

The lifeguard managed to keep the water pure that day, but a part of that little boy died that afternoon. When one of the coaches offered him a ride home, he declined. "With champion trophy in hand," Watkins wrote, Al walked the mile or so back home by himself. He was never the same after that.

The Hierarchy of Trace Amounts:

Griffes, Marabons, and Sangmelees

The American caste system was an accelerated one, compressed into a fraction of the time that India's caste system has been in existence. Its founders used the story of Noah and his sons to justify the bottom of the hierarchy but, without further biblical instruction, as in the Laws of Manu, they shaped the upper caste as they went along. This policing of purity in the United States began with the task of defining the dominant caste itself.

While all the countries in the New World created hierarchies with Europeans on top, the United States alone created a system based on racial absolutism, the idea that a single drop of African blood, or varying percentages of Asian or Native American blood, could taint the purity of someone who might otherwise be presumed to be European, a stain that would thus disqualify the person from admittance to the dominant caste. This was a punitive model of racial superiority as opposed to the South African model, which rewarded those with any proximity to whiteness and created an official mid-caste of colored people as a buffer between black and white. South Africa granted privileges on a graded scale based on how much European blood was thought to be coursing through one's veins, seeing "white" blood as a cleansing antiseptic to that of lowlier groups in the purity-pollution paradigm. Both were forms of white supremacy crafted to fit the demographics of each country. South Africa's white minority had an incentive to grow its power and numbers by granting honorary whiteness to those deemed close enough. The white majority in the United

States had no such incentive and, in fact, benefited by elevating itself and holding those fewer in number apart and beneath them to serve as their subordinates.

"Degradation, resulting from the taint of blood, adheres to the descendants of Ham in this country, like the poisoned tunic of Nessus," wrote Joseph Henry Lumpkin, the antebellum chief justice of the Georgia Supreme Court, managing to combine Greek mythology and two pillars of caste—divine will and pollution—into a single ruling. (The mythical tunic was the blood-soaked garment of the fallen centaur Nessus, which came to represent inescapable misfortune and ruin to those who wore it.)

The founders labored from the start over who should be allowed into the dominant caste. The vast majority of human beings, including many who are now considered white, would not have fit their definition. Twenty-five years before the American Revolution, Benjamin Franklin worried that, with its growing German population, Pennsylvania would "become a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us, instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs any more than they can acquire our Complexion."

Ultimately, the dominant caste used immigration and marriage law to control who could join its ranks and who would be excluded. That took constant redefinition. "The law could not separate what it failed to categorize," wrote the legal scholars Raymond T. Diamond and Robert J. Cottrol. "A legally mandated caste system needed at a minimum to define caste membership."

At first, Congress, in 1790, restricted American citizenship to white immigrants, "free white persons," according to the statute. But "whiteness" had yet to be settled, and by the mid-nineteenth century, with millions of people immigrating from Germany and fleeing famine in Ireland, supremacists on both sides of the Atlantic fretted over what was to become of a country flooded by "the most degenerate races of olden day Europe," in the words of Arthur de Gobineau, a widely read nineteenth-century advocate of Aryan supremacy. "They are the human flotsam of all ages: Irish,

cross-bred Germans and French, and Italians of even more doubtful stock."

For most of American history, anyone not Anglo-Saxon fell somewhere on a descending scale of human "pollution." Like a field marshal defending his flanks in multiple theaters, the dominant caste fought the "tainted" influx of new immigrants with two of the most stringent immigration bans ever enacted, just before and after the turn of the twentieth century.

The country tried to block the flow of Chinese immigrants into the western states with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Then it turned to the immigrants arriving from southern and eastern Europe, the "scum and offscouring," as a former Virginia governor put it, newcomers who purportedly brought crime and disease and polluted the bloodlines of America's original white stock. Congress commissioned an analysis of the crisis, an influential document known as the Dillingham Report, and the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization called hearings as the United States tried to further curate its population.

"The moral fiber of the nation has been weakened and its very life-blood vitiated by the influx of this tide of oriental scum," Rev. M. D. Lichliter, a minister from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, said in his testimony before the committee in 1910. "Our grand Anglo-Saxon character must be preserved, and the pure unmixed blood flowing down from our Aryan progenitors must not be mixed with the Iberic race," a term applied to southern Italians in the era of eugenics.

The findings set the stage for the 1924 Immigration Act, which restricted immigration to quotas based on the demographics of 1890—that is, before Poles, Jews, Greeks, Italians, and others outside of western Europe had arrived in great numbers.

Their status contested, these groups were not always extended the protections accorded to unassailably "white" people, not then anyway. There was an attempt to exclude Italian voters from "white" primaries in Louisiana in 1903. The decade before, in 1891, eleven Italian immigrants in New Orleans lost their lives in

one of the largest mass lynchings in American history, after the police chief was assassinated and the immigrants were seen as the prime suspects. After the lynching, hundreds more were rounded up and arrested. One of the organizers of the lynch mob, John M. Parker, later described Italians as "just a little worse than the Negro, being if anything filthier in [their] habits, lawless, and treacherous." He went on to be elected governor of Louisiana.

Later, in 1922, a black man in Alabama named Jim Rollins was convicted of miscegenation for living as the husband of a white woman named Edith Labue. But when the court learned that the woman was Sicilian and saw "no competent evidence" that she was white, the judge reversed the conviction. The uncertainty surrounding whether she was "conclusively" white led the court to take the extraordinary step of freeing a black man who in other circumstances might have faced a lynching had she been seen as a white woman.

By then, a majority of the states had devised, or were in the process of devising, ever more tortured definitions of *white* and *black*.

Arkansas first defined *Negro* as "one in whom there is a visible and distinct admixture of African blood." Then in 1911, the state changed it to anyone "who has . . . any negro blood whatever," as it made interracial sex a felony. The state of Alabama defined a black person as anyone with "a drop of negro blood," in its intermarriage ban. Oregon defined as nonwhite any person "with $\frac{1}{4}$ Negro, Chinese or any person having $\frac{1}{4}$ Negro, Chinese or Kanaka blood or more than $\frac{1}{2}$ Indian blood." North Carolina forbade marriage between whites and any person "of Negro or Indian descent to 3rd generation inclusive." The state of Georgia defined *white* to mean "no ascertainable trace of Negro, African, West Indian, Asiatic blood."

Louisiana had a law on the books as recently as 1983 setting the boundary at "one-thirty-second Negro blood." Louisiana culture went to great specificity, not so unlike the Indian Laws of Manu, in delineating the various subcastes, based on the estimated per-

centage of African "blood." There was griffe (three-fourths black), marabon (five-eighths black), mulatto (one-half), quadroon (one-fourth), octaroon (one-eighth), sextaroon (one-sixteenth), demi-meamelouc (one-thirty-second), and sangmelee (one-sixty-fourth). The latter categories, as twenty-first-century genetic testing has now shown, would encompass millions of Americans now classified as Caucasian. All of these categories bear witness to a historic American, dominant-caste preoccupation with race and caste purity.

Virginia went all in and passed what it called the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, which besides prohibiting interracial marriage, defined a white person as one "who has no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian."

"The 'traceable amount' was meant to ensure that even blacks who did not look black were kept in their place," wrote Diamond and Cottrol. "Tracing black ancestry as far back as possible became a prerequisite to the smooth functioning of the caste system."

The Trials of the Middle Castes:

The Race to Get Under the White Tent

By extending the dream of dominion over the land and all others in it to anyone who could meet the definition of *white*, the American caste system became an all-or-nothing gambit for the top rung. Which is why, when Ybor City, Florida, began segregating its streetcars in 1905, Cubans, who had been uncertain as to how they would be classified, were relieved and overjoyed "to discover that they were allowed to sit in the white section."

Those permitted under the white tent could reap the rewards of full citizenship, rise to positions of high status, or as far as their talents could take them, get access to the best the country had to offer, or, at the very least, be accorded respect in everyday interactions from subordinate groups who risked assault for any misstep. A two-tiered caste system raised the stakes for whiteness, leading

to court dockets filled with people on the borderline seeking admission to the upper caste.

A Japanese immigrant named Takao Ozawa had lived in the United States for more than twenty years. He tried to make the case that he was worthy of citizenship and should qualify as white because his skin was lighter than that of many "white people." He argued, what really was the difference? How could he not be white if his skin was white? What did it mean to be white if someone with actual white skin was not white?

His case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1922, the Court held unanimously that *white* meant not skin color but "Caucasian," and that Japanese were not Caucasian, notwithstanding the fact that few white Americans had origins in the Caucasus Mountains of Russia either and that those who did were at that very moment being kept out, too.

After the ruling, a newspaper that catered to Japanese immigrants mocked the decision: "Since this newspaper did not believe whites are the 'superior race,' it is 'delighted' the high tribunal 'did not find the Japanese to be free white persons.'"

A few months later, an immigrant from the dominant caste of India sought to make common cause with his upper-caste counterparts in America when his application for citizenship made it to the Supreme Court. Bhagat Singh Thind argued that he was Caucasian, Aryan in fact, descended from the same stock as Europeans, given that it was widely held that Aryans migrated south to India and formed that country's upper caste. It could be said that he had a more rightful claim to being Caucasian than the people judging him. After all, the Caucasus Mountains were next to Iran and closer to neighboring India than to western Europe.

The Court did not agree and rejected Thind's quest for citizenship in 1923. "It may be true that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity," wrote the Court, "but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them today."

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These decisions were a heartbreaking catastrophe for Asians seeking citizenship. With pro-western European sentiment running high, the government began rescinding the naturalized citizenship of people of Asian descent who were already here. This amounted to an abandonment of people who had lived legally in the United States for most of their adult lives, as would echo a century later with immigrants crossing the southern U.S. border with Mexico.

It could lead to tragic consequences. Vaishno Das Bagai, an Indian immigrant, had been in the United States for eight years by the time the Supreme Court ruled that Indians were not white and thus were ineligible for citizenship. He had a wife and three children and his own general store on Fillmore Street in San Francisco. He tended his store in three-piece suits and kept his hair cut short with a part on the side. Bagai lost his citizenship in the crackdown on nonwhite immigrants. He was then stripped of the business he had built, due to a California law restricting the economic rights of people who were not citizens. Shorn of a passport, he was then thwarted in his attempt to get back to India and was now a man without a country.

Far from his original home and rejected by his new one, he rented a room in San Jose, turned on the gas and took his life. He left a suicide note, in which he lamented the futility of all that he had sacrificed to come to America: "Obstacles this way, blockades that way, and bridges burnt behind."

No matter which route a borderline applicant took to gain acceptance, the caste system shape-shifted to keep the upper caste pure by its own terms. What a thin, frayed thread held the illusions together. A Japanese novelist once noted that, on paper anyway, it was a single apostrophe that stood between rejection and citizenship for a Japanese Ohara versus an Irish O'Hara. These cases laid bare not just the absurdity but the inaccuracy of these artificial labels and the perception of purity or pollution implied by them. At the same time, they exposed the unyielding rigidity of a caste system, defiant in the face of evidence contrary to its foundation, how it holds fast against the assault of logic.

Defining Purity and the Constancy of the Bottom Rung

As the middle castes pressed for admittance to the rungs above them, what was consistent was the absolute exclusion of the "polluting" lowest caste. African-Americans were not just *not* citizens, they were, like their Dalit counterparts in India, forced outside the social contract.

They and the Dalits bore the daily brunt of the taint ascribed to their very beings. The Dalits were not permitted to drink from the same cups as the dominant castes in India, live in the villages of the upper-caste people, walk through the front doors of upper-caste homes, and neither were African-Americans in much of the United States for most of its history. African-Americans in the South were required to walk through the side or back door of any white establishment they approached. Throughout the United States, sundown laws forbade them from being seen in white towns and neighborhoods after sunset, or risk assault or lynching. In bars and restaurants in the North, though they might be permitted to sit and eat, it was common for the bartender to make a show of smashing the glass that a black patron had just sipped from. Heads would turn as restaurant patrons looked to see where the crashing sound had come from and who had offended the sensibilities of caste pollution.

Untouchables were not allowed inside Hindu temples, and black Mormons in America, by way of example, were not allowed inside the temples of the religion they followed and could not become priests until 1978. Enslaved black people were prohibited from learning to read the Bible or any book for that matter, just as Untouchables were prohibited from learning Sanskrit and sacred texts. In churches in the South, black worshippers sat in the galleries or in the back rows, and, when such arrangements were inconvenient to the dominant caste, "the negroes must catch the gospel as it escapes through the windows and doors" from outside. To this day, Sunday morning has been called the most segregated hour in America.

Well into the civil rights era, the caste system excluded African-Americans from the daily activities of the general public in the South, the region where most of them lived. They knew to disregard any notice of a circus coming to town or of a political rally; those things were not intended for them. "They were driven from Independence Day parades," wrote the historian David Roediger, "as 'defilers' of the body politic."

What a British magistrate observed about the lowest castes in India could as well have been said of African-Americans. "They were not allowed to be present at the great national sacrifices, or at the feasts which followed them," wrote the colonial administrator and historian W. W. Hunter. "They could never rise out of their servile condition; and to them was assigned the severest toil in the fields."

Their exclusion was used to justify their exclusion. Their degraded station justified their degradation. They were consigned to the lowliest, dirtiest jobs and thus were seen as lowly and dirty, and everyone in the caste system absorbed the message of their degradation.

The burden fell on those in the lowest caste to adjust themselves for the convenience of the dominant caste whenever in contact with white people. An African-American man who managed to become an architect during the nineteenth century had to train himself "to read architectural blueprints upside down," wrote the scholar Charles W. Mills, "because he knew white clients would be made uncomfortable by having him on the same side of the desk as themselves."

Well into the twentieth century, a panic could afflict people in the dominant caste if ever a breach occurred. A frantic white mother in civil-rights-era Mississippi yanked her young daughter inside one day, held her over the kitchen sink and scrubbed her little hand with a Brillo pad as if both their lives depended on it. The girl had touched the hand of a little black girl who was working on the family's land. The mother told her never to touch that girl's hand again, though that was not the term she used.

"They have germs," the mother said. "They're nasty." The mother's fury frightened the little girl and brought her to tears as they stood there, bent over the sink. And the daughter's tears brought the mother to tears over the manufactured terror she had allowed to consume her and over the box that she realized in that moment had imprisoned her for all of her life.

This was a sacred prohibition, and it was said that, into the 1970s, the majority of whites in the South had not so much as shaken the hands of a black person.

A young dominant-caste man raised in the Depression-era South had been well taught the rules of the caste system and adhered to them as expected. When he went north in the mid-twentieth century and joined the military, he had to confront the mythologies of his upbringing.

"Strange things pop up at us like gargoyles when we are liberated from our delusions," the white southerner said.

Up north, on occasion, he found himself in situations where black people were permitted in the same work settings as whites. "I thought I was entirely prepared, emotionally and intellectually," the man, an editor at *Look* magazine, recalled years later.

But he discovered that he was a captive of his own conditioning, which he called a certain madness.

Every time he reached the point where he had to shake hands with a black person, he felt an automatic revulsion that had been trained into him. He recoiled even though it had been black women who had bathed him as a child, had mixed the dough for his biscuits, and whose touch had not repulsed him when extended in servitude. But with presumed equals, "each time I shook hands with a Negro," he said, "I felt an urge to wash my hands. Every rational impulse, all that I considered best in myself struggled against this urge. But the hand that had touched the dark skin had a will of its own and would not be dissuaded from signaling it was unclean. That is what I mean by madness."