It is for the Republican institutions of America that we hope and fear most.
—"Immigration into the United States," DeBow's Review, 1848

There may be those who can contemplate the addition to our population of vast numbers of persons having no inherited instincts of self-government and respect for law; knowing no restraint upon their own passions but the club of the policeman or the bayonet of the soldier; forming communities, by the tens of thousands, in which only foreign tongues are spoken, and into which can steal no influence from our free institutions and from popular discussion. But I confess to being far less optimistic.
—"Restriction of Immigration," Atlantic Monthly, 1896

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Anglo-Saxons and Others, 1840–1924

With two centuries of hindsight, the first thing one is likely to notice about the 1790 naturalization law is its fierce exclusivity. Indeed, this is no small matter. The limitation of naturalized citizenship to "free white persons" profoundly shaped Asian-American history, for instance. It was this law, still in effect in the 1870s and 1880s, that denied Chinese immigrants the political might with which to challenge the rising tides of exclusionism or to protect themselves against the violent white mobs of a Rock Springs or a Tacoma. It was this law, still in effect in 1942, that left Japanese immigrants so vulnerable to the wartime hysteria that would become a federal policy of internment. John Okada brilliantly rendered the enduring salience of the inclusions and exclusions of 1790 in his novel No-No Boy (1957), when Ichiro Yamada ruminates upon the fateful apostrophe separating the Irish O'Hara from the Japanese Ohara in American political culture. Clearly, the exclusivity of the 1790 law was of profound consequence.

What is too easily missed from our vantage point, however, is the stag-
gering inclusivity of the 1790 naturalization law. It was this law’s unquestioned use of the word "white" that allowed for the massive European migrations of the nineteenth century, beginning with the Famine Migration from Ireland, and ultimately including the '48ers from Germany, the Scandinavian pioneers, and then successive waves of East European Jews, Italians, Greeks, Poles, Ruthenians, Slovenians, Magyars, Ukrainians, Lithuanians—none of whom the framers had ever envisioned swelling the polity of the new nation when they crafted its rules for naturalization. This law, its unexamined inclusivity, and its unforeseen consequences set the stage for a nineteenth-century political crisis of remarkable urgency and scope.

Even as early as the eighteenth century there were some who saw whiteness not as monolithic but as variegated. In what was to become a standard political refrain in the nineteenth century and beyond, for instance, Benjamin Franklin wanted to know in 1751 why Pennsylvania, “founded by English, [should] become a colony of aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us, instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our language or customs any more than they can acquire our complexion?” “The number of purely white people in the world is proportionably very small,” he lamented in this essay on human population.

All Africa is black or tawny; Asia chiefly tawny; America (exclusive of the newcomers [that is, the English]) wholly so. And in Europe, the Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians, and Swedes are generally of what we call a swarthy complexion; as are the Germans also, the Saxons only excepted, who, with the English, make the principal body of white people on the face of the earth. I could wish their numbers were increased.²

But such concerns never found their way into the debate over the first naturalization law, probably because legislators at the time were so consumed by the legal problems posed by slavery, whiteness, and blackness. Consequently, whiteness in the early decades of the republic remained a legislative and conceptual monolith that left the gates open to all European comers.

The perceived over-inclusivity of the first naturalization law and the dawning political problem of whiteness itself in the mid-nineteenth century are nicely encapsulated in Richard Henry Dana, Jr.’s, sea-voyaging memoir Two Years before the Mast. A patrician New Englisher who had dropped his studies at Harvard to go to sea in the early 1830s, Dana
published a travelogue of his journey around the cape to California in 1840. A shift in the languages of peoplehood in this text indicates the profound cultural reorientation that had taken place between the book’s initial publication and the time of Dana’s added postscript for the 1859 edition. Throughout the original manuscript, Dana refers to Europeans and Euro-Americans as “whites” and “white men”—most often in contradistinction to the “dawling, lazy half-breeds” of San Pedro, to the Pacific’s “primitive” Kanakas only recently “advanced [from] barbarism,” or to the “darkies” among the ship’s crew itself. In the postscript of 1859, however, the phrases “English race” and “Anglo-Saxon race” appear in the text for the very first time. Significantly, these alternative racial appellations crop up within a paragraph of this remark: “The Cathedral of St. Mary . . . where the Irish attend, was . . . more like one of our stifling Irish Catholic churches in Boston or New York, with intelligence in so small a proportion to the number of faces.” This racial refinement from “white” to “Anglo-Saxon” is neither accidental nor idiosyncratic; rather, it reflects a political revision of whiteness in Dana’s New England during the two decades bracketing the Famine in Ireland and the tremendous Celtic exodus to North America.

Whereas the salient feature of whiteness before the 1840s had been its powerful political and cultural contrast to nonwhiteness, now its internal divisions, too, took on a new and pressing significance. The main currents in this period (c.1840s–1920s) included, first, a spectacular rate of industrialization in the United States, whose voracious appetite for cheap labor—combined with political and economic dislocations across industrializing Europe—brought unprecedented numbers of migrants to New World shores; second, a growing nativist perception of these laborers themselves as a political threat to the smooth functioning of the republic; and third, consequently, a fracturing of monolithic whiteness by the popular marriage of scientific doctrines of race with political concerns over the newcomers’ “fitness for self-government.”

This increasing fragmentation and hierarchical ordering of distinct white races (now in the plural) was theorized in the rarified discourses of science, but it was also reflected in literature, visual arts, caricature, political oratory, penny journalism, and myriad other venues of popular culture. It was this notion of variegated whiteness that surfaced in 1863, for instance, when the New York Tribune characterized the rioting Irish in New York as a “savage mob,” a “pack of savages,” “savage foes,” “demons,” and “incarnate devils.” It was this notion of variegated white-
ness that undergirded Henry Cabot Lodge's claim, in 1891, that Slovak immigrants “are not a good acquisition for us to make, since they appear to have so many items in common with the Chinese.” It was this notion of variegated whiteness that prompted one Colorado congressman, during an exchange on the merits of an immigration-restriction bill in the 1920s, to offer this cautionary fable:

Suppose we should move out of the United States all the hundred and six million people who are here now and put in their places a hundred and six million people who are to-day vegetating in darkest Africa. How long do you suppose that America would retain any similarity to its condition of the present time?

The picture appears plain enough when we paint it in such broad lines of black and white. But is it not essentially the same picture if we use shades—if instead of bringing in people who are entirely different we bring in people who are somewhat different?24

As these comments indicate, the older, supremacist meaning of whiteness was not completely overthrown by the new paradigm of plural white races. The key here is in his implicit ranking of human difference by degree—people who are “entirely” different and those who are “somewhat” different. But even if painted in “shades” rather than in stark, black-and-white polarities, the importation of “different” peoples posed a terrible threat to the well-being of the republic.

Thus race is not tangential to the history of European immigration to the United States but absolutely central. “Fitness for self-government,” a racial attribute whose outer property was whiteness, became encoded in a naturalization law that allowed Europeans’ unrestricted immigration and their unhindered (male) civic participation. It is solely because of their race, in other words, that they were permitted entrance. But the massive influx borne of this “liberal” immigration policy, in its turn, generated a new perception of some Europeans’ unfitness for self-government, now rendered racially in a series of subcategorial white groupings—Celt, Slav, Hebrew, Iberic, Mediterranean, and so on—white Others of a supreme Anglo-Saxon dom. This does not simply represent a shift in American thinking “toward racism,” as John Higham, still the premier historian of American nativism, would have it.5 Rather, the political history of whiteness and its vicissitudes between the 1840s and the 1920s represents a shift from one brand of bedrock racism to another—from the unquestioned hegemony of a unified race of “white persons” to a contest over
political “fitness” among a now fragmented, hierarchically arranged series of distinct “white races.” Race has been among the central organizers of the political life of the republic all along, and the racial reclassification of various European immigrants as their numbers swelled is among the most salient reminders of how powerful its sway has been.

Rethinking Whiteness

The demographics of the republic began to change dramatically in the mid-nineteenth century. In the early decades of the republic, immigration had been calculated by the mere thousands per year—an influx of 8,385 from all sending countries combined in the year 1820, for instance. But these yearly figures climbed to the tens of thousands per year by the mid-1820s, and to the hundreds of thousands per year by the 1840s. In 1847, among the worst years of the Famine in Ireland, total immigration to the United States leaped to 234,968, of whom nearly half (105,536) were from Ireland. From 1846 through 1855 a total of 3,031,339 immigrants came ashore in the United States, including 1,288,307 from Ireland and another 976,711 from Germany, the two new leading sources of immigration. By 1860 (that is, by the time “Anglo-Saxon” had displaced “white” in Dana’s racial lexicon) the foreign-born population of the United States was more than 4 million, of whom 1,611,304 had been born in Ireland, and 1,276,075 in Germany. Over the next several decades the economic and political dislocations across Europe continued to send increasing numbers of migrants to American shores, with each region furnishing its own statistical curve of migration slopes and peaks: Irish migration peaked at 221,253 in 1851; German migration peaked at 250,630 in 1882; Italian migration peaked at 285,731 in 1907; and Russian (largely Jewish) migration peaked at 258,943 also in 1907. By 1920 the “white” foreign-born population was more than 13.5 million, most of whom would not have qualified for Benjamin Franklin’s appellation “Saxon” (nor, indeed, “lovely white,” if even the Swedes are “swarthy”).

It is against this backdrop that the history of political whiteness took shape and that the fluidity of certain groups’ racial identities became apparent. The crosscurrents here are terribly complex. The Mexican War, slavery and Emancipation, Reconstruction, Indian wars, anti-Chinese agitation, Pacific expansion, and popular accounts of Pacific, Asian, and African exploration all kept vividly alive the crucial distinction in American political culture dividing white from nonwhite populations, as did
hiring practices, most labor agitation, and miscegenation statutes. And yet the multitudes of European immigrants who arrived in waves beginning in the 1840s, it was said, posed a new threat to democratic institutions. This emerging political crisis lent a new, multifaceted character to whiteness itself.

Thus, on the one hand, in The Inequality of Human Races (1855) Arthur Comte de Gobineau could look across the Atlantic at the United States and predict the decline of the Anglo-Saxons, who now found themselves suddenly overwhelmed by “the most degenerate races of olden day Europe. They are the human flotsam of all ages: Irish, cross-bred German and French, and Italians of even more doubtful stock.” Although penned in Europe, this sentiment would become increasingly common in North American discussion whenever immigration was the question of the moment. But when questions pertaining to slavery or expansion took center stage, on the other hand, racial differences among white populations receded. As Van Evrie put it, “Irishmen, Germans, Frenchmen, etc., come here, settle down, become citizens, and their offspring born and raised on American soil differ in no appreciable or perceptible manner from other Americans . . . [But the Negro is] as absolutely and specifically unlike the American as when the race first touched the soil and first breathed the air of the New World.” Or again, setting the Europeans’ environmentalist potential for change against the Africans’ hereditary stasis, Van Evrie declared, “The coarse skin, big hands and feet, the broad teeth, pug nose etc. of the Irish and German laborer pass away in a generation or two.”

There was hardly consensus on the prospect of immigrant “difference,” marked by physicality (“coarse skin,” “pug nose”), merely “passing away” with time. As had been the case with public debates over slavery and the displacement and extermination of American Indians, the gathering debate over immigration and the crisis it represented drew upon “knowledge” of peoples derived from the sciences. Indeed, as Ruth Benedict has remarked, the proportion of racialist literature in American intellectual history that deals with purportedly white peoples is staggering (perhaps, as she proposes, because “our treatment of the Negro conforms so closely to the predilections of these authors that they doubtless had little to suggest”). From Samuel Morton’s 1839 comment on the “unsophisticated Celts” of southwest Ireland, who “recall the memory of a barbarous age,” to the ascendant eugenics movement of the early twentieth century, the relative merits of the white races of Europe and America represented one of the abiding concerns of American ethnological sciences, anthropology,
sociology, literature, politics, and historiography. As Gobineau noted on the tenor of white supremacy at mid-century, “The most ardent democrats are the first to claim superiority for the Anglo-Saxons of North America over all the nations of the same continent.” And indeed, even a staunch abolitionist like Theodore Parker could intone, “No tribe of men has done such service for freedom as the Anglo-Saxons, in Britain and America.” (Elsewhere Parker would present an elaborate interpretation of world history, based upon a racial scheme of “five great powers of the civilized Christian world”: Russia, “a great Slavic people”; France, “a great Celtic people, variously crossed with Basque, Roman, and Teutonic tribes”; Germany, “a great Teutonic people”; England, “a great Saxon-Teutonic people”; and the United States, “a great English-Saxon-Teutonic people.”)

Josiah Nott was among the first in this country to invest the discourse of white races with full polygenetic implications. Objecting to the construction of a more or less unified “Caucasian” race presented in Samuel Morton’s Crania Americana (the category “Caucasian” was known in scientific discourse at this time, but was still rare in popular discourse), Nott commented that “the Teuton, the Jew, the Hindoo, the Egyptian, &c., have all been included under the term Caucasian; and yet they have, as far as we know, been through all time as distinct in physical and moral characters from each other, as they have from the Negro races of Africa and Oceanica.” The differences among the races were so pronounced, in Nott’s view, that “nothing short of a miracle could have evolved all the multifarious Caucasian forms out of one primitive stock . . . There must have been many centers of creation, even for Caucasian races, instead of one center for all types of humanity.”

Engaged as they were in both scientific inquiry and social observation, writers like Nott and the more avowedly polemical Van Evrie faced a complex task when it came to comprehending the divisions and rankings within the superior “white” race. For these authors slavery, not immigration, was the pressing question of the day and the real point of scientific inquiry into human types. Whether or not “all the multifarious Caucasian forms” could have developed from a single “primitive stock,” white supremacy did entail its own imperatives—especially at a time when slavery as an institution was under attack. Like Van Evrie, Nott considered slavery to be fully “consistent with the laws of God.” Thus standing firmly upon a bedrock of religiously and scientifically explained white supremacy generated within the context of slaveholding Mobile, Alabama,
he could only greet racial findings generated in the nativist Northeast or in the British Empire with some caution. For example, a contemporary English observer had described certain native Irish as “pot-bellied, bow-legged, and abortively featured; and [they] are especially remarkable for open, projecting mouths, with prominent teeth and exposed gums, their advancing cheekbones and depressed noses bearing barbarism on the very front. In other words, within a short period they seem to have acquired a prognathous type of skull, like the savages of Australia.” Nott responded by pointing out that “a healthy, well-developed race of men, like our domestic animals, (horses, cattle, and sheep) may be much more quickly and certainly altered for the worse than for the better.” These poor Irish merely represented a “diseased stock,” he argued, and their “abortive features” could be brought back “to their original type” in better circumstances: “It is wonderful how rapidly the lower class of Irish . . . do improve in America when they are well fed and comfortably lodged.”

By the 1860s Van Evrie was even more pronounced in his efforts to redeem the European immigrant, viewing the Irish as key constituents in a Northern, pro-slavery coalition. “Something like five hundred millions of money” had been funneled to the antislavery cause in Britain, he lamented, “money taken from Irish laborers within the last seventy years and expended for the assumed benefit of the negro.” The Irish, by this account, were so many “unfortunate white people” who should have been saved. Thus, as would be the case in the pan-white-supremacist agitation against Chinese immigrants in California in the 1870s, recouping or shoring up “Celtic” whiteness was among the chief tasks of political coalition-building among pro-slavery Northerners.

But as the discussions of Semites, Teutons, Slavs, or Anglo-Saxons on the part of Morton, Nott, and Gobineau suggest, notwithstanding the pressing slavery question these white races were subject to the new epistemological system of difference—a new visual economy keyed not only to cues of skin color, but to facial angle, head size and shape, physiognomy, hair and eye color, and physique. As the first to immigrate in huge numbers at once well within the literal language but well outside the deliberate intent of the “free white persons” clause of 1790, Irish and German arrivals of the 1840s and after drew special attention in discussions of race and its implications for assimilability and citizenship. In popular perception German immigrants generally remained the less racially distinct—or dangerous—of the two. By longstanding tradition in
the high discourse of race, the Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic traditions were closely aligned; indeed, by many accounts Anglo-Saxons traced their very genius to the forests of Germany—Anglo-Saxondom represented one branch of a freedom-loving, noble race of Germanic peoples.12

Further, in contrast with the Irish, a large proportion of German immigrants settled not in the polyglot, industrializing Northeast, but in the West. Thus even if in theory the various “New Germanys” of the West were to “keep the German settlers racially and culturally distinct,” they were nonetheless subject to the racial alchemy of a “frontier” society that saw the world divided between whiteness and others. As one scholar remarked in 1909, the historian “will find the German element on the frontier line at every single stage of its progress westward, securing and defending it.” German immigrants themselves also were less likely than their Irish counterparts to find the notion of a unified German race either terribly appealing or politically useful. According to one historian, the religious diversity of the German immigration in particular “made it very difficult for German Catholics . . . to see themselves as part of a larger ‘German’ entity” defined by race. Hence the Germans did not participate very actively in their own racial formation as non-Anglo-Saxons.13

Even so, ascriptions of Germanic racial identity were not uncommon. Richard Henry Dana could describe the “48er Carl Schurz as a “red-bearded Teuton”; the Ohio Republican, a Know-Nothing paper, could lament that Germans were driving “white people” out of the labor market; and Henry Cabot Lodge could blithely conclude that Germans “produced fewer men of ability than any other race in the United States.” Nor was racial self-ascription unknown among German immigrants: even in addressing assimilationism, speakers often turned to a language of “racial amalgamation.” After the failure of one “New Germany” in the West, a writer for the Illustrierte Welt (1859) identified racial amalgamation as the solution to the German problem: “Wouldn’t it be wiser to seek the cultural-historical task of the German emigration in a melting of Germanic idealism with the realism of the Anglo-Saxon?” According to one Anglo-American observer in the 1880s, German newspapers and German clubs fairly rattled with the question, “Will the Teutonic race lose its identity in the New World?” Even by World War I, however, it had not: one speaker at a Swiss festival in Philadelphia called for “the final, decisive victory of the Teutonic race,” while Germans in Chicago greeted war with Russia as a “war of the Teutonic race against the Slavic” and classed Slavs as the “natural serf races of Europe.” Another writer, more inclined to-
ward the allies, averred, "German blood has flowed freely in past times for the American union. It will flow as freely again if the Union again calls on its sons of the German race to be its sword and its buckler in its hour of danger."14

But by far the more powerful language of racial differentiation applied to the Irish. As Dale Knobel has amply demonstrated, beginning in the 1840s American comment on the "Irish character" became not only more pejorative but also more rigidly cast in a racial typology. During the mid-1840s, Knobel notes, American discussion of Irish immigration and urban social conditions rested upon the unquestioned fact of "something contemporaries had begun to call 'Irishism'—an alleged condition of depravity and degradation habitual to immigrants and maybe even their children." Negative assessments of Irishism or Celtism as a fixed set of inherited traits thus became linked at mid-century to a fixed set of observable physical characteristics, such as skin and hair color, facial type, and physique. The Irishman was "low-browed," "brutish," and even "simian" in popular discourse; a Harper's Weekly piece in 1851 described the "Celtic physiognomy" as "distinctly marked" by, among other things, "the small and somewhat upturned nose [and] the black tint of the skin." This comprehension of racial Irishness would surface in a wide range of contexts, including popular jokes, political speeches, newspaper cartoons, constabulary reports, and social policy guidelines. The Massachusetts State Board of Charities, for example, identified the immigrants' "inherited organic imperfection, vitiated constitution, or poor stock" as the chief cause of their pauperism and public dependency. Ultimately such racial conceptions would lead to a broad popular consensus that the Irish were "constitutionally incapable of intelligent participation in the governance of the nation."15

Racialism thus provided a powerful frame for interpreting and explaining Irish immigrant behaviors of all sorts, and for rearticulating at every turn the unbridgeable chasm separating natives (Anglo-Saxons) from immigrants (Celts). Whereas Irish nationalists themselves invoked their own yearning for liberty and fondly drew parallels between their cause and the glories of the American Revolution, native commentators often saw only chaos and irresponsibility in Irish political conduct. In the wake of an abortive Fenian raid on Canada in 1866, the Atlantic Monthly concluded, "All the qualities which go to make a republican, in the true sense of the term, are wanting in the Irish nature." To the "Celtic mind," the journal explained, "when anything comes in the guise of a law, there is