Assembly shall “pass such laws as will effectually prohibit free persons of
color from immigrating to and settling in this State.”

In the first half of the nineteenth century, politically restrictive uses of
the word “white” likewise appeared in the constitutions of Missouri
(1812), Mississippi (1817), Connecticut (1818), California (1849, 1879),
and Minnesota Territory (1849). Conversely, eighteen state constitutions
specifically classed blacks as “dependents,” thus assigning them the same
political status as white women and children of all colors. Although
popular prejudices certainly did exist against certain groups of “white
persons”—Jews and Catholics in many areas, for instance—still the
alchemy of slaveholding and the frontier was powerful enough that in
general Europeans, like Brackenridge’s “bog-trotter” Teague O’Regan,
became simply “white persons” in matters of race and the rights and
responsibilities of citizenship.

Whiteness and Science

The racist practices that normalized the connection between whiteness
and citizenship by 1790 had been carried out, as it were, without the
assistance of modern racist. From the early 1600s to the early 1800s
Euro-American policies of conquest, Indian removal, slave-trading, and
disenfranchisement relied on a logic of “civilization” versus “barbarism”
or “savagery,” or of “Christianity” versus “heathendom.” Peoples might
be displaced because of their benighted beliefs or their barbarous cus-
toms—their nomadic indifference to the benefits of enclosing and “im-
proving” land, for instance; or their legitimate enslavement might be un-
derstood as owing to the mark they bore of God’s curse on Ham. Religion itself carried physical markers, as far as seventeenth-century
Euro-Americans were concerned, as when James Otis, a dissenter on the
slavery question, wondered in 1764 whether “tis right to enslave a man
because he is black? Will short curled hair like wool instead of Christian
hair . . . help the argument? Can any logical inference in favor of slavery
be drawn from a flat nose?” God’s judgments and biological facts were
operating terribly closely here, but this was not racial, exactly. Although
Blumenbach had lighted upon his most lovely Georgian skull and so had
spoken the group “Caucasians” into existence in the late eighteenth cen-
tury, it was not until the nineteenth that the language of racism proper—
the language of “genus,” “species,” “types,” “poly-” and “monogenesis,”
“cranioetrics,” “phenotypes,” and “genotypes”—would frame discussion of human groups, their capacities, and their proper relationship to one another.

If the political meaning of whiteness seems barely to have changed with the advent of scientific inquiry into human types, the epistemological basis of whiteness and its “others” did change drastically. The historian Audrey Smedley has nicely delineated the rise of scientific racism in five elements that distinguished it from earlier understandings of human diversity, regardless of how similar the consequences for social and political relationships between, say, slaves and masters were. It entailed (1) the classification of human groups as “discrete and biotic entities” measured by physical and behavioral variations; (2) an inequitarian ethos that required hierarchical ordering of human types; (3) the belief that outer physical characteristics were but markers of inner intellectual, moral, or temperamental qualities; (4) the notion that these qualities were heritable; and (5) the belief that “the imputed differences, believed fixed and unalterable, could never be bridged or transcended,” so distinctly had these populations been created.69

Although the scientific outlook represents a new way of viewing “difference,” the development of such an outlook on human types was not a complete break from the conquests and enslavements of the past. On the contrary, the new sciences that arose to theorize the relationship among the world’s peoples—ethnology, anthropology, craniometry, anthropometry, and phrenology among them—owed a great deal to precisely those social questions generated by Euro-American expansionism and the intensifying slavery debate. In his instructions to the explorer Meriwether Lewis, for instance, Thomas Jefferson had asserted that “the commerce which may be carried on with the people inhabiting the line you will pursue, renders a knowlege of those people important.” He went on rather frankly to instruct that, “considering the interest which every nation has in extending & strengthening the authority of reason and justice among the people around them, it will be useful to acquire what knowlege you can of the state of morality, religion, & information among them; as it may better enable those who may endeavor to civilize and instruct them.” Decades later, in his paean to westward expansion, “A Passage to India,” Walt Whitman would appropriately number the ethnologist among the “noble inventors,” “scientists,” “chemists,” and “geologists” who were at the helm of the new, expansive epoch.61

The development of various scientific schemes for the understanding
and classification of humanity, wrote Franz Boas, one of the most creative and prolific participants in the project of modern anthropology, owed much to "the passions that were aroused by the practical and ethical aspects of the slavery question." The imperialism question weighed heavily, too. The rising nineteenth-century regime of ethnological knowledge, produced by Euro-American expansionism and slave-trading from its beginnings, in its turn created new epistemologies of human difference and thus buttressed a political order based upon physicality and its "recognition." As David Spurr has observed, once "knowledge of racial difference is made a condition for political power...such knowledge loses its status as an independent, a priori basis for practice, and becomes instead a mere aspect of practice, a construct produced by the same practice it would claim logically to precede." Thus the racial sciences were in fact racializing sciences, ever responding to the political imperatives of the slavery question, questions of territorial expansion, and, later, the vexing immigration question, and at the same time creating in their wake new kinds of "certainty" that "explained" slavery, expansion, and the trouble with immigrants.

Within the context of European and American exploration, trade, expansionism, enslavement, and conquest, then, a rising genre of scientific explication emerged to enumerate, describe, and ultimately to rank the world's peoples. In the long view, science provided an alternative vocabulary to the polarities of "heathendom" and "Christianity" of religious discourse—a vocabulary keyed to physicality and "nature" rather than to belief, yet marking peoples nonetheless as possessing an inherent degree of righteousness, now refigured as innate capacity. Scientific debate between the late eighteenth century and the late nineteenth shifted from natural sciences that merely classified types, toward biological models that apprehended, explained, and thus ranked these types; it also shifted away from static conceptions of various types, toward more dynamic, evolutionary models of diversification through constant change. The scientific controversies and arguments couched within these general intellectual shifts included a bitter debate between adherents of "monogenesis" (who believed in a single origin for all human types) and adherents of "polygenesis" (who argued that human types themselves were so divergent as to indicate separate origins); between hereditarians and environmentalists; and between Darwinians and Lamarckians. These controversies have been ably documented elsewhere.

Most important for the present purposes is the extent to which these
scientific models altered the epistemology of race, lent a new authority to popular notions of "difference," and thus altered the understanding of whiteness. The relationship between the politics of expansionism and slavery on the one hand, and scientific "knowledge" on the other, is nowhere as clear as in the writings of Josiah Nott. Among the chief propagandists for polygenesis in the United States, Nott frankly rooted his scientific observations in the context of the social relations that had produced them. In a letter to J. D. B. DeBow, printed as a preface to his Two Lectures on the Relationship between the Biblical and Physical History of Man (1849), Nott articulated the close connection between his scientific understanding of diverse peoples and the daily rhythms of antebellum Mobile, Alabama: "Born in a slave state, and having passed our childhood and manhood in daily intercourse with the white and black races, it is but natural that you and I should have become deeply impressed not only by the physical but also by the moral and intellectual differences which exist between them: nor is it less natural that a doubt as to their common origin should suggest itself to our minds." Nott's polygenetic view thus both justifies and derives from the fact that the slave-holding South was his laboratory writ large. "The Almighty in his wisdom," he continued to DeBow, "has peopled our vast planet from many distant centers, instead of one, and with races or species originally and radically distinct."

Nor are Nott’s scientific assessments of white supremacy limited to the "proofs" and "justifications" of black slavery. He also assigned science itself a key role in the imperialist enterprise—here, again, relying upon the "data" of domination for his justification of further domination: "The numberless attempts by the Caucasian race, during several thousand years, to bring the Mongol, Malay, Indian, and Negro, under the same religion, laws, manners, customs, etc., have failed, and must continue to fail, unless the science of Ethnography can strike out some new and more practical plan of operation." Or again, demonstrating the tortuous circularity of empire, slave-trading, travel, scientific knowledge, and political necessity, Nott in Types of Mankind (1855) described the peoples of the eastern coast of Africa,

each [tribe] presenting physical characters more or less hideous; and, almost without exception, not merely in a barbarous, but superlatively savage state. All attempts toward humanizing them have failed. Hopes of eventual improvement in the condition of these brutish
families are entertained by none but missionaries of sanguine temperament and little instruction. Even the slaver rejects them. 57

Given the circumstances in which such research was undertaken—the power relations which supported it, the social and political necessities which defined it—it is no surprise that scholars who vigorously disagreed with one another on many theoretical and conceptual issues were virtually unanimous in the white supremacy of their scientific findings. Thus scholars on both sides of the Atlantic like Samuel Morton, Arthur Comte de Gobineau, and James Cowles Prichard, who took quite different positions on the question of single or diverse human origins, nonetheless made strikingly similar pronouncements regarding that "uppermost" division of humanity, the "white" or "Caucasian" race. The polygenist Morton declared in his Crania Americana (1839) that the "Caucasian" race was "distinguished for the capacity with which it attains the highest intellectual endowments." Gobineau, for his part, would take the position of the agnostic on origins, even if he was convinced of "the inequality of human races" (as the title of his best-known work put the matter). Although "there are both scientific and religious reasons for not believing in a plurality of origins of our species," he wrote, "the various branches of the human family are distinguished by permanent and irremediable differences, both mentally and physically. They are unequal in intellectual capacity, in personal beauty, and in physical strength." His assessments of the world's peoples, moreover, were forged in a political ambience: he found that "white" peoples, for instance, "are gifted with relative energy, or rather with an energetic intelligence . . . greater physical power . . . extraordinary instinct for order . . . remarkable, even extreme, love of liberty, and are openly hostile to the formalism under which the Chinese are glad to vegetate, as well as to the strict despotism which is the only way of governing the Negro." 58

Prichard, for his part, was a strict monogenist, finding in the biological facts of interracial fertility undeniable proof that "all tribes of men are of one family." But his argument, too, was frankly bounded by the politics of the day. Although he noted that abolitionism was an object of scorn among most polygenists, for whom "the ultimate lot of the ruder tribes is a state of perpetual servitude," Prichard himself merely marshaled his monogenesis—his view of the similarity of human types—toward imperialism of a more benevolent stripe:

We contemplate among all the diversified tribes who are endowed
with reason and speech, the same internal feelings, appetites, aversions... We find everywhere the same susceptibility... of admitting the cultivation of these universal endowments, of opening the eyes of the mind to the more clear and luminous views which Christianity unfolds, of becoming moulded to the institutions of religion and of civilization.19

The question, then, is simply whether white stewardship is to be benign or not—the tenor of European supremacy, not the fact of it, is the ultimate stake in the poly- versus monogenesis debate, so far as Prichard is concerned.

Political questions of slavery, expansion, and conquest continued to be highly visible in scientific writings about race as static conceptions of human difference gave way to a more dynamic view based on principles of evolution. Euro-American expansionism was clearly a significant part of Charles Darwin’s laboratory as he theorized “the competition of tribe with tribe, race with race.” “When civilized nations come into contact with barbarians the struggle is short,” he averred, for instance, “except where a deadly climate gives its aid to the native race... We can see that the cultivation of the land will be fatal in many ways to the savages, for they cannot, or will not, change their habits.” Nor was a stubborn clinging to old “habits” the chief crime of such “savages.” Darwin gave voice to a supreme imperialist vision, when, in the closing lines of The Descent of Man (1871), he asserted, “I would as soon be descended from that heroic little monkey, who braved his dreaded enemy in order to save the life of his keeper; or from that old baboon, who, descending from the mountains, carried away in triumph his young comrade from a crowd of astonished dogs—as from a savage who delights to torture his enemies, offers up bloody sacrifices, practices infanticide without remorse, treats his wives like slaves, knows no decency, and is haunted by the grossest superstitions.”20

Because scientific inquiry was so rooted in the politics and practices of white supremacism, these writings tended to ratify the profound separation of whiteness from nonwhiteness that characterized pre-scientific (and hence merely protoracist) colonial policies and statutes. Among those who now seized upon scientific views to buttress political arguments were publicists like Van Evrie. His singular contribution to the scientific discourse of race involved not substance but simply volume. In tracts like his Negroes and Negro Slavery and in the pages of his pro-slavery Weekly
Caucasian, Van Evrie tirelessly popularized the scientific basis of white supremacism, though always peppering his science with a good dose of Biblical authority as well. Whereas Blumenbach had merely praised the physical beauty of “Caucasians” and held them out as an ideal type, Van Evrie now scanned the physiognomical surfaces for signs of a deeper, more abiding racial superiority. Thoroughly blending the aesthetic with the moral (and the patriarchal), Van Evrie waxed rhapsodic on the inner virtues betokened by the subtle beauties of the “Caucasian” face. “What is there at the same time so charming and so indicative of inner purity and innocence,” he asked,

as the blush of maiden modesty? For an instant the face is scarlet, then . . . paler than ever in its delicate transparency; and these physical changes, beautiful as they may be to the eye, are rendered a thousand times more so by our consciousness that they reflect moral emotions infinitely more beautiful. Can anyone suppose such a thing possible to a black face? that these sudden and startling alterations of color, which reflect the moral perceptions and elevated nature of white woman, are possible to the negress?

Van Evrie later added that, although whiteness itself was “essential” in reflecting noble passions, “without the deeply cut and distinctly marked features of the Caucasian, color would be comparatively useless in reflecting the grander emotions of the soul.”

The crux for Van Evrie was that “the Almighty has obviously designed all His creatures—animal as well as human—for wise, beneficent, and useful purposes.” Blacks were slaves not only by religious right and by longstanding American tradition, but by nature—slavery represented their “normal condition” and the “natural relation” between the races. As for the “Caucasian,” meanwhile, “the flowing beard . . . projecting forehead, oval features, erect posture and lordly presence, stamp him the master man wherever found.”

Thus, of course, the distinction between whiteness and nonwhiteness never fully lost its salience in American political culture. Mexican annexation, black Emancipation, Reconstruction, Jim Crow practices, Indian Wars, Asian immigration and Exclusion, Hawaiian and Puerto Rican annexation, and Philippine conquest—all would keep whiteness very much alive in both the visual and the political economies. But upon the arrival of the massive waves of Irish immigrants in the 1840s, whiteness itself would become newly problematic and, in some quarters, would begin to
lose its monolithic character—notwithstanding the rights and privileges that continued to inhere in whiteness, and the assertions of various John Van Evries that “in modern times there are no white barbarians. In all modern history, wherever found, white men are much the same.”

The Famine Migration announced a new era in the meaning of whiteness in the United States, an era greeted by many as a full-blown political crisis. In response, some would begin to question the monolithic quality of whiteness, and, again, science would provide the language and the models for understanding this natural fragmentation within the “white race.” As Samuel Morton had written of the “Celts” in 1839, “In some locales their physical traits, their moral character and their peculiar customs, have undergone little change since the time of Caesar. It is probable that the most unsophisticated Celts are those of the Southwest of Ireland, whose wild look and manner, mud cabins and funereal howlings, recall the memory of a barbarous age.”

By the 1860s the Irish would seem to some to be so many “thousands of barbarians in our midst, every whit as ferocious in their instincts as the Minnesota savages.” It is worth recalling, in this connection, that the “wild Irish” and the violent colonization of Ireland had provided the template for English understanding of North American savages and the course of North American colonization in the first place. “The wild Irish and the Indian do not much differ,” one English observer who was familiar with both had written in 1646, “and therefore [they] should be handled alike.” The white-over-dark dynamic of racial theorizing would retain its purchase in Euro-American thought, to be sure, but the fracturing of whiteness (the splitting off of “unsophisticated Celts,” for instance), would become an ever more salient feature of racial discourse as the massive immigrations of the nineteenth century progressed. The untroubled republican equation of whiteness with fitness for self-government, which had informed colonial thinking and had reigned in the new nation since 1790, then, became increasingly untenable as “free white persons” of undreamt-of diversity and number dragged ashore in the 1840s and after.