Whiteness
The Definitive Conceptualization of an American Identity

The emergence of an American cultural identity as white crystallized fairly early in America’s history with the founders and early settlers who for the most part came from the British Isles. The separation of the colonies from British rule was important. The role First Nations and blacks were to play in the uniqueness of America’s cultural identity was readily apparent. In the minds of the colonists, First Nations and blacks were both seen as cultureless savages. They never looked at them as Americans because they were unlike whites “in appearance, customs, and language.” Eventually, the American government had to take on the task of determining who was an American. Even though there was a social practice already in place, nothing offered a more powerful description of who was an American than the first Naturalization Act of 1790, which provided citizenship only to white men. What the American historian Alden Vaughan would later describe as the unbearable “multiethnic mix” was thus legally obliterated. Citizenship was not only about the legality it entailed in terms of rights; it also signified one’s equal status in society, equality that was denied to all racialized groups as well as to women. That America was “a white man’s country” gained both literal and symbolic meaning.

The development and progression of whiteness as an axiological code of white supremacy was already culturally operational and started way before the Naturalization Act of 1790. Indeed, it laid down the roots for determining who were Americans and how to access normative Americanness. Access was, for the most part, determined by one’s color, which dictated the rules for white ownership of America’s cultural identity. From the beginning of the formation of the United States, Americans were viewed as white. Even though First Nations, or “native” Americans, and blacks were already in...
America, their presence was obliterated. This forgetfulness, this self-inflated amnesia, is perfectly illustrated in the history told by historian David Ramsay, who boasts that the Scots, Swiss, Irish, Germans, New Yorkers, and Dutch “have been the sources from which [America] has derived her population.”

Equally oblivious was the French political thinker Alexis de Toqueville who, when he visited the United States in 1830, described America and its citizens as “Anglo-Americans.” All documents that defined America, including the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, contributed to promote a white America.

Unfortunately, the crucial details describing the process of the Americanization of America’s culture whereby First Nations, blacks, and other racialized groups were not looked on as Americans and were viewed as inferior have been rarely examined. Americanization percolated into practically every aspect of America’s daily life, from political debates to literature. Dana Nelson, in The World in Black and White: Reading “Race” in American Literature 1638–1862, pointed to the many ways in which “white” writers from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century constructed versions of an American cultural identity by defining themselves in opposition to racialized ethnic groups. Nonwhites’ alleged inferiority no doubt functioned as the underlying principle for whites to piercingly differentiate themselves from nonwhites. Cheryl I. Harris argues that it was not only the concept of racial inferiority that historically subordinated nonwhite people in America but “the interaction between the concepts of race and property.” In the same vein, the American historian Matthew Frye Jacobson frankly asserts that “who can own property and who can be property” played a critical role in the oppression of nonwhite people. Indeed, their inferiority carried with it a mark that would justify the discriminatory treatment of nonwhites in America, and was endorsed and daily reinforced within America’s institutions, public discourses, and social settings.

In fact, at the beginning of the formation of the United States, there was an emphasis on America as a homogeneous society despite the presence of culturally and physically diverse groups of people. In this sense, I will challenge and call into question the totalizing dominance of whiteness and its ambushing of an American cultural identity as white. Racialized ethnic groups including First Nations and blacks, who were already in America, and later Chinese, were not expected to embrace this so-called cultural oneness and become Americans. More fundamentally, it was the emphasis put by the founders on cultural oneness that would asphyxiate America’s cultural manyness.

My purpose in this chapter is to elaborate and show how the Americanization of America’s cultural identity denied racialized ethnic groups access to an America identity because nonwhiteness signified inferiority.