REVIEW ESSAY

Traditions of the American Identity[1]
Navigating the Complex Terrain of Whiteness

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Abstract

American identity is shaped by a dynamic interplay of traditions, including liberalism, civic republicanism, ethnoculturalism, and incorporationism, each contributing distinct yet interconnected elements to its development. Central to this evolving narrative is the concept of whiteness, which has transitioned from a presumed social norm to a contested socio-political construct. This study traces the historical trajectory of whiteness, examining its role in defining the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion within American identity. It explores how whiteness has operated as a marker of privilege, a tool of social stratification, and a performative identity, adapting to historical and ideological shifts while sustaining systemic inequalities. Through a historical lens, the study analyzes the relationship between whiteness and American traditions, highlighting its influence on key political and cultural developments, from the codification of racial hierarchies in the early republic to contemporary struggles over race and equity. Ultimately, the study underscores whiteness as a constructed and fluid force that continues to shape the social, political, and cultural dimensions of American identity, raising critical questions about power, belonging, and the future of pluralism in the United States.

Introduction

 The idea of American identity is a complex and constantly changing concept deeply ingrained in the historical and political fabric of the nation. To fully grasp the complexities of American identity, it is essential to explore the elaborate network of traditions that have significantly influenced its formation. Scholars have acknowledged several important traditions, including liberalism, civic republicanism, ethnoculturalism, and incorporationism, each offering unique elements to the intricate composition of American identity. At this point, it would be important to underline that these traditions are not

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[1] This article has undergone some minor changes after publication, at the authors' request, which do not alter its substance and results in any way

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mutually exclusive but rather coexist and interact with each other in shaping American identity. Recent scholarship has highlighted this complexity and competition among these traditions, with each offering different perspectives on what it means to be American (Hero, 2003; Schildkraut, 2003; Schildkraut, 2007; Yogeeswaran & Gómez, 2012; McDaniel et al., 2016).

At the heart of this discussion lies the elusive concept of whiteness, a foundational element intricately interwoven within the fabric of American identity, experiencing profound shifts over time. This essay embarks on an exploration into the metamorphosis of whiteness within the broader context of American identity, tracing its journey from a customary social construct to evolving into a source of unease and tension. Whiteness, in its varied forms, has wielded significant influence in shaping American society and politics, often serving as a divisive factor and a wellspring of discord. However, it would also be crucial to highlight our stance where we see whiteness is not an inseparable component of American identity but rather a constructed portion of it, challenging the implicit association of Americanness with whiteness. This perspective resists the naturalization of whiteness within the concept of American identity, emphasizing the constructed and contingent nature of both. Scholarly work supports this approach; for instance, Fields (2001) critiques whiteness as an ideological construct that distracts from deeper power dynamics in American society, framing it as a false equivalence to racial identity. Similarly, Devos and Banaji (2005) demonstrate that whiteness is often implicitly equated with Americanness, even when explicit attitudes oppose such conflation, showing how this dynamic marginalizes nonwhite identities. By disentangling whiteness from American identity, we align with scholarship that deconstructs the racial dimensions of belonging and power, such as Goldstein's analysis of the shifting racial identities in the American Jewish experience (Goldstein, 2006). These frameworks collectively underscore the necessity of viewing whiteness as an ever-evolving socio-political construct, not an inherent and unchanging element of national identity.

In line with the abovementioned approach to conceptualizations, this essay critically examines the existing scholarly debates on the transformation of American identity, offering a nuanced understanding of the diverse traditions and belief systems that have shaped its evolution. We identify that, spanning from the early colonial periods to modern times, the notion of whiteness has shifted within the framework of these traditions, taking on varied meanings and functions. It has served as both a force for inclusion and exclusion, reflecting the changing landscape of American society and politics.

As we hereby explore the complex socio-political and historical dynamics of whiteness and its influence on American identity, we will uncover different dimensions, including its portrayal as a social standing, its links to discontent, its emergence as a racial division, and its historical depiction as an intrinsic characteristic. Furthermore, we will investigate how whiteness transformed into a performative aspect during specific historical junctures, notably in the pre-Civil War era, when citizenship and race became closely intertwined. Furthermore, this essay will illuminate the influence of whiteness in American politics, tracing its historical significance in shaping policies and political alliances. It will elucidate how whiteness has been a defining factor in various political movements, ranging from the civil rights era to contemporary debates surrounding immigration and racial identity.

We suggest that the concept of whiteness emerges as a sociopolitical construct tied to the broader American identity. It has acted as a dynamic and ever-changing force, imprinting its presence on the social, political, and cultural aspects of American society. As we examine the conflicting traditions that have molded American identity, we gain valuable insights into the complex essence of whiteness and its lasting impact on the course of the United States.

Major Traditions of American Identity

In order to evaluate the issue we study on, it is significant to understand the complex and competing components of American identity which consist of different traditions that have been outlined by scholars. *Liberal*, *civic republican*, *ethnocultural* and *incorporatist* traditions can be counted as the most important components contributing to the scholarly debate on American identity (Higham, 1993; Hollinger, 2006; Schildkraut, 2007). Each tradition offers unique perspectives and insights into the ever-evolving nature of what it means to be American (Schildkraut, 2007).

Liberalism, as an example, highlights the significance of minimizing government involvement, championing economic and political liberties, and celebrating individualism. These principles have held substantial sway in shaping the core values of the American identity. Conversely, civic republicanism prioritizes civic duties and encourages active participation in community betterment, emphasizing the collective aspect of American identity. Ethnoculturalism, although contested, has historically influenced the definition of American identity based on specific ethnic criteria. Lastly, incorporationism speaks to the dynamic and inclusive nature of American society, where diverse backgrounds and experiences converge. We underline that these traditions offer a rich tapestry of ideas and values that illuminate the multifaceted mosaic of American identity and its continuous evolution. Following sections will delve deeper into the dimensions of each approach that have a crucial role in understanding the development of Whiteness within the American experience.

As defined by Hartz (1955), *liberal* understanding of American identity draws an American image in which liberalism defines the American political culture. In this liberal tradition, the minimal intervention of the government in private life and the promotion of economic and political freedoms with the condition of equal opportunity have been highly prioritized (Schildkraut, 2007). In terms of American identity, this normative tradition involves the endorsement of liberal principles by the group members that are not infringing upon the political and economic rights, as well as freedom of others. More specifically, individualism, notion, and promise of hard work, equality, and freedom, as well as the principle of rule of law, could be exemplified as the components of this tradition (Schildkraut, 2014). The notion of *American Creed*, which has been discussed by Myrdal (2017) and Huntington (2004), in this sense, is the basis of this liberal tradition as the endorsement of American Creed- e.g. hard working, minimum state intervention, political and economic principles- should be sufficient for the group membership, i.e. being American.

Ethnoculturalism, although less acknowledged by the liberal tradition, has also been a constitutive element of American identity. In this script tradition, there have been outlined rigid boundaries for belonging to American identity (Schildkraut, 2007). In accordance with this ethnocentric view defining the national identity based on some certain ethnic conceptualizations, Americans are defined as white, English-speaking Protestants of Northern European ancestry (Smith, 1997). This tradition, as it will be discussed more in detail in the following paragraphs, has been largely acknowledged in American social and political history in the process of defining whiteness. Despite being discredited over time, it is still one of the major traditions shaping American identity by many (Schildkraut, 2007). For instance, this ethnocultural view is visible among the elite and masses in today's American society as they endorse a restricting full range of citizenship rights to certain ethnic and religious groups (Davis & Silver, 2004; Schildkraut, 2007). As maintained by Schildkraut, "...for many people who genuinely reject such exclusions, ethnoculturalism still operates beyond their awareness." (2007, p. 599).

Civic republicanism refers to the civic responsibilities which are enhancing the notion of the well-being of the community. Under this tradition of American identity, it has been stated that a self-governing community in need of individual members to act on its behalf (Banning, 1986). More specifically, in other words, one should be involved in social and political life with the aim of serving the public good (Schildkraut, 2007). As the central component of the American identity, this tradition prioritizes making group members both informed and involved in public life by pursuing collective identity (Schildkraut, 2007).

Being considered alongside the ethnocultural tradition, incorporationism represents a contemporary perspective in defining American identity, rooted in the concept of cultural pluralism (Kallen, 1957). Proponents of this view assert that American identity is distinctive due to its immigrant heritage and its capacity to transform the challenges posed by immigration into sources of strength (Higham, 1993; Glazer, 1998; Tichenor, 2002). This perspective has, as Schildkraut (2007) notes, challenged the traditional ethnoculturalism viewpoint, although some argue that many Americans do not perceive these as mutually exclusive concepts (Citrin et al., 2001). However, it is undeniable that the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the political incorporation of immigrants and African Americans, along with their descendants, have significantly contested the ethnoculturalism perspective. In the following sections, we will further explore the implications and relevance of these developments in the social and political history of the United States, particularly within the context of the literature on American identity and whiteness.

Exploring the Varied Meanings and Historical Implications

As we delve further into our discussion, it is imperative to acknowledge the diverse definitions of whiteness within the scholarly discourse. Whiteness has been conceptualized as both a racial identity and a social construct, deeply intertwined with power dynamics and privilege in American society. It serves as the "unmarked" category against which other identities are contrasted, perpetuating invisibility and privilege while marginalizing non-White identities (Harris, 1993). Scholars have argued that American identity has historically been conflated with whiteness, reinforcing racial hierarchies and exclusion of minorities (Devos & Banaji, 2005).

Some scholars contend that whiteness has undergone a process of normalization throughout the social and political history of the United States (Olson, 2008). Conversely, others emphasize that assuming a normalized whiteness with a monolithic and imperceptible nature that remains impervious to political and cultural challenges is no longer tenable (Winant, 2012). It is noteworthy that many of these definitions have primarily contributed to the ethnocultural interpretation of American national identity, as previously discussed. Nevertheless, in a broader context, it can be asserted that whiteness is a concept that is contingent on both context and time, subject to examination as both a natural (Gross, 2008; Painter, 2011) and social identity (Schildkraut, 2014) in empirical and theoretical analyses within American political literature.

One of the conceptualizations of whiteness pertains to it being a form of social status or whiteness as a position of standing (Olson, 2008). This interpretation revolves around the notion that historical American citizenship endowed a level of honor and status that distinguished its holders, i.e., citizens, from noncitizens, notably slaves (Shklar, 1991). Within this framework, it is noteworthy that the most marginalized member within the white group enjoyed a higher status than the most esteemed member of the excluded community (Ignatiev, 2012), creating a paradoxical relationship where American citizenship simultaneously represented equality among citizens and served as a means of distinction

from non-citizens (Shklar, 1991). At this point, the construction of American identity has been consistently challenged by various groups, including white women, enslaved African Americans, and immigrants over time. For instance, white women have historically participated in and benefited from whiteness while simultaneously advocating for gender equity, exposing contradictions within the identity (Fields, 2001). Enslaved African Americans fundamentally undermined the ideology of whiteness through their resistance and fight for emancipation, challenging the moral and political legitimacy of White dominance (Stein, 2001). Non-White immigrant groups, such as Arab Americans, have further complicated racial categories by asserting both distinct ethnic identities and claims to whiteness to mitigate discrimination (Ajrouch & Jamal, 2007). Following sections trace the evolution of Whiteness and American identity.

Early Foundations of Whiteness and Racial Hierarchies (1600s–1870s)

The colonial and constitutional eras established the foundational structures of American identity, where whiteness became a defining characteristic of inclusion. Early laws and practices institutionalized racial hierarchies and exclusion, shaping the dynamics of American society. Scholars like Abrajano and Hajnal (2015) provide insights into how these dynamics emerged. Early colonial America was marked by interactions between Native Americans, white settlers, and enslaved Africans. These interactions laid the groundwork for racial hierarchies, justified by evolving ethnocultural claims and naturalist discourses.

In 1619, the arrival of African slaves in Virginia marked the beginning of racialized labor systems. Although the liberal tradition, inspired by thinkers like John Locke, emphasized equality and individual rights, it paradoxically justified colonial expansion and slavery by dehumanizing Indigenous peoples and Africans (Locke, 2013). These contradictions became evident in the Declaration of Independence (1776), which proclaimed equality but was interpreted to apply exclusively to white males, excluding enslaved individuals and Native Americans (Jefferson, 1998). The institutionalization of whiteness was legally codified with the Naturalization Act of 1790, which restricted citizenship to "free white persons". This reflected both the ethnocultural tradition's emphasis on shared heritage and the civic republican tradition's linkage of citizenship to whiteness and land ownership (Cuison-Villazor, 2023). During this period, whiteness became fetishized as a natural identity, exemplified by a focus on tall, attractive Anglo-Saxons, while early anthropological studies reinforced strict racial hierarchies (Painter, 2011).

The liberal tradition in American identity, which emphasized individual rights and equality, was deeply exclusionary during the colonial and antebellum periods. John Locke's philosophy justified land acquisition and slavery by dehumanizing non-whites (Locke, 2013). Similarly, the civic republican tradition focused on active participation and virtue but limited this vision to propertied white men. The Founding Fathers equated land ownership with civic responsibility, excluding women, Native Americans, and enslaved individuals from public life (Freehling, 1972; Brown R. D., 1996; Kann, 1999). This tradition culminated in Andrew Jackson's populist democracy, which expanded suffrage to all white men but reinforced whiteness as central to citizenship (Howe, 2007). The ethnocultural tradition, rooted in shared heritage and cultural norms, also marginalized non-European groups. The rise of Anglo-Saxonism during the 18th and early 19th centuries celebrated white Protestant heritage as the foundation of American identity (Horsman, 1981). This ideology justified policies such as the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which reflected both ethnocultural exclusion and the racial limitations of civic republicanism (Wilkins & Stark, 2017).

In antebellum America, whiteness was increasingly understood as a performance rather than an inherent essence, deeply intertwined with privilege and societal norms. Legal trials

of racial identity became critical in defining whiteness, equating it with citizenship and associated rights such as voting, jury participation, and military service (Gross, 2008). One notable case illustrating the performative nature of whiteness is *Morrison v. White* (1857). Alexina Morrison, a woman in Louisiana, sued for her freedom, asserting she was a white woman mistakenly enslaved. Her physical appearance, behavior, and social interactions, particularly her participation in white social events and relationships with white men, convinced jurors of her whiteness despite accusations of African ancestry (Johnson, 2000; Gross, 2008). This case underscores how whiteness was not solely determined by physical traits but also by social acceptance and behavior. Ultimately, the jury accepted Morrison's argument, granting her freedom. Such cases highlight the fluid and negotiable nature of whiteness within the legal and social frameworks of the time. Whiteness operated as both a social and legal construct, adapting to cultural norms and functioning as a marker of privilege and status. The performative dimension of whiteness reveals its constructed nature, shaped through social practices and legal adjudication, with cases like *Morrison v. White* exemplifying its intersection with societal power structures and reputational dynamics.

As immigration from Europe increased, the concept of whiteness has also expanded further. During the Civil War era, groups previously excluded, such as the Irish and Germans, were incorporated into whiteness. By the 1850s, Catholic and Irish immigrants were classified as "old immigrants" in contrast to newcomers from Central and Eastern Europe. This distinction was framed by nativist perspectives, as articulated by figures like Francis Amanda Walker, who emphasized the racial purity of earlier Anglo-Saxon settlers and warned against the demographic challenges posed by "alien populations" (Painter, 2011). Such essentialist and nativist ideologies positioned whiteness as central to American identity. The incorporatist tradition offered selective pathways to inclusion, primarily for certain European immigrants, while excluding Indigenous and Black populations. Assimilation policies targeting Native Americans, such as missionary efforts and forced cultural erasure, highlighted these boundaries (Prucha, 1995). Similarly, debates over the extension of slavery into new territories underscored the racialized limitations of incorporatism, with whiteness defining the boundaries of inclusion (Foner, 1995).

The literature on pre-Reconstruction American identity also highlights the coexistence of liberal aspirations and exclusionary practices. Scholars like Smith argue that American identity was shaped by an "ascriptive hierarchy", where liberal ideals coexisted with deeply entrenched racial exclusions (Smith, 1993). Ethnocultural narratives, as examined by Horsman (1981), constructed whiteness as a cultural ideal, while Prucha's (1995) work on Native American policy exposed incorporatism's racial limitations. Together, these ideological frameworks reveal the ways in which whiteness became both a defining characteristic and a mechanism of exclusion in the formation of American identity.

The Reconstruction era (1865–1877) marked a critical juncture in the civic republican tradition, as the Republican Party sought to implement ideals of political equality and shared governance. The abolition of slavery, the ratification of the 14th and 15th Amendments, and the establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau exemplified efforts to integrate freed African Americans into the political and social fabric of the nation (Foner, 1995). This alignment with civic republicanism aimed to expand citizenship and create a more inclusive polity. However, Southern Democrats mobilized against these reforms, invoking ethnocultural narratives to reassert white dominance. Through violent opposition, such as the activities of the Ku Klux Klan, and the enactment of Black Codes, they resisted federal intervention and underscored whiteness as central to Southern identity (Shapiro, 1964; Parsons, 2011; Treat, 2016). The Compromise of 1877, which ended Reconstruction,

represented the Republican Party's retreat from its commitment to racial equality, prioritizing economic interests and reconciliation with Southern elites over the civic republican ideal of an egalitarian society (Woodward, 2001).

Expansion and Codification of Whiteness (1877–1940s)

The evolution of whiteness as a defining characteristic of American identity continued through the Reconstruction era, into the 20th century, and culminated in the transformative Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. This period witnessed significant shifts in racial dynamics, political strategies, and social structures, revealing the adaptability and centrality of whiteness in shaping American identity. Whiteness remained a tool of inclusion and exclusion, defining citizenship, political power, and economic opportunity (Harris, 1993; Blanton, 2006; Anderson, 2007).

The post-Reconstruction period, known as the Redemption Era (1877–1890s), saw the systematic dismantling of reforms that had temporarily expanded African American rights. Southern Democrats institutionalized Jim Crow laws, codifying racial segregation and disenfranchising African Americans through mechanisms such as poll taxes, literacy tests, and grandfather clauses (Key, 1984). During this time, whiteness solidified as an ethnocultural identity that unified white Americans across class lines. This racial solidarity served the interests of Southern elites while co-opting poor whites with the privileges of racial superiority (Foner, 1988). Whiteness became a marker of full citizenship, relegating African Americans to second-class status and excluding them from civic republican ideals (Olson, 2008).

The early 20th century, often referred to as the nadir of American race relations, exposed the limitations of liberal ideals in addressing systemic racial inequalities. This period was marked by widespread racial violence, systemic exclusion, and political realignments that reinforced whiteness as a central construct in American identity (Adler, 2017). Whiteness, during this era, evolved as both an exclusionary and malleable tool for maintaining power and privilege amid significant social and economic changes (Collins, 2021).

The post-Reconstruction years were characterized by violent resistance to racial progress, culminating in events like the Red Summer of 1919 (Collins, 2021). During this period, race riots erupted across major cities, driven by heightened competition for jobs and housing amid rapid urbanization and industrialization (Trotter, 2001). These clashes underscored how whiteness operated as an exclusionary identity, protecting economic and social privileges at the expense of African Americans and immigrant groups. The resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s further entrenched this exclusionary framework. The second Klan wielded whiteness as a performative and ideological identity, targeting African Americans, immigrants, Catholics, and Jews to consolidate white Protestant hegemony (Woodward, 2001). While rooted in historical racial hierarchies, this iteration of the Klan also reflected new anxieties about cultural and demographic shifts.

Despite liberal ideals of equality, the early 20th century revealed systemic failures to address racial disparities. Both major political parties prioritized white interests, with Republicans abandoning their advocacy for African American rights to appease white voters and pursue economic goals (Olson, 2008). Southern Democrats, meanwhile, doubled down on segregationist policies, reinforcing ethnocultural whiteness as central to their regional identity.

Shifting Political Allegiances and Realignments

The limitations of liberalism became evident during the New Deal era, as programs like Social Security and the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), while aimed at economic relief during the Great Depression, frequently excluded African Americans or subjected them to discriminatory practices at the local level (Katznelson, 2013). These exclusions reinforced the racial boundaries of the incorporatist tradition, emphasizing whiteness as a determinant of economic opportunity. Adding to this systemic inequality, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) institutionalized racial segregation through discriminatory lending practices. Known as "redlining", these policies systematically denied African Americans access to homeownership, a critical pathway to wealth accumulation, while prioritizing loans for white families and excluding Black neighborhoods. This entrenched racial inequality and highlighted the economic privileges tied to whiteness (Rothstein, 2017).

Despite its exclusions, however, the New Deal catalyzed a realignment in African American political allegiances. Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration marked a turning point, drawing many African Americans away from the Republican Party toward the Democratic Party during the economic crisis. This shift was influenced by the advocacy of figures like Eleanor Roosevelt, who engaged with African American leaders and addressed racial issues. Her activism bolstered perceptions of the Democratic Party as a potential ally for African Americans (Weiss, 1983). Symbolic gestures, such as federal appointments and outreach to Black communities, further fostered trust.

New Deal policies, including the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) and the AAA, often subjected African Americans to discriminatory practices, particularly in agricultural and industrial sectors (Katznelson, 2005). Nonetheless, these reforms, alongside Democratic outreach, attracted African American support as the Republican Party struggled to offer solutions. This shift revealed tensions within the Democratic coalition. Northern Democrats courted African American voters, while Southern Democrats maintained their commitment to segregation, creating intra-party divisions. These tensions culminated in the Dixiecrat Revolt, where figures like Strom Thurmond led Southern Democrats in opposition to the party's evolving stance on civil rights (Phillips, 1969). The Republican Party, in turn, adopted a "Southern Strategy", appealing to white resentment in the South by emphasizing states' rights and opposing federal civil rights legislation (Lassiter, 2007). The New Deal era, therefore, illustrates how whiteness, intertwined with political power and alliances, evolved in response to shifting social and economic landscapes, shaping the trajectory of American identity and political institutions.

During World War II, racial exclusion extended beyond the Black-White binary, affecting various marginalized groups. Federal labor policies sought to expand job opportunities, yet African Americans encountered substantial obstacles in accessing skilled positions. The Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), established to combat workplace discrimination, often lacked sufficient enforcement power, enabling employers to sustain exclusionary practices. This limitation of federal efforts to address racial inequality underscored the role of whiteness as a gatekeeper to economic opportunities (Kersten, 2006). Meanwhile, the internment of Japanese Americans under Executive Order 9066 illustrated how whiteness functioned to exclude perceived "outsiders" from the American racial hierarchy (Ward B., 2012). This systemic exclusion aligned with broader patterns of anti-Asian sentiment, further exemplified by restrictive immigration laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act. These policies revealed the adaptability of whiteness as a tool for defining boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in American society (Griffin & Hargis, 2008).

Civil Rights Era and Political Realignment (1940s–1970s)

By the mid-20th century, the Democratic Party began embracing civil rights more fully, reflecting a renewed commitment to liberal and incorporatist ideals. Key milestones included President Harry Truman's desegregation of the military in 1948 and John F. Kennedy's support for landmark civil rights legislation. These developments alienated many Southern white Democrats, leading to the Dixiecrat revolt, spearheaded by figures like Strom Thurmond (Phillips, 1969). In response to the Democratic Party's growing support for civil rights, the Republican Party adopted a "Southern Strategy" to attract disaffected white voters. This strategy emphasized states' rights, opposition to federal civil rights initiatives, and narratives of white grievance. Through these efforts, whiteness was redefined as a conservative political identity aligned with resistance to racial integration (Lassiter, 2007).

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s fundamentally challenged entrenched racial hierarchies. Through nonviolent protests, legal challenges, and political advocacy, the movement dismantled key components of Jim Crow, culminating in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Harold, 2018). However, these victories also prompted significant backlash, with many white Americans shifting their political allegiances to the Republican Party in opposition to civil rights advancements (Mazumder, 2018). From the nadir of race relations in the early 20th century to the transformative Civil Rights Movement, whiteness evolved as a malleable construct, deeply embedded in American political strategies and social hierarchies. Both the Republican and Democratic parties played critical roles in shaping how whiteness operated as a form of standing, perpetuating racial inequalities (Brown J. A., 2016). This period highlights the adaptability of whiteness in maintaining power and privilege amid evolving political and social landscapes (Hamilton & Hamilton, 1997). The Democratic Party's alignment with labor while often marginalizing African Americans and the Republican Party's "Southern Strategy" exemplify how whiteness was instrumentalized (Frymer, 2009). This entrenchment of racialized politics was reinforced through legal and social mechanisms that sustained inequality (Thurber, 2023) and through systemic political shifts that adapted to resist racial justice (Ward J. M., 2011).

Post-Civil Rights Era and Contemporary Whiteness (1970s–Present)

The post-Civil Rights era saw whiteness shift from overt dominance to covert mechanisms embedded in institutions and cultural practices, sustaining privilege under the guise of equality (Olson, 2008). This adaptation, described by Winant (2012) as "racial dualism", reflected internal contradictions as whiteness navigated rising ideals of equality while maintaining systemic advantages. Through implicit norms and resistance to reforms like affirmative action, whiteness redefined itself, preserving dominance while aligning with narratives of meritocracy and neutrality. This section examines the covert normalization of whiteness, the dualistic tensions within post-Civil Rights racial identities, and the ongoing complexities of whiteness in contemporary politics.

Covert Mechanisms and White Normalization

In the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, whiteness underwent a profound transformation, shifting from being a publicly recognized form of social status to a covert mechanism that perpetuated white advantage within the legal framework of equality (Olson, 2008). This evolution involved the development of implicit norms that defined white interests, assets, and aspirations. These norms, embedded within institutions, policies, and cultural practices, allowed whiteness to maintain dominance without explicit endorsement. As racial discrimination was outlawed, the concept of white standing adapted and persisted with the tacit support of the state apparatus (Olson, 2008).

The shift to covert mechanisms resulted in profound social and psychological ramifications for white Americans. With legal strides to prohibit racial discrimination, white individuals could no longer rely on the state to openly safeguard their racial standing. This transition generated feelings of insecurity, anger, and resentment among a previously privileged population accustomed to normalized racial dominance (Olson, 2008). Brown W. (1993) articulates this phenomenon as "wounded attachment", wherein white Americans, feeling displaced, developed a collective desire for retribution against those they perceived as responsible for their perceived decline. This resentment highlights the inherent contradiction of white normalization: while white privilege persisted structurally, its loss as an overtly recognized status fostered feelings of victimhood and marginalization.

Painter's *The History of White People* examines the historical and ideological roots of these covert mechanisms, tracing how whiteness evolved into a naturalized identity (Painter, 2011). Painter's analysis focuses on the contributions of the American School of anthropology, where figures like Samuel George Morton and Louis Agassiz regarded white racial identity as supreme and inherent (Menand, 2001). This essentialist view of whiteness not only justified slavery but also provided a framework for nativist ideologies that permeated U.S. policy and culture. Within this pseudoscientific framework, whiteness acquired a context-dependent definition that positioned it as permanent and unchanging (Weisberg, 2014). Practices like craniometry—a pseudoscience focused on measuring skulls to assert racial superiority—rationalized slavery and exclusionary policies (Gould, 1978). Painter emphasizes that these ideas were not confined to the 19th century but persisted into the 20th century through instruments like the cephalic index, eugenics, and intelligence testing, which were used to police the boundaries of whiteness, excluding groups like Turks, Slavs, or Jews who did not align with idealized European standards. Even as overtly nativist practices waned, their ideological underpinnings continued to influence modern white normalization, fostering implicit hierarchies that privileged whiteness while marginalizing others.

Painter (2011) also explores the continuity of these exclusionary practices into the mid-20th century, highlighting how sterilization programs targeted marginalized groups under the guise of public health. Often justified by nativist arguments about mental illness and hereditary defects, these practices reflected broader anxieties about preserving whiteness. This historical continuity underscores how white normalization, though less overt after the Civil Rights Movement, remained deeply embedded in societal structures and narratives.

Racial Dualism and Other Tensions

In contrast to Olson's (2008) perspective on the covert mechanisms of white normalization, Winant (2012) offers an alternative lens in *Behind Blue Eyes: Whiteness and Contemporary U.S. Racial Politics*. Winant argues that in the post-Civil Rights era, whiteness became fragmented, reflecting a "deep fissuring" caused by the racial conflicts of the time. He posits that whiteness, as a concept, could no longer serve as a straightforward basis for claims of racial superiority. Instead, its justification evolved through redefinitions and reinterpretations of race, driven by the demands of a changing social and political landscape.

This fragmentation created what Winant terms "racial dualism", a framework where whiteness simultaneously inherited the legacy of white supremacy while grappling with the political and social challenges brought about by the Civil Rights Movement. Racial dualism underscores the internal contradictions within whiteness: as the ideals of participatory democracy, economic egalitarianism, and racial equality gained traction, they clashed with the structural and cultural dominance that whiteness sought to maintain. Winant (2012)

highlights how these challenges gave rise to a counter-tradition that opposed white supremacy and sought to make counterclaims on behalf of racially excluded and subordinated groups. For example, affirmative action policies and desegregation efforts directly contested the structural advantages of whiteness, forcing a rearticulation of white identity. Yet, these reforms also provoked backlash, as many white Americans framed them as threats to fairness and individual merit—principles rooted in the liberal tradition (Deslippe, 2012). Critical race theorists argue that these conflicts reveal the persistence of structural racism embedded in policies framed as neutral (Taylor, 2000). Moreover, backlash politics have served to reinforce narratives of white victimhood and reverse discrimination (Steinberg, 1997).

Williams and Janyes (1990) examine how this dualism permeated not only white identity but also broader racial dynamics. They argue that both Black and white communities experienced internal divisions, as the legacy of racial hierarchies collided with the evolving demands for justice and inclusion. Within this framework, whiteness oscillated between notions of egalitarianism and privilege, or color blindness and normalization.

Winant (2012) further emphasizes that these contradictions create a state of confusion and anxiety within whiteness. For example, colorblind ideologies, while rejecting overt racial categorizations, often obscure the systemic advantages of whiteness. This reframing allows racial disparities to persist under the guise of neutrality, reflecting the incorporatist tradition's superficial commitment to inclusion while maintaining exclusionary practices. These tensions also intersect with the ethnocultural tradition. Painter (2011) and Winant (2012) both highlight how whiteness continued to be framed as the normative standard for American identity, even as it faced challenges from civil rights reforms (Painter, 2011; Winant, 2012). Policies such as opposition to affirmative action and resistance to multicultural education reveal how racial dualism operates within ethnocultural anxieties about preserving heritage and national identity (Deslippe, 2012; Dietrich, 2015). This duality perpetuates a framework where whiteness remains central, while simultaneously denying its dominance through claims of equality and meritocracy (Thompson Dorsey & Venzant Chambers, 2014). The persistence of racial dualism, as Winant notes, illustrates the adaptability of whiteness in the face of systemic change (Winant, 2012). While overt claims to superiority have largely dissipated, whiteness continues to operate as a powerful yet contested construct, oscillating between maintaining privilege and engaging with the ideals of egalitarianism introduced by the Civil Rights Movement.

Contemporary Perspectives, Complexities, and Challenges

Since the 1980s, partisanship and polarization have persisted in American society, with the Civil Rights Movement playing a critical role in reshaping racial dynamics. Whiteness, as a social and political construct, continues to adapt and intertwine with key traditions of American identity—liberalism, civic republicanism, ethnoculturalism, and incorporatism. These connections illuminate how whiteness sustains its dominance through new forms of stratification and exclusion, even as its overt forms have declined.

The liberal tradition, emphasizing equality and individual rights, remains deeply entangled with whiteness. While the liberal ethos ostensibly promotes inclusion, the persistence of racial stratification reveals inherent contradictions. Bonilla-Silva (2004) describes the Black/non-Black dichotomy as a central feature of racial stratification that "is undergoing a profound transformation where non-white groups experience restricted access to resources, opportunities, and representation" (p. 931). In the contemporary era, this changing old-dichotomy challenges the liberal promise of equality, as systemic inequities perpetuate the "wages of whiteness" (Roediger, 2017). Claire Jean Kim's theory of racial

triangulation (1999) further complicates the liberal framework by showing how Asian Americans are positioned as "valorized outsiders" while Black Americans are "insiders" who remain devalued. This hierarchy reflects the liberal ideal of meritocracy, where Asian Americans' successes are celebrated but leveraged to undermine demands for systemic racial justice. This dynamic underscores how liberalism, in practice, often reinforces rather than dismantles racial hierarchies.

As an example, Arizona's SB 1070, passed in 2010, mandates law enforcement to check immigration status during stops, which critics argue encourages racial profiling, especially against Latinx communities. This law, seen as part of a broader trend of nativist policies, echoes exclusionary practices like Jim Crow and aims to curb demographic shifts while asserting white dominance (Michalowski, 2013; Campbell, 2014). While proponents argue it deters illegal immigration, the law has been criticized for its social and psychological impacts, disproportionately targeting minority communities and perpetuating systemic racial exclusion when it comes to utilizing and receiving public assistance (Toomey et al., 2014). Arrocha (2010) further argues that such laws echo the exclusionary and racist practices of the past, reflecting anxieties and racism about demographic change. These policies operate within the liberal framework of rule of law but perpetuate racialized exclusion where immigrant minorities are consistently racialized and left out of "whiteness" (Rodriguez, 2018), highlighting how whiteness shapes the liberal tradition to maintain its privileges in the presence of what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2021) calls "color-blind racism".

In the contemporary era, civic republicanism has excluded non-white groups from public life. Winant (2012) contends that whiteness intersects with civic republican ideals, framing itself as a defender of national identity and the common good. In contemporary politics, this manifests as white grievance narratives, where economic concerns, fears of crime, and cultural anxieties fuel exclusionary policies (Abrajano & Hajnal, 2015). Olson (2008) identifies resentment among white Americans as a key driver of polarization, as they perceive their racial status to be under threat (Olson, 2008). Republican strategists have mobilized these sentiments, reframing civic republican values to appeal to white voters. Issues like welfare, abortion, and immigration are cast as threats to the virtuous middle class, which is implicitly framed as white (Haney-López, 2014). This strategy reinforces racial divisions while claiming to uphold civic republican ideals. The further decline of overtly biological explanations for racial inequality has led to the recasting of whiteness in terms of universalism and nationalism (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). This shift aligns with civic republicanism by portraying whiteness as central to the nation's cultural and political integrity. However, these narratives often obscure systemic inequalities and marginalize non-white contributions to the republic.

Ethnoculturalism remains a powerful force in sustaining whiteness during this period. Jacobson (1999) highlights how European immigrant groups, such as the Irish and Italians, were historically racialized as "other" but later incorporated into whiteness. This process expanded the boundaries of whiteness while maintaining its exclusivity, ensuring that it remained central to American identity. In contemporary politics, ethnocultural whiteness is invoked to justify exclusionary policies and narratives. Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich (2008) describe the "Latin Americanization" of U.S. racial stratification, where skin color, culture, and language increasingly define racial hierarchies. Policies like SB 1070 reflect these dynamics, targeting Latinx minority populations under the pretext of "preserving national identity". These policies echo historical attempts to marginalize non-white groups, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and Japanese internment during World War II.

Kim's (1999) racial triangulation framework further illuminates how ethnocultural anxieties shape perceptions of racial minorities. Literature also highlights the ways in which Asian

Americans are often positioned as "honorary whites" through stereotypes like the "model minority" which validate white cultural norms while devaluing non-White Americans (including Blacks and Browns) as cultural "others" (Kim, 2000; Prashad, 2002). Ong further explains how racial hierarchies in the U.S. ideologically "whiten" Asian immigrants while "blackening" others, perpetuating systems of privilege and marginalization (Ong et al., 1996). This dynamic reinforces the centrality of whiteness as the normative standard, marginalizing non-white groups while perpetuating systemic inequalities.

Incorporatism addressed whiteness serving as the benchmark for belonging in this era. Jardina (2019) highlights the salience of white identity as a collective political force, particularly in response to increasing diversity. White Americans often frame cultural change as a threat to national identity, resisting policies and movements that challenge whiteness's dominance. Hooker (2023) examines how racialized experiences of loss, such as Black grief and white grievance, deepen societal polarization. White identity politics frequently invoke incorporatist rhetoric to exclude non-white groups while reaffirming whiteness as central to American culture. For instance, anti-immigration policies and opposition to affirmative action are framed as protecting fairness and meritocracy, even as they reinforce racial hierarchies. Research by Devos and Banaji (2005) underscores the association between whiteness and American identity, revealing biases that influence perceptions of citizenship and belonging. This dynamic perpetuates the incorporatist tradition, where inclusion remains conditional on alignment with white norms and values. Miyawaki's (2015) study, for example, reveals that whiteness shapes the social incorporation of part-white multiracial individuals through marital patterns, with significant racial and gender disparities in their likelihood of marrying whites, reflecting stratified pathways to inclusion (Miyawaki, 2015).

The contemporary period has seen challenges to whiteness's dominance, but these efforts face significant resistance. Lipsitz (1995) describes whiteness as a "possessive investment", where policies and practices disproportionately benefit white communities. This investment is often invisible, obscured by narratives of colorblindness and meritocracy that deny the systemic advantages whiteness confers. Hamilton et al. (2024) examine the racialized stratification of higher education, showing how institutional practices reinforce inequalities while appearing neutral. These findings highlight the current persistence of horizontal stratification, where non-white students are funneled into less prestigious institutions and programs. Such practices illustrate how whiteness adapts to maintain its advantages even within ostensibly inclusive systems. Yadon and Ostfeld (2020) explore the intersection of whiteness and political attitudes, finding that darker-skinned white Americans are more likely to identify strongly with their racial group and adopt conservative views. This phenomenon underscores how whiteness operates as a stratified and contested identity, adapting to demographic and cultural changes while reinforcing its centrality.

In the contemporary context, any discussion of whiteness must also consider the political and cultural dynamics that have profoundly shaped modern understandings of white identity and its role in American society. Political campaigns and public discourse in recent year exemplify a mobilization of racial resentment, as evidenced by events like the 2017 Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville and the January 6 Capitol insurrection in 2021, both of which were marked by the overt assertion of white identity and grievance. Scholars have argued that recent political discourse capitalized on long-standing racial anxieties and white identity politics, galvanizing a base that viewed increasing racial diversity as a threat to their socio-political dominance (Maskovsky, 2017; Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019; Bunyasi, 2019; Graham et al., 2021). Moreover, campaign rhetoric during this period framed whiteness as an embattled identity needing reclamation, often invoking nostalgic narratives of a

racially homogenous past (McGettigan, 2016; Smith & King, 2021). Such incidents highlight the persistence and adaptability of whiteness as a socio-political construct, highlighting its central role in shaping contemporary discourse on race, identity, immigration, and national belonging in contemporary America.

Conclusion

Defining whiteness is a complex and evolving endeavor that cannot be reduced to a fixed or universal concept. It is deeply intertwined with the broader and continually shifting notion of American identity, shaped by traditions such as liberalism, civic republicanism, ethnoculturalism, and incorporationism. Whiteness, however, is not an inherent feature of this identity but a socio-political construct that has adapted to changing historical and ideological contexts. This adaptability has enabled whiteness to remain a central force in shaping the boundaries of belonging, often by defining inclusion for some while enforcing exclusion for others.

From its early role in colonial society, whiteness has been instrumental in reinforcing hierarchies of power and privilege. Codified in laws such as the Naturalization Act of 1790, whiteness was tied to citizenship and property rights, positioning it as a defining standard of inclusion. Yet, as civil rights movements and demographic shifts challenged these structures, whiteness transformed, aligning itself with ostensibly neutral frameworks like meritocracy and colorblindness. These shifts reveal its remarkable capacity to sustain dominance while obscuring systemic inequities. Whiteness operates as an unmarked standard, simultaneously pervasive and contested, creating a dynamic where it defines belonging while marginalizing nonwhite identities (Devos & Banaji, 2005).

Our analysis highlights that whiteness is not merely a historical artifact but a living, adaptable construct that continues to shape contemporary debates on race, immigration, and national identity. It persists not as an overt ideology but as a normalized framework embedded in institutions, policies, and cultural practices. This normalization obscures its role in maintaining exclusion and stratification while reinforcing the privileges it affords. For instance, the ongoing political polarization and the resurgence of white identity politics demonstrate how whiteness adapts to resist challenges posed by increasing diversity and calls for systemic change (Jardina, 2019).

Ultimately, whiteness reflects the contradictions within American identity itself, drawing upon traditions of freedom and equality while perpetuating structures of exclusion and privilege. These contradictions have created enduring tensions, as whiteness struggles to reconcile its historical dominance with the ideals of an increasingly diverse and equitable society. As a constructed and adaptable force, whiteness continues to shape the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, often under the guise of neutrality or equality. Its ability to maintain systemic privilege while aligning with American ideals highlights its centrality to the nation's socio-political fabric. Addressing these tensions requires a critical examination of how whiteness operates as a socio-political construct, shaping who belongs and whose voices are valued. As the United States grapples with issues of race, equity, and national belonging, dismantling the hold of whiteness is essential for envisioning a future that embraces the pluralism and diversity foundational to the country's ideals.

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