-committal term like "ethnic group" should be used to designate human groups which differ from one another physically.<sup>31</sup>

This intellectual reworking of race reached its zenith in *The Race Concept* (1950, 1952), a series of statements hammered out by the world scientific community under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Its major points had become familiar fare by 1950: humanity is characterized by an essential and undeniable unity, and such differences as exist are paltry; not heredity alone, but both heredity and environment are at play in creating these paltry differences; there is no demonstrated connection between cultural traits and racial traits; classifications vary, but most agree that there are three great races (Caucasian, Negroid, and Mongoloid); intelligence and psychology do not coincide with race; there is no evidence supporting genetic explanations of cultural difference; and there is no such thing as a "pure" race.

The statement's final points cut to the political issue of race, equality, and democracy: social equality as an ethical principle does not depend upon equality of endowment among diverse human beings; there is no evidence for the belief that groups differ in capacities for intellectual and emotional development; differences *within* a given race may outstrip differences *between* races; and there is no evidence that racial mixture is disadvantageous from a biological point of view.<sup>32</sup>

Again, the urgency of the UNESCO statement is easily traceable to then-recent state policies, especially in Nazi Germany. As one scholar noted in his commentary on the statement, "I think I am right in assuming that Unesco is primarily concerned to show that Jews are not specifically different from the other members of the communities in which they [live]." He went on to suggest that "Jews should be considered as belonging to the European group. The term 'Asiatics' . . . applied to the Jews, is misleading."<sup>33</sup> His comments capture a crucial element of the feverish postwar revision of "difference": the reification of humanity's "grand divisions" in an effort to expunge wherever possible its "lesser" divisions. The effort to prove that "Jews are not specifically different," in this instance, reflected a tacit distinction between "the European group"

on the one hand and "Asiatics" on the other. In a more general sense, as scientists asserted over and over that "Aryans," "Jews," "Italians," "Nordics," and the like were not races, their myriad assertions themselves all buttressed an edifice founded upon three grand divisions of mankind—"Caucasian," "Mongoloid," and "Negroid"—whose differences by implication *were* racial.

This dynamic was fully explicit in much of the literature. Benedict's *Races of Mankind*, for instance, included a tricolored world map whose three broad regions corresponded to "Caucasian," "Mongoloid," and "Negroid" areas.<sup>34</sup> Thus as Huxley had noted in *We Europeans*, "Even where lip-service is rendered" to the abolition of race as a sound theoretical construct, "the terms employed (such as 'race' itself) carry far-reaching implications of a contrary nature."<sup>35</sup> Much of the antiracist work of the period was founded upon the very epistemology of race that it sought to dismantle. For the probationary whites who had immigrated to the United States before the eugenic restrictions of 1924, this was a deeply significant trend in mid-century race thinking.

This emergent pattern of revised racial distinctions was solidified by a second trend in the mid-century scholarship. At precisely the moment when the cataclysm in Nazi Germany suggested that race as a category of ascription best be abolished as far and as quickly as possible, so the historic fact of the Nazis' racial policies themselves—combined with increasing social tensions and escalating civil rights agitation on the homefront—demanded that race as a political force be further studied and better understood. Thus the growing body of literature questioning the objective standing of race in nature was joined by a second, also burgeoning scholarship that fortified the race concept by analyzing the social and political struggles among "races." Although often contrary in their implications—the one attempting to deny race, the other at least tacitly affirming it—these two distinct orientations could contend with each other even within a single work.

Whereas the first development in mid-century scholarship represented a thoroughgoing revision of "the race concept," this latter development represented a shift in the *locus* of scholarly inquiry. An interest in various kinds of typology and in discovering "essential" traits or the paths of development of this or that race—interests that had shaped the scholarship from Blumenbach on down—now gave way to the more immediate question of social relations. "Race relations" now came into its own as a field, from the Chicago school's sociological studies of urban cultural ge-



ography in the 1920s, to historical works like W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* in the 1930s, to social analyses like Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma* and Oliver Cox's *Caste, Race, and Class* in the 1940s. (Again, as an emblem of overlap, Franz Boas's 1945 compendium *Race and Democratic Society* embodies both impulses.)

"Race relations" was not altogether new, of course—the field dates back at least as far as Mary Roberts Coolidge's *Chinese Immigration* (1909), Ray Stannard Baker's *Following the Color Line* (1906), or W. E. B. Du Bois's *Philadelphia Negro* (1899). What was new among white scholars in this period (and thus to dominant disciplines and institutions) was a reversal in the presumed link between "race" and "race relations." In an earlier period, the categories of distinct races and the presumed moral-intellectual *content* of these distinctions were thought to govern the social and historical details that made up the story of "race relations." "Celtic" character *caused* impoverishment and frequent incarceration, that is; "Hebrew" character itself was the prime explanation for Jews' social ostracism; "Anglo-Saxon" character naturally led to world domination; and the history of slavery and the harsh life under Jim Crow were nicely explained by "the Negro character." In the 1930s and 1940s this link was dramatically reversed. Now, among writers as diverse as Robert Park, George Schuyler, Ashley Montagu, Gordon Allport, and Ruth Benedict, "race relations" required study, because social relations governed the presumed moral-intellectual content of racial distinctions, and race in and of itself held relatively little interest. The literature of race had thus dealt in a lexicon of "capacities," "traits," "characters," and "deficiencies." It had dealt, occasionally, in a lexicon of "genius," although far more often in a lexicon of "idiocy," "imbecilism," and "feeble-mindedness." The rising literature of race relations, by contrast, dealt in a language of "equality," "justice," "democracy," "discrimination," and "prejudice."

In "The Nature of Race Relations" (1939), Robert Ezra Park defined the phrase itself as referring to "the relations existing between peoples distinguished by marks of racial descent, particularly when these racial differences enter into consciousness of the individuals and groups so distinguished, and by doing so determine in each case the individual's conception of himself as well as his status in the community." Further,

anything that intensifies race consciousness; anything, particularly if it is a permanent physical trait, that increases an individual's visibility and by so doing makes more obvious his identity with a particular

ethnic unit or genetic group, tends to create and maintain the conditions under which race relations, as here defined, may be said to exist. Race consciousness, therefore, is to be regarded as a phenomenon, like class or caste consciousness, that enforces social distances. Race relations, in this sense, are not so much the relations that exist between individuals of different races as between individuals conscious of those differences.<sup>36</sup>

The idea here is deceptive in its apparent simplicity: physical markers generate race consciousness, and race consciousness in its turn influences social relations. The content of race, then—the specific set of traits that constitutes "blackness," for instance—is secondary to the social relations created and maintained by the consciousness that such traits stir within both those who possess them and those who do not.

Yet the passage conceals some vexing complexities which speak to the social power of the scholarship on race in this period. First, Park writes of "marks of racial descent" and "permanent physical traits" as if they are independent of the eye of their beholder. But if physical traits can generate consciousness, so can a consciousness of social distinctions generate an awareness of otherwise unnotable physical markers. When the position of a particular "ethnic unit or genetic group" becomes socially or politically important for one reason or another, its physical markers and other "racial distinctions" are more likely to "enter into consciousness"—as they did in the 1850s, for instance, when Anglo-Saxons became so adept at recognizing the distinct physiognomy of the newly arrived and problematic Celts.

Second, inasmuch as race itself depends upon consciousness, a number of things can generate such consciousness, not the least of which might be an avalanche of scientific data on "the races" and a stream of goodwill propaganda on their "relations." As Yehudi Webster argues and as Park's own logic suggests, if race itself is highly unstable and experience is not inherently racial but is in fact *racialized* by consciousness, then "racialized relations, not race relations, should be considered the object of study. And the relations are racialized by social scientists themselves."<sup>37</sup> There is a danger in overstating this case—as, indeed, I believe Webster has. The social sciences did not create the social division between black and white; writers like Park, Louis Wirth, and Lloyd Warner were remarking on the impact of distinctions that predated modern sociology and that had long been maintained by law, by real estate and housing policies, by employ-



ment practices, and by a range of segregated institutions from movie theaters and churches to labor unions and military units. Nonetheless, in defining certain social relations as the proper object of study and in absolutely neglecting others, the disciplines devoted to "race relations" did generate their own "races." And inasmuch as there was a broad consensus on which relations were most important, for good or bad the populace became racialized along certain lines and not others.

Which is to say, third, that the study of "social distances," as Park defined it, quietly and by implication generated its own series of social *proximities*: whatever these writings accomplished for the social relations of people defined as "Negroid" and people defined as "Caucasian," they worked a profound alchemy with the former groups of Slavs and Hebrews and Celts and Mediterraneans and other probationary immigrant groups now within the Caucasian fold. Although these works were not devoted to defining the races, such studies did generate a race-making power of their own, as certain categories of "difference" were naturalized by their logic of opposition ("white" and "Negro," most significantly) while others dropped away entirely. Typifying the dynamics of this approach to race, for instance, was Ruth Benedict's antiracist objection in *Patterns of Culture* (1934), "We have come to the point where we entertain race prejudice against our blood brothers the Irish."<sup>38</sup> The sentence quietly gathers the Irish into the fold of presumed white readers, while the *even* implicit in its logic—"we *even* entertain prejudice against the Irish," the line clearly implies—expels some unnamed Others against whom prejudice may be more understandable. The upshot of this feverish revision of race at mid-century, then, was less a new understanding of the race concept itself than merely a new pattern of races delineated along new lines.

Among the self-conscious popularizations of this new, post-Nazi racial economy of "difference" was a public exhibit entitled "Races of Mankind" based on Benedict's pamphlet of the same name. Combining both the "revision of race" and the "race relations" projects, the exhibit was developed by the Cranbrook Institute of Science in 1943 and purchased by the American Missionary Association as a traveling show for use by any group "seeking to promote interracial understanding and goodwill through the medium of visual education." The exhibit translated current scientific thinking into easily digested pictorial and short-text panels, matching in its bedrock assumptions the intellectual content of publications by the Council against Intolerance in America, or, later, the UNESCO statements on "the race concept."

A quick stroll through the twenty-nine panels conveys both the ideol-

ogy and the tone of the project.<sup>39</sup> The exhibit opened with a panel on the "races of mankind" emphasizing "the common origin of all races." Significantly, the opening mural featured "cut outs of Adam and Eve with yellow, white, and Negro children"—that is, children representing the three grand divisions of mankind, Mongoloid, Caucasian, and Negroid. The next several panels were devoted to the race concept itself—"What Is Race?" "Early Concepts of Race," "Physical Characters of the Human Races," "Why Are the Races Different?" The intent here was not necessarily to destabilize the fixities of race, but rather to call into question the degree of difference which race represented: "Each so-called race became functionally adapted to the region in which it found itself. So-called racial differences are superficial." After a brief discussion of which human differences do and which do not qualify as "racial," the exhibit moved on to celebrate the cornucopia of architectural, poetic, artistic, technological, and culinary achievements of the world's diverse peoples. Next came panels emphasizing the environmental determinants of racial difference in titles such as "It's Not in the Blood," "No Race Is Most Primitive," "No Race Is Mentally Superior," and "Races Persist—Cultures Change." (Panel 24, "Culture Is Not Inborn," demonstrated that "habits depend on environment" by depicting a "Chinese girl holding [a] Shirley Temple doll.") The closing two panels, "What Is an American?" and "Let Us Live at Peace," cut to the civic heart of the matter, summing up "the aim of the entire exhibit—to show that race is superficial—that with this knowledge we all will work towards a better and greater world civilization on the basis of democracy for all."

Central to this project—indeed, to the broader project of redrawing racial lines according to the three great divisions—were the ideas expressed in panels 7 through 10 of the exhibit:

Panel 7: Nationalities Are Not Races—The commonest mistake in all discussions of race is the confusion of nationality with race.

Panel 8: The Jews Are Not a Race—Jews are people who practice the religion of Judaism; they are represented in many racial groups.

Panel 9: Who Are the Aryans?—Ideal Aryan would be slender, long headed, blond, and virile, making references thereto by Hitler, Goering and Goebbels utterly ridiculous.

Panel 10: Composition of the American Negro—Shows him to be a descendant of the African Negro, American Indian, and white man.



Here again is proof of Huxley's dictum that, even when marshaled toward the aim of abolishing hierarchies of difference, racial categories inherently carry with them "far-reaching implications of a contrary nature"—a very real power to create and police boundaries. In the guise of a direct refutation of the racial logic of the Nazi program, the Johnson Act, and the "Negro problem" in the United States, this educational exhibit evaporated an earlier era's white races (panels 7, 8, and 9) and reproduced them simply as "the white man" (panel 10). And even if the intent of panel 10 is to destabilize any facile notions of reified blackness, the text nonetheless *does* reify blackness (and whiteness and Indianness) by taking as its genetic building-blocks "the African Negro, American Indian, and white man."

Similarly, the breakdown of races in Panel 18, "The Foods We Cultivate Are a Gift from All Peoples," demonstrates this refashioning of races:

1. African Negro (Black Race)
2. American Indian (Yellow Race)
3. West Asiatic (White Race)
4. South Asiatic (Yellow Race)
5. North European (White Race)
6. East Asiatic (Yellow Race)

The division of the "white race" into "North European" and "West Asiatic" is at the very crux of becoming "Caucasian" for, say, the Semite or the Armenian, just as the strained categorization of the American Indian as representing the "Yellow Race" conveys the urgency by which Benedict has organized the exhibit around humanity's "three great divisions."

The racial dynamic of the "three great divisions" gained power, moreover, by its replication and repetition throughout the culture—in films such as *South Pacific*, *Showboat*, *The Ten Commandments*, and the myriad Cold War westerns; in novels such as *Studs Lonigan*, *The Edge of Sadness*, and *The Changelings*; and in the racial terminology of print journalism. Interest in race was now largely an inquiry into "race relations," and "race relations" were defined almost exclusively by the divide separating black from white. Hence those who were not "Negroid" became "Caucasian" (and "Mongoloids," meanwhile, became largely invisible in serious civic discussion, making mostly minstrelized appearances as a foil for "Western" values in popular texts ranging from *South Pacific* and *Drums along the Mohawk* to comic books and *Gilligan's Island*).<sup>40</sup>

As ever, the transformations here were not instantaneous but glacial.

Even individual writers might demonstrate some inconsistency as one scheme gave way to the next. Benedict, among the chief popularizers of the new racial geography, could nonetheless lapse into a language of "Celts, Alpines, [and] Mediterraneans." In *Patterns of Culture*, within a span of ten pages she had slipped back and forth among terms like "Alpine sub-race," "Nordics," and "Mediterranean sub-group of the white race" on the one hand, and a less nuanced phraseology of "the white man" on the other.<sup>41</sup> Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole's *Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups* (1945), too, reflected an allegiance to both the waxing and the waning paradigms of difference. The authors defined "race" along the color line, yet one discovers thick traces of the older system of plural white races in their discussion of "ethnicity" and the prospects for assimilation. Thus "the people racially most like white 'old Americans'"—and therefore possessing the greatest chance for unhindered assimilation—"are other Caucasians." And yet, "the Caucasoid immigrant population has been divided into those who are largely like the present old-American stock and those who are least like them"—"light Caucasians" (like the South Irish and English Jews) and "dark Caucasians" (like Armenians, Sicilians, and the "dark skinned" Jews and Mohammedans of Europe).<sup>42</sup>

On the scale of assimilability, groups turn out to be predictably ordered according to their degree of deviation from a white Protestant norm, and the division of Caucasians into "light" and "dark" suspiciously coincides with the earlier scheme of distinct white races. Thus the purely cultural matter of assimilation is not entirely independent of race, even for those who have now become "Caucasians": "the light-skinned Jew who is not physically different and thereby not burdened with negatively evaluated racial traits" assimilates more easily than "his dark-skinned co-religionist," the dark Caucasian.<sup>43</sup>

But by the 1950s, if scholars might wonder about the persistence of ethnic subcultures among European groups, few seemed to think anymore that race had much to do with it. By the universality it tacitly bestowed, their silence on race underwrote the view of immigrants and their children and grandchildren as unquestionably Caucasian, and whiteness itself as the normative American condition.

### *E Pluribus Duo* (I): American Politics in Black and White

When four Armenian immigrants petitioned to overturn a lower court's ruling that they did not qualify for citizenship as "free white persons," a



Circuit Court judge in Massachusetts ruled in their favor, citing, among other things, standing segregation statutes in the South whose formulas regarding whiteness and blackness set Armenians squarely on the white side of the divide.<sup>44</sup> The ruling in *In Re Halladjian* (1909) thus demonstrated most succinctly a pivotal principle: for certain groups, at certain moments, under certain conditions, Jim Crow whitened, and whitened decisively. (Du Bois captured this from the opposite side of the color line in *Dusk of Dawn*, when, at the end of a tortuous socratic dialogue exposing the impossible contradictions of the race concept, he offered the easy rule of thumb, “the black man is a person who must ride ‘Jim Crow’ in Georgia.”)<sup>45</sup> This lesson was writ large in American politics in the 1940s. As questions of segregation and desegregation assumed new prominence, thus elevating to national significance the power of Jim Crow to create or enforce racial distinctions along strict, binary lines, a number of hitherto probationary white races became more decisively white.

In the logic and conduct of American politics, no less than in the social sciences, this mid-century revision of race had profound consequences. The dynamic relationship between the scientific revision of race and the changing political climate—particularly the race politics of World War II at home—generated three distinct developments. First, *ethnicity* was adopted to describe a new brand of “difference” whose basis was cultural; thus peoples still defined as racial groups were also tacitly marked by a degree of difference that was more than merely cultural. The faultlines dividing color from whiteness (“colored races” from “white ethnics”) deepened. Second, ethnicity itself provided a paradigm for assimilation which erased race as a category of historical experience for European and some Near Eastern immigrants. Not only did these groups now belong to a unified Caucasian race, but race was deemed so irrelevant to who they were that it became something possessed only by “other” peoples. As Lillian Smith remarked, “It must seem to people watching us a strange and curious thing that when we in America study race relations we study the Negro—not the white man. No governor, no mayor, no President has ever appointed a committee to study the white man and race.”<sup>46</sup>

Finally, the Cold War period witnessed a celebration of ethnic diversity as universalism in which confections of “difference” and self-congratulation over the superior system of capitalist democracy were closely enmeshed, and the logic of this entire scheme was proved by a single anomaly: “the Negro.” A complex system of races had given way to a strict scheme of black and white, which itself implied an absence of race on the

white side and a presence of race on the black. The “ethnic” experience of European immigrant assimilation and mobility, meanwhile, became the standard against which blacks were measured—and found wanting.<sup>47</sup>

If a national politics of race based upon the simplified dyad of black and white had been visible even in the urban North earlier on—in the riots of 1919, in Stoddard’s *Rising Tide of Color*, in *Birth of a Nation*, *The Jazz Singer*, and *Gone with the Wind*—this systemic, bifurcated understanding of the populace gained considerable credence in the 1940s. World War II heightened both the consciousness and the perceived stakes of that segregation, which Stoddard had euphemistically called “bi-racialism.” On the one hand, as Alain Locke wrote, because of the jarring confluence of Nazi racial rhetoric from one side of the Atlantic and nationally embarrassing Jim Crow practices from the other, the war brought the race issue “around from a backyard domestic issue to front-porch exposure.” On the other hand, as Louis Wirth put it, “given adverse economic circumstances, war, and propaganda, [ethnic and racial prejudices] can be aroused to white heat.”<sup>48</sup> Many non-Nordic immigrants became full-fledged “whites” in precisely this social and political “heat” of wartime. In public discourse the plurality of former race questions was now totally eclipsed by the longstanding but singular “Negro Problem.”

As had been true during World War I, the sacrifices made by African-Americans in the Second World War dramatically altered the racial climate on the homefront. The racial issues of the war itself, in this instance, went even one better than Woodrow Wilson’s pious declarations in the 1910s concerning a world made “safe for democracy.” As C. L. R. James wrote in the *Socialist Appeal* (1939), “The democracy I want to fight for, Hitler is not depriving me of.”

When Roosevelt and the other so-called lovers of “democracy” protested to Hitler against his treatment of the Jews, Hitler laughed scornfully and replied, “Look at how you treat the Negroes. I learned how to persecute Jews by studying the manner in which you Americans persecute Negroes.” Roosevelt has no answer to that. Yet he will call on Negroes to go to war against Hitler.<sup>49</sup>

Even among the defense industries that assembled the engines of this war against fascism abroad, companies like Vultee Aircraft announced baldly that “only members of the Caucasian race will be employed in our plant.”<sup>50</sup> One black schoolteacher from North Carolina queried Louis Adamic: “Can the people of the United States afford to criticize Germany



for crushing the Jews when people in America will hang Negroes up trees and cut off parts of their bodies for souvenirs?" In 1944 a sixteen-year-old black student in Columbus, Ohio, won an essay contest on the theme "What to Do with Hitler after the War" by submitting the single sentence, "Put him in a black skin and let him live the rest of his life in America."<sup>51</sup>

The spirit of such arguments was manifest in A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement, which secured (without actually marching) the establishment of a Fair Employment Practices Commission at the federal level; it was manifest in the Pittsburgh *Courier's* "Double V" campaign—victory against fascism abroad, victory against racism at home; and it was manifest in a spate of books, articles, and journals throughout the 1940s devoted (as *Survey Graphic* couched it in 1942) to "Color, Unfinished Business of Democracy."<sup>52</sup>

If continuing inequities and the wartime sacrifices of African-Americans brought white-black issues to center stage with a new urgency, the world political climate in the postwar years only added to that urgency. Pursuing the logic of the Nuremberg trials, argued the *Courier*, the American North was morally responsible for the lynchings in the American South, and no white American could dodge responsibility for anything that happened in Georgia or Tennessee. The question of national moral responsibility became especially sensitive during the Cold War, as the United States and the Soviet Union vied for the hearts and minds of the unaligned nations of the world. No one put this matter more forcefully than Fisk University President Charles Johnson, writing in the early Cold War chills of 1948. Commenting upon efforts by the United States to peddle its brand of democracy abroad, and the inexplicable failure "of the peoples of the world to rush up and buy our product as we took it for granted they would do," Johnson contended that the problem was "the breakdown of American democratic theory" on the issue of race. News of American race relations carries "to every corner of the world, two thirds of whose inhabitants are colored." Thus race

has become the scale on which democracy is being weighed in a world that is being relentlessly forced to choose between ideologies . . . It is my belief that some genuine act of democratic conviction at home such as repeal of the poll-tax, enactment of federal fair employment practice legislation, the elimination of segregation in the nation's Capital or the banning of segregation in our Armed Forces—

would do more to strengthen our cause than the threat of superior weapons. The time of proof has come, and race is the touchstone.<sup>53</sup>

Such views took firmer hold as the Cold War progressed. Even an amicus brief filed by the U.S. Justice Department in *Brown v. Board of Education* argued that desegregation was in the national interest because "the United States is trying to prove to the people of the world, of every nationality, race and color, that a free democracy is the most civilized and most secure form of government yet devised by man."<sup>54</sup>

In such a bifurcated racial climate, the whiteness of the former white races became more salient than the once-perceived differences among them. For those who were not encompassed by the one-fourth, one-eighth, or one-drop rules establishing how much "black blood" renders a person "black," ineluctably and irrefutably Jim Crow whitened. Nor was it simply the case that probationary whites became Caucasian purely through a regressive politics played out at the expense of nonwhites, like the Irish who had resisted the draft in 1863, insisting upon their privileges as "white men." Rather, progressive projects and coalitions, too, exerted a powerful influence in creating out of many races, two. As "bi-racialism" came to be widely identified as the overriding social problem facing the nation, even many of the solutions militated toward a racial dyad of black and white (see Chapter 8).

It lies beyond the scope of this chapter to chart the history of the early Civil Rights movement during World War II and after, but, as standard narratives most often take 1954 as the opening date of the modern movement, a quick refresher on the race politics of the 1940s may be useful.<sup>55</sup> In the wake of the Detroit race riot of 1943, Fisk University instituted a new journal with the self-explanatory title *A Monthly Summary of Events and Trends in Race Relations*. This eye-opening compendium presents a society fully racked by racial strife and increasingly obsessed with race problems and racial solutions even before the war had come to an end. Summarizing the ten-month period from March to December 1943, for instance, the journal recorded "242 major incidents involving Negro-white conflict in 47 cities" (46 percent in the South, 42 percent in the North, and 12 percent in the West). Southern conflict most frequently occurred "in relation to the armed forces, transportation, civil rights, and racial etiquette"; Northern incidents most often involved "housing, labor, and the police." In addition, the journal noted that more than 145 new



interracial committees for unity had formed in 1943, "practically all" in the North.<sup>56</sup>

Certain items in *Race Relations* hint at the stakes of these developments for European immigrants and their children. Scanning the popular press accounts of the Detroit riot, the journal pointed out the "interminority conflicts involving, particularly, Negroes and Poles and Irish Catholics in such Northern cities as Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Buffalo." (Indeed, the two major convictions stemming from the Detroit violence were those of Aldo Trani, Italian, convicted of manslaughter in the death of a black man; and Aaron Fox, black, convicted of second-degree murder for killing an Italian.) Likewise, *Race Relations* noted the "interminority" character of a Chicago case in which a Jewish landlord had opened housing to black tenants, much to the displeasure of Italian residents. The blacks were driven out, and as the journal explained, "many of those who participated in the threats and abuse to the new Negro residents had been led to believe that a Jewish real estate man was attempting to cause the deterioration of an Italian neighborhood by deliberately introducing Negro residents." The journal did institute a section entitled "Jewish Scene" and a regular column on Japanese-Americans in 1945, and occasionally noted the social struggles of the white races—as when Frank Sinatra slugged a Hearst journalist for calling him a "dago." But typically the world of *Race Relations* was a world starkly depicted in black and white. This racial binarism reflected the nationalization of the race questions that had characterized the South for generations.<sup>57</sup>

From 1943 until the end of 1948, the staff of *Race Relations* monitored and reported myriad crises, outbreaks, protests, court battles, hostilities, and alliances among the races nationwide. The journal's pages present a dizzying staccato of race in social action. The overall tableau of *Race Relations* included an alarming rise in "race-angled" juvenile delinquency, as when a "free for all" erupted in Cambridge, Massachusetts, after "300 white youths (largely of Irish Catholic extraction)" marched into a black section looking for trouble; or when "forty to sixty Negro youths" on a Brooklyn trolley purposely sought "to annoy white passengers—in some cases going as far as robbery and assault." It included episodes of local insult and national response, such as the Kiwanis Club raffle in Ahoskie, North Carolina, whose first prize—a new Cadillac—was denied to the rightful winner, the tenant farmer Harvey Jones, on the simple grounds that as a "Negro" he was "ineligible." The nationwide outcry on Jones's behalf—including a "Cadillac for Jones Fund" sponsored by a New York

City radio station—forced the Kiwanis Club to reverse its initial decision. The tableau included major civil rights struggles, such as the desegregation of major league baseball, the desegregation of the Cotton Bowl (both on the field and in the stands), and the attempted desegregation of the University of Oklahoma Law School. And it included dramatic challenges to American racial custom in the court of world opinion, as when the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) took the case of African-Americans before the United Nations, noting that the new world organization's charter referred in five separate articles to the obligation of the international body to uphold basic human freedoms and rights.

Increasingly *Race Relations* also covered acts of white resistance. It reported a case of arson in Redwood City, California, that destroyed the home of a black veteran in a white neighborhood, and the more tragic case of a Fantana, California, family who were engulfed in the flames of a similar, racially motivated arson. It included a strike of white schoolchildren in Gary, Indiana, who refused to attend school with blacks, and the massive "sick leaves" mysteriously taken by white restaurant and hotel workers in Cincinnati during the NAACP convention there. And it included an escalating battle over housing in Chicago—a "restrictive covenant war." Covenants drawn up by local white homeowners' associations forbade the sale of property to blacks. In May and June 1946, bombs ripped through thirty-five homes belonging to black families in covenanted areas of Chicago. In the fall, "hysterical mobs of white persons of both sexes" demonstrated against the entrance of blacks in Fernwood Park Homes, an emergency veterans' housing project in southwest Chicago; only a riot detail of one thousand averted what, according to observers, threatened to become the city's worst riot since 1919.<sup>58</sup>

Against this backdrop, race moved dramatically toward the center of national political discussion in the war years and after, particularly in the wake of the 1943 riots. Several developments marked this shift in American politics: the debate over Jim Crow military and defense industry policies; the establishment of a Fair Employment Practices Commission; the emergence of "racial equality" (by which was not meant Nordics, Mediterraneans, and Alpines) as an issue in the 1944 presidential campaign; and the emergence of lynching, employment practices, and the poll tax as chief congressional issues in 1945. Both the Republicans and the Democrats took up civil rights questions and passed civil rights resolutions in their 1948 conventions, and it was the issue of race that divided



the Democrats, prompting the third-party movement of Strom Thurmond and the Dixiecrats.

Indeed, already by the mid-1940s goodwill activists like Mary McLeod Bethune, Charles Johnson, Pearl Buck, Ralph Bunche, Ernesto Galarza, Robert Redfield, and Walter White had organized the American Council on Race Relations. In December 1946, Harry Truman issued Executive Order 9808, creating a Committee on Civil Rights at the federal level. The committee's recommendations, published toward the end of that year, may not have represented a "second abolition movement," as the *Richmond News* had it, but the report was sweeping in its recommendations. Its provisions included strengthening the machinery for the protection of civil rights by bolstering the Justice Department and the FBI, and establishing a standing Committee on Civil Rights in Congress; securing the right to safety through legislative measures such as antilynching legislation; securing the right to citizenship and its privileges by guaranteeing electoral participation and desegregating the armed forces; and securing the right to equality of opportunity by eliminating segregation, denying federal dollars to companies or agencies with discriminatory practices, passing a Fair Employment Practices Act, guaranteeing equal access to public accommodations, and eliminating discrimination in educational admissions, housing, health facilities, public services, transportation, and federal spending.<sup>59</sup>

Under the heading of "strengthening the right to citizenship," the committee also recommended a revision in standing naturalization law so as to do away with the one-hundred-fifty-year-old color qualification. Like so much in the committee report, this would have to wait. But perhaps the clearest indication of the shifting signification of race between 1924 and the 1950s was the congressional debate over precisely this point when it reappeared as part of the Walter and MacCarren immigration bills (1952). Although John Kennedy and others objected to continued restrictions on immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe, and although the phrase "Anglo-Saxon" surfaced from time to time in the debate, far and away the greatest "racial" issue identified in this discussion was the fate of aspiring "Negro" immigrants from the former colonies. Inasmuch as the proposed bills represented "racial quotas" or "racial discrimination," it was because they would "exclude Negroes by drastically reducing immigration from colonies in the Western Hemisphere," according to a newspaper ad taken out by more than seventy prominent liberals. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., who emerged as the most vocal of the bill's opponents,

decried various clauses devised to minimize the flow of nonwhite immigration. "The ancestry test smacks closely of the infamous Nuremberg laws of Hitler Germany," he protested; the bill discriminated against "would-be immigrants from Jamaica, Trinidad, and other colonies of the West Indies, most of whom are Negroes." Harking back to the Johnson Act, Powell chided his colleagues in the House:

The 1924 law early achieved notoriety for the racist sentiments which engendered it and the Ku Klux Klan support which insured its passage. The McCarren-Walter bills perpetuate this obvious racist discrimination, and by doing so reaffirm a bias against Negro immigrants which should have been repudiated long ago.

The bill, in Powell's estimation, "sets up a Cape-Town-Washington D.C. axis."<sup>60</sup>

That "the Negro question" now dominated discussions of race even in the context of immigration quotas—in sharp contrast to the eugenics debates of the 1920s—dramatizes the extent to which American politics had come to be drawn in black and white. Well before *Brown v. Board of Education*, in other words, well before Rosa Parks's courageous stand in Montgomery and the sit-ins in Greensboro, a number of developments charted an increasing significance of race in national politics. Race itself no longer retained any salient distinctions among Madison Grant's Nordics, Alpines, and Mediterraneans—much less the thirty-six European races enumerated by the Dillingham Commission—but rather referred to the longstanding, simpler black-white dyad of the Jim Crow South. The liberalized immigration legislation of 1965—passed, as David Reimers points out, by the first U.S. Congress in which Roman Catholics constituted a plurality<sup>61</sup>—consecrated the earlier waves of European immigration by giving preference to those immigrants' relatives and so normalizing the presence of non-Anglo-Saxon white persons in the body politic.

### *E Pluribus Duo* (II): American Culture in Black and White

"The Lord must have had His reasons for making some of us white and some of us black," muses Annie Johnson in *Imitation of Life* (1959). In sharp contrast to the fading cultural regime under which writers like Dashiell Hammett would depict a racial underworld of immigrant gangsters, under which Frank Norris and Jack London would depict a naturalistic universe menaced by racially degenerate villains, or under which



Hollywood could seize upon the Italian Rudolph Valentino to portray the racial exotic in a spectacle of Otherness, increasingly in the 1920s and afterward the landscape of American popular culture was peopled simply by blacks and whites. A sharp, bifurcated understanding of black and white increasingly gave form to the images and representations of American culture.

Again, it is important to underscore that this bifurcation was not an invention of the 1920s in the nation's popular culture or in its burgeoning visual culture. Thomas Edison's turn-of-the-century mocked battles between American soldiers and Filipino "savages" (filmed in New Jersey) were among the earliest popular films; and cultural productions such as the Midway Plaisance and the ethnographic exhibits of Chicago's Columbian Exposition (1893), too, presented an "ascending scale" of humanity that overtly enforced a pan-white-supremacist reading of world history.<sup>62</sup> Among the most influential white-over-black icons of American visual culture was *Birth of a Nation* (1915), D. W. Griffith's effort at galvanizing the nation by glorifying the white-supremacist bargain that had brought Reconstruction to a close in 1877. Despite occasional references to other racial systems of difference (to Americans' "Aryan birthright," for instance), the political logic and the visual economy of the film had rested upon the dualism of black and white.<sup>63</sup> The incarnation of the Ku Klux Klan, which rose up in the urban North in the film's wake, of course, endorsed a more nuanced reading of whiteness itself—far more so than that presented in Griffith's work. White Catholics and Jews hardly qualified for this brand of white supremacy. But as *Birth of a Nation* proved so popular even among urban immigrants, it must be numbered among the Progressive Era's transformative cultural icons. As Walter Benn Michaels boldly puts it, "White supremacy made possible the Americanization of the immigrant."<sup>64</sup>

An encyclopedic consideration of the black-white dyad in U.S. culture might run from *King Kong* and *Gone with the Wind*, to *Absolom, Absolom!*, *Studs Lonigan*, *Dragnet*, and *The Goldbergs*. I will focus on four works (or clusters of works) that in different ways illuminate the rivaling conceptions of race during these decades: Al Jolson's *Jazz Singer* (1927), which appropriates blackness to constitute Jews' whiteness; George Schuyler's satirical novel *Black No More* (1931), which documented the fluidity of "Nordic," "Anglo-Saxon," and "Caucasian" whiteness as part of an effort to dismantle established notions of immutable races; Laura Z. Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), which revised racial Jewish-

ness by demonstrating the interchangeability of Jews and non-Jews, but which, ultimately, surrendered to its own rejected notions of stable, immutable Jewish racial identity; and finally, a group of urban dramas from the 1950s and early 1960s including *West Side Story* (1957, 1961) and *Corner Boy* (1957), in which adherence to the sharpening color line is the means of becoming "American" for a range of probationary "white persons"—the newly minted "white ethnics" of American social science. These texts reveal the power dynamics, the possibilities for resistance, the conscious strategies, and the unconscious assumptions attaching to the question of whiteness in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Taken together they lay bare the layers of interpretation that defined "difference" itself.

In American popular culture this reworking of racial "difference" and the emergence of a binary system were most clearly announced in Hollywood's first talkie, Al Jolson's *Jazz Singer* (1927). The film tells the story of a young Jewish man, the last of a long line of cantors, who renounces his traditional calling to become a jazz singer on the secular stage; who falls in love with a non-Jewish performer named Mary; and who is on the verge of hitting the big time. When his father the cantor takes ill on the holiest night of the year, Jakie Rabinowitz (now Jack Robin) must either renounce the stage and return to Orchard Street to sing the Kol Nidre for "his people," or forsake his people for his frivolous and individualistic success on the American stage. Melodramatic though it is, *The Jazz Singer* thus represents the question of assimilation perfectly posed, the immigrant family's clashing sensibilities perfectly scripted.

But this film of assimilation is not so much about cultural Americanization and the reweaving of tradition as it is, ultimately, about the whiteness of Jews. *The Jazz Singer* encapsulates the racial transformation of the Jews in the twentieth century in all its elements. Jolson's metamorphosis from Jakie Rabinowitz to the Americanized Jack Robin is predicated upon a literal racial redefinition, which is effected in its turn by the racial masquerade of the jazz singer's blackface routine. The film does mark "assimilation" in part by its attention to the imbibed spirit of New World popular culture, to the "Anglo-Saxon severity" of modern American clothing and styles, and to emergent patterns of desire and consumption ("Diamonds!" his mother exclaims upon opening a gift from Jack; "I got so much money, Mama, Rockefeller is jealous of me").<sup>65</sup> At bottom, however, it is not just that the immigrant becomes American by appropriating jazz and "singing nigger songs" in a German beer garden,



as various residents of the Jewish ghetto put it in the original screenplay. Rather, it is that, paradoxically, by donning blackface the Hebrew becomes Caucasian.<sup>66</sup>

Jolson's blackface routine becomes the vehicle for a complex racial triangulation among Hebrews (Jakie's family and their congregation), African-Americans (literally absent but ubiquitously suggested by the blackface itself), and white Americans (embodied by Mary). The burnt cork at once masks Jewishness and accentuates whiteness: in playing black, the Jew becomes white. On the one hand, the blackness of the blackface distances or alienates Jakie from the Jewish community: according to title card 49, "Orchard Street would have had some difficulty in recognizing Jakie Rabinowitz of Beth-El choir under the burnt cork of Jack Robin." Or again, as his neighbor Yudelson exclaims in title card 143 as he beholds the jazz singer in full burnt-cork regalia, "It talks like Jakie, but it looks like a nigger."<sup>67</sup>

And what is being hidden here, precisely? Significantly, throughout the screenplay Jewishness is written in as a *visible* marker; and Jewishness as race is effaced only by the whiteness created by the blackface routine. One might guess reasonably enough that certain physical properties would be assigned to Jewishness in a screenplay of the 1920s, but various stage directions remove all doubt: Yudelson is "a tall, spare Hebrew with a straggly beard"; the theater "is filled with a fashionable throng and a generous sprinkling of Jewish types"; another scene features "a typical businessman of the Hebraic type"; at the front of the synagogue "there is a steady stream of people entering, Jews, old and young, bearded and clean-shaven, women in shawls and stylish street attire." (Other white races, too, are marked by their unmistakable physicality: among the earliest shots in the film is one labeled simply, "Close-up Italian"; and Dr. O'Shaughnessy is described as "a big husky, greyhaired Irishman.")<sup>68</sup> The blackface thus racially revises Jolson by masking his physical Jewishness—it renders him, as titles 49 and 143 note, unrecognizable as a Jew.

But this is only half of the transformation. The blackness of the blackface not only masks Jewish physicality but also unites Jack with Mary by casting the actor's whiteness in stark relief. The film self-consciously plays on the white-and-black contrasts inherent in the minstrel form—as when, in one scene backstage, "Jack wipes a white glove across his eyes, leaving a white streak across his face"—thus heightening the visual impact of Jolson's white skin.<sup>69</sup> The white streaking effect is important to Jakie's overall transformation, but it is especially important to his liaison with

Mary: it is this harshly juxtaposed black and white that emphasizes Robin's whiteness—that is, his racial consanguinity with Mary.

"Playing a romantic scene in blackface may be something of an experiment," warns one stage direction, and it goes on to offer the director an alternative way of shooting the scene. But playing the love scene *without* blackface is rather a different kind of experiment—an experiment in interracial romance—and the blackface thus solves at least as many problems socially as it creates logistically. As the blackface turns Jolson white, it erases the racial "difference" between Jakie and the *shikse*, and transforms Jewishness itself into a mere matter of culture and religion (which Jack can continue to embrace). In the final scene, as Jolson sings the Kol Nidre for "his people," an onlooker exclaims, "You are listening to the stage's greatest blackface comedian singing to his God" (in the final film version the title reads simply, "a jazz singer—singing to his God").<sup>70</sup>

Ultimately, then, the burnt cork serves not only to change the race of the Jew, but also to eradicate race from *Judaism*: one might embrace the Hebrew God without necessarily being a "Hebrew type." Not incidentally, finally, the film polices the very boundaries whose creation it depicts: the whiteness of Jews that the film announces in its internal logic is reinforced by the external logic of its Jim Crow casting. The absence of African-Americans from this production about jazz reiterates Jordan Baker's assertion in the presence of Jimmy Gatz, "We're all white here."

As Jeffrey Melnick has remarked, *The Jazz Singer* is a kind of "nostalgic valentine" which marks the decline of blackface minstrelsy as a cultural form. Although this first talking picture was in some sense the very high point of the form, it also marks the end of an era in which blackface would be among the most popular forms in urban culture. But it is worth noting that the age of minstrelsy roughly coincides with the age of problematic whiteness. It would be a mistake to venture that the minstrel tradition accomplished any one thing exclusively. Indeed, the act of blacking up is complex: it provided a visual idiom for projecting, disavowing, and yet appropriating certain traits presumed to be racial; it was a means of cultural theft and political protest; and it gave voice to antimodernism and to a raucous white republicanism, as scholars like Michael Rogin have demonstrated.<sup>71</sup> Nonetheless, laying claim to whiteness through a deployment of contrasting blackness was certainly one of the things this form accomplished, and its declining popularity in the 1930s and after may have had something to do with immigrants' diminishing need for a whiteners. In any case, if Jakie Rabinowitz's use of blackface to make the



transition from Hebrew to Caucasian merely replicates several decades of practice among vernacular theater performers of various backgrounds, in 1927 there was a difference: the transformation was about to take hold. From the vantage point of the late twentieth century, it is the visual cue to a racial Hebrewness that strikes us as most peculiar, not Jack and Mary's daring interracial romance.

Whereas the blackface and the visual racial economy of *The Jazz Singer* represent a strategy for claiming whiteness paired with an unself-conscious symptomatology of the distinctions and hierarchies still presumed *within* whiteness, George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931) is a more meditative approach to race and races. *Black No More* is a biting satire of figures on all sides of the race question and on both sides of the color line. It is also a brilliant analysis of the fundamental position of race in American political economy and culture. The plot is propelled by the miraculous process invented by Dr. Junius Crookman, a "great and lucrative experiment of turning Negroes into Caucasians." As a result of his experimentation with a blanching skin disease that "both Negroes and Caucasians" may be susceptible to, Crookman comes up with a method by which "in three days the Negro becomes to all appearances a Caucasian." At a public unveiling of his invention, and as a powerful demonstration of his method's effects, Crookman points out "the most Nordic-looking person in the room" and explains that he is, in fact, Senegalese.<sup>72</sup> Virtually all of Harlem, it turns out, is eager to become Caucasian.

The story's central figure is the "Negro" Max Disher, who decides to become the "white" Matthew Fisher because, among other things, he wants to meet a certain white woman whom he has been able to admire only from afar. As Schuyler traces the career of this racial shape-shifter, he demonstrates the enormous stake that all kinds of people have in the racial status quo—not only outright white supremacists like the "Knights of Nordica" or the "Anglo-Saxon Association of America," but "Negro" leaders and cultural figures like "Santop Licorice" (Marcus Garvey), "Dr. Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard" (W. E. B. Du Bois), the leaders of "Dusky River Agricultural Institute" (Tuskegee), and Madam Sisseretta Blandish (Madam C. J. Walker). The erasure of racial distinction turns the nation upside down until, at last, "real" whites discover that Crookman's former "Negroes" tend now to be *whiter* than white, and so racial hierarchy is built anew on the inverse principle of dark-over-light.

Schuyler's twin themes throughout the novel are the unforgiving nature of the color line on the one hand, and the absolute social fabrication of

race on the other. Once Dishman had become Caucasian, for instance, such were the imperatives of American life that "there was no other alternative than to seek his future among the Caucasians with whom he now rightfully belonged." One could scarcely turn back. Nor, given the realities of power and its disposition, would one necessarily want to: "At last he felt like an American citizen." (Indeed, following the reasoning of 1790, having become white, "an American citizen" is precisely what Dishman had at last become.) And yet for all the social and political certainties that go along with being either a "Negro" or a "Caucasian," Schuyler argues, neither category really makes any sense at all. Visual cues are notoriously unreliable, for instance, as there are

plenty of Caucasians who have lips quite as thick and noses quite as broad as any of us. As a matter of fact there has been considerable exaggeration about the contrast between Caucasian and Negro features. The cartoonists and minstrel men have been responsible for it . . . many so-called Caucasians, particularly the Latins, Jews and South Irish, and frequently the most Nordic of peoples like the Swedes, show almost Negroid lips and noses.

Or again, even "blood" is dubious: genealogical statistics generated by a race "purity" law prove that more than fifty million "Anglo-Saxons" in fact have some measure of "black" blood.<sup>73</sup> It is this manufactured, arbitrary, *mistaken* quality of race, in fact, that gives such bite to Schuyler's observations on its primacy as an organizer of the nation's political and social life.

But though Schuyler was primarily concerned with the white-black color line, he had tremendous insight into the social relations on the white side of this divide as well. As the juxtaposition of the "Knights of Nordica," the "Anglo-Saxon Association of America," and Crookman's own experiment of "turning Negroes into Caucasians" suggests, Schuyler was keenly attuned to the vicissitudes of whiteness. Consider his very assertion, for example, that "many so-called Caucasians, particularly the Latins, Jews and South Irish, and frequently the most Nordic of peoples like the Swedes, show almost Negroid lips and noses." Here the self-undermining appellation "so-called Caucasians" has two distinct referents: the undergirding logic of the sentence seems to be that it is their "almost Negroid lips and noses" that call their "Caucasian" identity into question and render them "so-called Caucasians." There is no racial purity, and the lips and noses of these would-be "Caucasians" proclaim as much.



But Schuyler's division of the "Caucasian race," his assertion that suspect lips and noses are "particularly" found among "Latins, Jews and South Irish, and frequently the most Nordic of peoples like the Swedes," also gives the lie to the category "Caucasian" by evoking a series of counter-races whose salience had been so powerful in recent years. These peoples are "so-called Caucasians" not only because they may in fact be part "black," in other words, but because popular eugenic propaganda had so convincingly cast them as members of distinctive races.

Schuyler apprehended the shift that was just taking place in the reconsolidation of whiteness, and he drew upon the power of that observation to further his argument about the general fabrication of races—all races. These "Caucasians" were pulling a fast one, and Schuyler knew it more than a decade before Ruth Benedict, Ashley Montagu, and others had made "Caucasian, Negroid, and Mongoloid" the mantra of America's public discourse of "difference." Among the customers of Madame Sisseretta Blandish's beauty parlor were "two or three Jewish girls from downtown . . . [who] came up regularly to have their hair straightened because it wouldn't stand inspection in the Nordic world." Other references to racially subdivided whiteness include the depiction of one of Crookman's patients as an "ersatz Nordic"; a reference to the uptown businesses of "canny Hebrews"; the characterization of a German immigrant as a heavy "Teuton"; and mention of the popularly proclaimed virtues of "docile, contented, Anglo-Saxon labor."<sup>74</sup> By freezing this vision of racial difference at the very moment when such differences were melting away in the popular imagination, Schuyler rendered the core instability of race in accessible terms. If yesterday's "Nordics," "Latins," "Hebrews," "Teutons," and "Anglo-Saxons" could be today's "Caucasians," then how solid, after all, are the certainties that separate "Caucasian" from "Negro"? The novel is indeed about racial changeability, but not just the changeability of Crookman's imitation whites.

Schuyler not only depicts the superficial divisions among conceptual categories like "Anglo-Saxon," "Nordic," and "Hebrew," moreover; he explores the working of such distinctions in the power relations among these white peoples. The Knights of Nordica advance a pan-white-supremacist agenda, for example, as when one of their broadsides blares that "the racial integrity of the Caucasian Race is being threatened by the activities of a scientific black Beelzebub in New York." Schuyler identifies this kind of race allegiance in terms very similar to those used by Du Bois in his description of the "psychological wage" of whiteness: "As long as

the ignorant white masses could be kept thinking of the menace of the Negro to Caucasian race purity and political control, they would give little thought to labor organization."<sup>75</sup>

The "Anglo-Saxon Association of America," by contrast, represented something else again: members "believe in white supremacy the same as [the Knights of Nordica] but they claim that Anglo-Saxons are the cream of the white race and should maintain the leadership in American social, economic and political life." This group corresponds more closely with the eugenic organizations of the 1910s and 1920s than with pan-white supremacy. Indeed, its leader, Arthur Snobbcraft (who, incidentally, is "suspiciously swarthy for an Anglo-Saxon"), advances a frankly eugenic program that not only distinguishes among the white races but is framed in the good old, time-honored republican logic of "fitness for self-government." He proposed "sterilization of the unfit, meaning Negroes, aliens, Jews and other riff raff, and he had an abiding hatred of democracy." His pet scheme was to pass a "genealogical law" disfranchising all people "of Negro or unknown ancestry," as "good citizens could not be made out of such material."<sup>76</sup>

Later, as political battlelines are drawn, Schuyler notes that Jews and Catholics seem ready to support the nativist candidate purely on the strength of his staunchly antiblack program. "In this they were but running true to form, however, as they had usually been on the side of white supremacy in the old days when there was a Negro population observable to the eye."<sup>77</sup> Thus *Black No More* captures the social-political stakes of the nation's white-over-black power relations, especially for marginal whites who stand to benefit from inclusion as "Caucasians"; and yet it also depicts the racial struggle among whites, and the potentially diverging patterns of inclusion and exclusion summoned by a conceptual category like "Anglo-Saxon." Schuyler's attention to problematic whitenesses and the power struggles attending them, then, adds a second dimension to his primary concern for problematic blackness: the public fiction of race itself, and its tremendous power to decide the fortunes and misfortunes of the populace. Like all races, the Caucasian race is a fabrication—a fact made tragic by the inflexibility of the color line and the profound social and political consequences at stake in the public caprice of classification.<sup>78</sup>

A decade and a half after the appearance of *Black No More*, Laura Z. Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) offered yet another meditation on whiteness and "difference." Like *Black No More*, this novel evokes a



number of racial categories in motion and collision. Despite the transnational history of anti-Semitism that surely has inflected the Jewish experience in North America, Schuyler and Jolson's "Hebrews" nonetheless traveled the path of other white races through the historic vicissitudes from white, to non-Anglo-Saxon, to Caucasian. Hobson comments upon the last leg of this racial odyssey, from Semite or Hebrew to Caucasian, both consciously and unconsciously in *Gentleman's Agreement*.

Hobson was more interested in anti-Semitism than in Jewishness per se, but she could not write about the one without coming to some kind of understanding of the other; and in 1947 this meant taking up Jewishness as a race question. A Gentile journalist named Philip Green (played in the movie by Gregory Peck) is assigned a series on American anti-Semitism for a major news magazine. Looking for a fresh angle, he hits upon the idea of posing as a Jew—passing—and then writing an exposé of American anti-Semitism based on his own experience. "I Was Jewish for Six Months," this *tour de force* will be called. He actually does pull this off, and he finds out many interesting things along the way (not least, that most everyone he knows, including his fiancée, is anti-Semitic).

On its face, *Gentleman's Agreement* is unequivocal in its erasure of Jewish racial difference; indeed, whatever statement the novel seeks to make about Jewishness, and, finally, about justice, derives entirely from the central idea of *interchangeability*. Phil Green can experience anti-Semitism firsthand because he can pass as a Jew; and he can pass because, at bottom, there is no "difference" between Jews and Gentiles. (This, in turn, is what is so absurd about anti-Semitism, Hobson will have us conclude. What does it mean that a non-Jew can be the victim of Jew-hatred?)

But the text is at war with itself in a way that not only undermines Hobson's project of expunging racial Jewishness, but also wonderfully demonstrates the nature of racial categorization itself as ideology deeply entrenched. Hobson's novel offers a unique snapshot of the contest in the mid-twentieth century between a waning racial order that identified Jews as Semites or Hebrews, and the ascendant order by which their status as Caucasians would become more salient. Though clearly connected to a transnational history of Jewishness and anti-Semitism (it is no accident that the novel appears in the wake of the Holocaust), this contest nonetheless bears witness to shifting paradigms of race particular to the American context—shifts that at certain historical junctures also produced questions regarding the racial identity of Celts, Slavs, Mediterraneans,

and Iberics—categories that have faded from our visual lexicon as well as from our racial vocabulary.

The pivotal moment in Hobson's political project is when Green first decides that he could indeed pass as a Jew—that Jews and Gentiles are essentially interchangeable. In the movie, Gregory Peck runs over and checks himself out in the mirror. In the novel Green mentally scans his own physiognomy to make sure that such an imposture would be believable:

He checked on himself in his mind's eye—tall, lanky; sure so was Dave [Goldman, his Jewish friend], so were a hell of a lot of guys who were Jewish. He had no accent or mannerisms that were Jewish—neither did lots of Jews, and anti-Semitism was hitting them just the same. His nose was straight—so was Dave's, so were a lot of other guys'. He had dark eyes, dark hair, a kind of sensitive look . . . Brother, it was a cinch.

When his son asks him about anti-Semitism and Jewishness ("What *are* Jews anyhow?"), race is not in the lexicon with which Green is prepared to deal with the question. Jewishness is a religion, period; "Oh, they talk about the Jewish race, but never about the Catholic race or the Protestant race."<sup>79</sup>

Later Hobson takes up the race question overtly, referring to the (non-fictional) anthropologist Ernest Hooton's work on "the balderdash of race and types." Or again, as his fiancée struggles with her own anti-Semitism, she racializes and then quickly re-racializes Jews in her own thinking: having slipped and used the phrase "the Jewish race," she scrambles to correct herself: "She knew perfectly well that the three great divisions of mankind were the Caucasian race, the Mongoloid, the Negroid. She remembered [Phil's] finger pointing out a phrase in a pamphlet written by leading anthropologists. 'There is no Jewish race.'<sup>80</sup> Hobson thus endorsed a system of difference not yet fully ascendant in 1947—a system by which Jews are Caucasian rather than Hebrew or Semitic—and she willfully sought to eradicate the vestiges of an older order based upon white races and Anglo-Saxon supremacism.

In a social context like the United States, however, a politics of justice based upon literal "sameness" is highly problematic. The ideological move entailed by this revision of Jewishness is fraught with implications for other racially defined groups. The broadest, most sweeping stakes of



Philip Green's project (and hence of Laura Z. Hobson's project) are summed up when Green poses the rhetorical question, "What the hell chance have we of getting decent with thirteen million Negroes if we can't lick the much easier business of anti-Semitism?" Here, by a kind of circular comment, the novel demonstrates its own political limitations: there is no chance of "getting decent" with everyone in this nation of nations if decency is predicated upon literal "sameness." And yet "sameness" itself is both constructed and arbitrary. The thing that makes anti-Semitism an "easier business" is Hobson's own decision to challenge the perceived "difference" dividing Anglo-Saxon from Hebrew while leaving intact that which divides "Caucasian" from "Negroid" from "Mongoloid." What makes anti-Semitism an "easier business," in short, is Hobson's unconscious endorsement of the color line. The social stakes of recasting the entire Jewish race as "Caucasian" were foreshadowed by the popular 1940s appellation "white Jews" as applied to those who, in the words of Green's secretary, were not "the kikey ones." Indeed, a conversation between Green and his mother about his boyhood friend Petey Alamacho (who was Mexican) overtly suggests that there are levels of "difference" whose bridging is less certain than in the case of the presumably consanguine Gentiles and Jews.<sup>81</sup>

Hence although the title is meant to refer to restrictive housing covenants in places like New Canaan, Connecticut, the most portentous "gentleman's agreement" here is *this* agreement to expose the constructedness of racial difference, then not to *unthink* it, but simply to *rethink* it as "color." What one cannot learn from this book about restrictive housing covenants is that in 1946, the year before the novel appeared, in the single city of Chicago in the months of May and June alone there were more than thirty residential bombings whose aim was not the expulsion of Jews by non-Jews, but the expulsion of "Negroes" by "Caucasians." The point is not simply that, by her silence on this bit of social context, Hobson misses an opportunity to take her critique further. More, by the particular ways in which the novel frames questions of "difference" and justice, it provides no moral syntax for commenting upon antiblack racism at all (other than simply to say that it represents the "tougher business" to which anti-Semitism is the "easier business"). Anti-Semitism is incomprehensible *primarily* because Jewish "difference" is called into question by an unreliable Jewish physicality. Wholly outside the novel's moral compass are cases where questions of "difference" and justice cannot be re-

solved by an argument of "sameness" indicated by literal interchangeability. Recast as biblical injunction, *Gentleman's Agreement* reads, "Do unto others—who could pass for you—as you would have others do unto you—if you could pass for them." This fairly captures the central tendency in American political culture from the 1920s to the 1960s: as race moved to the center of political discussion nationally, "difference" among the former white races diminished, race itself was recast as color, and race-as-difference was reified along the lines of what Hobson (after Hooten and Benedict and others) called the "three great divisions of mankind." American political life was *this* gentleman's agreement writ large.

In the novel itself, however, there is a second, countervailing current. We now know that the paradigm of racial difference that reified Caucasian unity won out. The nineteenth century's simian caricatures of Celts strike us as oddities; phrases like "the Jewish race," if not totally faded from our popular political lexicon, likely strike us, not as naturalized and invisible, but as noticeable and vaguely sinister. But as Hobson was writing in the 1940s, the residual scheme of distinct white races still had significant purchase on popular ideology and perception—Hobson's included. Is there such a thing as "looking Jewish"? Even Philip Green himself wonders. "Does Dave *look* Jewish? Yes, he supposed he did, now that he asked . . . Where was it, this Jewishness? . . . What makes people look or not look Jewish?" The most dramatic and telling passage, however, is Hobson's description of a guest at a cocktail party: "Lieberman was plump as well as short, middleaged, with the face of a Jew in a Nazi cartoon, the beaked nose, the blue jowls, and the curling black hair. Phil saw all of it, and the fine candid eyes."<sup>82</sup>

Despite a plot that turns on the presumption of interchangeability, it is this view of Jewish "difference" marked by a distinct Jewish physicality that silently gains the upper hand in the narrative. Despite Hobson's proposition of interchangeability, the remarkable fact is that in this novel, which is all about passing, the character who does all the passing *never actually passes*. That is, Phil Green's passing as a Jew depends upon his *telling* everyone that he is a Jew, and getting the rumor mill started ("I'm going to be Jewish, that's all. Just tell people I am, and see what happens"). Everyone *hears* that he is a Jew and believes it; but no one ever once (mis)takes him for one. The idea pivots on the same logic as a joke told of Michael Arlen, and quoted in the novel: when asked if he was "really" Armenian, Arlen answered, "Would anyone *say* he was Armenian if he



wasn't Armenian?"<sup>83</sup> In 1947 in the United States, would a non-Jew ever claim to be Jewish? Phil Green's passing is predicated on his telling a lie that no one would ever have reason to question.

Not only do people not take him for Jewish until he announces that he is, but in fact they always comfortably assume that he *is not*: a cabdriver makes an anti-Semitic remark about the Jews on Park Avenue, comfortable in his assumption that Phil Green the passenger is not Jewish; a doctor makes an anti-Semitic remark about Jewish doctors who always overcharge, comfortable in his assumption that Phil Green the patient is not Jewish. Even when Green experiments by checking in at a restricted hotel in the country, he is about to be admitted until he raises a fuss about whether or not the hotel is in fact restricted, thereby arousing suspicions.<sup>84</sup> Green can volunteer to be outraged by anti-Semitism, in other words, but he cannot volunteer to be victimized by it.

The novel's "real" Jews, meanwhile, never need to announce it; their physiognomy always announces it for them. Lieberman looks like a Jew in a Nazi cartoon. Phil Green's friend Dave Goldman (who Green has decided he looks "just like") is verbally assaulted at a bar by a drunken soldier who doesn't like "yids"—precisely the kind of affront which Green is never subjected to in the course of his experimentation. And when Green inspects his new secretary, Elaine Wales, he notes that "high cheekbones made her seem Scandinavian, Slavic, something foreign and interesting." She turns out to be not Elaine Wales but Estelle Walovsky, a Jew who is passing. Foreign indeed.<sup>85</sup>

It is ultimately through Lieberman, a Jew distinctly marked by classically Jewish physicality, that Hobson attempts to resolve the question of racial Jewishness. "I have no religion," remarks Lieberman,

so I am not Jewish by religion. Further, I am a scientist, so I must rely on science which tells me I am not Jewish by race since there's no such thing as a distinct Jewish race. As for ethnic group or Jewish type, we know I fit perfectly the Syrian or Turkish or Egyptian type—there's not even such a thing, anthropologically, as the Jewish type . . . I will go forth and state flatly, "I am not a Jew." . . . With this face that becomes not an evasion but a new principle.<sup>86</sup>

Here is Hobson's attempt to bring the warring elements of the narrative together—to suture the politics of interchangeability to her recognition of "difference" marked by Jewish physicality. There are two ways of look-

ing at this "new principle" Hobson is groping for: if the New Principle is a politics of justice based not upon sameness but upon an acceptance of "difference," then it is a principle that the novel itself never adequately articulates; if the New Principle is a politics of unharassed *whiteness*, the novel articulates it all too well, regardless of Hobson's nobler intentions.

The dilemmas that Hobson sought to resolve and those that she unwittingly generated point to a fundamental dynamic of America's racially saturated political culture. *Gentleman's Agreement* is like a cultural videotape in which the fluidity of race and the collision of racial categories are captured in motion. By the logic of its "politics of sameness," the novel indicates the white-supremacist dynamic that was historically written into the racial odyssey from Hebrew (or Celt or Slav or Iberian or Levantine) to Caucasian. As we have seen, Hobson was scarcely alone in her tendency to expunge racial "difference" in one area in such a way as to leave it intact, unquestioned, unproblematic, and thus further naturalized elsewhere; this tacit, white-over-nonwhite dynamic in Hobson's liberal effort to rethink race was a staple of the social sciences. The novel demonstrates the ideological, constructed basis of a conception like "Caucasian," and it indicates the social and political capital inherent in the category. And finally, it suggests how that capital itself is contingent upon the category's seeming to be not ideologically constructed, but an irreducible fact of biology. Ultimately Hobson could not shake that conception of a racial Jewishness that posed so convincingly as a biological fact, just as we in our turn, a half-century later, have trouble shaking the conception of a Caucasian race that has so convincingly taken its place.

In the years after *Gentleman's Agreement* appeared, this cultural figure of the Caucasian ascended in a flourishing genre of urban realism that brought together some of the most salient political strands of the 1950s and 1960s—a changing urban geography, "ethnic" territoriality, housing discrimination, the fight for scarce resources, and, often, juvenile delinquency. Novels like Jo Sinclair's *The Changelings* (1955) and Edwin O'Connor's *Edge of Sadness* (1961) at once accepted and popularized the notion of "ethnic" difference as occupying an epistemological plane distinct from racial difference, even in their liberal attempts to question the bases of antagonisms rooted in racial thinking. "All that summer," begins *The Changelings*, "as no white people came to rent the empty, upstairs suites of the Valenti house or the Golden house, tension had mounted in the street. Only Negroes came."<sup>87</sup> Italian and Jew are here joined as con-



sanguine “whites” in contrast to invading “Negroes”; and, later, it is the depth of the division between the black and the white races that renders Vincent and Clara’s friendship across the color line so extraordinary.

In films like *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), too, an ethnic hodge-podge (Dadier, Katz, Murdock, Warnke) is made to stand for whiteness (and thus for Americanness). “I don’t care if a boy’s skin is black, yellow, or purple,” says Warnke, the principal of this multi-ethnic high school. “He gets the same breaks, the same teaching, as any white boy.”<sup>88</sup> Whiteness thus becomes the normative experience at the school; and in presenting its “lesson in democracy” through the relationship of a white teacher and his black student (Sidney Poitier), the film ultimately erases whatever distinctions are said to exist among the multi-ethnic group of whites themselves. In the teacher Dadier and Warnke’s heated discussion of “what should not be said” in a democracy, for instance, the epithet “Mick” vanishes behind the veil of concern regarding the more explosive epithet “nigger”; and so Irish difference is rendered as no difference.

The tone and the logic of this kind of multi-ethnic pan-whiteness are matched and conveyed most succinctly in the opening stage direction of *West Side Story* (1957): “the Sharks are Puerto Ricans, the Jets an anthology of what is called ‘American.’” This anthology, we come to find, consists chiefly of “Wops,” “Micks,” and “Polacks.” Although the division between immigrant and native is not without significance in this conflict (“The mother of Tony was born in Poland; the father still goes to night school. Tony was born in America, so that makes him an American. But us? Foreigners!”), it is race that quietly confers rights and decides claims to national belonging. It is not necessarily the length of their residence in America that renders this rag-tag bunch of Wops, Micks, and Polacks “an anthology of what is called ‘American,’” in other words. It is their whiteness, just as it is the Sharks’ darkness that visibly marks them as national outsiders. Lieutenant Schrank refers to the Sharks as “half-breeds,” then menaces: “Clear out, Spics. Sure; it’s a free country and I ain’t got the right. But it’s a country with laws; and I can find the right. I got the badge, you got the skin.” Or again, amid some quick banter between the rival gangs:

Anita: Will you let me pass?

Snowboy: She’s too dark to pass.

Similarly, whereas Anita’s Americanization is linked to consumption (“Automobile in America, / Chromium steel in America, / Wire-spoke

wheel in America—/ Very big deal in America!”) Maria’s Americanization is both sexual and racial: in choosing the “Polack,” the “Spic” will become “American.” As in *The Changelings* and *Blackboard Jungle*, white “ethnicity” is deployed throughout *West Side Story* not so much as a marker of “difference,” but as suggestive of mere variety in a way that consolidates whiteness and accentuates the distance between whiteness and its racial others.<sup>89</sup>

Perhaps most dramatically, in *Corner Boy* (1957) Herbert Simmons described the shifting cultural geography of a Midwestern city in these terms: “The black belt had spread ten miles in each direction in the last twenty years, and white families had fled, to avoid the plague further west and north, so that now the downtown district was almost completely surrounded by Negro communities. The Caucasians had to come alarming distances to go to work and shop.” Among the “Caucasians” whom we meet straight away is Papaseppe Garveli. Much later, after Garveli’s daughter, Georgia, has been killed in a car accident and rumors abound about her “interracial” affair with a black neighbor, Jake Adams, “on Peabody Avenue the gulf widened between the Garvelis and the [black] neighborhood . . . one thing was clear, the Garvelis were white, as white as all the white people in the world.”<sup>90</sup>

As white as all the white people in the world. This was perhaps the fondest aspiration concealed behind the mask of the blackface minstrel; it was a certainty called into question by George Schuyler in his dismantling of race and races; and it was a biological fact secretly doubted by Laura Z. Hobson in her quiet distinction between “real” and “unreal” Jews despite a central trope of racial passing. But by the 1950s “as white as all the white people in the world” is indeed what the inferior European races—those genetic “bad investments” of Henry Cabot Lodge’s day—had largely become, if not in socioeconomic status, then certainly in both scientific and popular thinking regarding the “natural divisions of mankind.” In 1960 one of them would be elected president.

Looking back at an earlier era’s race consciousness from the vantage point of the 1940s, Ruth Benedict wrote, “In all the American racist volumes there was an immediate political objective: revision of the immigration laws. The American temper had changed since the days when our motto was ‘No distinction of race, creed, or color’ and we offered an asylum for the oppressed.”<sup>91</sup> And when, we ought to ask, was *that*? At the time that



Benedict was writing, the phrase "white persons" had been on the books for nearly a century and a half and still operated in naturalization law, although it had been modified by amended references to peoples of "African nativity and descent." Benedict's view typifies the liberal tendency to see turn-of-the-century racism as an anomaly rather than as a revision or an extension of the long-standing racial codes which had regulated citizenship since the first Congress took up the question in 1790. It is a tendency that rests upon a bedrock of Caucasian consanguinity among white peoples and upon a tacit acceptance of normative whiteness as the invisible marker of true citizenship. Only when "immigrant" means "European-American," and only when the immigrant experience is cast as an "ethnic" saga free of any racial valences, can the racism of the eugenics era of immigration restriction be seen as a departure from standard American practice.

Similarly, in *Race and Nationality in American Life* (1957), in tones now astonishing for their optimism, Oscar Handlin announced that Americans had "ceased to believe in race" after the 1930s. The "example of Europe" during the Nazi period, among other things, had "destroyed racism, the hate movements, and discrimination" in the United States; and "science, which created race as an intellectual concept, also helped destroy it. For it is the strength of science to contain within itself the means of its own redemption." Later in the same volume Handlin asked, "Is our belief in democracy coupled with the reservation that it is workable only in favored climes and in the hands of favored men, or is this a way of life open to all?" The question itself was not new; and (although Handlin merely posed it rhetorically) the answer is embedded in American history itself—in the "free white persons" clause of 1790, in slavery and the Black Codes, in miscegenation laws, in Indian wars and Chinese Exclusion, and in eugenically derived immigration quotas. "The national-origins quota system and segregation," Handlin continued,

rest on totally false assumptions. They are the products of men who lost confidence. With their uneasy fears they sought refuge in a kind of withdrawal from the world about them, hoping for security in the purity of their own race. Out of the biased science of the early part of this century they drew the distorted notion of a fundamental difference between black and white, between old and new immigrants. From that notion there followed the idea that different groups of men enjoyed different capacities for becoming American citizens.<sup>92</sup>

This interpretation of race and racism as enjoying only a momentary reign in American political culture entails a rather remarkable erasure of the long history of race thinking across time: if Handlin's certainty that race thinking had been repudiated once and for all was perhaps a trifle premature, his positing an egalitarian "confidence" that had momentarily been "lost" in the early twentieth century is more problematic still. Unequivocal confidence in the fitness of all peoples for self-government, regardless of race, had been rare enough from the Revolutionary generation on down. But mid- to late-twentieth-century liberalism has demanded a certain amnesia regarding both the naturalization law of 1790 and the fact that today's Caucasians had ever been anything other than a single, biologically unified, and consanguine racial group. Liberalism's cherished myths of Golden-Door opportunity and the fundamental openness of American society require a repression of that racial odyssey in which various Teague O'Regans passed through several vicissitudes of whiteness from "bog-trotters" and "aborigines" to full-fledged "whites." And liberalism requires that we forget the extent to which that whiteness itself has been conferred or claimed largely as a result of confrontations with various versions of "de vile savage," who first marked, and later stressed, the "natural" boundaries of American citizenship.