

How Do You Know Who is White?

Whiteness isn't about skin colour

If we don't think about why white people are white, whiteness seems 'natural,' 'biological.'¹ Historian Corrie Scott explains **who counts as 'white' changes over time, so whiteness is not 'natural' but a historically specific construct.**² So why do we think we know who is white and who isn't? Skin colour? Today, French Canadians and the Irish count as white, but they didn't always, so it's not skin colour. Instead of asking what race *is*, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun **asks what race does.**³ This lets us see the power relations race sets up.⁴

Whiteness is about power relations

Race is about power and power is relational. Some people are racialized by categorizing them as different compared to 'normal' (whiteness), and this normalization of whiteness is why it is an unearned privilege. **Repeating made-up racial differences makes them seem real, even though 'race' is scientifically disproven.**⁵ Scott argues "racial discourses create corporeal realities, not the other way around."⁶ If race were natural, don't you think we wouldn't have to repeat it so much?

Colonization

The myth of the settler colonial Canadian state is that English and French settlers were the "two founding 'races.'"⁷ But wait...isn't 'race' a construct and **didn't Indigenous peoples already live on Turtle Island for millennia?** Settlers (people not indigenous to where they live) stole Indigenous lands because they considered it 'empty land' (*terra nullius*). **Colonization** is a violent, ongoing process of territorial, cultural, and political displacement. How do settlers justify colonial violence? European settlers, particularly British Protestants, thought they were more 'civilized' than Indigenous peoples because they lived differently. Attaching morality to difference means gaining power. **Here race sets up unequal power relations by linking whiteness to the "idea of progress,"** which portrays white people as 'farther ahead.'⁸ Do you think stealing land is more 'civilized' than living sustainably for millennia?

Why were French Canadians not white in the 19th century?



In 1840, Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (Québec) became the United Province of Canada after the Patriot Rebellions on the advice of the Durham Report. Note: this is all still stolen Indigenous land!

Why are French Canadians white in the 21st century?

Today, French-Canadians are seen as and see themselves as white. **That doesn't mean they were really white all along** because who counts as white changes over time. **So, what changed?** French Canadians gained middle class status during post-WWII prosperity.¹⁴ Even though French Canadians still have distinct linguistic (French), religious (Catholicism), and cultural traditions, **because they have socio-economically assimilated, they now count as 'white.'** In many ways, race is about class, which shifts over time too, because class is also about power.

The English racialized French Canadians by repeating they were "not quite white" in newspapers and legislatures to get power over them.⁹ Lord Durham mentioned "race" 32 times in the 1839 Durham Report, arguing French Canadians should be assimilated.¹⁰ Lord Durham's argument was convincing because it repeated the **"established discourse of white supremacy and patriarchy."**¹¹ Ironically, France uses the same racist logic to colonize Africa and the Americas.¹² Whiteness differs in time and place. White supremacy (the racist belief white people are better because they are white) is also about masculinity. White women participate in colonization but are not equal to white men. **Can you see how gender sets up power relations too?**

¹Corrie Scott, "How French Canadians became White Folks, or Doing Things with Race in Quebec," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39.7 (2016): 1281.

² Scott, 1280.

³ Ibid, 1282.

⁴ Ibid, 1294.

⁵ Ibid, 1282.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 1283.

⁸ Ibid, 1285.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 1283.

¹¹ Ibid, 1284.

¹² Ibid, 1289.

¹³ Ibid, 1284.

¹⁴ Ibid, 1292.



How Do You Know Who is White?

Why were Irish Catholics not white in the 19th century?

What is nativism?

Nativism is the rejection of immigrants considered 'foreign.'¹⁵ In the 19th century, British Protestants thought themselves 'native' even though Upper Canada (Ontario) was only established in 1791...about 50 years before the Irish Famine. **Not a long time compared to the thousands of years Indigenous peoples have been here.** Historian Scott See argues the nativist response to the influx of Famine Irish had to do with **critical mass and anti-Catholicism.**¹⁶

Anti-Catholicism

In the 19th century, religion primarily provided "self and community identification" which impacted economic and political status.²¹ The **Doctrine of Discovery** is also religious, as it justifies Christians colonizing non-Christian lands. Protestantism and Catholicism are both sects of Christianity, but power can be leveraged on any difference. **Protestants were worried about being outnumbered by Catholics** because majorities can monopolize power, and a Protestant majority kept the colony **loyal to the British Empire.**²² So whiteness was limited to Protestants, which made Irish Catholics non-white.

Political Status

What else can a majority do? Form a **voting bloc.** Protestant men were worried about being outvoted by Catholic men who could vote since the 1830s.²³ Political parties gained religious affiliations: the Liberals with Catholics, the Conservatives with Protestants.²⁴ However, until the 20th century, Irish Catholics held few political offices.²⁵ What about the 21st century? Go to ourcommons.ca/Members/en to find out (spoiler alert: a lot of white men). **See how race and gender can concentrate political power?**

¹⁵Scott See, "An Unprecedented Influx: Nativism and Irish Famine Immigration to Canada," *The American Review of Canadian Studies* 30.4 (Winter 2000): 430.

¹⁶ See, 430.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 431.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 436.

²¹ Ibid, 435.

²² Ibid, 431.

²³ Ibid, 439.

²⁴ Ibid, 440.

²⁵ Ibid, 443.

²⁶ Ibid, 429.

²⁷ Ibid, 442.

²⁸ Ibid, 441.

Irish Potato Famine and critical mass

Critical mass means a threshold has been surpassed. The Irish Potato Famine (1845-1849) sent a wave of migration that quickly surpassed critical mass.¹⁷ In 1847 alone, **100,000 Irish** emigrated to Canada; **90% were Catholic.**¹⁸ Mid-19th century Canadian colonies had a majority white population alongside Indigenous peoples, Black people, and some other European settlers.¹⁹ **There is power in numbers, so the majority felt threatened by being outnumbered.**²⁰

Economic Status

Famine Irish travelled to Canada on "coffin ships," which had high mortality rates due to unsanitary conditions and diseases like typhus.²⁶ Many were buried at sea or in Canadian quarantines. Those who survived arrived poor because they spent all their money to make the journey. **Canadian settlers were worried about losing their jobs and blamed Irish immigrants instead of the bosses (capitalists) who exploited Irish labour in low-paying, dangerous jobs because they were Catholic.**²⁷ In the 1840s, New Brunswick's timber industry was depressed, so when Famine Irish arrived, they worked for lower wages than other settlers.²⁸ Here, anti-Irish racism and anti-Indigenous racism is connected: **Irish labour is exploited to clear cut stolen Indigenous land.** Over time, Irish Catholics socio-economically assimilated, and today count as white. Sound familiar?

What did we learn?

From Scott, See, and Chun we can look at **what race does to understand race is made-up to justify unequal power relations that keep giving political and economic power to whiteness and masculinity.** Power is relational! **What kind of relations could be set up if we were willing to share power?**

Bibliography

Scott, Corrie. "How French Canadians became White Folks, or Doing Things with Race in Quebec." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39.7 (2016): 1280-1297.

See, Scott W. "An Unprecedented Influx: Nativism and Irish Famine Immigration to Canada." *The American Review of Canadian Studies* 30.4 (Winter 2000): 429-453.