

Are Italians White? The Perspective from the Pacific

Tommaso Caiazza

Are Italians White? is the title of an influential collective work published in 2003, when so called Whiteness Studies were at their peak.¹ The not-so-ironic question encapsulated the then-ongoing debate among historians as to how to define the racial status initially assigned to large “non-Anglo-Saxon” European immigrant groups, notably Irish and the “new immigrants” from Southern and Eastern Europe. The problem under scrutiny pertained not so much to anti-Irish or anti-Italian racism; it involved, rather, Irish or Italian participation in the “pan-ethnic” historical formation of so-called “white Americans” through their acquisition of a white identity, this necessarily leading them to embrace the same racism by which they had previously been targeted.² In this debate, two major interpretations competed: on the one hand, David Roediger’s “in-between peoples” suggested that “new immigrants” became “white” only over time, after passing through an ambiguous racial status; their whiteness was contested by means of racist stereotyping and practices similar to those afflicting “non-whites,” especially within the labor market. On the other hand, Thomas Guglielmo’s “white on arrival” interpretation claimed that no European immigrant group ever seriously saw their whiteness disputed, whatever other prejudices might be brought into play. The racial status of all European groups, Italians included, remained clearly “white,” particularly when it came to legal rights and privileges denied to “non-whites.”³

Roediger and Guglielmo’s opposite hypotheses derived from key theoretical distinctions in the study of race and race relations as applied to the era of European mass migration. According to Roediger, “messiness” dominated the U.S. “racial landscape” at the turn of the twentieth century, as race was anything but a defined concept, since it could be “at once biological and cultural, inherited and acquired.”⁴ This point not only reinforced the “in-between peoples” interpretation by explaining why legally white immigrants, such as Italians, nonetheless happened to see their whiteness contested; it also supported Roediger’s strong focus on “consciousness” as a way to highlight how, in the popular mind, conceptions of whiteness developed and changed over time through dynamics of inclusion and exclusion also occurring within European groups.⁵

¹ Jennifer Guglielmo, and Salvatore Salerno, eds., *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America* (New York: Routledge, 2003). For a historiographical introduction on whiteness studies as applied to the case of the Italian group, see Stefano Luconi, “Whiteness and Ethnicity in Italian American Historiography,” in *The Status of Interpretation in Italian American Studies*, ed. Jerome Krase (Stony Brook, NY: Forum Italicum Publishing, 2011), 146–63.

² The concept of “panethnic” racial formation is from Paul Spickard, *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 17.

³ James R. Barrett and David R. Roediger, “Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality, and the ‘New Immigrant’ Working Class,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16/3 (1997): 3–44; Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890–1945* (New York: Oxford University press, 2003); David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

⁴ Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 35.

⁵ Roediger’s attention to “consciousness” was a legacy of his work on labor history and working-class identity. See, for example, David Roediger, “Race and the Working-Class Past in the United States: Multiples Identities and the Future of Labor History,” *International Review of Social History*, 38, Supplement 1 (1993): 127–43.

By contrast, according to Guglielmo, the understanding of racial differences was relatively clear-cut, as it was based on the binary distinction between “color” and “race.” The former category encompassed major established divisions between “black, brown, red, white, and yellow races,” while the latter evinced minor and vaguer divisions, such as “Celtic” and “Mediterranean.” In Guglielmo’s more structural approach, it is the functioning of this binary scheme that explains why marginalized groups, such as Italians, were nonetheless “white on arrival,” as the allotment of benefits coming with full citizenship followed the wider “color,” not the narrower “race” criteria.⁶

Both Roediger’s and Guglielmo’s hypotheses tackle the problem of non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrant groups’ whiteness from a similar diachronic perspective. At its most basic level, indeed, their debate confronts the question as to *when* these groups of immigrants can be said to have acquired a position as “whites” in the U.S. racial structure, whether immediately or gradually. However, by basing their analysis on the *time* variable, both historians posit a uniform, nationwide solution which underestimates how whiteness was shaped by the West Coast, with its historically distinct, multi-racial context including already settled Mexican residents as well as Asian immigrants arriving from across the Pacific. Admittedly, Roediger’s paradigm of in-betweenness accommodates an appreciation of regional specificities; nevertheless, these tend to disappear in the “racial messiness” described in his work. By over-focusing on the timing of Irish and new immigrants’ “whitening,” i.e. their recognition (and self-recognition) as whites, the subsequent debate neglected the Pacific Coast’s key contextual variance in the racialization process. In fact, the experience of an Italian immigrant entering what was known at the turn of the twentieth century as America’s “racial frontier” differed greatly from that of a fellow co-national settling to the East, in the predominantly white, industrial North, or the black South.⁷ The *space* variable is also important. Thus, in addressing the question about non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrants’ racial status, it is also necessary to ascertain, through a synchronic perspective, *where* in the United States such immigrants’ whiteness was either accepted or contested, and to what extent.

Most research examining Italians’ racialization (including that of Guglielmo) are case-studies based on Italian communities established in East Coast and Mid-Western metropolises, undoubtedly the “new” immigrants’ most important areas of settlement at the turn of the twentieth century.⁸ A smaller but no less significant number of works focus on the racial experience of Italians in rural Southern states, where the strongest racist attacks against them (to the extent of lynching) occurred.⁹ In both scenarios, African-Americans have come to represent a

⁶ Guglielmo, *White on Arrival*, 8.

⁷ For a general introduction to the idea of the U.S. Pacific Coast as a “racial frontier,” see Carey McWilliams, *Brothers under the Skin* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1943), 79.

⁸ Robert Orsi, “The Religious Boundaries of an In-between People: Street Feste and the Problem of the Dark-Skinned Other in Italian Harlem, 1920–1990,” *American Quarterly* 44/3 (1992): 313–47; Stefano Luconi, *From Paesani to White Ethnics: The Italian Experience in Philadelphia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); Maria C. Lizzi, “‘My Hearth is Black as Yours’: White Backlash, Racial Identity, and Italian American Stereotypes in New York City’s 1969 Mayoral Campaign,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 27/3 (2008): 43–80; Peter G. Vellon, *A Great Conspiracy against Our Race: Italian Immigrant Newspapers and the Construction of Whiteness in Early 20th Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

⁹ Vincenza J.A. Scarpaci, *Italian Immigrants in Louisiana Sugar Parishes: Recruitment, Labor Conditions, and Community Relations, 1880–1910* (New York: Arno Press, 1980); Dino Cinel, “Sicilians in the Deep South: The Ironic Outcome of Isolation,” *Studi Emigrazione* 27/97 (1990): 55–86; Peter G. Vellon, “‘Between White Men and Negroes’: The Perception of Southern Italian Immigrants through the Lens of Italian Lynchings,” in *AntiItalianism. Essays on a Prejudice*, ed. William J. Connell and Fred Gardaphé (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 23–32.

historical counterpart, Italians' racial status being evaluated by comparing the two groups' social conditions and exploring their relationships at society's margins. This Italian vis-à-vis African-American analytical scheme followed Roediger's groundbreaking examination of the many "Black-Irish connections" during America's mid-nineteenth century industrial growth.¹⁰ The idea that Irish immigrants' racial status was "disputed" was therefore posited by Roediger on the basis of their unclear position within the white/black dichotomy structuring the industrial North's race relations. However, in any case study based in California, Irish or Italian immigrants' whiteness needs to be understood alongside a different "non-white counterpart." As Erika Lee has properly noted, in the Pacific Coast states "immigration and whiteness were defined most clearly in opposition to Asian-ness or 'yellowness.'"¹¹

California's white vis-à-vis Asian perspective does not necessarily match the U.S. Western region as whole. Research focusing on the Southwest has shown how any binary understanding of race relations fails to apply in areas with a significant Mexican population, their intermediate positioning in the racial system contributing to stratifying rather than polarizing its structure.¹² Although Mexicans together with native Americans had been residing in California since long before the arrival of so-called "whites," I argue that in the state's Northern areas, the white-Asian dichotomy was the one which prevailed. The "racial frontier," as applied to the North American Pacific region was originally coined in relation not to the wider spectrum of minorities residing there, but to Asian immigration only, as I will shortly explain.

To return to the main question of whiteness, scholars have already suggested that racialization of non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrants differed significantly on the two sides of the country. Matthew Jacobson, for example, has noted that "an Irish immigrant in 1877 could be a despised Celt in Boston—a threat to the republic—and yet a solid member of The Order of Caucasians for the Extermination of the Chinaman in San Francisco, gallantly defending U.S. shores from an invasion of 'Mongolians.'"¹³ Nonetheless, to date, no comprehensive study on how and why non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrants' racial status on the West Coast changed has yet been produced. This article goes some way to fill the gap. By reexamining, from a Californian vantage point, the question of whether Italians were "white on arrival" or "in-between peoples," it illuminates how racial boundaries were traced within and outside European groups. "White racial formation" proceeded more smoothly on the Pacific "frontier," where white-Asian polarity, rather than a white-black one, structured race relations.¹⁴

For a comprehensive study on Italian lynchings see Patrizia Salvetti, *Corda e sapone: storie di linciaggi degli italiani negli Stati Uniti* (Rome: Donzelli, 2003).

¹⁰ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991), 133–63.

¹¹ Erika Lee, "The Chinese Exclusion Example: Race, Immigration, and American Gatekeeping, 1882–1924," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 21/3 (2002): 36–62, 43.

¹² Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Phylis Cancilla Martinelli, *Undermining Race: Ethnic Identities in Arizona Copper Camps, 1880–1920* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2009).

¹³ Matthew F. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 5.

¹⁴ Michael Omi and Howard Winant define "racial formation" as the "sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed." Michael Omi, and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55.

The Pacific Coast as the “Frontier of the White Man”

In 1909, Fresno journalist Chester Harvey Rowell, the dominant intellectual among the California Progressives, published a pair of articles that serve as a revealing introduction to the study of race relations on the Pacific.¹⁵ In them, while discussing the longstanding problem of Asian immigration on U.S. and Canada western borders, Rowell defines the Pacific Coast as “the frontier of the white man’s world, the culmination of the westward migration,” which, in his opinion, constituted “the white man’s whole history.”¹⁶ Although seemingly conventional, Rowell’s definition altered the traditional meaning of the frontier, which had changed from an outpost of conquest for the “white man” to his last line of defense. The U.S. 1890 Census had declared the frontier officially ended with the completion of the westward expansion on the Pacific side.¹⁷ However, according to Rowell, the “multitudes of Asia” threatened to push the same “white man’s frontier” backwards “over the mountains and across the plains” towards the Atlantic.¹⁸ Such a view of the Northern Pacific Coast as a “racial frontier” due to Asian immigration became a widespread paradigm. It influenced, for example, the 1920s “Survey on Race Relations on the Pacific Coast,” in which Robert Park also participated.¹⁹ In Park’s opinion, the idea of the Pacific as a “racial frontier” underestimates the fact that global migrations and racial intermingling were necessary consequences of an increasingly interconnected world. Furthermore, according to the Chicago sociologist, race relations between Asian and European peoples along the West Coast posed no risk to racial integrity; rather, they paved the way for the formation of a new civilization along the entire Pacific rim, assimilation between different races and cultures being, in his view, an “irreversible” process furthering human advancement.²⁰

In the end, it was Rowell’s pessimistic outlook on race relations, not Park’s optimistic, progressive one, which dominated early-twentieth-century California politics and culture. In 1909, the California Legislature had just attempted to pass several anti-Japanese measures restricting land ownership and imposing residential and school segregation. As had occurred in 1906, when the San Francisco Board of Education ordered the segregation of “Oriental” children, this new crusade against Japanese immigrants roused strong criticism from the East Coast, including by President Theodore Roosevelt, who promptly intervened to prevent the measure being approved.²¹ California’s extremist position in the matter of Japanese immigration was still “nationally unpopular” due to both economic and political interests in maintaining good relationships with the emerging Japanese power (Daniels, *The Politics of Prejudice*, 46). In fact, Rowell himself did not support such explicit anti-Japanese actions. In his articles, he made clear

¹⁵ Chester H. Rowell, “Orientophobia,” *Collier’s Weekly*, February 6, 1909, 13 and 29; republished in the *San Francisco Call*, February 14, 1909, 28; id., “Chinese and Japanese Immigrants: A Comparison,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 34/2 (1909): 3–10; republished in the *Labor Clarion*, October 15, 1909, 1. The definition of Chester Rowell as the “dominant intellectual among California republicans” is from Kevin Starr, *Inventing the Dream: California through the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University press, 1985), 239.

¹⁶ Rowell, “Chinese and Japanese Immigrants,” 10.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Report on Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890*, pt. 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office: 1895), xxxiv.

¹⁸ Rowell, “Orientophobia,” 13.

¹⁹ Eckard Toy, “Whose Frontier? The Survey of Race Relations on the Pacific Coast in the 1920s,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 107/1 (2006): 36–63, 38–39.

²⁰ Robert E. Park, “Our Racial Frontier on the Pacific,” *The Survey*, May 1, 1926, 192–96.

²¹ Roger Daniels, *The Politics of Prejudice: The Anti-Japanese Movement in California and the Struggle for Japanese Exclusion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 34–36.

that he was not “pleading” for any “specific measure,” such as California’s demand to extend to all Asian immigrants the same exclusion law already applied to the Chinese in 1882. As a Progressive Republican, Rowell followed the same party line of President Roosevelt and had no reason to fuel further tensions, all the more so given that the Federal Government had just signed the Gentlemen’s Agreement, which drastically reduced Japanese immigration. Nevertheless, Rowell himself shared the apprehensions of the “average” (i.e. white) “Californian,” to use his expression, for “Oriental” immigration;²² he probably also wanted to make local Progressives more competitive with the Democrats on such a major political issue. Therefore, while remarking that “for the present,” policies on Chinese and Japanese immigration were “satisfactory,” he cautioned the government against “surrendering” the western border, “even for a brief interval,” so guaranteeing the “West’s future generations” to be born of “occidental blood” and under “American institutions.”²³

Frank Van Nuys, a prominent historian of the West, has suggested that Rowell’s racial views were essentially a by-product of “Anglo-Saxonism.”²⁴ Undoubtedly, many aspects in Rowell’s “racial frontier” argument reflected typical WASP racial ideology. For example, the belief that racial mixture—“mongrelization,” as he called it—would cause “the wreck of America’s free institutions and social texture” can be traced back to the popular “Teutonic origins” theory.²⁵ The same idea of the westward expansion as a racial phenomenon echoed many late-nineteenth-century interpretative U.S. histories, assigning to the Anglo-Saxon race the “winning of the frontier,” to quote Theodore Roosevelt.²⁶ Nevertheless, to conflate Rowell’s views with Anglo-Saxonism would be misleading. When it came to “racial integrity,” what mattered to Rowell was the white race as whole, not the racial distinctions favored by contemporary eugenics and social Darwinism, e.g. Anglo-Saxons, Celts, Mediterraneans, Alpines, Slavs, etc. Such categories, as Matthew Jacobson’s and Nell Painter’s studies have shown, undermined the idea of a common white racial ancestry as well as the dignity of the various European peoples vis-à-vis the superior and original American “Anglo-Saxon” stock.²⁷ However, Rowell’s articles never take inter-European racial divisions into consideration. The racial frontier that he aimed to defend was a “white” frontier, and not an Anglo-Saxon, Teutonic, or Nordic one. This is clear from the key issue underlying his argument against Asian immigration, namely, the comparison with European immigrants landing on the East Coast. “The

²² Rowell aimed to expose “the more obvious facts of Chinese and Japanese Immigration as they strike the average Californian” (“Chinese and Japanese Immigrants,” 3).

²³ “This is not a plea for an immediate exclusion law, or an exclusion treaty, or any other specific measure. But it is the cry of the unborn generation of the West for the right to be born of Occidental blood and under American institutions,” Rowell, “Orientophobia,” 29; “For the present, the situation as to both Chinese and Japanese immigration is satisfactory. But to relax the present policy, even for a brief interval, would be to load ourselves with a burden which all eternity could not again throw off and all our vitality could not withstand,” Rowell, “Chinese and Japanese Immigrants,” 10.

²⁴ Frank W. Van Nuys, “A Progressive Confronts the Race Question: Chester Rowell, the California Alien Land Act of 1913, and the Contradictions of Early Twentieth-Century Racial Thought,” *California History* 73/1 (1994): 2–13, 8–9.

²⁵ “The future can determine, in the light of the Hawaiian experience, whether the mongrelization of races is safe,” Rowell, “Orientophobia,” 13. On U.S. “Teutonic Origins Theory” see Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 84–122.

²⁶ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 29–62.

²⁷ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 39–90; Nell I. Painter, *The History of the White People* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010).

permanence not merely of American civilization, but of the white race on this continent,” Rowell believed, “depends on our not doing, on the Pacific side, what we have done on the Atlantic side.”²⁸ In other words, Asian immigration on the Pacific Coast should not proceed unrestricted as had European immigration on the East Coast given that, in Rowell’s eyes, Asians would involve numbers and “types of races” impossible to assimilate. He remarked that to deal with “unlimited hordes of white immigrants, equal or inferior, desirable or undesirable” was “relatively easy” compared to having to deal with “the overflow of a whole world of Chinese, Japanese, and Hindus”; unchecked European immigration raised a “problem at most political or social,” while in the case of Asian immigration the issue was “biological.”²⁹

Van Nuys misses the sharp racial distinction traced by Rowell. He introduces Rowell’s thoughts as an example of how, on the Pacific Coast, concerns regarding racial homogeneity did not “focus entirely” on southern and eastern European immigrants but also on Asian immigrants.³⁰ However, Rowell’s concerns did not include “new immigrants” from southern and eastern Europe. In one of his articles, Rowell mentioned the Sicilians as an example of an immigrant group that could even match Asians for low work standards.³¹ This means that he embraced common racial stereotypes applied to Southern Italians in the early-twentieth century. Most American institutions considered Southern Italians to be highly diverse, racially speaking, from Northern Italians as well. In line with the rising racial anthropology of the time, Southern Italians were reputed to be members of one of the lowest and least civilized among European races, the “Mediterranean,” and were targeted with slurs of “backwardness” and “savagery,” reflecting many ethnocentric prejudices underlying the Italian “Southern Question.”³² Notwithstanding his adherence to such stereotypes, Rowell firmly believed that America would sooner or later “digest” all European immigration coming through the “New York mouth,” Sicilians—and Southern Italians more generally—included. What could never be digested, in Rowell’s opinion, were immigrants coming through the “San Francisco mouth” because “only Asia” could assimilate “Oriental blood.”³³

Italians on the “White Man’s Frontier”

Rowell’s opinion about Asian immigrants and their conflation under the generic term of “Orientals” was nothing new for the Progressive Era’s popular understanding of racial differences. However, his labeling of “new immigrants,” such as the Italians, as safely “white and assimilable” in spite of their “inferiority” and “undesirability,” was more problematic.³⁴ Here

²⁸ Rowell, “Chinese and Japanese Immigrants,” 10.

²⁹ Rowell, “Orientophobia,” 13.

³⁰ Frank W. Van Nuys, *Americanizing the West: Race, Immigrants, and Citizenship, 1890–1930* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 18.

³¹ Rowell, “Orientophobia,” 13.

³² On the construction of Southern Italians as racially different from Northern Italians, see Pasquale Verdicchio, *Bound by Distance: Rethinking Nationalism through the Italian Diaspora* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), 29–32; Peter D’Agostino, “Cranium, Criminals, and the ‘Cursed Race’: Italian Anthropology in American Racial Thought, 1861–1924,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44/2 (2002): 319–43.

³³ Rowell, “Orientophobia,” 13.

³⁴ The controversial nature of Rowell’s view about Italians’ secure whiteness and assimilability clearly emerges for example from the words of economist Robert Foerster who in 1919 maintained, “In a country where yet the distinction between white man and black is intended as a distinction in value as well as in ethnography it is no

was something the “average” (white) non-Californian American would have probably been reluctant to accept. Rowell’s racial views clearly exemplify how anti-Asian racism in California cannot be explained, much less justified, on the basis of the Pacific Coast state’s distinct demography and immigration patterns. At the time Rowell wrote his articles, Asian immigration in California was no greater than “new immigration” from Southern and Eastern Europe arriving at the East Coast. Although “new” European immigration, taken as a whole, poured into California in lower numbers than on the other side of the country, Asian immigration, since the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, had lost a major component. After the Chinese, Japanese immigrants started arriving *en masse* in California, but, following the same trend, they were again outnumbered by the largest “new” European immigrant group, the Italians. The decade between 1900 and 1910 saw a boom in both the Japanese and Italian foreign-born populations in California. Although the Japanese immigration rate was higher than the Italian one, the Italian population still outnumbered the Japanese, 63,000 to 38,000. Greeks, Russians and other “new immigrants” also poured in, whereas Asian immigration was now limited to virtually only the Japanese, immigration from India at this point in time being much smaller.³⁵ Therefore, to depict Rowell’s obsession with “Asiatics” and his comparative indulgence towards “new immigrants” as a mere consequence of California’s greater exposure to immigration from across the Pacific would be misleading. It would reproduce rather than deconstruct early-twentieth-century mainstream discourse on the alleged “Oriental invasion” on the West Coast, to which Rowell also contributed.³⁶ Rowell’s racial thoughts were just that—not a matter of numbers, but of race, pure and simple.

Rowell’s version of European groups’ so-called “equal” whiteness, albeit containing a subdivision into “superior” and “inferior,” seems to confirm Guglielmo’s “white on arrival” hypothesis and its assumption that in early-twentieth-century U.S., two different categories, race and color, determined human classification. Italians may have been regarded as racial undesirables, as “Mediterraneans,” “South Italians,” “Latins” and so forth; however, their color status, according to Guglielmo, remained unequivocally “white.”³⁷ Another aspect that might suggest Rowell’s adherence to a color-race scheme is his view of the Japanese as a sort of “superior” race which had to be considered even as “racially equal” to the superior strains of the white race, to whom the California journalist unsurprisingly assumed himself to belong.³⁸ Even though Rowell opposed Japanese immigration, he respected the Japanese and considered them very different from the Chinese.³⁹ This perhaps means that Rowell divided Asians and Europeans along a “color” line while tracing, within these two categories, inner racial hierarchies. However, in Rowell’s articles, Guglielmo’s theoretical race/color distinction also finds points of denial. For example, Rowell treats Japanese, Chinese, and “Hindus” separately by naming them “brown men, yellow men, bronze men,” respectively.⁴⁰ Rowell thus uses “color” not to highlight

compliment to the Italian to deny him whiteness, yet that actually happens with considerable frequency.” Robert F. Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 408.

³⁵ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910. Vol. 1: Population* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1913), 838–40.

³⁶ Lee, “The Chinese Exclusion Example,” 44.

³⁷ Guglielmo, *White on Arrival*, 9.

³⁸ Rowell stated: “Many of the Europeans whom we welcome are our inferiors. The Japanese, to whom we object, are, as a race, our equals” (“Orientophobia,” 29).

³⁹ Rowell, “Chinese and Japanese Immigrants,” 5.

⁴⁰ “Literally hundreds of millions of brown men, yellow men, and bronze men would now like to come to America, for the same reasons that the Europeans wanted to come,” Rowell, “Orientophobia,” 13.

Guglielmo's major divisions, but instead for "minor," intra-racial subdivisions. As such, from Rowell's accounts emerges not so much racial clarity as messiness. Furthermore, although Asian immigrants were lumped together under the generic term of "Oriental" or "Asiatic," Rowell never really talks about an "Oriental" or "Asiatic" race. He focuses rather on stereotypical differences between Chinese, Japanese, and "Hindus" by considering them as individual races, notwithstanding their being part of the same menace afflicting California shores. Therefore, to say that Rowell saw these Asian immigrant groups as belonging to a common "color race" would be misleading.

More importantly, however, Rowell's opinions need to be put in context. He voices a geographically driven viewpoint about race and immigration: that of the "white man's frontier." He claims to express the "essential message [that] the Pacific Coast has to utter to the American people."⁴¹ Such an "essential message" was that "no other possible national menace at all" could be "compared" with Asian immigration, not even the then-despised "new" European immigration landing on the Atlantic side.⁴² Therefore, the motive for Rowell's definition of "new immigrant" Italians as "white and assimilable" derived from distinguishing them from local "Orientals." The secure "white on arrival" status he assigns to Italians certainly reflects a Pacific Coast perspective, but did he also voice the perspective of other U.S. regions where the "Italian problem" replaced the Chinese one? The then-common label for Italians as the "Chinese of Europe" raises doubts in this regard. As Donna Gabaccia has noted, Italian and Chinese immigrants were both relevant members of a growing international proletariat following job prospects in the increasingly globalized industrial labor market.⁴³ In Anglo-Saxon countries, Italians and Chinese underwent similar racialization processes. Both groups were identified as inferior races embodying the menace of various forms of "un-free" labor and became the target of restriction campaigns led by white workers. In the light of this Italian-Chinese connection, it seems reasonable to surmise that, by contrast, on the East Coast, where there were few Chinese to help bolster the Italians' racial status, Italians came under attack in a way that disputed their whiteness. The coinage in 1882 by the *Boston Daily Advertiser* of the slogan, "The Italian Must go," with its reformulation of the original, "The Chinese Must Go," speaks for itself in this regard.⁴⁴

On the other hand, Roediger's hypothesis of a gradual whitening of "new" European immigrants does not match the case of Italians on the "white man's frontier," whose racial dynamic evidently upgraded Italians towards complete "whiteness," rather than downgrading them towards "in-betweenness," as Rowell's view suggests. Scattered testimonies corroborating this point can be found in several studies. Already in 1862, Bay Area Italian fishermen mobilized to obtain a California state regulation "for the protection of the white fishermen, against the

⁴¹ Rowell stated: "It is a reminder of the high duty not to surrender at the western border and at the culmination of our civilization [...] It is the one message, the only essential message, which the Pacific Coast has to utter to the American people" ("Orientophobia," 29).

⁴² "We know what could happen, on the Asiatic side, by what did happen and is happening on the European side. On that side we have survived [...] But against Asiatic immigration we could not survive [...] There is no other possible menace at all to be compared with this," Rowell, "Chinese and Japanese Immigrants," 10.

⁴³ Donna Gabaccia, "The 'Yellow Peril' and the 'Chinese of Europe': Global Perspectives on Race and Labor, 1815–1930," in *Migration, Migration History, History: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*, ed. Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen (Bern: Peter Lang, 1997), 177–96.

⁴⁴ The *Boston Daily Advertiser*'s article is available online at <https://www.juglaris.org/29-menacing> [consulted December 8, 2018].

encroachment of the Mongolians”;⁴⁵ twenty years later Italian fishermen rioted against their Chinese competitors, accusing them of having destroyed “white fishermen’s nets.”⁴⁶ During the great anti-Chinese labor agitation of the 1870s, the Italian presence is registered in the racist Workingmen’s Party of California as well as in an Amador County miners’ association to protect “white labor” from the competition of “inferior races,” namely Chinese miners.⁴⁷ San Francisco’s Italians took part in the movement for Chinese exclusion by forming the Swiss-Italian Anti-Chinese Company of Dragoons in the 1880s; major California Italian-American notables and civic leaders, such as Anthony Caminetti and Andrea Sbarboro, were at the forefront of many Pacific “anti-Oriental” activities.⁴⁸

The fact that Italians in California seem to have readily acquired a fully white status demands a re-interpretation of their immigration experience.⁴⁹ In line with most late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Italian-American accounts, many historians have considered Italian immigration in California “unique” within U.S. Italian-America scenario, but for reasons other than race.⁵⁰ Andrew Rolle, forefather of California’s Italian-America exceptionalism, defined “westward” Italian immigrants as “upraised” in his 1968 classic study,⁵¹ in contradistinction to Oscar Handlin’s label of “uprooted” for their East Coast equivalents.⁵² In Rolle’s eyes, the West—and California in particular—provided Italians not only with a new land where they could compete on equal terms with other “pioneers”; it also provided opportunities suited to Italians’ skills (i.e. agriculture and fishing).⁵³ Due to its “similarities” to Italy, California was depicted as a sort of “Mediterranean America” (Rolle, *The Immigrant Upraised*, 251 and 288). Fishing and agriculture are usually mentioned to emphasize California’s Italians’ economic success and their contribution to the state’s progress, thanks to which, according to Deanna Gumina, they acquired a reputation as “desirable citizens,” unlike their East Coast co-nationals.⁵⁴ Another factor often underlying the thesis of the alleged uniqueness of California’s Italian-American experience, though more implicitly, is that in California, unlike in other areas of the United States, a large

⁴⁵ Arthur F. McEvoy, *The Fisherman’s Problem: Ecology and Law in the California Fisheries, 1850–1980* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 97.

⁴⁶ Bénédicte Deschamps, “Italian Americans and the Chinese Exclusion Act,” in *Small Towns, Big Cities: The Urban Experience of Italian Americans*, ed. Dennis Barone and Stefano Luconi (New York: American Italian Historical Association, 2010), 132–45, 140.

⁴⁷ Lucile Eaves, *A History of California Labor Legislation. With an Introductory Sketch of the San Francisco Labor Movement* (Berkeley, CA: The University Press, 1910), 33; Ira B. Cross, *A History of the Labor Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1935), 68.

⁴⁸ Andrew Rolle, *Westward the Immigrants: Italian Adventurers and Colonists in an Expanding America* (Niwot: University of Colorado Press, 1999), 259; Joseph P. Giovinco, “The California Career of Anthony Caminetti, Italian American Politician” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1973); Sebastian Fichera, “The Meaning of Community: A History of the Italians of San Francisco” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1981), 183–233.

⁴⁹ Tommaso Caiazza, “Italiani in California, un’esperienza ‘eccezionale’? Alcune note per reimpostare il dibattito sulle orme dei whiteness studies,” *Archivio Storico Emigrazione Italiana* 13 (2017): 145–52.

⁵⁰ Marius J. Spinello, “Italians in California,” *Sunset Magazine* 15/3 (1905), 256–58; Ettore Patrizi, *Gl’Italiani in California* (San Francisco: Stabilimento tipolitografico del giornale L’ITALIA, 1911).

⁵¹ Andrew Rolle, *The Immigrant Upraised: Italian Adventurers and Colonists in an Expanding America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968).

⁵² Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted. The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951).

⁵³ Rolle, *Westward the Immigrants*, 265–274.

⁵⁴ Deanna P. Gumina, *The Italians of San Francisco, 1850–1930* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1978), xi.

number of Italians were from the more “developed” northern Italy rather than from the South. As such, they tended to be better educated, with better skills and at least some financial wherewithal. Under these tacit assumptions, not only has the demographic and social relevance of Southern Italians in California been somewhat neglected; common stereotypes about their “backwardness” with respect to Northern Italians have proliferated. Sebastian Fichera, for example, maintains that in San Francisco, the original Northern Italian colony, with its entrepreneurial ability and cooperative spirit, was the driving force behind a unique “community-building” process and the development of a successful “ethnic-economy,” both benefitting the wider Italian population as a whole.⁵⁵ In his opinion, this helped reduce crime and poverty more common to Italian enclaves elsewhere in the United States (and where, by inference, Southern Italians predominated). Gloria Lothrop neatly summarized this overall historiographical trend when stating that Italians “fulfilled” the “promise of California” by giving way to “migrant experiences [...] appreciably different from those of their counterparts who settled in urban centers on the eastern seaboard.”⁵⁶

The comparison between East and West coast Italian-American experiences undoubtedly has its own analytical strength, as it helps to pinpoint particular patterns according to their different contexts. Nevertheless, California’s Italian-American exceptionalism has two weak points. First of all, it offers an idyllic image of the Italian experience in California by downplaying the negative aspects of anti-Italian racism and marginalization. Discrimination, poverty, and exploitation were undeniable parts of that same experience, as Paola Sensi Isolani and Joseph Giovinco have shown.⁵⁷ Southern Italians, arriving in increasing numbers at the turn of the twentieth century, encountered particular prejudice. Also in California, stereotypes regarding their “backwardness” and racial otherness were widespread and often reinforced by Northern Italians as well.⁵⁸ The second weakness is that “race” is overlooked as an explanation for California’s Italian-American alleged uniqueness, whereas ethnic diversity marked Californian history. In line with its idealizing narrative, the exceptionalist interpretation states that Italians in California encountered little discrimination since racial hatred chiefly targeted the many minorities residing there.⁵⁹ Formulated this way, the problem of race is too narrow. Italians are merely seen as a passive target of racism, rather than an immigrant group actively involved in the local race-making process, either by being deemed “inferior” or by using the same label against others. Rowell gives us a clear example. In “Orientophobia,” he defines the “Hindu” as the “most pitiful immigrant” on the Pacific Coast in that he could be “kicked from pillar to post as a ‘nigger’ by outcast mobs of inferior white men.”⁶⁰ Rowell’s so called “inferior white men” were Italians, most likely Southerners. His reference point were the several Italian mobs who

⁵⁵ Sebastian Fichera, *Italy on the Pacific: San Francisco’s Italian Americans* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 51–77, 101–128.

⁵⁶ Gloria R. Lothrop, “California’s Italians: A Promise Fulfilled,” in *Fulfilling the Promise of California: An Anthology of Essays on the Italian American Experience in California*, ed. Gloria R. Lothrop (Spokane: California Italian American Task Force and The Arthur H. Clark Company, 2000), 233–73, 235.

⁵⁷ Paola A. Sensi-Isolani, “‘La pelle in California, i soldi in Italia’: The Italian Strike in McCloud, California, 1909,” *Studi Emigrazione* 27/97 (1990): 108–19; Joseph P. Giovinco, “Success in the Sun? California’s Italians During the Progressive Era,” in *Struggle and Success: An Anthology of the Italian Experience in California*, ed. Paola A. Sensi-Isolani and Phylis Cancilla Martinelli (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1993), 20–37.

⁵⁸ Tommaso Caiazza, “‘No Mafia Here’: Crime, Race and the Narrative of San Francisco’s Italian American ‘Model Colony,’” *Italian American Review* 6/1 (2016): 31–53.

⁵⁹ See for example Lothrop, “California’s Italians,” 235.

⁶⁰ Rowell, “Orientophobia,” 13.

attacked Asian Indians in various Northwestern Pacific Railroad construction sites during the 1907–08 economic crisis.⁶¹

It is worth noting that Rowell's use of the racial slur to emphasize the condition of Asian Indians as the most oppressed of California's immigrants suggests that the more traditional white/black dichotomy was still present in his mind and even overlapped with the white/Asian one. This is not surprising as the construction of Asian immigrants as "non-whites" followed stereotypical leitmotifs and forms of oppression already applied to African-Americans.⁶² The point, nonetheless, remains that the "inferior" but still "white" racial status accorded by Rowell to Italians resulted from the white/Asian polarity structuring race relations in California. Here, indeed, "new immigrant" Italians quickly learned how to exploit their newfound whiteness at Asian immigrants' expense. This aspect should not be neglected when comparing their experience with that of Italians elsewhere in the United States.

The reason for Italians' rapid positioning as whites in California's racial structure has little to do with the relatively large presence of the more racially "appreciated" Northern Italians; on the Pacific "racial frontier," Southern Italians, although severely discriminated against, could still seize their share of white privilege by participating in anti-Asian oppression. Neither can Italians' "early whiteness" in California be merely ascribed to the size of the Asian immigrant population and the subsequent deflection of white racial animosities from "new" European immigrants to more phenotypically obvious targets.⁶³ In the South, where African-Americans, rather than Asian immigrants, were numerous, the reverse process occurred: far from immediately acquiring fully white status, Italians saw their whiteness being questioned, once even by a judge in a court case.⁶⁴ One might suppose that the different fate of Italians' whiteness in California and the South was the result of phenotypes. An Italian immigrant, especially a Southern Italian with a dark complexion, might have been "confused" for an African-American, but never for a Chinese or Japanese person. In other words, in terms of physical features, an Italian could have been "non-visibly black," to use David Richards' expression, but not "non-visibly Oriental."⁶⁵ However, Irish immigrants, whose skin color was probably much whiter than that of a Sicilian, experienced similar racialization as Italians. While associated with African-Americans on the East Coast, in California, as already noted, they became the champions of "whiteness" and "Caucasianness" against Asian immigration.⁶⁶ Therefore, the reason for Italians' rapid acquisition of white status in California relies neither on numbers of respective populations and minorities nor on phenotype. Rather, it relies upon the distinctive white/Asian racial scheme operating on the "white man's frontier," as opposed to the white/black polarity dominating the South and the industrial North. To better understand this point, an in-depth examination of how such a distinct race-relations pattern operated is now required.

⁶¹ "Turbans Save Hindoos from Clubs of Italians," *San Francisco Call*, August 30, 1907, 4; "Italian Laborers Attack Hindu Strikebreakers," *San Francisco Call*, August 22, 1908, 1.

⁶² Najia Aarim-Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans, and Racial Anxiety in the United States, 1848–1882* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press: 2003).

⁶³ See, for example, Micaela Di Leonardo, *The Varieties of the Ethnic Experience: Kinship, Class, and Gender among California Italian Americans* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 56.

⁶⁴ The reference here is to *Rollins v. Alabama* (1922). A black man was acquitted from the charge of miscegenation as, in the judge's opinion, it was not clear whether the woman involved, a Sicilian immigrant, could be considered "white" (Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 4).

⁶⁵ David A.J. Richards, *Italiani d'America. Razza e identità etnica* (Milan: Giuffrè editore, 2004), 11.

⁶⁶ For an examination of Irish immigrants' representation as black, see the classic work by Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 34–59.

“Whites” and “Orientals”: Northern California’s Distinct Binary System

Tomás Almaguer has noted that California, after its annexation into the United States during the second half of the 1840s, developed not a traditional “black/white” binary racial system but, rather, a distinct multi-strata hierarchy reflecting the racialized power relationships between the dominant “white” Euro-American group and the many minorities, namely, former Mexican residents and Asian immigrants, in addition to African and Native Americans as in other regions of the country, which the newly founded state then incorporated.⁶⁷ Almaguer’s interpretation certainly applies to his area of study, Southern California, which however was not inundated by Chinese immigration as rapidly and extensively as was Northern California. Here, the 1849 Gold Rush and, later, employment on the Transcontinental railroad were major forces in attracting Chinese immigrants. African-Americans in search of fortune also arrived in California with the Gold Rush. Some came as free-blacks from the northeastern seaboard; others were slaves brought by their masters from southern states, while still others were immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America. However, for a long time, the number of African-Americans in California remained very small, as the newly founded state was not exempt from the anti-black “institutional racism” prevailing elsewhere in the country.⁶⁸ Therefore, in Northern California, as Barbara Berglund also observes regarding San Francisco, “Chinese” and “white” emerged as “the most potent racial opposites,” replacing the more standard “black/white” dichotomy.⁶⁹

According to Almaguer’s interpretation, in California’s racial hierarchy of the second half of the twentieth century, Mexicans were assigned to an “intermediate” position between white Euro-Americans and non-white Indians, Asians, and Blacks. This was chiefly for two reasons: firstly, Mexicans could claim a mixed European origin; secondly, their relatively small numbers prevented any significant class competition with “white” workers, at least until the early 1900s, when massive immigration from Mexico started, gradually relegating them to the level of a “non-white” group.⁷⁰ This hypothesis about early Mexican “in-betweenness” undoubtedly applies to Southern California which, having being the most settled area of the old Mexican province of Alta California, already had a sizeable and steady population of Californios of mixed Spanish and Mexican descent in rural areas as well as a traditional circulating Mexican migration from across the border. Again, the situation in Northern California differed because the demographic context was being rapidly subverted by the Gold Rush, which attracted a massive and heterogeneous foreign population from all over the world, indelibly marking the area’s regional identity and subsequent history.⁷¹

In the initial years of the Gold Rush, Mexican Sonorans, Chileans, and Peruvians, together with Californios, comprised the majority of the immigrants pouring into the gold fields on the north-western slopes of the Sierra Nevada. Their unfair treatment by white miners highlights the ambiguous racial status assigned to Hispanics in the new Anglo California. Not only were they

⁶⁷ Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

⁶⁸ Sucheng Chan, “A People of Exceptional Character: Ethnic Diversity, Nativism, and Racism in the California Gold Rush,” *California History* 79/2 (2000): 44–85, 72.

⁶⁹ Barbara Berglund, *Making San Francisco American: Cultural Frontiers in the Urban West, 1846–1906* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2007), 98.

⁷⁰ Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines*, 45–74.

⁷¹ Glenna Matthews, “Forging a Cosmopolitan Civic Culture: The Regional Identity of San Francisco and Northern California,” in *Many Wests: Place, Culture, and Regional Identity*, ed. David M. Wroebel and Michael C. Steiner (Lawrence: University of Kansas press, 1997), 211–34.

attacked physically and driven out from their own placer claims, they were also targeted by typically racist propaganda which accused them of being “peones” threatening the Gold Rush’s “free” and “independent” (here meaning white) character.⁷² The majority of them subsequently returned to Southern California and to their Latin American countries in the early 1850s. In their place arrived Chinese gold-seekers. They were also discriminated against but could not return so easily to their place of origin, and so stayed on, making a living in marginal placer claims, in menial occupations supporting the mining activities (cooking, laundering, etc.), and finally in agriculture. The result was that while the originally large Hispanic immigration promptly withdrew from Northern California, the Chinese continued arriving in numbers, gradually causing a white/Asian polarization of race relations rather than a white/Mexican/Asian stratification. This is particularly evident in San Francisco’s urban area. As the population grew due to the city’s rapid transformation into a commercial manufacturing metropolis, the relatively few Hispanics remaining saw their percentage of the local population shrink compared to the Chinese, who began to settle in San Francisco in increasingly large numbers with the exhaustion of the gold fields and the completion of the Transcontinental railroad in the late 1860s. While the Chinese comprised 10% of San Francisco population, Hispanics had diminished to less than 2%.⁷³ Therefore, in Northern California’s case, Almaguer’s multiple fault lines model needs to be replaced with a more fitting white/Asian binary.

This white/Asian scheme left no “in-between” space to be filled, either by the small remaining Mexican population or the rapidly growing “new immigrant” Italian. Italians on the Pacific were subject to the typical “racial alchemy of a frontier society that saw the world divided between whiteness and others,” to use Jacobson’s words.⁷⁴ Jason Pierce has recently shown that along the Great Plains frontier, a crucial role in the making of the “white man’s West” was assigned to Northern European immigrants, especially Germans, who participated extensively in the settlement of areas belonging to Native American and Hispanic populations.⁷⁵ German immigrants were particularly appreciated as colonizers since they fit the nineteenth-century conception of the westward expansion as a mission not only of the white race, but of the “freedom-loving” and “hard-working” Teutonic peoples to whom Anglo-Saxon America attributed its origins (*Making the White Man’s West*, x and 169). However, along the Pacific Coast, the edge of the westward expansion, any racial barrier among Euro-Americans dissolved, whiteness coalescing in face of the otherness represented by Asian immigration. Irish and, subsequently, new immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe were indeed granted ready access to the Caucasian family as defenders of the “white man’s frontier.” In 1908, California businessman and Italian community leader Andrea Sbarboro could publicly declare that California did “require immigration” but of the “right kind, composed of the Caucasian race which soon assimilate with us,” while the “Mongolian race” had to be kept out.⁷⁶ Sbarboro’s emphasis on “Caucasianness” dismantled the nationwide prevailing racial distinction between “old stock” Americans from North-Western Europe and “new immigration” coming from South

⁷² Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom’s Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 82–92.

⁷³ Tomás F. Sandoval, *Latinos at the Golden Gate: Creating Community and Identity in San Francisco* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 54.

⁷⁴ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 47.

⁷⁵ Jason E. Pierce, *Making the White Man’s West: Whiteness and the Creation of the American West* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2016), 86–87.

⁷⁶ Andrea Sbarboro, “Danger of Japanese Immigration,” *Labor Clarion*, November 13, 1908, 5.

and Eastern Europe since it included: “the German, the French, the Italian, the Swiss, the English, the Slavs, and even the Turks” (5).

According to Jacobson, only from the interwar years onward did the notion of a “Caucasian race” come to erode those racial distinctions—Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Mediterranean, Slav, etc.—which had previously prevented the formation of a shared white identity among Euro-Americans.⁷⁷ Such a periodization of the history of whiteness definitely applies to the industrial North. Here, the racial dynamic pitting the Northern European “old stock” against the “new” European immigrants turned into the standard white/black polarity, given that African-Americans started arriving in large numbers with World War I, while the 1920s Quota Laws reduced “undesirable” Mediterranean, Slavic, and Eastern Jewish immigration.⁷⁸ However, in California, a large “non-white” minority (i.e. the Chinese) had been resident since the state’s foundation in mid-nineteenth century; therefore, the racial dynamic always pitted whites against Asians. This is particularly evident within the context of organized labor. As early as the 1870s, California’s labor movement widely used the notion of “Caucasian race” as a synonym for “white” and “assimilable,” in contradistinction to everything “Mongolian,” “Chinese” or “Oriental.”⁷⁹ Certainly, Caucasian membership did not necessarily grant “new immigrant” Italians a warm welcome from California organized labor. Yet, their condition remained clearly distinct from that of Asians. In San Francisco, skilled unions discriminated against Italians as well as against Hispanics, but at least a door was left open to them in the form of various and separate “Latin locals”; Asians, on the other hand, were denied any such opportunities.⁸⁰ In agriculture especially, being “Caucasian and not ‘Asiatic’” made an “immense difference,” as Ronald Takaki points out.⁸¹ In California, “inferior” Caucasian immigrants, such as Italians, could escape marginalization within the labor market by renting or buying land, while non-white Asian immigrants, denied citizenship, encountered severe obstacles in this regard, especially after the 1913 Alien Land Law. It is not by chance that Italians, Ligurians in particular, managed to monopolize vegetable orchards and their profitable commercial spin-off in the countryside around San Francisco.⁸² These Ligurians brought with them agricultural skills as well as a cooperative spirit enabling them to rent and acquire land more easily. Equally importantly, however, Italians were able to take advantage of the fact that their Chinese truck-gardener competitors had been gradually driven out due to the Bay Area’s “anti-Chinese atmosphere.”⁸³

On the “white man’s frontier,” therefore, Italians’ racial status changed significantly as compared to other areas of the United States, where the white/black scheme was in effect. In the industrial North, but also the rural South, Italians initially found themselves relegated to sharing neighborhoods and work with African-Americans, the two groups interacting freely. Historian John Higham coined the concept of racial “in-betweenness” to highlight Italian/black social proximity; in his opinion, this is what reinforced “white” Americans’ prejudices regarding the

⁷⁷ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 91–96.

⁷⁸ Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 145–156.

⁷⁹ Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 18.

⁸⁰ Michael Kazin, *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 24 and 34 n. 38.

⁸¹ Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 15.

⁸² Sebastian Fichera, “Entrepreneurial Behavior in an Immigrant Colony: The Economic Experience of San Francisco’s Italian-Americans, 1850–1940,” *Studi Emigrazione* 32/118 (1995): 321–44, 324.

⁸³ Sucheng Chan, *This Bitter-Sweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860–1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 115.

“whiteness” of Italians, who seemed to observe much less strictly the period’s rigid protocols of interracial interaction.⁸⁴ On the Pacific, however, no such social proximity between Italian and Asian immigrants occurred. Although they neighbored each other in major cities such as San Francisco and also shared similar labor patterns, Italian and Asian immigrants remained rigidly separated, in line with a scheme of race relations with no intermediate space between whites and Asians. The frontier’s racial dynamic, while not excluding anti-Italian racism, nevertheless involved Italians in the mechanism of Asians’ “total exclusion,” to quote Alexander Saxton, the ultimate aim being the complete removal of Asians from the West Coast.⁸⁵ This leaves no doubt concerning Italians’ racial status in California nor the meaning of whiteness, whose definition, according to some critics, has remained “vague” among historians of the field.⁸⁶ Certainly, whiteness needs to be understood as a legal category encompassing the whole set of privileges coming with full citizenship. Guglielmo stresses this point by pointing out Italian immigrants’ rights to naturalization, to marriage, and to buying a house without any sort of “color” restriction.⁸⁷ However, focusing only on the legal dimension of whiteness carries the risks of underestimating Italians’ much more complex everyday racial experience, given that they also encountered discrimination. The racist language used against them, as well as their racialized position within the U.S. industrial labor market shaped Italians’ lives in the short term no less than did the privileges granted by their being officially classified as white. Actual recognition and consciousness are thus also very important to identify whiteness, which, like any other identity, is relational and requires feedback of other subjects, here particularly other “whites,” in order to be developed.

How then to explain the racial status of an immigrant group legally identified as white, yet still experiencing contestation and denial? The concept of “in-betweenness” remains valid, especially if we consider racial liminality to entail Italians’ racial downgrading or upgrading according to the diverse contexts of race relations in which they participated in the early-twentieth century United States. Unlike Italians in other regions, on the Pacific Coast, Italians entered the racial dynamic of a “frontier,” that of the “white man” vis-à-vis Asian immigration. This immediately granted them the dubious privilege of denying the so-called “whiteness” of other ethnicities, and all the symbolic and material advantages involved.

⁸⁴ John Higham, *Strangers in The Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 169.

⁸⁵ Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class, Politics, and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 2003), 302–03.

⁸⁶ Eric Arnesen, “Whiteness and the Historians’ Imagination,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60 (Fall, 2001): 3–32, 6.

⁸⁷ Guglielmo, *White on Arrival*, 28.