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## The “Becoming White Thesis” Revisited

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### Cover Page Footnote

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 107th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association in Denver in August 2012. We appreciate the constructive comments and suggestions of three anonymous reviewers of the JPPS.

## **Abstract<sup>1</sup>**

The claim that some non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrant groups such as the Irish, Italians, and Jews became white in historical America has largely been taken for granted these days, but we see a need for a qualified rectification of this thesis. Did these non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrant groups really become white? We argue that the answer to this question depends on how “becoming white” is defined. We have found no evidence to support the “becoming white thesis” in terms of change in the official racial classification of these groups in the record of social institutions such as U.S. censuses, naturalization laws, and court cases. Changes in the meaning of race in U.S. racial and ethnic lexicon explain why there is a discourse on how these non-Anglo-Saxon European groups changed their “races” to white. If “becoming white” did happen to these groups, its real meaning was a change in their social status from a minority group to part of the majority group rather than in racial classification. Evidence lends credence to this argument. Our findings help settle a debate about if some non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrant groups became white and have implications for race relations today and its pedagogy.

## **Keywords**

becoming white, non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrant groups, the Irish, Italians, Jews, race

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 107th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association in Denver in August 2012. We appreciate the constructive comments and suggestions of three anonymous reviewers of the JPPS.

## INTRODUCTION

As the argument of the social construction of race gains wide acceptance in the academic community these days, the claim that some non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrant groups such as the Irish, Italians, and Jews arrived in America as nonwhite but later became white has often unquestionably been embraced by scholars and educators. We see a need to revisit this so-called “becoming white thesis” for three reasons. First, this re-assessment will help settle a debate over whether these non-Anglo-Saxon immigrant groups really became white in historical America. There are two camps in this debate. The assertive camp argues and documents that these non-Anglo-Saxon immigrant groups became white from separate races historically. This camp is best represented by such scholarly works as *The Wages of Whiteness* (Roediger 1991), *How the Irish Became White* (Ignatiev 1995), *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (Brodkin 1998), *Whiteness of a Different Color* (Jacobson 1998), and *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White* (Roediger 2005). The dubious camp casts doubt upon, and challenges, this “becoming white” claim (see, for example, Arnesen 2001; Fields 2001; Guglielmo 2003; Reed 2001). In particular, Arnesen (2001) argued that by manipulating definitions and putting words into historical subjects’ mouths, some historians first made certain European immigrant groups “nonwhite” and then made them “white.” However, Arnesen’s (2001) article, as well as Fields’s and Reed’s, is commentary in nature but provides scant evidence, much less systematic empirical examination. Guglielmo (2003) did offer empirical evidence that Italian immigrants to Chicago between 1890 and 1945 were white on arrival, but his evidence is confined to Italian immigrants in one city during a limited period of time. Much more systematic evidence for more European groups in a broader scope and a longer period of time is called for. At the present, this ongoing debate remains inconclusive. One important reason for the lack of consensus is that these scholars have different concepts of becoming white in mind and do not share a common language. For example, Roediger, Ignatiev, and Jacobson speak about becoming white as a change in social status, but Arnesen and Guglielmo see becoming white as a change in racial classification, and Brodtkin talks about becoming white as a change in both racial classification and social status.

Second, we need to reassess the “becoming white thesis” because this debate has implications for the ongoing discourse on racial hierarchy and relations in America. “Contemporary debates over whether some Asian Americans, Arab Americans, and Latinos are or might become white have given this literature an urgency and edge,” as David Roediger (2005:7) put it (see, also, Alba and Nee

2003; Bonilla-Silva 2004; Gans 1999; Kim 2007; Yancey 2003; Yang 2006; Zhou 2004).

Third, we need to revisit the “becoming white thesis” because this research has important impact on the teaching of race and ethnicity courses. Because of the nebulous and various meanings of becoming white in the original whiteness writings (e.g., Arnesen, 2001, Barrett and Roediger 1997; Brodtkin, 1998; Gugliemo, 2003; Ignatiev 1995; Jacobson, 1998; Roediger 1991, 2005), textbooks and instructions based on the literature are even more ambiguous or sometimes erroneous. Quite a few sociology textbooks on racial and ethnic relations often accept the assertion that these non-Anglo-Saxon European groups in America became white, without elucidating the meaning of becoming white (see, for example, Cornell and Hartmann 2007; Feagin and Feagin 2011; Luhman 2002; Schaefer 2013). Some instructors including graduate student instructors and assistants who often may not have read the original whiteness writings fare even worse than textbook authors. The simplistic, less-nuanced, or even erroneous notion of becoming white is being passed on to students. We believe that a qualified rectification needs to be made in order to reveal historical facts, to preclude the transmission of erroneous information, and to rethink about racial hierarchy and relations in America today.

Did some non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrant groups such as the Irish, Italians, and Jews really become white in historical America? We argue that the answer to this question is contingent upon how becoming white is defined. If becoming white refers to change in the official racial classification of these groups, it has never happened. However, if becoming white means change in social status from a minority group to part of the majority or dominant group, that had definitely transpired. The purpose of this paper is to revisit the “becoming white thesis” and to provide evidence to support our argument. In the remainder of this paper, we pithily depict our data and methods. We then show historical evidence on whether there was any change in the racial classifications of these non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrant groups, bring to light why there exists a discourse about the changed race of these groups to white, and decipher what becoming white really means in the literature if it indeed occurred. We discuss the implications of our findings in the concluding section.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

To support our argument, we use two methods. The first method is historical and archival analysis (see Pitt 1972). Our data consist of census questionnaires and documents, naturalization laws, and rulings of federal court cases. We analyzed the official racial categories in the census questionnaires from the first census in

1790 to the latest census in 2010 and relevant documents. We also analyzed the naturalization legislation from 1790 to 1952 and the rulings about who was and was not white in the federal court cases from 1878 until 1944. In addition, we examined the four United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) statements of race issued in 1950, 1951, 1964, and 1967. The historical and archival analysis is most appropriate for answering our research question.

The second method is textual analysis. Textual analysis is a research method that is designed to describe and interpret the content, structure, and functions of messages in texts such as books, journals, films, TV programs, advertisements, and so on, and it is a way to make sense of the world (Frey, Botan, and Kreps 1999; McKee 2003). There are different types of textual analysis. In this study, we focus on qualitative content analysis and try to uncover the meanings of texts. Textual analysis was used mainly for revealing the real meaning of “becoming white” in relevant existing publications. It can show what is documented and what is not in the extant publications.

## **DID THE RACIAL CLASSIFICATION OF SOME NON-ANGLO-SAXON EUROPEAN IMMIGRANT GROUPS CHANGE?**

Race is a legal construction (Honey Lopez 1996), and official racial classifications largely, albeit imperfectly, reflect and shape popular racial categorizations. Hence, it is essential and important to examine how whiteness is legally or officially constructed by U.S. social institutions. We found no evidence from U.S. censuses, naturalization legislation, and court cases that the racial categorization of some non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrant groups such as the Irish, Italians, and Jews changed to white. They were legally white and always white, and there was no need for them to switch to white.

### *U.S. Censuses*

Racial categories have been used in every U.S. population census (Nobles 2000). Racial classification in U.S. population censuses represents official racial categorization and can reveal if changes in the categorization of non-Anglo-Saxon European groups have taken place over time. As shown in Table 1, since the first population census in 1790, U.S. racial categories have changed very frequently. For example, in the 1790 Census the categories included “free white males,” “free white females,” “all other free persons,” and “slaves.” “All other free persons” was changed to “all other free persons, except Indians not taxed” in the 1800 and 1810 Censuses. The “free colored persons” category was added in the 1820-1840

**Table 1.** Racial Classifications in the U.S. Censuses, 1790-2010

Census	Racial label	Racial Categories
1790	None	Free White males, Free White females, All other free persons, Slaves
1800	None	Free White males, Free White females, All other free persons (except Indians not taxed), Slaves
1810	None	Free White males, Free White females, All other free persons (except Indians not taxed), Slaves
1820	None	Free White males, Free White females, Free Colored persons (except Indians not taxed), Slaves
1830	None	Free White persons, Free Colored persons, Slaves
1840	None	Free White persons, Free Colored persons, Slaves
1850	Color	White, Black, Mulatto
1860 <sup>a</sup>	Color	White, Black, Mulatto
1870 <sup>a</sup>	Color	White, Black, Mulatto, Chinese, Indian
1880 <sup>a</sup>	Color	White, Black, Mulatto, Chinese, Indian
1890 <sup>b</sup>	None	White, Black, Mulatto, Quadroon, Octoroon, Chinese, Japanese, Indian
1900	Color or race	White, Black, Chinese, Japanese, Indian
1910 <sup>c</sup>	Color or race	White, Black, Mulatto, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Other
1920	Color or race	White, Black, Mulatto, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Hindu, Korean, Other
1930	Color or race	White, Negro, Mexican, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Hindu, Korean, Other
1940	Color or race	White, Negro, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Hindu, Korean, Other races-spell out in full
1950	Race	White, Negro, American Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Other races-spell out
1960	Color or race	White, Negro, American Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Part-Hawaiian, Aleut, Eskimo, (etc.)?
1970	Race	White, Negro or black, Indian (Amer.), Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Korean, Other (Print race)
1980	Race	White, Negro or black, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, Indian (Amer.), Asian Indian, Hawaiian, Guamanian, Samoan, Eskimo, Aleut, Other

		(Specify)
1990	Race	White, Negro or black, Indian (Amer.), Eskimo, Aleut, Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese, Asian Indian, Samoan, Guamanian, Other API (Asian or Pacific Islander), Other race
2000	Race	White; Black, African Am., or Negro; American Indian or Alaska Native (Print name of enrolled or principal tribe); Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Other Asian (Print race), Native Hawaiian, Guamanian or Chamorro, Samoan, Other Pacific Islander (print race); Some other race (Print race). Mark one or more races
2010	Race	White; Black, African Am., or Negro; American Indian or Alaska Native (print name of enrolled or principal tribe); Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Other Asian (Print race, for example, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on), Native Hawaiian, Guamanian or Chamorro, Samoan, Other Pacific Islander (print race); Some other race (Print race, for example, Fijian, Tongan, and so on). Mark one or more races

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census (2002, 2014).

<sup>a</sup> “Mulatto” includes quadroons, octoroons, and all persons having any perceptible trace of African blood.

<sup>b</sup> The word “black” refers to persons who have three-fourths or more black blood; “mulatto,” persons who have from three-eighth to five-eighth black blood; “quadroons,” persons who have one-fourth black blood; “octoroons,” persons who have one-eighth or any trace of black blood.

<sup>c</sup> The word “black” includes all persons who are evidently full-blooded negroes while the term “mulatto” included all other persons having some proportion or perceptible trace of negro blood.

Censuses. The “free white males” and “free white females” categories were merged into a single category “free white persons” in the 1830 and 1840 Censuses. The “white” category has appeared in census questionnaires since 1850, although in 1850 and 1860 census enumerators were instructed “in all cases where the person is white leave the space blank” (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2002). “Mulatto” was inserted between 1850 and 1920, except for 1900. “Chinese” and “Indian” were added since 1870. However, despite the changes, non-Anglo-Saxon Europeans were always lumped under the “white” category.



They had no other option but “white” on the race question in the U.S. census (Lee 1993). Of course, not all whites were treated equally. Anglo-Saxon whites were considered superior to non-Anglo-Saxon southern and eastern Europeans (Nobles 2000). There were concerns about the degeneracy and inferiority of certain white races resulting from racial mixture with nonwhites. The southern and eastern European groups encountered harsh prejudice and discrimination (Dinnerstein and Reimers 1982; Higham 1955; Lewis 1971). Nevertheless, intrawhite racial differences, albeit real and consequential, were deemed less important by the late 1920s. The evidence shows that “In any case, the census had always counted European immigrants as ‘white,’ although enumerators’ instructions never defined *white*” (Nobles 2000:72).

### *Naturalization Legislation*

Naturalization legislation provides another important source that substantiates no need for non-Anglo-Saxon European groups to become white as they were always eligible for U.S. citizenship. As is well known, nonwhite minorities were made ineligible for naturalization and gradually gained their right for U.S. citizenship in historical America. People of African descent were ineligible for U.S. citizenship until the Naturalization Act of 1870 based on the 14th Amendment to the Constitution granted them the right for citizenship. Native Americans were not eligible for U.S. citizenship until the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924. Chinese immigrants were deprived of citizenship right until 1943 when all Chinese exclusions laws were repealed. Indian and Filipino immigrants were ineligible for U.S. citizenship until the Luce-Celler Act of 1946 was passed. Japanese immigrants did not gain their citizenship right until 1952. However, none of the European groups has ever been excluded from U.S. citizenship because they were always considered “free white persons.”

In the early stage of the republic, at least three states restricted citizenship to “white persons”: Virginia in 1779, South Carolina in 1784, and Georgia in 1785 (Kettner 2005). The Naturalization Act of 1790, the first naturalization law in the United States, granted citizenship only to “free white persons.” Subsequent legislation until 1870 upheld the 1790 act. For the foreign-born, in 1870 citizenship was only open to “aliens being free white persons.” In other words, in the 1870 legislation, foreign-born whites had access to U.S. citizenship upon entry. In fact, Haney Lopez (1996) found that despite many subsequent changes in naturalization requirements, the “white person” prerequisite was included in every naturalization act from 1790 to 1952, with one exception—an accidental error of omitting the phrase in 1870 but corrected in 1875. Baum (2006) listed the legal cases between 1878 and 1923 that called upon the U.S. federal courts to interpret the phrase “free white person” in the U.S. naturalization laws passed between

1790 and 1870. What is significant here is that the traits that have been taken as what Baum (2006) called “the defining criteria of racial difference” vary across time and space. This lack of consistency on who is white can be seen in the 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Act that made references to “lesser European races” meaning the Jews, Italians, Poles, and Greeks. And yet, there was no law that disqualified non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrants for U.S. citizenship because these European groups were always considered Caucasian and white. As Roediger (2005:121) put it, “the new [European] immigrant could claim whiteness via naturalization and naturalization via whiteness.” No wonder Guglielmo (2003), who set out to uncover how Italian immigrants became white, eventually came to the conclusion that Italian immigrants at the turn of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were “White on Arrival,” the title of his book.

### *Court Cases*

Coupled with naturalization legislation, rulings of U.S. courts about cases pertinent to “free white persons” also offer another source of support for our argument that the Irish, Jews, and Italians need not become white.

The first reported whiteness ruling was made in 1878 in a federal case concerning Ah Yup’s race in California (Haney Lopez 1996). From 1878 to the end of World War II, U.S. courts had ruled on fifty-two legal cases germane to who was white and who was not (Table 2). Among these rulings, the courts ruled consistently that Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, Burmese, Hawaiians, Native Americans, and Afghanis were not white, while Armenians and Mexicans were white; but the court oscillated over whether Syrians, Arabians, and Asian Indians were white. The courts simply equated the white race with Caucasians. For example, in delivering the opinion of a Circuit Court of Appeals in the case of *US v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923), Justice Sutherland stated,

the words “free white persons” are words of common speech, to be interpreted in accordance with the understanding of the common man, synonymous with the word “Caucasian” only as that word is popularly understood...The children of English, French, German, Italian, Scandinavian, and other European parentage, quickly merge into the mass of our population and lose the distinctive hallmarks of their European origin. On the other hand, it cannot be doubted that the children born in this country of Hindu parents would retain indefinitely the clear evidence of their ancestry.

It is clear that the courts almost always treated Caucasians or those from Europe as whites. Although there were doubts about the racial status of some

**Table 2.** Court Rulings Regarding Who Is White in the U.S., 1878-1952

<b>Legal case</b>	<b>Court ruling</b>
In re Ah Yup, 1 F. Cas. 223 (C.C.D. Cal. 1878)	Chinese are not white.
In re Camille, 6 F. Cas. 256 (C.C.D. Or. 1880)	Persons half white and half Native American are not white.
In re Kanaka Nian, 6 Utah 259 21 Pac. 993 (1898)	Hawaiians are not white.
In re Hong Yen Chang, 84 Cal. 163 24 Pac. 156 (1890)	Chinese are not white.
In re Po, 7 Misc. 471 28 N.Y. Supp. 838 (City Ct. 1894)	Burmese are not white.
In re Saito, 62 F. 126 (C.C.D. Mass. 1894)	Japanese are not white.
In re Gee Hop, 71 F. 274 (N.D. Cal. 1895)	Chinese are not white.
In re Rodriguez, 81 F. 337 (W.D. Tex. 1897)	Mexicans are not white.
In re Burton, 1 Ala, 111 (1900)	Native Americans are not white.
In re Yamashita, 30 Wash. 234 70 Pac. 482 (1902)	Japanese are not white.
In re Buntaro Kumagai, 163 F. 922 (W.D. Wash. 1908)	Japanese are not white.
In re Knight, 171 F. 299 (E.D.N.Y. 1909)	Persons half white, one-quarter Japanese, and one-quarter Chinese are not white.
In re Balsara, 171 F. 294 (C.C.S.D.N.Y. 1909)	Asian Indians are probably not white.
In re Najour, 174 F. 735 (N.D.Ga. 1909)	Japanese are not white.
In re Halladjian, 174 F. 834 (C.C.D.Mass. 1909)	Armenians are not white.
United States v. Dolla, 177 F. 101 (5th Cir. 1910)	Asian Indians are white.
In re Mudarri, 176 F. 465 (C.C.D.Mass. 1910)	Syrians are not white.
Bessho v. United States, 178 F. 245 (4th Cir. 1910)	Japanese are not white.
In re Ellis, 179 F. 1002 (D.Or. 1910)	Syrians are white.
United States v. Balsara, 180 F. 694 (2nd Cir. 1910)	Asian Indians are white.
In re Alverto, 198 F. 688 (D.Or. 1910)	Persons three-quarters Filipino and one-quarter white are not white.
In re Young, 195 F. 645 (W.D.Wash. 1912)	Persons half German and half Japanese are not white.
In re Young, 198 F. 715	Persons half German and half Japanese are not white.

(W.D.Wash. 1912)	
Ex parte Shahid, 205 F. 812 (E.D.S.C. 1913)	Syrians are not white.
In re Akhay Kumar Mozumdar, 207 F. 115 (E.D.Wash. 1913)	Asian Indians are white.
Ex parte Dow, 211 F. 486 (E.D.S.C. 1914)	Syrians are not white.
In re Dow, 213 F. 355 (E.D.S.C. 1914)	Syrians are not white.
Dow v. United States, 226 F. 145 (4th Cir. 1915)	Syrians are white.
In re Lampitoe, 232 F. 382 (S.D.N.Y. 1916)	Persons three-quarters Filipino and one-quarter white are not white.
In re Mallari, 239 F. 416 (D.Mass. 1916)	Filipinos are not white.
In re Rallos, 241 F. 686 (E.D.N.Y. 1917)	Filipinos are not white.
In re Sadar Bhagwab, 246 F. 496 (E.D.Pa. 1917)	Asian Indians are not white.
In re Mohan Singh, 257 F. 209 (S.D.Cal. 1919)	Asian Indians are white.
In re Thind, 268 F. 683 (D.Or. 1920)	Asian Indians are white.
Petition if Easurk Emsen Charr., 273 F. 207 (W.D.Mo. 1921)	Koreans are not white.
Ozawa v. United States, 260 US 178 (1922)	Japanese are not white.
United States v. Thind, 261 US 204 (1923)	Asian Indians are not white.
Sato v. Hall, 191 Cal. 510 217 Pac. 520 (1923)	Japanese are not white.
United States v. Akhay Kumar Mozumdar, 296 F. 173 (S.D.Cal. 1923)	Asian Indians are not white.
United States v. Cartozian, 6 F. 2d 919 (D.Or. 1925)	Armenians are white.
United States v. Ali, 7 F. 2d 728 (E. D.Mich. 1925)	Punjabis (whether Hindu or Arabian) are not white.
In re Fisher, 21 F.2d 1007 (N.D.Cal. 1927)	Persons three-quarters Chinese and one-quarter white are not white.
United States v. Javier, 22 F. 2d 879 (D.C. Cir. 1927)	Filipinos are not white.
In re Feroz Din, 27 F.2d 568 (N.D.Cal. 1928)	Afghanis are not white.
United States v. Gokhale, 26 F. 2d 360 (2nd Cir. 1928)	Asian Indians are not white.
De La Ysla v. United States, 77 F. 2d 988 (9th Cir. 1935)	Filipinos are not white.

In re Cruz, 23 F. Supp. 774 (E.D.N.Y. 1938)	Persons three-quarters Native American and one-quarter African are not African.
Wadia v. United States, 101 F. 2d 7 (2nd Cir. 1939)	Asian Indians are not white.
De Cano v. State, 110 P. 2d 627 (Wash. 1941)	Filipinos are not white.
Kharaiti Ram Samras v. United States, 125 F. 2d 879 (9th Cir. 1942)	Asian Indians are not white.
In re Ahmed Hassan, 48 F. Supp. 843 (E.D.Mich. 1942)	Arabians are not white.
Ex parte Mohriez, 54 F. Supp. 941 (D.Mass, 1944)	Arabians are not white.

Source: Adapted from Haney Lopez (1996), Tables 1-3 of Appendix A.

European immigrants and campaigns against Irish naturalization in the 1840s and 1850s and against Italian naturalization in the early twentieth century, the courts almost always endorsed the whiteness of European immigrants (Barrett and Roediger 1997). It should be noted that in the Massachusetts case of *In re Halladjian* (1909) concerning the petitions of four Armenian immigrants for naturalization, the ruling of the U.S. Circuit Court singled out “Hebrews” as a particularly vexed instance. The ruling stated that

...the Hebrews are a true race, if a true race can be found widely distributed for many centuries. Their origin is Asiatic...If “the aboriginal peoples of Asia” are excluded from naturalization, as urged by the United States, it is hard to find a loophole for admitting the Hebrew.

But the court eventually used an inclusionary argument to justify the admissibility for naturalization of Armenians (and Hebrews). Thus, some doubts and challenges notwithstanding, the Irish, Italians, and Jews have always been eligible for U.S. citizenship because of their white status.<sup>2</sup> It is worthwhile to mention that despite not the focus of this paper, the racial classifications of Asian Indians, Syrians, and Armenians did change as shown in Table 2.

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<sup>2</sup> There were other cases of challenges to the whiteness of some European groups. For example, in a case in Minnesota naturalization lawyers sought to bar radical Finns from naturalization on the grounds that they were not “Caucasian” and therefore not white, but the attempt eventually failed (Barrett and Roediger 1997).

## CHANGING MEANINGS OF RACE IN THE U.S.

If change in racial classification has never happened to non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrant groups, how do we explain the existence of a discourse on how these non-Anglo-Saxon European groups changed their “races” to white? The linchpin to understanding this question lies in the changing meanings of race in the United States.

The term “race” has been used for five centuries (Sollors 2002). Probably derived from the Old French term “rasse,” the Italian term “razza,” the Spanish word “raza,” and the Portuguese word “raca,” the English term “race” connotes common origin or descent from a tribe, people, or nation. However, its connotation in the United States has evolved over time. Before 1950, “race” was similar to the meaning of “ethnicity” used for today, and “color” had a meaning similar to “race” for today.<sup>3</sup> One can easily find such phrases as “the Irish race,” “the German race,” “the Dutch race,” “the Swedish race,” “the Jewish race,” “the Italian race,” “the Mexican race,” “the Chinese race,” and the like in early publications prior to 1950. In these usages, race carried roughly the meaning of today’s ethnicity based on culture or national origins, although at times it could conflate with physical attributes just as ethnicity did. One important reason was that culture was believed to be derived from racial origins. For example, as the historian George Stocking (1968, 266) stated, “[F]or ‘race’ read ‘culture’ or ‘civilization,’ for ‘racial heredity’ read ‘cultural heredity.’” Another reason was that race was believed to be associated with common peoplehood or national origin. In the place of race, “color” was normally used. For example, in the nineteenth-century U.S. census questionnaires, the term “color” was always used as a heading for racial categories such as “white,” “black,” “Mulatto,” “Indian,” “Chinese,” and so on (Table 1). Even for censuses up to 1960, “color” was still often used as a heading for racial categories. Race tended to have a broader meaning than color. Race was often loosely used to denote both physically based groups and cultural or national-origin groups, such as white, black, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Hindu, Mexican, and so on.

In the wake of Nazi racialism and genocide during World War II, the UNESCO was founded in 1945 with the purpose of contributing to peace and security by promoting education, science, and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law, and for human rights and fundamental freedoms. To make know of scientific facts about race and to combat racism, a

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<sup>3</sup> Guglielmo (2003) made a similar point, but he dated the threshold at before World War II. As demonstrated in this section, the UNESCO Statement on Race issued in 1950 was the precise cutoff point in history that changed the meaning of “race” in common usage. Jacobson (1998:109) also implied that the 1950s saw the fixture of the meaning of “race” based on physical characteristics.

group of experts gathered by the UNESCO issued a “Statement on Race” on July 18, 1950. The Statement affirmed human equality, rejected the notion of racial hierarchies, and condemned racism. The Statement defined “race” as “a group or population characterized by some concentrations, relative as to frequency and distribution, of hereditary particles (genes) or physical characters” (UNESCO 1969:30-31). It pointed out an error of using the term “race” in popular parlance at that time; namely, when most people use the term “race,” they treated race as “any group of people whom they choose to describe as a race” including “national, religious, geographic, linguistic or cultural groups” (UNESCO 1969:31). These national, religious, geographic, linguistic, or cultural groups are what we call “ethnic groups” or “ethnicities” today. The Statement recommended that “it would be better when speaking of human races to drop the term ‘race’ altogether and speak of ethnic groups” (UNESCO 1969:31).

A second group of experts summoned by the UNESCO to discuss the concept of race released a second “Statement on the Nature of Race and Race Differences” in June 1951. This second Statement reaffirmed the main conclusions of the first Statement but modified some conclusions by shifting certain emphasis and dropped some propositions. It again stressed that the use of the term “race” in speaking of national, religious, geographic, linguistic and cultural groups may be “a serious error” “habitually committed” (UNESCO 1969:39). This Statement declared that

Since race, as a word, has become coloured by its misuse in connexion with national, linguistic and religious differences, and by its deliberate abuse by racialists, we tried to find a new word to express the same meaning of a biologically differentiated group. On this we did not succeed, but agreed to reserve race as the word to be used for anthropological classification of groups showing definite combinations of physical (including physiological) traits in characteristic proportions (UNESCO 1969:37-38).

After these UNESCO statements on race, gradually most scholars, organizations, and publications no longer misused the term “race” and reserved it for groups based on physical characteristics.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, largely as a result of assimilation, many Americans lost interest in the distinctions between Alpines and Anglo-Saxons; the color line became their primary concern (Guglielmo 2003). By the early 1950s, race and color had become basically synonymous, and, in fact, race

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that both the 1950 and 1951 UNESCO statements, as well as the later UNESCO statements in 1964, 1967, and 1978, treated race as a biological concept, but they acknowledged that race is a dynamic rather than a static concept.

had largely replaced color to denote human groupings based on physical characteristics; a new term “ethnicity” based on culture and national origin had been coined to denote differences previously thought to be based on race (Jacobson 1998).<sup>5</sup> White ethnics could be considered ethnically inferior and discriminated against because of their ethnic distinctions, but in terms of race or color, they were all white and had access to resources not available to nonwhites.

It was precisely because of the changing meanings of race that “the Irish race,” “the German race,” “the Dutch race,” “the Jewish race,” “the Italian race,” and so on changed their *races* and became white. In today’s terminology, it should be read that these European groups changed their *ethnicities* to become part of whites, or more precisely they were *racialized* to become white.

### **THE REAL MEANING OF “BECOMING WHITE”**

If the racial classification of non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrant groups did not change, then what did “becoming white” mean for them? We argue that if “becoming white” really happened to them, its real meaning was a change in their social status (broadly defined in terms of wealth, status, and power) from a minority group to the majority group. The majority/dominant group or American whiteness has been expanding over time (Painter 2010), from white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) in colonial America to northwestern Europeans beginning in the late eighteenth century to Caucasians (i.e., all Europeans, including those from southeastern Europe) starting at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Non-WASP Europeans “became white” through assimilation or by becoming very similar to WASPs culturally, economically, and structurally. Once the WASPs decided to no longer severely stigmatize them for being ethnically different from the WASPs, these European groups were allowed into American whiteness. Our argument is largely based on our analysis and assessment of the whiteness literature. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the meanings of “becoming white” in the whiteness literature vary largely from a change in racial classification (e.g., Arnesen 2001; Guglielmo 2003) to a change in social status (e.g., Ignatiev 1995; Jacobson 1998; Roediger 1991, 2005) and to a change in both (e.g., Brodtkin 1998). However, our textual analysis can only detect evidence of a changed social status of these non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrant groups but no evidence of changed racial reclassifications or both. The balance of this section provides a critical textual analysis and evidence for the Irish, Jews, and

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<sup>5</sup> The term “ethnicity” was first used in 1941 by W. Lloyd Warner and Paul Lunt (1941) in *The Social Life of a Modern Community*. It was included in the Supplement of *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1972.



Italians, the three groups written a great deal in the literature, to shed light on the real meaning of becoming white.

### *The Irish*

The works of historians David Roediger (1999) and Noel Ignatiev (1995) offer the best documentations of how the Irish became part of the majority group but no evidence of racial reclassification. About 3.6 million Irish immigrated to the United States in the 1840s-1890s (see Olson 1994), largely as a result of the Great Potato Famine (1845-1854), English colonial policy and oppression, religious persecution, and a system of landlordism that evicted Irish families from their lands (Takaki 1989). Unlike WASPs from England, they were predominantly Catholic and poor peasants or unskilled workers. Class and religion appeared to be two obvious signifiers of differences between the “poverty-stricken Irish Catholics” and the WASPs (Gordon 1961). They suffered from tremendous prejudice and discrimination. However, with time they were able to move up the socioeconomic echelon and became accepted as whites. It is very clear from the following quote that Ignatiev (1995:2-3) was talking about the change in Irish social status (broadly defined to include economic, political, and social dimensions) rather than in the reclassification of the Irish race:

What did it mean to the Irish to become white in America? ... To Irish workers, to become white meant at first that they could sell themselves piecemeal instead of being sold for life, and later that they could compete for jobs in all spheres instead of being confined to certain work; to Irish entrepreneurs, it meant that they could function outside of a segregated market. To both of these groups, it meant that they were citizens of a democratic republic, with the right to elect and be elected, to be tried by a jury of their peers, to live wherever they could afford, and to spend, without racially imposed restrictions, whatever money they managed to acquire. In becoming white the Irish ceased to be green.

Roediger and Ignatiev demonstrated how the Irish used the Democratic Party and the Catholic Church to help gain and secure their newly found place in the white republic and how the Irish changed from an oppressed class in Ireland to part of an oppressing class in America. The Democratic Party of the late nineteenth century was held together by white supremacy (Ignatiev 1995). It consisted of planters in the South and a huge Northern base that came together on the appeal of a white ideology. In order to broaden its base, the party made overtures toward the Irish working class thwarting the attempts of the nativist movement to keep new

immigrants out. Therefore, it was a critical player in enabling Irish assimilation although its primary intention was to garner a voting bloc. According to Ignatiev (1995:76), “The Democratic Party eased their assimilation as whites, and more than any other institution, it taught them the meaning of whiteness.” Another player was the Catholic Church that managed to overcome the pull toward territorial parishes organized along ethnic lines, and instead put into place some commitment toward a national parish (Roediger 2005). In other words, Catholics of different white ethnicity were brought together, and the parish was used as a defense against black movement into white neighborhoods. Overall, identification with whiteness superseded all else. Whiteness was used in defense of home or neighborhood when all of a sudden whites were able to band together and embrace restrictive covenants that sought to segregate housing (Roediger 2005). Thus, the history of becoming white for the Irish was a transition from exclusion to inclusion into both “Americanness” and whiteness (Bonnett 1998).

### *Jews*

In her autobiography, the anthropologist Karen Brodtkin (1998) demonstrated how Jews gained social status as whites but provided no evidence of their racial reclassification.

According to Brodtkin, the Jews in America became white after World War II. Brodtkin (1998) uncovered several conditions that elevated Jews to whites. The war against fascism and the decline of anti-Semitism and racism against all southern and eastern European immigrants paved the way for a more inclusive version of whiteness. The socioeconomic mobility of Jews and other Euro-ethnics driven by postwar economic prosperity facilitated their assimilation to and acceptance by the dominant group. The whitening of Jews also owed in part to Jewish residential assimilation into white suburban neighborhoods. Brodtkin in particular underscored the important roles of government policies and programs. She specifically emphasized the roles of GI Bill of Rights, which treated northwestern European men and southeastern European men equally with the benefits received, and FHA and VA mortgages, which facilitated residential assimilation.

The GI Bill and FHA and VA mortgages, even though they were advertised as open to all, functioned as a set of racial privileges. They were privileges because they were extended to white GIs but not to black GIs. Such privileges were forms of affirmative action that allowed Jews and other European American men to become suburban homeowners and to get the training that allowed them—much less so women vets or war workers—to become professionals,

technicians, salesmen, and managers in a growing economy (Brodkin 1998:50).

Finally, Brodtkin stressed the importance of community changes from the immigrant, working-class Jewish community of her grandparents in New York to her parents' farming, working-class Jewish community in Vermont and to her own middle-class Jewish community. Unlike Ignatiev, in speaking about how Jews became white Brodtkin (1998) talks about changes in both racial assignment or classification and social status, but she does not substantiate any change in official racial reclassification of Jews and instead talks about "popularly held classifications" (p. 3). Her evidence appears to buttress Jewish mobility in social status.

The historian Matthew Jacobson (1998) also wrote extensively about how Jews became Caucasian or white. Like Barrett and Roediger (1997), Jacobson also acknowledged the in-betweenness status of Jews in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. He saw Jews as both white and Other and as "probationary whites" before the mid-twentieth century. He evinced the long-lasting anti-Semitism in America and the deeply-rooted perception of Jewish unassimilability. Jacobson (1998) identified several conditions that gave Hebrews a ticket to whiteness. He argued that World War II and the revelations of the horrors of Nazi Germany partly contributed to the acceptance of American Hebrews into the community of Caucasians or whites in the mid-twentieth century. U.S. social changes shaped by World War II and the early Cold War also accelerated the process of becoming Caucasian for Hebrews. Geographic dispersion of Jews to suburbs and sunbelt cities and to other places of white concentration was also another facilitator of whitening. Like Brodtkin, Jacobson also recognized the roles of government racial policies such as GI Bill of Rights and government's "whites only" approach to suburban housing loan in the admission of Jews into whiteness. Finally, the founding of Israel as a *white* client state in the Middle East had an effect of whitening Jews. Whether Jacobson means change in racial classification or social status in discussing becoming white for Jews is nebulous. However, the evidence provided in his analysis in essence points to the mobility of social status among Jews rather than change in their racial classification.

### *Italians*

Differing from Ignatiev, Barrett and Roediger, Jacobson, and Brodtkin, Guglielmo (2003) seems to emphasize change in *racial classification*. As mentioned earlier, instead of finding how the Italians became white, his research based on Italian immigrants in Chicago in the period of 1890-1945 found that "For much of the turn-of-the century and interwar years, then, Italians were white on arrival not so much

because of the way they viewed themselves, but because of the way others viewed and treated them” (Guglielmo 2003:6). Despite prejudices, discrimination, inequalities, and doubt about whether they were “full-blooded Caucasians,” Italians were still largely accepted as whites by most people and institutions including naturalization laws and courts, the U.S. census, race science, newspapers, unions, employers, neighbors, realtors, settlement houses, politicians, and political parties (Guglielmo 2003). They could become naturalized U.S. citizens, apply for certain jobs, live in certain neighborhoods, choose their marital partners, and patronize businesses and public places. They could openly identify with white and mobilize as white. “Italians’ whiteness” given more powerfully by the federal government than any other institution “was their single most powerful asset in the ‘New World’; it gave them countless advantages over ‘nonwhites’ in housing, jobs, schools, politics, and virtually every other meaningful area of life” (Guglielmo 2003:12). Guglielmo’s study challenges the assumption or now largely accepted argument that “European immigrants arrived in the United States as ‘inbetween peoples’ and only became fully white over time and after a great deal of struggle” (p. 10). He argued that Italians never occupied an in-between social position between nonwhites and whites, and their color was always white. Italians could be considered racially inferior “Dagoes” and privileged whites simultaneously.

However, Guglielmo’s (2003) view is not shared by some other scholars such as Robert Orsi, David Barrett, and David Roediger. For instance, Orsi (1992) demonstrated the racial in-between status of immigrants from southern Italy in Harlem, New York, in the several decades after their first arrival in the 1920s. He showed that southern Italian immigrants were perceived as “lazy, criminal, sexually irresponsible, and emotionally volatile” and were discriminated against. They competed with African Americans for housing, jobs, neighborhoods, and power and learned to look down everything white people loathed. Overtime, they gained the status of whites.

Orsi’s standpoint is echoed by Barrett and Roediger (1997). Barrett and Roediger (1997) demonstrated that the Italian immigrants, as well as other southern and eastern European immigrants (e.g., Greeks, Poles, Hungarians), in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were treated by the native-born and older immigrants as above nonwhites (i.e., blacks and Asians) but below “white” people. They were the in-between peoples. The native-born Europeans were whites, but the Italians and other southern and eastern European immigrants were foreigners. Barrett and Roediger (1997:7) found that the term “guinea” long used to refer to African slaves and their descendants was increasingly applied to southern European immigrants, “first and especially to Sicilians and southern Italians who often came as contract laborers” since the late 1890s, an indication of their inferior status. Their in-between status lasted at least until the late 1930s as reflected in such phrases as “our temporary Negroes” (Dollard 1949) and “not-yet-white ethnics” (Goldberg 1990). In

his earlier study, Higham (1955:173) also observed that “In all sections, native-born and northern European laborers called themselves ‘white men’ to distinguish themselves from Southern European immigrants.” The Italians and other Southern and Eastern European immigrants quickly learned that the worst among all was being “colored.” They competed with African Americans for jobs, wages, and housing. Decades later, they gradually became white in the process of becoming American. Identity shift appeared to be important. The only way for Italian immigrants to liberate from the inferior in-between status was to abandon their national pride and to become 100 percent American (Barrett and Roediger 1997). By becoming 100 percent American, they also became 100 percent white.

In his more recent study, Roediger (2005) discussed a number of factors that transformed the racial in-betweenness of Italian and other southern and eastern European immigrants to a firmer acceptance of their whiteness position and identity. The racial in-betweenness consciousness of the new southern and eastern European immigrants pushed them to work harder in order to attain a fully white status in the racial hierarchy. The nadir of new immigration as a result of immigration restrictions in the 1920s ushered in a period in which assimilation of the new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe could take place. The great liberal mobilizations of the New Deal and industrial unionism in the 1930s created an environment for the new immigrants to mobilize as whites and to exclude racial others. Very crucially, the construction of new immigrant housing through state policy on urban settlement for the segregation of neighborhoods in the 1920s and then through New Deal housing policy separated whites from African Americans, thereby unifying all Europeans and forging whiteness.

It is not difficult to uncover from the analyses of Orsi, Barrett and Roediger, and Roediger that, albeit inexplicitly, in speaking of “becoming white” they essentially document change in the social status of Italian immigrants and other Slavic and Mediterranean immigrants rather than change in their official racial classifications.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this paper, we question the now widely held belief that some non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrant groups such as the Irish, Italians, and Jews became white in historical America. We have found no evidence to support the “becoming white” thesis in terms of change in the official racial classifications of these groups in the record of social institutions such as U.S. censuses, naturalization laws, and court cases. Non-Anglo-Saxon European groups arrived in America as whites, and there was no need for them to be reclassified as whites. U.S. census questionnaires provide no evidence of reclassifications for these European groups, and U.S.

naturalization laws and U.S. courts always treated these Europeans as “free white persons” eligible for U.S. citizenship. Changes in the meaning of race in U.S. racial and ethnic lexicon explain why there is a discourse on how these non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrant groups changed their “races” to white. One may still argue that “becoming white” did happen to these non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrant groups, but the real meaning of “becoming white” for these groups was a change in social status from a minority group to part of the majority or dominant group. Evidence lends credence to this argument.

To be perfectly clear, it is not our argument in this article that race is merely a legal construction by social institutions or that the legal construction of whiteness should be given preponderance over the popular construction of whiteness. What we really argue is that since becoming white conveys different meanings, researchers and educators should clarify the meanings of becoming white in their writings and teaching. We show that there is no evidence of becoming white in racial classifications for some non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrant groups because this is what is nebulous and missing in the whiteness writings. But we also recognize that the meaning of social status change for becoming white is important in the literature.

Our findings help resolve the controversy over whether certain U.S. non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrant groups became white in historical America. Our analysis suggests that “becoming white” carries different meanings: change in racial classification, and change in majority/minority status. In terms of the former, “becoming white” for non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrant groups is bogus. Hence, the argument of Eric Arnesen (2001), Aldoph Reed (2001), Barbara Fields (2001), and Thomas Guglielmo (2003) that the Irish, Italians, and Jews were white on arrival in America is vindicated. It is useful to note that although racial reclassification did not happen to Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants, it did occur to Syrians, Armenians, and Asian Indians as shown in Table 2. However, in terms of the latter, “becoming white” is arguably real. Thus, David Roediger (1991, 2005), Noel Ignatiev (1995), and Matthew Jacobson (1998), among others, do not fall wide of the mark in articulating and documenting how these non-Anglo-Saxon European groups became white. To these writers and other whiteness writers (e.g., Doane 2003; Frankenberg 1993; Wray 2006), to become white is to be unmarked as racial “other” or to lose the stigma of otherness; whiteness is equivalent to normalcy and respectability. The crux lies in being clear and precise about what one seeks to address. Ambiguities in conceptualization of “becoming white” among some existing studies stand as a major obstacle to the advancement of the discourse. Even worse is the mixture of both change in racial classification and change in majority/minority status in writing about “becoming white.” This is precisely why it is important to understand the different meanings of “becoming white.” Nonetheless, it is

apropos and fruitful to talk about “becoming white” so long as its meaning is well defined.

Our findings suggest that it is important to study the legal or official classifications of whites and the relationship between legal whiteness and popular whiteness, to which the existing whiteness literature has not paid sufficient attention. Legal whiteness classifications and popular whiteness classifications are not uncorrelated, but without understanding legal whiteness classifications it will be difficult to fully comprehend popular whiteness classifications. The legal or official racial classifications are to some extent reflections and codifications of popular racial classifications. Nonetheless, official racial classifications do not match popular racial classifications perfectly. For example, most Americans equate “European Americans” with “white Americans,” but many are unaware that Americans who originate from Northern Africa (e.g., Egypt, Libya, and Algeria) and West Asia (e.g., Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia) are officially white. Officially, “Hispanic” is not a racial category, but quite a few Americans perceive it as a “race.” It is also critical to understand that official racial classifications shape popular classifications. A case in point is that the creation of a racial category for “Asian” or “Asian American” in the 1960s led to the widespread use of the popular term “Asian” or “Asian American.” It is equally important to recognize that popular classifications can also shape official classifications. The consideration of including a racial category for Hispanic in the 2020 Census is an example.

Our findings also suggest that we ought to avoid understanding the history of race, ethnicity, and immigration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in today’s thinking and language, because “‘race’ did not really mean ‘race’ back then” (Jacobson 1998:6). Although history is subject to interpretation, there is still such a thing called original, undistorted historical facts that scholars should uncover with objectivity.

Our results have implications for racial relations in the United States today. Recent years have witnessed a discourse on the expansion of white category and the possibility for Asian Americans and Latinos to become white in the near future (see, for example, Bonilla-Silva 2004; Gans 1999, 2012; Hecker 1992:16; Kim 2007; Lee and Bean 2004; Warren and Twine 1997; Yancey 2003; Yang 2006; Zhou 2004). Both Gans (1999) and Bonilla-Silva (2004) placed some Asian and Latino groups in the “honorary white” category for the future of U.S. racial hierarchy. Yancey (2003) also contended that Asians and Latinos have a better chance of becoming white than blacks in the future because of their assimilability to the dominant group. Gans (2012) recently suggested that by the mid-century, whites may whiten the descendants of Asian Americans and Latinos in order to maintain the demographic and social dominance. Currently, Hispanics in the United States have an option to check the white category for the race

question on the Census questionnaire. This means that Hispanics can be legally white and therefore do not need to officially “become white.” In fact, in the 2000 Census, 48 percent of the 35.3 million Hispanics self-proclaimed white (i.e., white alone), but in the 2010 Census out of the total 50.5 million Hispanics the percentage of them who selected white alone grew to 53 percent (see U.S. Bureau of the Census 2011a, 2011b). According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (2011b), in 2000 the Hispanic white alone population totaled 16.9 million, accounting for 8 percent of the total 211.5 million white alone population; in 2010 Hispanic whites alone grew to 26.7 million, accounting for 12 percent of the total 223.6 million white alone population, an increase of more than 9.8 million or 58.1 percent. The number and percentage of Hispanics who self-identify as white are very likely to increase in the near future. However, the social status of Hispanics is still substandard to that of non-Hispanic whites just like a century ago. Thus, in terms of social status they still need to go through the “becoming white” process in order to reach equality with non-Hispanic whites. High inter-marriages between Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites could contribute to their whitening process.<sup>6</sup> Unlike Hispanics, Asian Americans are not officially white, but high inter-marriages between Asians and whites may help them become white. If becoming white refers to a change in majority/minority status rather than a change in racial classification, the possibility for Asians and Latinos to become white seems to be less remote. However, there is no lack of dissent (see, for example, Alba and Nee 2003; Kim 2007; Yang 2006; Zhou 2004). For instance, Alba and Nee (2003) contended that the wholesale “whitening” experienced by the European groups through boundary shift appears to be highly unlikely to visible nonwhites. Some (e.g., Kim 2007; Yang 2006; Zhou 2004) suggest that the likelihood for Asian Americans to become white remains minimal in the foreseeable future. At least at the present, “honorary white” is nothing more than a refurbished version of the “model minority” image of Asian Americans. What will happen in the future remains to be seen.

Our findings also have implications for pedagogy in race and ethnic relations. Textbooks and instructors for courses in the area of race and ethnic relations and for introductory sociology that normally covers race and ethnic relations should explicitly distinguish the two meanings of “becoming white” and explain what actually happened historically in “becoming white” and what is likely to take place in U.S. racial hierarchy in the future.

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<sup>6</sup> A Pew Research Center report by Wendy Wang (2012) found that among all the newlyweds in 2010, Asians (28 percent) and Hispanics (26 percent) were more likely to marry out than whites (9 percent) and blacks (17 percent); white/Latino couples (43.3 percent) were the most common type of intermarriage couple followed by white/Asian couples (14.4 percent).



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