Since the publication of David Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York, 1991), the study of “whiteness” has become a dominant organizing principle in US labor history as well as other fields. In the last eleven years, historians have churned out an innumerable number of articles and books using the concept of whiteness to reshape the way the field. On November 30, 2001, a couple hundred graduate students, academics, and activists packed a New York University hall to hear seven prominent scholars, who have written on both labor and race, debate the impact of whiteness studies on US labor history. The evening began with Eric Arnesen (University of Illinois at Chicago) offering his assessment. Arnesen was followed by the six other scholars who responded to him and offered their own views on whiteness studies. The editors of *International Labor and Working-Class History (ILWCH)* organized this public forum because of the interest generated by the symposium on the same issue that appeared in the fall 2001 issue of their journal. Along with *ILWCH*, the event was sponsored by the New York University History Department and the Committee on Historical Studies at the New School for Social Research. The forum was quite a success as the panelists and the audience engaged in lively and occasionally heated discussion on the relative strengths and political ramifications of whiteness studies. Those interested are encouraged to read the longer pieces in the earlier symposium in the Fall 2001 *ILWCH*.1

At the beginning of his comments, Arnesen stated that he had agreed to write a piece on whiteness studies for *ILWCH* because he felt that there had been far too little serious critical assessment of whiteness scholarship’s impact on US labor history. His assessment was quite damning. He concluded that because of a number of conceptual and methodological problems whiteness studies has “yet to deliver the goods” and has not proven to be a useful category to better understand US labor history. In his talk, he quickly went over what he sees as three serious problems with the whiteness literature; a problem of definition, whiteness scholars’ use of the idea of whiteness as a psychological wage, and the
assertion by whiteness scholars that Irish and other immigrants had to become white after their arrival. By a problem of definition, Arnesen meant that whiteness scholars have defined and used the concept of whiteness in a too elastic, inconsistent, and arbitrary manner. In doing so, whiteness has become a concept that scholars can project their own meaning. His second main criticism concerned whiteness scholars’ use of the W. E. B. Du Bois’s concept of the psychological wage to explain white workers’ investment in whiteness and hence their failure to make common cause with black and other minority workers. Arnesen argued that David Roediger and other whiteness scholar’s use of the psychological wage argument presupposed the possibility of some form of ideal working class unity—a notion that Arnesen finds problematic. He called this assumption of working class unity “marxism lite.” Lastly, Arnesen argued that the whiteness scholars’ now well-known argument about how Irish and other later immigrants had to become white (partially by embracing racism) is flawed. He does not believe there is the historical evidence to back up this argument. According to Arnesen, whiteness scholars conflate nativist thought with whiteness, ignore the fact that such major institutions as the nineteenth century Democratic Party and the Catholic Church certainly considered the Irish to be white on their arrival, and rely primarily on white elite discourse as evidence.

Linda Gordon (Columbia University) argued that Arnesen dismissed much too quickly important new scholarship that has shed much light on the formation and reformation of racial identities. She found Arnesen’s criticism of whiteness scholars for their imprecise and too elastic definition of whiteness to be off-base. Gordon argued that this “imprecision” is not really a weakness at all rather it’s a strength given the “fuzzy” and complex reality of racial discourse in US history. However, Gordon did offer several of her own criticisms of the whiteness studies such as its failure to make the distinction between race distinctions and racist distinctions, for overemphasizing culture and the fluidity of racial identities, and for not sufficiently incorporating gender in its analyses. Also, like several of the other panelists, Gordon attempted to contextualize the use of whiteness, arguing that it is the last of three major slogans on the left concerning race (the other two being white supremacy and white skin privilege).

Out of all the participants, Barbara J. Fields (Columbia University) was the least sympathetic to whiteness studies. According to Fields, whiteness scholarship is flawed because of the theories underpinning it. First, she argued that whiteness is a “shotgun marriage” of two crucial concepts used by many historians, identity and agency, both of which Fields finds problematic. She stated that academics, who tend to be liberal and progressive, are uncomfortable with the concept of racism because it violates their ideas of agency and freedom. So they replace racism with race and from there arrive at racial identity. By this set of maneuvers, they are able to provide white workers agency. White workers use their agency/freedom to develop their identity of whiteness. Fields argued that it is more accurate to speak of racism than race or racial identity in order to explain the dynamics of US race relations. Racism speaks more directly to the disparities of civil, political, and economic power that exists in our society (for that
reason, she recommends that we use the term racist profiling rather than racial profiling to describe the policies of some police forces). In the end, Fields stated that the concept of whiteness neither helps to answer the question of why white workers become racist nor illuminates the political, economic, and social dynamics of U.S. race relations.

In his comments, Eric Foner (Columbia University) stated that he found most of Arnesen’s criticisms of the whiteness literature to be compelling. Like Arnesen, he worried that whiteness has too often become an “an all-purpose explanation” used to explain political and cultural developments, thereby obscuring other important discourses. He also agreed with Arnesen’s critique of whiteness scholars’ argument that nineteenth-century Irish immigrants had to become white. Foner pointed out that in terms of legal and political rights, they were never nonwhite. While they and other immigrants certainly faced various forms of discrimination and were even viewed by some as a different race, Foner argued that this is not the same as being considered nonwhite. At the same time, Foner felt that Arnesen failed to see that some of the whiteness literature has contributed to our understanding of how racial identities are constructed. In particular, Foner pointed to scholarship on race in the Southwest. Foner also took exception to Arnesen’s point that the whiteness scholarship’s argument about the social construction of race as being “old hat.” Foner pointed out that this idea is certainly not “old hat” to his students. Lastly, Foner argued that the persistence of racial inequality, the rise of Reagan Democrats, and the crisis of liberalism in the 1980s help to explain the rise of the whiteness scholarship.

In his comments, Gary Gerstle (University of Maryland) expressed his dismay that Arnesen seemed to find absolutely nothing of value in whiteness studies. While he also had his criticisms of aspects of this scholarship (such as it sometimes being too cultural in its approach and too quick to argue that whiteness overwhelmed other identities), he argued that it has greatly enriched our understanding of U.S. history. In his comments, Gerstle focused on the particular part of Arnesen’s critique in which Arnesen argued that the whiteness literature has added little to our understanding of the immigration in the early twentieth century. Gerstle felt that the opposite is true and argued that the work of James Barrett, Matthew Jacobson, and other whiteness scholars have pushed our understanding of race and immigration in this period far beyond the Higham/Handel thesis by uncovering the complex and shifting racial discourses surrounding these immigrants. Gerstle also criticized Arnesen for creating a false uniformity in his blanket critique of the whiteness studies and he wondered why Arnesen failed to address the recent important work of Linda Gordon and Thomas Sugrue, whom he feels are clearly influenced by whiteness studies.

Victoria C. Hattam (New School for Social Research) also found Arnesen to be much too dismissive of whiteness studies and worried that he posited a false distinction between historical work informed with theory and good historical work grounded in serious archival research. In her comments, Hattam explained what she felt are the three main theoretical contributions made by the whiteness
literature and then discussed some her own criticisms of the literature. The first contribution is its abandonment of a Marxist understanding of class and its understanding of class as a form of identity formation. Therefore, contrary to Arnesen, who chided whiteness scholarship for holding on to what he called “Marxism lite,” she applauded it for breaking with Marxism. Whiteness studies’ second theoretical contribution is in its historicizing of racial classifications and categories. The third contribution is that by moving race to the center of American history, whiteness scholarship has forced us to reexamine questions of nation and national identity. One criticism Hattam made of some of the whiteness scholarship is that it seems to accept the older immigrant assimilation narrative, only changing it by racializing it rather than actually asking if this narrative works.

More than the other participants, Adolph Reed Jr. (New School for Social Research) confronted directly the question of why the whiteness literature has gained so many proponents so quickly and why now. In terms of why it gained proponents so quickly, Reed argued that the rapid growth of whiteness studies was reinforced by certain dynamics of academic life such as the common academic tendency to embrace new paradigms that seem to offer a new take on old questions, the increasing pressure on academics to publish, and the growth of cultural studies and other trends that encourage interdisciplinary work. In terms of “why now,” Reed, like Foner, argued that the whiteness studies has gained appeal at this specific historical point because of difficulties faced by the left in the last several decades and much of the left’s rejection of class politics in favor of a politics organized around other identities such as race or gender. In this sense, Reed argued that whiteness studies has tried to answer Werner Sombart’s old question: Why is there no socialism in the United States? Their answer has been to focus on white workers’ investment in their whiteness. Reed stated that unfortunately much of the whiteness studies has been flawed by using whiteness as a ahistorical construct foisted upon their subject rather than a close examination of how white workers understood and acted in a changing political and cultural world.

In his brief response, Arnesen responded to several points made by the other panelists. In response to Gordon’s defense of whiteness studies’ elastic use of the term whiteness, given that it is trying to describe a complex and “fuzzy” world, Arnesen stated that he agreed with Gordon in part. Yes, it is a “fuzzy” world. The problem that he has with whiteness studies is that they use one word (whiteness) to describe this complex reality. To Hattam’s point that he is positioning an unfortunate distinction between “bad” historical work informed by theory and “good” archival research, Arnesen pleaded innocent. He has no problem with theory. He readily acknowledged that all historical work is informed either consciously or unconsciously with theory. His problem, therefore, is not with theory, but with historical work that uses theory but is not backed up with archival evidence. To Gerstle’s concern that he does not see the significant limitations in the work of John Higham or Oscar Handlin, Arnesen stated that he was in agreement with Gerstle on the limitations of this older scholarship, but
still questioned if whiteness studies has provided many new insights on the sub-
ject of early twentieth century immigration.

After Arnesen’s final comments, the audience was given time to make com-
ments and ask questions. One member of the audience voiced her concerns that
the growth of whiteness studies might be to the detriment of African-American
studies. Most of the panelists argued that this was not the case. There were a
number of questions about the implications of whiteness studies, both political
and to the historical profession. Echoing Reed’s comments, one member of au-
dience criticized whiteness studies’ cultural bent and argued the logical/political
stance of whiteness studies is nothing more than a liberal moralism. As she put
it, “If only whites could stop thinking of themselves as white.” Fields echoed this
concern as argued that whiteness studies seem to be about “implicating more
white people with racism.” Gordon, Hattam, and Gerstle disagreed and argued
that whiteness studies has addressed the role of such structures as the law. Gor-
don worried that critics of whiteness studies were creating a “straw man” with
their arguments that whiteness was only about “attitude” or that it ignored struc-
ture. In response to a question about where we as historians go from here, Ger-
stle said while he has no easy answer to that question, he recommended that
there be more investigation of the role of law in the construction of racial iden-
tities and an examination of how the arrival of new immigrants such as Asians
will complicate the story of race in the US.

While this forum, along with the earlier symposium in ILWCH, will cer-
tainly not end the debate around the usefulness of the concept of whiteness as
tool to understand US history, it did succeed in clearly identifying some of the
main issues of the debate. Moreover, while arguably polemical, Arnesen’s cri-
tique did identify several serious methodological and conceptual problems with
whiteness studies that its practitioners might want to address. Of course, this de-
bate over whiteness studies is connected to a number of other ongoing debates
in the field of history such as arguments over the relative strength of cultural his-
tory, the use of theory, and the usefulness of class analysis. And these debates
are certainly not unrelated to the crisis of left politics and debates over the rise
identity politics outside the academy. One of the strengths of the forum was that
the panelists and the audience tried to grapple with both the historiographical,
the political, and the connection between the two in a serious and substantive
fashion. It reminded one historian of the debates and meetings sponsored by the
Mid-Atlantic Radical Historians Organization (MARHO) in the early 1970s.
Let us hope that more such meetings are held.

NOTES

1. The participants were the same in both forums except for James R. Barrett (Uni-
versity of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and David Brody (University of California at Davis) who
were respondents in the fall 2001 symposium, but did not participate in the NYU forum and
Gary Gerstle (University of Maryland) and Linda Gordon (Columbia University), who did not
participate in the earlier symposium, but were respondents in the later forum.
To celebrate the fiftieth issue of *Labour/Le Travail*, scholars, unionists, and political activists from across Canada and from the United States, Australia, Ireland, and Brazil gathered in Peterborough, Ontario, from May 31 to June 2, 2002. Founded by the Canadian Committee on Labour History in 1976, *Labour/Le Travail* has been a central pole for the development of Canadian labor history and one of the world’s leading labor history journals. Its jubilee issue provided a welcome occasion for considering the state of Canadian labor history, the challenges of putting out labor history journals, and political problems confronting workers and organized labor. Many of those present came from the generation that founded *Labour/Le Travail*, including Greg Kealey, Bryan Palmer, Joan Sangster, and other early editors, contributors and board members of the journal.

The most effusive praise for *Labour/Le Travail* came from non-Canadians, with the Canadian contingent a bit harsher on their own. At the opening session, David R. Roediger (University of Illinois), enumerated the qualities that have made *Labour/Le Travail* his favorite labor history publication. Roediger expressed appreciation for the journal’s internationalism and its expansive conception of what constitutes labor and labor studies. He also remarked on *Labour/Le Travail*’s long-standing attentiveness to the importance of gender and female labor to labor history. Then, characterizing Eric Arnesen’s essay in *ILWCH* 60 on “Whiteness and the Historians’ Imagination” as including a full-scale repudiation of Marxist notions of solidarity, Roediger urged *Labour/Le Travail* to promote debates among labor historians over their basic assumptions, which rarely get expressed in print.

Like Roediger, Verity Burgmann (University of Melbourne) noted that *Labour/Le Travail* was shaped by the particular moment of its founding, which coincided with the emergence of the “new labor history.” In its tone, politics, and conception of the field, *Labour/Le Travail* allied itself with this historiographic tendency from its outset. Burgmann contrasted this with the Australian journal *Labour History*, launched in 1962, before the emergence of the new labor history and the democratizing expansion of higher education. Though as Greg Patmore, the current editor of *Labour History*, noted at a later session, the journal did eventually embrace social history, it has been more closely associated with institutional history than its Canadian equivalent. Burgmann also noted that because of the long-standing position of power of the Australian Labour Party, Australian labor historians, in contrast to their colleagues in Canada and many other countries, do not need to confront public ignorance of labor history but public cynicism about a movement they think they know all too well.

When Canadians historians got their chance to assess labor history as re-
flected in *Labour/Le Travail*, they focused on shortcomings. Suzanne Morton (McGill University) contended that in spite of its printed mandate, *Labour/Le Travail* has published relatively little about the lives of ordinary working people, with such studies becoming less common over time. She decried what she saw as a tendency for the social history articles that have appeared to focus on the work place, while ignoring work in the home. Her view provoked controversy, with Brian Palmer questioning the accuracy of the article classification figures she cited from an article by Des Morton in *Labour/Le Travail’s* Fall 2000 issue.

David Bright (University of Calgary) discussed how *Labour/Le Travail* has treated western Canada. He noted the contributions of the journal to the move away from idea of western exceptionalism, but cautioned against completely rejecting the idea of regional variations in the dynamics of labor history. Jacques Ferland (University of Maine-Orono) implicitly supported this view in sharply challenging the normative definition of Quebec labor. (At the “Writing Canadian Labour” conference, as has been true in *Labour/Le Travail*, francophone labor history was discussed but underrepresented.) Ferland pointed out that Canadian labor historians generally do not include French-Canadian workers living in the United States in their conception of their subject, even though at times there were roughly equivalent numbers of French-Canadian industrial workers in the United States and in Canada. By adopting a geographic rather than ethno-cultural definition of the nation, Canadian scholars have written out of Canadian history a major element of its working class, while US scholars have displayed little interest in the particularities of French-Canadian emigrant communities. Ferland faulted labor historians for failing to treat the efforts by French-Canadian workers in the US to establish of a set of institutions, usually tied to the Catholic Church, corresponding to those in their homeland, as a form of collective activity worthy of investigation, let alone celebration.

Two other sessions also dealt with scholarly concerns. One considered the history and challenges of publishing labor history, bringing together editors from *ILWCH, Labour History* (Australia), *Labor History* (US), and *Saothar* (Ireland), and a representative of a Brazilian working group which hopes to create a national labor history review. Another discussed “Native Peoples and Labour History: Bridging the Divide.” Then, after a night of outdoor barbecue and indoor drinking (which featured a “Musical Keynote Address” by Chicago singer and labor historian Bucky Halker), the last day of the conference turned away from the academy.

A session on “Working-Class History as Public History” began with Nolan Reilly (University of Winnipeg) discussing a series of collaborative efforts by historians, unionists, and community activists to make the history of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike better known. A conference on the strike, periodic tours of strike sites, a guide booklet to them, and related oral history projects have stimulated interest by the local labor movement in its own history. Many audience members were particularly intrigued by Reilly’s description of a local Ukrainian labor hall—still in use—that houses an extraordinary collection of documents and artifacts related to labor and left-wing history. Craig Heron
(York University) analyzed the successes and failures of the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre in Hamilton, Ontario. In an once abandoned industrial building, the center has become a meeting place for labor and activist groups and the generator of an impressive series of exhibits, many of which have traveled to sites elsewhere. Nonetheless, working-class audiences have not come to the exhibits in the numbers the organizers hoped for. Heron argued that this spoke to a general failure of academics to think creatively about who makes up the contemporary worker audience, what they bring to a public history experience, and what approaches and venues are needed to reach them on their own terms. (Interestingly, three participants at this session used visual presentations, while no one else at the conference did, a measure, perhaps, of the greater attention to pedagogy among public historians than among academics at large.)

Joanne Burgess (Université du Québec à Montréal) recounted her work with a neighborhood museum that has used history to stabilize and build pride in what had been a declining working-class community. She also discussed several collaborative projects with local groups seeking to document their own history, and how students can be integrated into such efforts. Michael Frisch (University of Buffalo) discussed the documentation of working-class life in the context of deindustrialization. Using photographs and oral histories from *Portraits in Steel*, a book he and Milton Rogovin produced about Buffalo steelworkers, Frisch argued for seeking out the full complexity of working-class lives. Rogovin did this by photographing workers at both their work sites and their homes, resulting in some startling contrasts. In interviews with the same subjects, Frisch captured the way working people often hold beliefs that are very different from each other, yet which they themselves do not see as contradictory.

The final session before summing up dealt with “Poverty, Civil Society, and the Workers’ Movement.” Canadian activists John Clarke (Ontario Coalition Against Poverty) and Jaggi Singh (Anti-Capitalist Convergence) sharply criticized the official Canadian labor movement for its stance in recent coalition efforts. Clarke noted a decreasing use by the labor movement of its potential power, leading many young activists to be skeptical of unions as actors in the fight against neo-liberalism. He called for rank-and-file unionists to confront leaders who constrain membership mobilization. Singh took organized labor to task for its lack of solidarity with anti-globalization activists who use militant tactics and have a more radical conception of the problem of globalization. He also discussed the different perceptions of the anti-globalization agenda in developed and developing countries, such as conflicting views on international labor and environmental standards. Finally, Alexandre Fortes (Centro Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Brazil) discussed the problem of poverty in Brazilian society. Fortes stressed that Brazil was not a poor nation, being richly endowed with mineral resources and arable land, but suffered from profound inequality. After discussing some of the historic roots of inequality, including the late abolition of slavery and long periods on autocratic rule, he recounted recent anti-poverty efforts.

Housed at the intimate, in-city campus of Trent University’s Traill College,
the “Writing Canadian Labour” conference combined an easy informality with deep seriousness. Every session ran out of time for audience discussion. The extensive experience that attendees brought with them greatly enriched the sessions, though the relatively paucity of younger participants at least implicitly raised questions about the long-term future of the field. With much to be proud of, Labour/Le Travail found a fine way to mark a major milestone in its history.