



Andrew Gyory. *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xii + 354 pp. \$32.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-8078-4739-8.



Matthew Frye Jacobson. *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998. x + 338 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-06371-6.



Reviewed by Louis C. Anthes

Published on H-Law (April, 1999)

"All Africa is black or tawny; Asia chiefly tawny; America (exclusive of the newcomers) wholly so. And in Europe, the Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians, and Swedes are generally what we call a swarthy complexion; as are the Germans also, the Saxons only excepted, who, with the English, make the principle body of white people on the face of the earth. I could wish their numbers were increased" (Benjamin Franklin, 1751).

Franklin's racial taxonomy is hardly an oddity from late colonial British North America. In truth, the myth underlying it persisted through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Though the particulars changed, Americans continually color-coded their visions of the one and the many.

Two recent books examine color-coding in American history. Andrew Gyory's *Closing the Gate* and Matthew Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color* explore the realm lying between "black" and "white" through the lens of immigration history. Gyory focuses on the history of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882; Jacobson offers a survey of the history of European immigration. Both authors accept race as constructed, but they emphasize differently how such constructions have been made. Whereas Gyory focuses on labor and political history, Jacobson approaches the topic from cultural history. Taken together, these two works demonstrate that race consciousness in America history has been top-down, bottom-up, and all-around.

Gyory, an independent scholar who received his Ph.D. in history from the University of Massachusetts, asks a "simple question: Why did the United States pass the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882?" (p. 1). Not surprisingly, his simple question deserves a not-so simple answer, and it in fact, requires rejecting three theses that historians have previously offered: first, that Californians demanded the law; second, that a racist atmosphere pervaded nineteenth-century American culture; third, that the national labor movement lobbied for the law. In a carefully documented presentation, Gyory argues that "The Chinese Exclusion Act provides a classic example of top-down politics and opens a unique window for viewing the political system of the Gilded Age" (p. 15).

At the heart of Gyory's argument lies a distinction that he claims most Americans east of the Rocky Mountains accepted. He notes that throughout the 1870s, "the bulk of eastern workers ... remained steadfast in the opposition to imported labor and support for voluntary immigration" (pp. 44, 67). And so, although most favored immigration regulation, they aimed to end "contract labor"--the practice of hiring immigrant workers in groups. According to Gyory, the distinction between "importation" and "immigration" represented a solidarity "from below," as workers recognized employers importing Chinese labor as an attempt to weaken their movement. It is the strongest claim of his book, and the clarity with which he presents it earns him a respectable place in the historiography about anti-Chinese politics in American history.

Although labor solidarity at times looked forward to international socialism (pp. 88), it also recalled the ideals of abolitionism and the politics of Free Labor, which communicated certain meanings of "freedom" dear to those movements. For example, in a debate over whether Congress should strike the word "white" from the 1790 law limiting citizenship to "free white persons," one Republican senator from Wisconsin proposed in-

stead limiting citizenship by creating a religious test for immigrants, barring unrepentant "pagans." In the same debate, Senator Lyman Trumbull, author of the Civil Rights Act of 1866, rhetorically asked his fellow Senators: "is it proposed to deny the right of naturalization to the Chinaman, who is infinitely above the African in intelligence, in manhood, and in every respect?" (pp. 51). Such remarks, which betrayed other chauvinisms in the name of protecting Chinese immigrants, were also echoed in the rhetoric of striking workers. In the Cigar Makers' strike of 1877 in New York City, one labor newspaper observed that the Chinese had proven to be reliable picketers and noted that the Chinese "showed themselves capable of REAL civilization" (pp. 98).

Gyory often underanalyzes the racial meanings implicit here. By emphasizing how little anti-Chinese sentiment existed outside California, Gyory overlooks how race informed solidarity on the east coast. For instance, Gyory describes one St. Patrick's Day banquet in Connecticut, at which the director of a Chinese Educational Mission, Yung Wing, told attendees of his hopes that the "two races progress in Christian education and civilization" (pp. 92). For Gyory, such tributes represented a kind of "interethnic unity." But he misses how both groups conceived of themselves as having "racial," not "ethnic," identity, and ignores that "unity" was articulated in terms of "Christianity" and "civilization."

Gyory ignores how ideas about race often consolidated, rather than divided, Americans. Ideas such as Christianity and civilization, which when not explicitly associated with "whiteness" (though they often were --see, e.g. p. 194), could imply a shared identity of race-lessness. This particular idea of race, as being an attribute of the civilized Christian, goes to the heart of the pro-immigration / anti-importation distinction. Only by admitting, assimilating, and converting, Chinese immigrants one at a time could native-born Americans accept them. As one Massachusetts worker

revealingly opined: "I don't object to their coming here. Let 'em come single-handed, like other emigrants, and take their chance. But they come banded together. That isn't right" (pp. 42). Such typical thoughts, rather than those coming from figures like Dennis Kearney, constantly led Congress to consider passing laws, just short of total exclusion, aimed at restricting Chinese immigrants from coming as single men, rather than with families (p. 213), or from coming "together" on boats, fifteen or more at a time (pp. 136-68). Although Gyory argues that political "manipulation" was the "essence" of anti-Chinese politics (p. 257), we might properly suspect that its "essence" also entailed its opposite: an "acquiescence" to the values of a kind of American individualism rooted in certain ideals about Christian civilization.

In contrast to Andrew Gyory's professedly "top-down" history, Matthew Frye Jacobson, an assistant professor of American Studies and History at Yale University, decentralizes racial politics in his survey of European immigration to the United States. "Racial categories themselves," he writes, "reflect competing notions of history, peoplehood, and collective destiny by which power has been organized and contested on the American scene" (p. 9). Emphasizing racial "fluidity," "vicissitude," and "mutability," Jacobson's account seeks to demonstrate that to "write about race in American culture is to exclude virtually nothing" (p. 11). If his project seems so broad as to be meaningless, he is aware of this irony, since he describes his project as rendering something "at once so thick" and yet so "vaporous." In other words, race does not exist, yet it exists all-around.

The thesis of *Whiteness of a Different Color* is principally that the history of European immigration should not be represented uncritically in terms of the history of "ethnicity." As he complains: "historians have most often cast the history of nineteenth-century immigration in the logic of twentieth-century 'ethnic' groups" (p. 6). In the spirit of David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness:*

Race and the Making of the American Working Class (1991), and Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: Volume One: Racial Oppression and Social Control* (1994), Jacobson argues that what needs to be understood is how different Europeans have always been ascribed a place in America's racial color-coding scheme, only to be caught in the push and pull of, what W.E.B. DuBois aptly named, the "wages of whiteness."

Jacobson's important book helps to fill an important gap in the literature about the history of European immigrants assuming different racial identities in the United States. Many legal scholars will welcome it, as it substantiates an argument that Harvard Law School Professor Patricia Williams has made about the impoverishment of contemporary racial discourse: "I suspect that a realization that a culture of whiteness exists is occasioned only rarely. ... [P]erhaps it is easier to look at immigrant communities of those whom we now call whites in order to recapture the extent to which acculturation in the United States is assimilationist in a deeply color-coded sense" (Patricia Williams, "Metro Broadcasting, Inc. v. FCC: Regrouping in Singular Times," 104 *Harvard Law Review* 530 (1990)).

For example, Jacobson explains how immigrants from Italy in the 1890s lived in a "racial middle ground" within the binary world of white-over-black. Though entitled to citizenship according to the Naturalization Law of 1790, which permitted "free white persons" to naturalize, Italians in the Jim Crow south were socially segregated by self-ascribed whites, who referred to them as "dagoes" and "white niggers" (p. 57). As Jacobson points out, color itself was not simply determinative of race, as if it could be, but was associated with a set of "social arbiters" such as manners, employment, and housing: "Italians were known to have been lynched for alleged crimes, or even for violating local racial codes by 'fraternizing' with blacks." As one merchant in New Orleans

complained at the time, "I had rather have a thousand Chinamen than one Italian" (p. 58).

On the other hand, though, European immigrants could also try and claim the privileges of identifying as white. By the middle of the twentieth century in fact, claims to whiteness tended to dominate the thinking of those identifying as descendants of European immigrants. "As if by collective fiat," Jacobson observes about the 1930s, "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'" (p. 96).

A consequence of Jacobson's analysis is his provocative claim that liberal coalition politics that constituted the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s led to unintended consequences that did not benefit blacks: "[I]n forging a new politics of racial justice along an axis of black and white, progressives did help to shift the most salient lines of racial identity, beginning at a moment when the consolidated whiteness of the new immigrants was not at all a forgone conclusion" (p. 272). That is to say, the very effort of assimilating blacks into "white" America reaffirmed European immigrants' place there. In the name of racial justice, the Civil Rights movement helped settle an identity of "white" for Europeans who had previously been troubled by that same identity.

The virtue of Jacobson's book--his attention to the fluidity of color-coding, its historicity--is also perhaps its vice. By taking in the whole scenery of race, it loses the sense of focus that Gyory's book nicely provides. Gyory's book has the virtue of showing how race was mobilized politically to change the law. America's politicians thus appear to bear responsibility for racism. By contrast, Jacobson seems to suggest that traditional examples

of racial coalition-building have been of severely limited effect.

At the same time, though, because of his broad sweep of history, Jacobson is able to reveal previously ignored ways in which anti-racism coalitions have succeeded without yielding to assimilationist ideology. For instance, Jacobson calls attention to the case of American Communist August Yokinen, a Finnish immigrant accused of failing to intervene while others tried to expel black workers from attending a dance at a Finnish Club in Harlem, New York. For his crime of inaction, the Party put Yokinen on trial before "1500 white and Negro workers," and he was "convicted" and "sentenced" to promote racial equality (pp. 251-54). Jacobson shows how passively identifying as white, and then not acting in the face of racist violence, was, for New York Communists, regarded as racist itself. In this episode, racial politics became not simply a liberal program of including members of an "out" group, and so defining the "we" as equal Americans. The organizers of Yokinen's trial wanted to go deeper, forcing people to be constantly aware of how people assert race, without seeming to assert it.

For a country that constitutionalized a system of racial slavery and legally naturalized only "free white persons," the study of the history of immigration to the United States must always account for its founding myths about color and difference. As works on immigration history, *Closing the Gates* and *Whiteness of a Different Color* remind us that attempts at legal and social exclusion (blackness), at the same time, have always meant legal and social inclusion (whiteness). Scholars who become familiar with the arguments of these two important and provocative books will find that no group or person in American history has escaped this predicament.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the au-

thor and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-law>

Citation: Louis C. Anthes. Review of Gyory, Andrew. *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act.* ; Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race.* H-Law, H-Net Reviews. April, 1999.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3021>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.