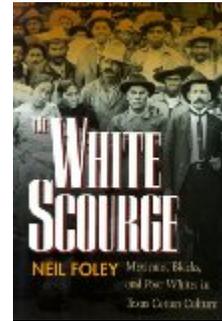


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Neil Foley. *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. xv + 326 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-20723-3.

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## Whiteness Lost/Whiteness Regained

Phrases such as “Anglo,” or “Mexican,” are so broad and vague as to have limited explanatory power in historical discourse. Thus, there has long been a need for a monograph that points the way out of the binary woods (black/white, Mexican/Anglo) toward a more complicated mode of analysis, and Neil Foley has heeded that call. His new book has successfully woven together a complex story that explains the shifting boundaries of race (at least in terms of whiteness) in nineteenth and twentieth century central Texas. The goal of the book, therefore, is to overcome rigid notions of race and to posit a new understanding of whiteness that explains how not all whites were equally privileged. Hence, Foley examines the shifting, variegated nature of social constructions of whiteness from the Texas Revolution through the New Deal.

Focusing on the region bounded by Dallas, Houston, Corpus Christi, and San Antonio in order to explain the nature of whiteness in the context of the cotton culture of central Texas, he asserts that whiteness was neither a monolithic, nor racially inclusive construction. Rather, whiteness was a “complex social and economic matrix wherein racial power and privilege were shared, not always equally, by those who were able to construct identities as Anglo-Saxons, Nordics, Caucasians, or simply whites” (p. 7). Foley cogently argues throughout the book that the attainment of whiteness was the goal for various white ethnic groups, including Mexicans.

Expanding on the works of Noel Ignatiev, David

Roediger, and Alexander Saxton, Foley examines how whiteness was constructed as superior and normative. Further, he shows the ways in which the presence of Mexicans undermined a racial paradigm that was suited for ordering social relations in other parts of the United States, but which was inapplicable in the tri-racial social environment of Texas. As Foley explains it, the primary potential beneficiaries of this racial paradigm were poor whites and Mexicans who, over time, either ‘became white,’ or moved closer to whiteness in social status. Africans remained marked most clearly as ‘other’ and remained isolated at the bottom of the social structure.

Most of the discussion of women appears in chapter six, “The Whiteness of Manhood: Women, Gender Identity, and Men’s Work on the Farm.” This concentrated discussion of women does not, however, marginalize women in the text. Rather, Foley uses the chapter to detail the ways in which gender identity translated into daily experience. Through each chapter Foley sustains a focus on the power of gender constructions as they affected race and work roles. The result is an artfully woven gendered perspective throughout the narrative which shows, at various points, how notions of work and race were masculinized or feminized. Thus, in this work, gender means far more than ‘what women were doing.’ It becomes part of the fabric of the analysis.

The most powerful impact of Foley’s book is the way in which he shows the existence of degrees of white-

ness. He persuasively points out that while throughout the period under study whiteness was understood as superior, the presence of poor whites in the cotton belt undermined the possibility of making whiteness universally based solely on skin color or ethnic background. Poor whites reminded elite whites of the malleability of racial constructions that marked social privilege, and underscored the very real possibility of downward mobility.

By bringing together theoretical assumptions of race, class and gender and linking the relationships between agricultural capitalism and social constructions of race, Foley has successfully transcended what he refers to as “the black-white and Mexican-Anglo binaries of southern and western race relations that inform the history of Mexicans and African Americans in Texas” (pp. 15-16). And while Foley’s deconstruction of monolithic whiteness is powerfully presented, the overall work would have been improved had he addressed more fully the impact of class differentiation among Mexican Americans, although admittedly that might have proven difficult in light of the rural nature of his focus on cotton production. The scope of his study allows for the examination of ways in which Mexican farmers attempted to lay claim to the privileges afforded by whiteness, but there is an en-

tirely different middle-class, urban aspect of this desire for whiteness that is touched on only in a very cursory manner.

Foley has written a superbly argued work that persuasively moves our discussion of race away from rigid binary categories toward a more complicated, yet fruitful understanding of how racial categories are socially constructed and affected by a variety of influences. His use of a plethora of sources such as governmental records, personal papers, organizational records, and oral interviews has allowed him to create a richly textured, multi-leveled analysis. The photographs he has included add to the narrative by visually emphasizing his argument for a variety of experiences within racial categories. Readers will notice that the book revisits several chapters in Texas history and covers ground that has already been trod. Yet, what is stimulating and important about this work is the way in which the author brings a fresh eye to this historical territory and finds in it a new significance.

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