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TS History

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This week, writings included the contents of an 1837 Anti-Catholic Petition presented to Congress, an excerpt from *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People* by Helen Zia, and an excerpt from *Becoming Caucasian: Vicissitudes of Whiteness in American Politics and Culture* by Matthew Frye Jacobson.

In an 1837 Anti-Catholic Petition, 97 electors outlined their reasoning against the immigration of Roman Catholics on the basis of ‘intolerance towards intolerance’. The United States’ “equal right of suffrage” and self-government was key to its democracy, the petition argues, and Roman Catholics’ religion directly clashed with these principles. If such a population were to become the majority, it would subvert democracy through those very systems. While America guaranteed religious freedom, it should not grant such freedoms to an overtly political ideology masquerading as a religion, the petition asserts, lest free institutions crumble. The petition proposes citizenship restrictions, but acknowledges as a first step re-education to ensure the Catholic immigrants embraced ‘American principles’.

Helen Zia argues in *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People* that Asians had a large but seldom recognized impact on American history, from important legislative victories to agricultural inventions. She outlines the creation of a single Asian identity from several separated nationalities. Asian nations offered a cheap source of labor for American labor demand; each nationality of incoming workers believed the previous wave to be responsible for their own downfall, and that they could gain the acceptance of America; however, none were successful. Instead, legislatively Chinese, Japanese, Asian Indian, and other nationalities were lumped together as Asians and discriminated against on purely racial bases wholesale. Employers attempted to exploit inter-nationality conflict to prevent

concerted strikes, but eventually these were trumped by eventual ethnic unity. Thus, Zia asserts, the Asian American identity was formed by attempts at discrimination, exclusion, and division.

In *Becoming Caucasian: Vicissitudes of Whiteness in American Politics and Culture*, Matthew Frye Jacobson argues that race as we understand it is not biological, but instead mutable and a reflection of political, economic, and social circumstances. Historically, Jacobson contends, whiteness was defined by the exclusion of non-white groups. Early in American history, prevailing Enlightenment assumptions about what a people fit for self-government would be was premised not in whiteness, but Anglo-Saxon superiority. However, with the introduction of African-American migration, various ‘white ethnicities’ consolidated to form whiteness. Ideas of rethinking race unity along *sameness* and not *acceptance of difference* reframed race in terms of color and hence further drove division between broader racial definitions, strengthening what it meant to be white.

Matthew Frye Jacobson makes a fundamental assumption in *Becoming Caucasian* that the term “Caucasian” is synonymous with “white”; he uses the two terms interchangeably and establishes little distinction higher than grammar between the two. Different ethnic groups originally considered non-white were united under being Caucasian, Jacobson asserts; however, this blurring of ‘Caucasian’ and ‘white’ misses several important distinctions, is prone to historical contradictions, and misses a larger and more nuanced picture. Asian Indians were considered the “Mediterranean branch of the Caucasian family”¹, yet the Supreme Court ruled in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* that citizenship could not only be granted on the basis of being ‘Caucasian’; a citizen needed to be ‘white’². This indicates that there is a clear meaningful distinction between the two. The 1790 Naturalization Law allowed only “free white persons” to become U.S. citizens³, and on a more cultural level, billboards broadcast that “This [the United States] is a White Man’s Country”⁴. Why is it so that the term ‘Caucasian’ never appears in writing in many contexts? Furthermore, the newly consolidated ‘Caucasian race’ Jacobson argues was not and would

¹ Helen Zia, “*Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People*” (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 32.

² Zia, “*Asian American Dreams*”, 33.

³ Zia, “*Asian American Dreams*”, 33.

⁴ Zia, “*Asian American Dreams*”, 34.

never be perfectly unified; this is exemplified by strong internal strife, like anti-Semitic or anti-Irish violence. Hence, it is natural to ask why Anglo-Saxons would accept peoples different from them as one of them, especially given their notable physiognomic differences⁵ and reigning notions of Anglo-Saxon self-governing superiority. I believe that ‘whiteness’ was separate from being ‘Caucasian’ on a meaningful level – at least, initially; in fact, these racial designations reveal subtle hierarchies of power. The Sicilians, Irish, and other European ethnicities that leveraged their Caucasian race to gain entry were second-hand white citizens; thus their primary identity was more *Caucasian* than *white*. For instance, Edith Labue, a Sicilian immigrant, was determined in 1922 case to not be conclusively white⁶ as to be prosecuted for anti-miscegenation laws – not white enough to be prevented from being tainted by blackness. On the other hand, black Americans⁷ and Asian immigrants⁸ were conclusively excluded from being white *or* Caucasian. Thus, a power hierarchy emerged: first-class Anglo-Saxons as *first-class white citizens*, the most capable of self-government⁹; second-class Celts, Slavs, Hebrews, and other European ethnicities as *Caucasian* but not fully white; third-class black Americans and Asian immigrants as complete Others. This structure was useful to maintain notions of Anglo-Saxon governing superiority by pitting the second-class against the third-class; for instance, Irish immigrants could be loathed as Celts while actively engaging as members in The Order of Caucasians for the Extermination of the Chinaman¹⁰. Thus, being Caucasian was a less culturally spoken standard, a label whose context appears to be rooted more in biology to serve as a more concrete divider; being *white* was a golden standard, serving as a far more malleable designation used to differentiate first-class and second-class whiteness within being Caucasian; this explains its presence in cultural writings. With rising immigration of black and Asian people, the more solid barrier of being Caucasian split society into “Caucasian, Negroid, [and] Mongoloid”¹¹ races. Whiteness within being Caucasian, however, was malleable, and different groups put

⁵ Jacobson, “*Becoming Caucasian*”, 92.

⁶ Jacobson, “*Becoming Caucasian*”, 86.

⁷ Jacobson, “*Becoming Caucasian*”, 90.

⁸ Zia, “*Asian American Dreams*”, 39.

⁹ Jacobson, “*Becoming Caucasian*”, 10.

¹⁰ Jacobson, “*Becoming Caucasian*”, 87.

¹¹ Jacobson, “*Becoming Caucasian*”, 95.

in the same category tend to unify over time. This is exemplified by, for instance, the eventual unionizing of different Asian nationalities that had previously been pitted against each other¹². Hence, a three-level power hierarchy collapsed – at least partially – into a two-level one with time, spurred by, as Jacobson writes, strictly non-Caucasian presence; being white *became* a generally equivalent designation to being Caucasian, but the two were not so initially. This more nuanced view of racial classifications fits more smoothly into the complexities of racial patterns throughout history. Additionally, by framing whiteness and being Caucasian through the lens of hierarchy, historical and even modern-day inter-Caucasian antipathy is explained instead of ignored.

¹²Zia, “*Asian American Dreams*”, 37.