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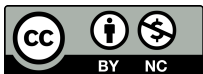
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Pat Jennings and Meredith Redlin

Constituting White Identities

disClosure interviews David Roediger

David Roediger is among those pathbreaking scholars breathing fresh life into labor history.¹ In contrast to approaches that treat race as additive to class, as a function of class, and/or as simply a divisive strategy in social relations of labor, Roediger attempts to situate class and race as relational—as mutually determining social constructions. The understanding that racialization—the process of “othering”—is key to the formation of national identity and labor republicanism, is at the crux of Roediger’s well known works, *The Wages of Whiteness* and *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness*.² Through his analyses of race and class as mutually influencing and interpenetrating processes, Roediger enriches the body of work on whiteness that is emerging from, and crossing the boundaries of, multiple disciplinary sites.

David Roediger was invited to participate in the Spring 1997 Social Theory Lecture Series at the University of Kentucky. In keeping with the theme of the series, *whiteness*, Roediger spoke on *Studying Whiteness: An African American Tradition*. We had the pleasure of speaking to David Roediger about his past and present work. Our conversation wandered through topics that ranged from the relationship between theory and representations of race and labor to questions of essentialism and multiple forms of subordination. This interview presented the opportunity for Roediger to clarify themes in his existing works, to respond to criticism of his work, and to provide us with some new and

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interesting insights.

The interview begins with a dialogue on theory. We first address the issue of theoretical paradigms and first causes. First cause approaches typically argue that racial subordination is caused by capitalism. In other words, race is derived from class. This debate has significance for how race and class are viewed and, consequently, for views on social justice and social change. We then move to a more detailed discussion of the relationship between race, capitalism, and social justice. This dialogue attempts to clarify Roediger's views on the work of William Julius Wilson and on Wilson's program for racial uplift through economic change. The influence of poststructuralism on Roediger's work and the relationship between Marxism and poststructuralism is then examined. This is followed by questions that address Roediger's view on white ethnicity as an essential identity. A discussion on multiple forms of subordination in the construction of whiteness ensues. The interview then moves toward a discussion on the role of race in academic work on whiteness. Recent critiques on studies of whiteness bring to light the possibility that these studies act to place whites in the center of academic discourse on race. Finally, the interview ends with a discussion of historical methodology and Roediger's relationship to traditional historical methods.

race or class? theoretical foundations, first causes, and social change

disClosure: We would like to talk to you about the origins of race and class, the debate on first causes, and the debate surrounding reductionism; that is, the tendency to reduce race to class or class to race. In a footnote to his introductory discussion on the history of competition between European immigrants and African Americans in *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California*, Tomas Almaguer critiques your work by stating,

The most recent restatement of this contention can be found in David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class...* Although he acknowledges both the material and discursive dimensions of white racial formation, Roediger ultimately identifies two "needs" of capitalism as the key determinants of the racialization process. In outlining his main thesis, Roediger contends that "whiteness was a way in which white workers responded to a fear of dependency on wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline" (p.13). This class reductionism and functionalist logic obscures the ways in which racialization is a defining feature of the imposition of white supremacy, not merely the consequence of proletarianization and the structuring of the labor process under

capitalism. As I have argued here, the very positioning of ethnic groups and placement of individuals within the social relations of production was predicated on who had—and who did not have—privileged access to the class structure. This opportunity for class mobility was fundamentally a racial issue, not the imperative of capitalist class relations, in nineteenth-century California.³

Almaguer seems to be making the claim that your work treats racialization as a function of ethnic competition and, accordingly, that you reduce race to class. How would you respond to Almaguer's criticism?

David Roediger: I like Almaguer's book a lot. I even liked the criticism when I first read the book because among radical historians I get criticized from the opposite direction. The critique is that I liquidate class and move into this airy area of culture. And, my work is pitted against Barbara Fields' work [a Marxist historian]. In another part of this quote Almaguer connects my work with Barbara's which I think is a much more accurate portrayal. Basically I claim Marxism. I don't have any problem with that.

It's not ethnic competition that I'm trying to argue. What I'm trying to argue is much more centered on reactions to proletarianization and class formation. In many ways that is why I was glad to do the work on the North and analyze white working class identity. There wasn't as much face-to-face competition in the North. Groups in the North who had very little face-to-face competition with African Americans still defined themselves along those lines [along the lines of whiteness]. I think that Almaguer's book is interesting because it originated as a Marxist project and he has become much more interested in identity and ideology as the years have gone on. But his Marxist framework remains there implicitly. So, when he talks about who was white and who wasn't in California populations, basically he's talking about class with some really interesting things to say about gender as well. But, I think what makes the book so fascinating for me is that it has this Marxist grounding but it's also moving away from Marxism at the same time. So it becomes a really fascinating book.

May I say something about first causes? I think we might be talking about different things. When historians talk about first causes of racism, they tend to mean capitalism, or some kind of deep psychological aversion to Blackness, or colonialism and conquest in settling. But, from what you said I thought that you may be talking about something different.

dC: I probably am to some extent. I was thinking more in the sense of the distinction between a beginning spark or a point where you say

"that started," and then everything that followed happened within that. So it's like Capitalism started then race follows within this. For instance, there is an ongoing debate among sociologists and some make the claim that racism did not exist until capitalism. It is argued that under colonialism aversion to difference was an expression of xenophobia but there was no racism. In the same vein it is stated that there was no sexism. The organizing force or first cause of these "isms," as we know them, is capitalism—that's the original outset and the structure in which all other "isms" are maintained from that point on. How different is this view from the historian's view of first causes?

DR: When people talk about first causes I'm always interested in what it would mean if we arrived at a first cause. Ann Stoler has a great article where she refers to regimes of truth in the study of race. One of the things that her article suggests is that we really need to think about why this scholarship is so fascinated with first causes and what the implications of that are. In a very general way I tend to think that racism, modern racism as opposed to fear of strangers, is a product of capitalism in mediated ways. But I don't think that settles much of what we do today or even how we understand race today. I don't think that we can then say that we have to solve the class question first, or first socialism then reform of race relations.

dC: Then, in that sense first causes are never a priority. But, often, first causes are important politically. For instance, it becomes a question of what's our priority to take on as opposed to the theoretical position of what came first and what does that mean for social change. In other words you have political activists saying this is our priority and this is the root as well.

DR: Yes, one could just as easily say that historically as capitalism formed it justified itself on the basis of racism, accumulated capital on the basis of racism, and therefore the first point of attack is racism today. In the same way that capitalism goes straight to racial subordination you could go to racial subordination and try to dismantle it. I just don't think that the history can tell us what to do now in that kind of direct way. Stoler has very important things to say about that. The fascination with first causes is very often about contemporary conclusions politically. You read them back and you miss a lot of the complications that were always there. For instance, you miss the way that class was always in race and race was in class because you have an understanding in the present about what ought to be done. The other thing about class as first cause that sometimes distresses me is that it doesn't necessarily lead to radical politics. I think it very often leads to a type of Clinton politics. In the way that class gets debated today, class means any sort of government program that is about economics. There is a

strange alliance of neo-liberals and Marxists who both say well let's talk about the economy, and you don't get any type of fundamental critique of this society. You get Clintonism.

the political economy of race: race, labor, and capitalism

dC: You discuss the Genovese/Marx debate on conceptualizations of the pre-Civil War South as a pre-capitalist *vs.* capitalist economy in *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness*. I'd like to know if you would elaborate on this debate and why this debate is important. It seems to lead back to the debate over first causes. Could you clarify the debate and tell us where you stand on it?

DR: Unfortunately, I don't think it's much of a debate. Even though he has declared himself to be a conservative now, I think that most people read Genovese as the Marxist account of slavery in the United States. Most are surprised to find that much in Marx would argue the exact opposite conclusion. In other words, in contrast to Genovese's view of the slave South as a precapitalist social system, much in Marx would argue that the slave South was a capitalist social system. I don't claim to be an expert on the Marxological—who can find the best quote—studies or on the political economy of race and capitalism. However, I'd like to see the debate conducted by other people, and to a certain extent it is—particularly in the West Indies. There is some sophisticated scholarship on this question coming out of the West Indies.

For me the debate is important from a labor history perspective. What happens in working class history in the United States is that people talk about slavery and then they talk about labor history. I was at a North American Labor History conference in Detroit a few years ago, and there was a panel on slavery and emancipation. The person who organized the panel got up and said, "I'm so glad that my colleagues came to give their papers. It was so difficult to persuade people that there would be a place for a discussion of slavery at a labor history conference." I thought, wow, how could that be (how could historians fail to view slavery as part of labor history)! For instance, in the Reconstruction period, DuBois discusses what he calls the general strike of the slaves. He argues that this strike turned the tide in the Civil War. Historians might repeat DuBois and quote DuBois, but they don't think of it as a 'real' general strike because these weren't 'real' workers. Then, after the Civil War, the tragedy of white unions not uniting with Black unions or enrolling Black workers is seen purely in terms of a lack of labor unity and not in terms of the fact that slaves had been the most militant sector of the working population. Slaves were the most experienced in resistance, and they were the most experienced in working on large units that resembled modern factories. Compared to the

textile mills the slave population was immense. So all of that is lost.

I've been doing some research on strikebreaking. The typical folklore is white strike, Black strikebreakers. People say, "Well, this was the cost of racism in the labor movement." The left liberal approach is to say that the labor movement was racist and therefore you naturally have the problem of Black strikebreaking. Well, I've been looking into the 1870's, 1880's, and 1890's, and on an order of about five to one I'm finding whites breaking Black Strikes more often than Blacks breaking white strikes. The leading edge of the working class was the Black working class. The Black working class was the basis of the Knights of Labor in the South. The way this history gets written and remembered is that this was the backward sector that always needed to be pulled along into the union. But, time and again there were Black strikes or Black labor demonstrations and either white strikebreakers were brought in or a white militia came in and broke the strike. So, for me it's a very practical matter. I would like to see people talk about who the working class really was and to what extent we can talk about a capitalist South with a modern working class. I come at it not from a political economy end so much as from working class history.

dC: Some African American social scientists such as William Julius Wilson—whose work you discuss in the introduction of *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness*—focus on the need for economic programs such as jobs programs. They focus on these programs because the consequence of racial oppression is so often experienced as an unequal distribution of economic burdens. I'm concerned about undermining the very real economic experience of racial subordination. How can, or how does, your work bridge the work of scholars such as Wilson? Or, how would you address Wilson since you point out that there are limitations to his suggestions for economic uplift? How limiting might it be not to focus enough on economic solutions especially when racially subordinated groups are, in a big way, losing the small economic gains that were made through Civil Rights struggles?

DR: I'm not arguing against a focus on economics. I'm arguing for a bolder focus on both the extension of affirmative action and race specific initiatives, which Wilson generally fails to support, and on class programs that would actually be bold enough to draw the white poor into coalitions with African Americans. I want to get past, "How big is the pie?" and, "What's my slice of the pie?" I think the real impasse is that there is no political force that is willing to say, "We're for racial justice and we're for the kind of structural reform that will make white workers and the white poor buy into a coalition with people of color" and which would also say, "yes, affirmative action and this!" I think that is where things stop in American politics right now.

Wilson's argument is very difficult to criticize because it has been so popularly misunderstood. As I read him, he does not argue that racism has declined. Yet, he's constantly invoked in that way. In fact, much of what he argues is that racism is so fierce that it can't be frontally attacked. Therefore, you have to develop class-wide coalitions and you have to develop a class politics that can get around the problem of making frontal attacks on racism. But then Wilson's class politics turn out not to be very far-reaching in structural demands. Henry Louis Gates visited Minnesota recently, and he suggested the idea that we need these kinds of structural reforms. He was basically talking about Wilson's thesis (Wilson has joined Harvard's faculty), and his conclusions were that we need tax incentives for business and free enterprise zones. Gates went on to suggest that we then need to move the inner city to the suburbs, because the jobs will always be in the suburbs. Therefore, according to Gates, we should just realize this and demand that the inner city populations be moved to the suburbs. Well, once you say that you're right back to race again, because the suburban resistance to that will be race-based in its form. Many of the programs that Wilson talks about are hated because they're connected with so called 'privileges' for Black people and are deemed to be too particularistic. But, these programs are actually universal programs, and there are almost no race-specific initiatives. Even affirmative action is not mainly a race-specific initiative, so what we're really talking about is how these programs which are universal or broad get typed as being pro-Black programs. A new set of universal programs would fall prey to exactly the same thing. You still have to think about how you address racism within a new set of programs.

dC: And, how poverty is represented. This is an issue even in a state like Kentucky with an Appalachian region. When I came here a few years ago, I read an article on welfare and it conveyed the "remarkable" news that the majority of the people in Kentucky on welfare were white. They needed to say it.

dC: If we move toward a politics of abolishing whiteness, what does that mean for capitalism? What might that mean for class politics? When you were addressing the social theory students, I was thinking, well, if we abolish whiteness, then are we left with a class politics? Then are we back to reducing race to class? What does it mean for capitalism if we move toward a politics of social justice that accounts for both race and class?

DR: I can imagine whiteness being abolished only in the context of growing anticapitalist movements. However, I'm not viewing this from the traditional Marxist stance, which too often is to say that you solve the class problem and that allows people to give up on their racism.

Rather, you do two things at once. You fight toward abolishing whiteness and toward economic democracy at the same time. Think about why Clinton had to attack affirmative action, in the original instance. Clinton attacked affirmative action at the same time that Republicans attacked it, before Clinton became a defender again of affirmative action in attenuated form. I think that the reason Clinton had to do it, and that the Democrats have had to do similar things all through the years, is that he couldn't project any kind of a program that would draw in white workers alongside affirmative action.

The Democratic Party sometimes billed itself as being the party of African Americans, the party of people of color, and the party of labor. But, it's difficult to actually flesh that out and to imagine what that would mean in terms of putting forward demands for racial justice and fundamental demands for economic justice that might enable, say, a white union leader to go to rank-and-file whites and say, "Yes, affirmative action but also this, and therefore we support the Democrats." I think that a multiple approach has to go on. The challenge to white privilege creates some space for people to let go of their white identity. If whites let go of their white identity, you wouldn't necessarily have the kind of posing of economic problems in terms of scapegoating people of color. It's never race or class, it's always about race and class, and class and race. The ways that we might envision getting past racial oppression and class oppression have to be considered together.

dC: Could you be a little more specific on your vision of an economic justice that incorporates race politics? Are we looking at a combination of universal programs and race-based economic programs that work together somehow? For example, can we implement universal programs such as national child care and health care but avoid making those programs race-typed?

DR: What if there were a tremendously strong campaign for a national health policy? I don't mean the kind of piecemeal thing that Clinton ended up proposing, a program which I think ultimately would have left tremendous class and racial inequalities. And, as a result of racial inequalities, sectors of the program would have been portrayed as just for Black people or just for Latinos. But what if there were real national health plans being put forward at the same time as a strong defense of affirmative action? This is all fanciful and the fact that it's fanciful is telling—we can't imagine that kind of combination at the national level. If the Democrats were a party of labor and a party of African Americans, and if the Democrats said they were going to push as hard as they could for labor law reform and for the extension of affirmative action, you could see the possibilities for creating a coalition along those lines. But that's not a policy combination that ever gets broached inside the two parties.

a poststructural twist?

dC: In *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness*, you indicate that you are not a poststructuralist. But, we see a poststructural influence in our reading of your work. What theoretical perspectives do influence your work?

DR: I think that African American studies is probably the central tradition that my work grows out of. Studies of slavery influence my work, and in studying with Sterling Stuckey I tried to see slavery from the slaves' point of view. This is what made me look at DuBois and C.L.R. James and then read Baldwin and think about the traditions of studying whiteness which were already out there. In terms of when I went to graduate school, and politically at that time, I think my work is Marxist work and New Social History work. It's a kind of Marxism that tries to be bottom-up Marxism and to think about how not just slaves, but also other workers, viewed the world and what kinds of agency they might have had. George Rawick, who wrote a very good book called *From Sundown to Sunup*, was a big personal influence. He was not my teacher in a formal sense, but I found out that he lived in Saint Louis and I plopped myself on his doorstep. After that he became a very big influence on what I do.

What bothers me about the response of much of the Marxist tradition to postmodernism and to poststructuralism is that it's been such a harsh response, and in some ways a dishonest response. I think that, very often, the Marxist attack on poststructuralism dismisses it wholesale and says that we can't learn anything from it. Furthermore, it says that this is really some kind of a right-wing political plot and a cover for motion to the right. I just don't think that this is true empirically. The students whom I see that are interested in poststructuralism are very often left-wing students. I also think that this critique of poststructuralism lets the Marxist tradition off the hook for its rightward motion. The kinds of things that were being put forward by Marxist scholars in the 1960's and 1970's—visionary sweeping kinds of calls for change—those are also lost. Society has moved to the right. It's not just that poststructuralists have taken us to the right. There is a wonderful example of this in *Monthly Review*, an old Marxist journal. About every fourth issue, it seems, the journal is devoted to attacking postmodernism. The last time that they did it, they had all of these essays about how postmodernism is a cover for rightward political motion and then the last essay was a review of Eric Hobsbawm's (the Marxist historian) new book on the twentieth century. The review was glowing. Yet Hobsbawm himself has not only moved light years to the right, but he has helped take British politics to the right. He's been a part of the Clintonization of the Labour Party and, at times, a key advisor in that process. That doesn't get mentioned. Because Hobsbawm re-

tains Marxist categories, his rightward political motion is ignored, but if you can find a poststructuralist who is moving to the right, that indicts the whole tradition.

dC: Is part of that critique simply based on how can you have identity politics? For instance, poststructuralism is asking what's a subject? Is the poststructural view of subjectivity considered to be in conflict with Marxism—is subjectivity part of the attack on poststructuralism?

DR: Yes, but that's exactly where Marxists ought to be learning from poststructuralists. A lot of these things are deeply ironic. For instance, as the world's working class and the nation's working class becomes not white and not male, the Marxist tradition, in its most rigid variants anyway, is building bunkers around itself. Marxists are resisting the need to learn about identities. At the very moment when that kind of information could feed into class politics in a very meaningful way, people are saying, "We don't want to learn about that—we want to go back to things that are universal."

dC: Poststructuralists criticize Marxists for reducing everything to class, but the Marxist critique of poststructuralism is that all forms of social relations and social organization are reduced to discourse—to language. That gets back to your discussion on the need to look at discourse if we are to understand identity and meaning and the construction of identity. I think they are both very rich traditions. Do you think they can be bridged? Can Marxism and poststructuralism work together?

DR: I don't believe that we can study a society just through its discourse, and I don't believe that class identity and racial identity are the same. But to say that isn't to say that race is unimportant and class is important. To acknowledge that there is a materiality in class that's not in race—in fact, race is utterly constructed as a category—doesn't mean that race is therefore a far less important analytic category. This goes back to the first causes question. I was very struck at a conference once. Nancy Hewitt (the great historian at Duke) and I were on a panel and my Marxist friends in the audience were denouncing her use of poststructuralist language. I remember it very vividly because I almost did the same thing to her. This was five or six years ago. Nancy made this point using the poststructuralist language. Immediately somebody jumped up and said, "Why did you have to use that language? You know you could have arrived at that same conclusion through Marxist language. You didn't need all that fancy stuff"—as if Marxist vocabulary isn't a specialized vocabulary of its own, too. Nancy said, "I came into the left in the women's movement with tremendous attention to issues of language and power, and much of my relation with orthodox Marxist historiography has led me away from those issues of language

and power. Poststructuralism has provided one way for me to get back to those issues." That would suggest to me that Marxism has a lot to learn from poststructuralism. If those people in the audience really wanted her to make those points and consider them part of the Marxist tradition, they have to learn something before that can happen.

dC: But also that Marxism and poststructuralism are not mutually exclusive. Conclusions are shared and concerns are shared.

DR: Yes. I think so.

dC: Since the division of labor is gendered and raced, can't we talk about a material basis of race and gender? In a sense, class itself is socially constructed so is it possible to see race and gender as having a material base in the division of labor and an ideological counterpart in symbolic representations?

DR: I don't think it's useful to think of it in those ways. When we start to talk about race in that way, we're still grounding its materiality in class. So were going back to the same kind of Marxist assumption, even though it's a more expansive conception. It's especially more expansive when you get to gender because you start to talk about reproductive labor as well. I think you could more cogently make the argument around gender than you can around race. But, I just don't see how people can say that there's no such thing as race outside of social construction and then say it's an equivalent concept to class, because people do spend a huge section of their lives working for other people. What people are going to make out of their working lives in relationship to their identity is not predictable but I think it has some impact, in a thousand different directions, on their identity.

dC: The problem with the definition of labor is that the definition is so narrow. The definition of labor from a white male-centered view acts to define other types of work as outside of labor. So, I think the tendency to want to talk about a racial and gender division of labor is to try to look at the informal economy and reproductive labor as part of a system of labor that contributes greatly to the existence of wage labor. It's an attempt to expand the definition of labor.

DR: Again I think that works better for gender than it does for race because even the things that sit outside of wage labor—the work of people of color around the world that is outside of wage labor—fit into a class structure. People have a way of talking about that labor and understanding that labor in a way that is still classed. Much of the problem when we talk about gender and the assumptions—the narrow assumptions—that people make about what labor is lie in the fact that there is nothing in the theory to account for unpaid household labor. Reproductive labor and caring are just not a full part of Marxist political economy at this point.

dC: I am interested in the social psychological theme in your work which seems to be centered on a neo-Freudian repression/projection thesis. For instance, your work suggests that there is a relationship between industrialization, Taylorism, a repressed ethnic culture, and racialization. In other words, European immigrants were required to repress their ethnic experiences and traits in order to adapt to industrial labor. These repressed traits were then split off and projected onto an 'inferior other.' Are you arguing that there is an ethnic essence that we need to rediscover in order to abolish whiteness?

DR: I agree that there is this kind of vaguely Freudian repression/projection dynamic that runs through my work, not so much via Freud but secondhand; however, I don't view white ethnicity as something that gets rediscovered or that could get rediscovered. I am trying to argue that what is being repressed is a *human* reaction to industrialization, class formation, and proletarianization rather than a white ethnic reaction. I have a lot of trouble with the term white ethnicity and, now, Euro-American. Historically I just don't think that there ever was white ethnicity.

the simultaneity of subordinations

dC: I was interested in Cheryl Harris's article on whiteness as property—as literal property. I thought her article was a wonderful analysis of property in race.⁴ But, historically, women have also been treated as property. How would you apply Harris's treatment of race as property in a way that incorporates both race and gender? In other words, gender seems to complicate understandings of how whiteness is constructed. We've talked about whiteness as a masculinist construct in the context of labor but whiteness also benefits white women. How are you thinking about the relationship between gender and race and do you plan on addressing gender in your work?

DR: This question always comes up when my students read Cheryl's article. In her new article, "*Finding Sojourner's Truth*," she wrestles with the question: Is maleness property and how can we talk about maleness—about masculinity as property? It's interesting that they are two separate articles. I think it suggests where we are—these things still get written in two's. Most work doesn't really incorporate race, class, and gender. But Cheryl tries to develop arguments about both production and reproduction. She discusses the difference between the slave's labor and white women's labor in households and, sometimes, wage labor, but she also discusses differences in reproduction. Cheryl talks about the fact that slave women gave birth to slaves and thus gave birth not only to makers of property but also to property. White women gave birth to both labor and to the owners of property, including slave prop-

erty. She clarifies tremendous affinities in misogyny and racial oppression. But Harris also pulls back and says, here's where those affinities end. Here's where they're not as strong anymore, and here's where the differences are. These questions have a long history in feminist writings and Black womanist writings, and I think we are beginning to see more precision and success in getting at those questions.

My work on gender right now tends to be much more empirical. The historical work that I'm doing is around how Eastern and Southern European immigrants became white. I'm exploring the extent to which whiteness was learned in the public sphere and the extent to which it was learned in the household. For instance, how did children, especially working adolescents, who were still in the household, factor into the learning of whiteness and of how America figures race? In going back and trying to write on the South, I'm focusing on the way in which losing land and losing prospects to become an independent free laborer caused refigurings of patriarchy. This left a lot of space for white racism to be part of the new manhood, or to be one aspect of a manhood that's not going to be based on the ownership of property—of productive property. To what extent is white masculinity racism? I've become more interested in the word "boss" (boss comes up a little in my first book) and the way that it gets played out in the South after the Civil War. Free people start calling their former masters "boss" for the same reason that white workers use the word "boss," because they didn't want to say the word "master." In movies where you see Black people saying "boss," the word is regarded as a badge of oppression. In fact, "boss" was a term of resistance during Reconstruction, and masters hated it. But whites, once they got power again, took the word and made all Blacks call all whites "boss" and created a white coalition along those lines. Then, at about the same time, there are all of these really interesting gendered uses of "boss" in which white men started talking about their wives as their boss. So discourse about who is "boss" crosses race, gender, and class lines. What I'm looking for are points of entry into these questions without producing a comprehensive history.

dC: I'd like to ask you about the development of whiteness and proximity. In a lot of ways you have been addressing issues of whiteness as proximity, particularly in the South. But, as you mentioned before, proximity isn't always necessary for there to be a transcendent whiteness in relationship to Blackness. Yet, there are other racial groups where whiteness doesn't seem to transcend proximity. For example, Native Americans seem to be a particular instance of this. In the West, white proximity to Native Americans is an integral part of the construction of a white identity. However, in other regions of the country, such

as the South, Native Americans seem to be absent from the construction of white identity. In other words, as we've been reading your book and thinking about ourselves and how our identities were constructed, racial identity is framed simply in terms of a Black/white racial construction. The existence, nonexistence, partial existence, or presence of the Native American culture in this area was not considered to be part of the process of how white identity was formed. In that sense "othering" didn't transcend proximity where for me, as someone who grew up in Montana among Native Americans, it was the primary one because of proximity. Yet, what white person doesn't know that they aren't Black regardless if they have met a Black person in their lifetime?

DR: In the early nineteenth century—the period that *The Wages of Whiteness* was about—I think that there certainly was a national sense of not being American Indian, and I think there are great studies on that, such as Richard Slotkin's and Richard Drinnon's work. There are a lot of really good works that discuss constructions of the frontier. For instance, what people use to call the frontier got back to Eastern cities in popular culture. The way that nineteenth century intellectuals talked about what made the U.S. different was set against American Indian "others" in very significant ways. Sometimes it was then linked to anti-Black racism. In South Carolina, Blacks rioted at the end of Reconstruction, and the newspapers in New York would say, "well this must have given a lot of comfort to the savages who were attacking General Custer." And, "reds and reds," were connected. That is, anti-Indian headlines would be next to anti labor-headlines. There is weight to the impact that American Indians had—that "othering" of American Indians had on whiteness. But, the impact of Native Americans was not mainly along an axis of labor, even though American Indians were significantly involved in wage labor in the nineteenth century.

dC: What about Asian Americans? Contemporarily, there is a construction of certain Asian Americans, particularly Chinese and Japanese, as model minorities. At the same time, there is a history of constructing Asians as exotic, primitive, barbaric (especially in relationship to religion and Christianity), and there is the history of the Chinese Exclusion Act. Some of these constructions carried over to the present but are contradicted by, or combined with, constructions of Asians as intelligent and as hard workers. Does the concept of model minority, as one component of dominant constructions of Asian Americans, complicate whiteness as whiteness is constructed in opposition to an "inferior other?"

DR: I probably can't address this in any deep way. With graduate students, I'm reading into these issues, but I don't think that I know enough about it to comment intelligently on the question. I think it's

wrong to make anti-Asian racism seamless. The stereotypes around Chinese exclusion in the 1860's and 1870's were, despite incorporating tropes from anti-Black racism, based on something like model minority constructions. One fear was that they worked too hard, spent too little, and prospered too much. The Chinese were constructed much as anti-Semitism at times constructed Jews. But the constructions also had fierce, not just exotic (almost all of the Asian immigrants were men) appeals, to white female purity. Asian immigrant men supposedly introduced oral sex into the United States. Child abuse was very often a professed concern. One of the things that's really interesting about contemporary constructions of the model minority is how huge sections of the Asian American population get written off. In the Twin Cities much of the Asian American population is desperately poor; and yet, that's not factored into discussions of the model minority.

dC: It's tempting, maybe in that same kind of crass multicultural way, to try to build white identity up as this composite of white in comparison to Asian, white in comparison to Native American. Is that a futile attempt?

DR: Do you mean to try to get it off of a Black/white axis and have it on several axes?

dC: Or attempt some sort of ridiculous checklist in a sense. What does white mean in comparison to this, or to that?

dC: Don't we need to think about white identity in comparison to, or in relationship to, others—a relationship that occurs in a historical context, a regional context, and so on? For instance, I think whiteness in California has different meanings because historically, the relationships are among different groups that include Mexicans and whites, Asians and whites, Blacks and whites, and so on. It seems that we need to bring a geography to this analysis.

DR: Yes, I think the more I'm around, and thinking about, California (a state that has become a type of laboratory for racist initiatives and where people most directly debate some of these issues), I realize how different it is. In California, African Americans are the third or fourth group. Yet, there is a certain weight to Black/white relations historically and in law. Even the anti-Chinese stereotypes in the 1860's and 1870's—which were different, I think, from anti-Black stereotypes—still incorporated Black/white relations. If you look at drawings and other cultural artifacts, you can see two things happening simultaneously. People constructed the Chinese differently from African Americans but, at the same time, they borrowed a lot of stereotypes of slaves and Northern free Blacks.

white men on whiteness: recenterings or decenterings?

dC: Your works are historical analyses of industrialization, racialization, and racial identity in the nexus of industrial America. However, the United States has experienced a shift from industrialization to a post-industrial economy—an economy that is largely organized around a service sector. Of course, whiteness as an identity is still constituted in the nexus of social relations of race and class. But what does it mean, or how does it work, when the largest growing sector—the service sector—of the economy is overwhelmingly composed of women and racially subordinated persons? We keep trying to demonstrate to whites that it's in their interests to build coalitions with persons of color. But, why is it in the interests of persons of color, and women for that matter, to build coalitions with white male workers when, in many ways, white working class men have experienced political disempowerment through the decline of unions and the growth of the service sector? One issue that arises in discussions among feminists of color and white feminists is that women are exhausted with trying to teach men about their sexism, and racially subordinated persons are exhausted with trying to teach whites about their racism. So why would we expect persons of color to want to work with whites? Where would that trust come from? Maybe, in some ways, persons of color and women could build more powerful coalitions because of demographic changes in the market. In other words, from a purely strategic stance, it might be a more useful political strategy to build coalitions across race and gender subordination.

DR: I think that maybe that's the most important question that confronts studies of whiteness now. This question is important because many studies of whiteness assume that white men are the center of wage labor, and that's not true anymore and it hasn't been true for about twenty years. At least, it hasn't been true numerically. Last year, for the first time, white men became a minority in the unions, and almost nobody knows it. You would think that this would make banner headlines in every left paper. For years people have been waiting for the day when class wouldn't necessarily be a particularistic identity. But it just hasn't been picked up. At the Columbia University Teach-In with the Labor Movement, I spoke about the fact that white women, women of color, and men of color are now the majority of the labor movement and I spoke to what that means. Studies on whiteness go far towards explaining the consciousness of white men, but at the very moment when the consciousness of white men ought not be the center of discussion about strategy. It may be that coalitions among people of color and white women are the really important things to talk about. If you look at the anti-affirmative action initiative in California, if white

women's votes could have been mobilized (well, they were mobilized, but they were often mobilized on the wrong side) there would have been a very different outcome.

When I argue that one of the dangers of studies on whiteness is that it redirects attention to white men, I don't mean that just as an abstraction. I think in terms of current politics it may be that white men are not the most important thing to look at. Attacks on identity politics—expressed in works which argue that identity politics has ruined class politics by breaking everything up—could just as easily be read as an example of white male identity politics. These attacks could be read as, "Let's get back to the universal, which we really know is white and male." It is vital to get past thinking that labor is white and male. Let's talk about class politics, but who is the working class?

Another thing we're starting to see is unions getting attacked as organizations of women and organizations of people of color. The fierce attacks on public employee unions are a very interesting development. Public employee unions are attacked more than other unions and there's a reason for that. They are closer to equal pay than any other union, and they are very integrated unions in terms of gender and race. And they are singled out for attack. There is a case in Youngstown where the employers in a nursing home had gone to the NLRB (National Labor Relations Board) and said that the union organizers (Service Employees International Union) were passing around cartoons showing white people in a bad light. They suggested that the cartoons might be read as referring back to slavery—the images might be read as harking back to the slave master. The employers claimed that this was an unfair labor practice. The cartoons were quite ambiguous. But the employers were defining that union, which is actually a mixed union, as a Black union and attacking it as Black. That's a new thing. Much of what we're describing, those of us who are treating nineteenth century whiteness, might be of interest as part of a process that got us here, but it's very different from where we are now.

dC: This is related to discourse. Is there an academic wigger?⁵ In other words, is there a discursive practice in academia that inadvertently reifies or perpetuates racism? For instance, I go back and forth on discursive possibilities because in some ways, such as in your speech yesterday and in reading certain books on race, I'm always taken aback by the use of the "N- word." I'm never comfortable with its usage, although certainly academics are looking in the text and understanding its import and the necessity of it. Still, I never feel comfortable, particularly when this word is coming out of white mouths, including my own. Yet, I don't know. Is it simply my own whiteness, my reluctance, or an attempt to understand my whiteness by trying to overcome that reluctance?

DR: It might be partly a history *vs.* sociology difference. I just don't think that historians can possibly ignore the word unless you want to have a lot of "N blank, blank, blank, etc." I don't think it's possible to take that out of the historical discourse. I just never see it as a question in a way that I think sociologists might see it as a question—whether it's O.K. to quote racist language.

However, there's a whole set of important questions around the positionality of people who are studying whiteness (who are mostly white men at this point, in the discipline of history) that doesn't really get raised. It's surprising to me that they don't get more sharply raised. Lisa Lowe, a wonderful writer on race and Asian American identity, asked me some sharp questions in San Diego about this. Her questions were very friendly but also necessarily sharp. They were along the lines of, "Isn't this a new way to talk about white men—to recenter the discourse onto white men?"

dC: Recently, some additional issues, or problems, regarding current studies on whiteness arose in a graduate course on Black critical thinkers taught by Doris Wilkinson. Dr. Wilkinson suggested that some studies of whiteness might be shifting the burden of racism onto the white working class to the exclusion of a deeper analysis on the role of the power elite in the construction of whiteness. In other words, some studies on whiteness, to use Dr. Wilkinson's term, may be treating the white working class as "functional Archie Bunkers," as a way to deflect from larger forces of privilege and power and the power elite. How would you address this critique? How can we understand the relationship of whites to practices of racialization, given that whites are positioned differently in systems of power and privilege? For instance, all whites have a stake in whiteness, but power is held unevenly among different groups of whites. Therefore, different groups of whites can affect different outcomes in terms of racial practices.

DR: Historically in issues of work it's difficult to say who has had the power to exclude. Clearly, throughout most of U.S. history, bosses could hire and fire at will so you could say that racial hierarchies at work are the employer's fault. But frequently the management experts would say, "We'd like to hire Black workers but the white workers won't let us." And a fair amount of the time when Black workers were brought in, there were hate strikes, or more subtle ways were used to freeze Black workers out or to keep them out of skilled jobs once they did get into the plant. So at the point of production I think it's unclear whether white workers had a lot of power to structure this relationship.

My emphasis is on history from the bottom up (when I was in school that's what we called it) and what struck me in looking at the historiography on race was that there just wasn't any history from the

bottom up. We were writing history of workers in which they had agency in every other part of their lives—in which the subaltern could speak and act in every other way—but then you come up against racism and say, "Well, the ruling class creates that and then projects it onto workers." If it were just about who we are going to indict morally, I wouldn't have much problem indicting the elite; but if it's about resistance, we need to look at the white working class—if racism serves the interests of elites in this society, they're not going to give up on racism.

I have friends that talk about the fall of the Soviet Union—pro-Soviet friends—and they say, "If it wasn't for the bad faith of the capitalist world, trade policies, propaganda, encirclement, military attacks, the Soviet Union could have built a viable socialist society." I think that's the job of the capitalist world! You're not going to convince capitalist states that they should treat Soviet experiments nicely—it's not going to happen. If you believe, and I do, that racism functions in important ways in the interest of elites and you want to conceive of a strategy against it, you have to begin to try to understand how it also works at the bottom of white society or else you're just reduced to making moral appeals. I know that my work is sometimes read as implying that we don't have to talk about white workers any more because they're racist and backwards so we can go on to talking about other issues. That's not the project that I see myself involved in at all—it's about how racism operates in the white working class and how we might develop strategies to intervene in that.

how should history be done? a question of method

dC: Which question did you want to skip?

DR: The one about method. [The questions on method was, "Does your approach impact how historical methodology is done? That is, is your work a process of new interpretation of traditional historical material, or are you also formulating a new methodology in the field?"]

It's not that I want to skip it [the method question]. The answer is just no. The one way in which I think my work is different is that I read a lot of secondary sources in a lot of areas and try to pull things together. That's not well-accepted in history. People will write reviews and point out that many of my citations are to secondary sources, as if that's a damning indictment of the work. But that's not a question of method.

dC: How would your approach inform how original documents are viewed since original documents are so embedded in a history, a context, and a construction of race? Has this influenced what you bring to the reading of historical texts—to the interpretative process?

DR: I'm not very reflective about my own work in that way. I have a

graduate student in sociology who's doing a project that asks, "Is cyberspace white?" She's doing some very specific things on the chat rooms, on race, and around the "interrace" web site. One thing she's trying to get at is whether there is an expectation on the Internet that discourse is a discourse that white people are sharing, and then she's looking at what else comes in as a break in that discourse. So she's beyond looking at the individual documents. Her question is not really just about textual analysis of the individual document but about what sort of expectations are being brought to bear on this whole system of communication. I guess that thinking about the assumed nature—the normative nature—of whiteness similarly informs, or frames, my analysis of historical texts.

dC: Are you ever accused of being too theoretical for a labor historian?

DR: I have never had a book reviewed in *Labor History*. My books are reviewed in theology journals, in sociology journals, and so on. *Labor History* has never reviewed a single book that I've written. So perhaps it is a matter of being ignored rather than accused. The narrowness of labor history as a field can be troubling. Historians fret over the question, "Is labor history dying?" Presses are retrenching their series on labor history. It's a field that was riding high fifteen years ago and now is not. Yet if people thought of some of the works out there as working class history, labor history would be one of the most exciting fields going. *Gay New York*, George Chauncey's book, is a wonderful book and it is largely working class history. It's about areas near the waterfront and bars where mostly working men gathered. It won't be reviewed in *Labor History* either. *Gay New York* won many prizes. People could just as easily say, "We're part of this exciting field that's looking at the history of the whole working class, not just at unions, and we can claim all of this." But so far it just hasn't happened.

endnotes

1. This interview was conducted in Lexington, Kentucky on January 25, 1997.
2. See David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991); David Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (New York: Verso, 1994).
3. See Tomas Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
4. See Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review*,

Vol. 106 (1993), 1707-1745.

5. For a discussion of wiggers see David Roediger, "What to Make Of Wiggers: A Work in Progress," forthcoming in Joe Austin and Michael Willard, eds., *Youth Culture Reader* (New York University Press).

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