

HISTORICIZING WHITENESS

Week Nine



Images via: Piktochart

Corrie Scott, 1282:

"race is many things at once: a socially constructed category used to naturalize inequality; an individual and collective identity for both oppressed and oppressive groups of people; a discursive practice; a political tool that can be exploited"

Consider:

Although the readings, film and lecture this week bring to light the stories of Irish migrants to Canada consider how the narratives of Indigenous peoples are erased/ignored through the telling of these histories. Settlement in 'Canada' required the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands and the erasure of their sovereignty. It is important to acknowledge that Indigenous historical actors are erased throughout these materials through settler beliefs that they had an inherent right to the lands. How did the arrival of Irish migrants to North America re-shaped the lives of Indigenous peoples? How has the process of 'whitening' potentially aiding in the assimilation of Indigenous peoples into colonial western institutions? How did Indigenous peoples feel about the influx of migrants and the changes in societal structures that followed, how did Indigenous peoples resist these changes?

Bibliography:

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 See, Scott W. "An Unprecedented Influx: Nativism and Irish Famine Immigration to Canada." *The American Review of Canadian Studies* 30, no. 4 (2000): 429-453.
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French and English Tensions

- Anglo-Canadians viewed themselves as a predominate force within settler society, using notions of white supremacy and patriarchy to establish themselves as a governing force
- 19th-century racial and religious (Protestantism) views by the dominant society excluded French Canadians, viewing them as not 'white'
- French Canadians were depicted in racialized ways as unprogressive, inactive and unskilled in people in the process of civilization and urbanization
- The imposition of hierarchal systems suppressed the authority of working/middle-class people of all ethnic groups creating a dichotomy between elites and those they deemed as 'others'
- Consider how these historical tensions and socio-economic assimilation occurred through 'whitening' to eventually allow French Canadians to be constructed as white Quebecois. The 'whitening' of French Canadians was dependent on growing racial attitudes towards Black and Indigenous peoples to further assimilate, colonize and dispose of them

Irish Migrants to British North America

- Irish Catholics were an oppressed group in Ireland and this discrimination was initially carried onwards within British North America
- Migration from Ireland to the colonies was ongoing, in 1845, however, a famine caused a large increase in migration patterns for those who could afford and survive the long journey
- Migrant labour was quickly exploited by settler elites as it kept labour costs down
- Protestant concerns, however, rose due to an influx of Catholic migrants, thus moves were made to exclude the Irish from power structures and label them as 'outsiders'
- The Irish were eventually mainstreamed into 'white' society similar to the process French Canadians underwent

Law Enforcement and the Orange Order

- During the early years of settlement, British troops were often sent in to ease tensions, as seen in the Lower and Upper Canada Rebellions (1837-38). In reality, however, the imposition of colonial officials and forces often caused more chaos, creating armed confrontations rather than peaceful diplomatic solutions
- Majority populations (often British settlers) held positions of powers and used them to shut out those they deemed as 'others' from the social order
- The Orange Order was a society that celebrated the Protestants Ascendancy in Ireland via the defeat of King James II (Catholic) at the Battle of Boyne, July 12, 1690
- Orangemen celebrated the political dominance of Protestants through demonstrations that showcased sectarian violence. The Party Processions Act was passed in Canada in 1843 and was used to prohibit the actions of Orangemen and ease tensions towards the Irish, however, it was poorly enforced as Orangemen held the local level positions of authority, demonstrating the limitation of state powers to enforce laws
- Law enforcement in the colonies required the centralization of power at the local level to enforce laws and cement legitimacy, thus it was dependent on societal beliefs towards the legitimacy of the law
- State monopolization restructured authoritative positions, dismantling the local level power

Nativism

- A term used to describe settlers reactions to an influx of 'white' and Catholic immigrants
- The rejection of immigrants, specifically Irish migrants was due to a fear of Irish-Catholic encroachment through defensive nationalism
- Canadian nativism was practiced through political, economic and social hostility towards migrants asserting loyalty to the British Empire
- Anyone who rejected Protestantism was seen as a threat thus measures were taken to ensure the interests of 'native-born' (settler) inhabitants
- Sentiments even went as far as to be xenophobic or anti-immigration

'Whiteness'

- Whitening involves systematic choices to enter into Whiteness and secure societal advantages
- Whiteness is socially constructed and is dependent on history, geography, politics and social culture not necessarily the paleness of someone's skin
- Whiteness changes over time and adapts to fit the meaning of society, this explains how formerly excluded European groups are now accepted as white despite once being labelled as outsiders and minorities (ie: Jewish people, the Irish, French Canadians)
- When whiteness is used to include formerly excluded groups concepts of white supremacy are strengthened
- As a self-adopted racial identity and assigned racial category whiteness enforces the racialization of bodies through political, economic and ideological means

Racism, Colonialism and White Supremacy

- Race as a tool that aids in the projects of colonialism and the construction of white supremacy through performative and repetitive actions, one's political and ethical choices (ie: how the Doctrine of Discovery and Terra Nullius are used to justify the erasure of Indigenous bodies)
- Whiteness is created through hegemonic structures and in western societies, whiteness is often normalized creating a majority population that is often not racially named
- Unnamed whiteness contributes to embedded systematic inequality within social, cultural, and political structures allowing for the production of white privilege (unearned everyday advantages due to having white skin)
- Whiteness is used to enhance and spread ideas about evolution, progress and civilization
- Racist terms become naturalized in everyday language to excluded groups and label them as minorities to further legitimize colonial projects by the state

Concluding Thoughts

- Regardless of the impositions of racial attitudes, white supremacy, nativism and settler colonialism, it is important to consider how historical actors were often active agents within their own lives, despite state attempts to erase power. As a contingent concept race reflects the ideals of society; as structures change over time so do public opinions allowing for once excluded racialized groups to be accepted within the 'white' majority. The inclusion of French Canadians and the Irish into the dominant society relied on changing racial attitudes towards Indigenous and Black bodies justifying their forced removal, inequality and structural limitations within society. It is critical to acknowledge that the 'whitening' of society required the dispossession, assimilation and colonization of Indigenous communities.