Creating a "white man's country" in Australia, South Africa, & the US

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Wulf D. Hund, Jeremy Krikler and David Roediger, eds., *Wages of Whiteness & Racist Symbolic Capital* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2010). 240 pp. $34.64 Hardcover.

The year 2011 marked the twentieth anniversary of David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. Roediger's path breaking and influential work was, in part, a response to the countless droves of white workers in the US who voted for Ronald Reagan in 1980 and then again in 1984, long after and despite Reagan's dispassionate response to the poor, to working people, and to the air traffic controllers in August 1981. Reagan was solidly against organized labour, despite his union leadership and occasional comments about "solidarity," "the right to belong to a free trade union," and union membership being "one of the most elemental human rights." As a Screen Actors Guild (SAG) labour boss during the 1940s and 1950s, he provided the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) with names of suspected Communist sympathizers before resigning amid membership pressure regarding his handling of a strike in which SAG members unsuccessfully demanded a share of profits from studios that were selling film rights to television.

It is no surprise, as Roediger tells us in a 2010 collection of essays by various scholars titled, *Wages of Whiteness and Racist Symbolic Capital*, "that the first major studies of working class white identity and practice were written in reaction to the 1980s regimes of Ronald Reagan and published in or just after the term of George Herbert Walker Bush in the 1990s. These presidencies locate the then-new studies not only in reactionary times, but also in periods in which substantial numbers of white workers, even union members, voted for reaction." Notes Roediger, "the moment elicited a passionate interest in working class conservatism and its relationship to race. Thinking and voting as whites, rather than as workers, made the white worker a problem in the present and opened possibilities of making the emergence of the white workers an historical problem as well" (13).

Wages of Whiteness & Racist Symbolic Capital is a wonderful, compact collection of essays that includes an introductory "editorial" and three "exposés," followed by four case studies. Although I question the staying power of this collection versus any number of monographs written during the last 25 years, I do think that there are several significant insights to be gleaned from the critical study of whiteness in global settings. Much of the book rests on outlining and providing examples of the myriad ways that white politicians, union leaders, and

mining, sugar, and auto manufacturers attempted to turn various places globally into "white man's country." This repeated theme, as well as the role of imperialism and colonialism, is extremely significant. Various authors in the collection highlight the numerous nineteenth and twentieth century exclusionary immigration and employment policies, lasting violence, unequal labour laws, and countless racist practices that made it possible to promote the creation of many "white man's countr[ies]." This book also illustrates the tremendous applicability, impressive reach, and possibilities of Roediger's work and ideas to scholars working elsewhere on Germany, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and South America, for example.

Roediger's essay in this latest work builds on and strengthens earlier efforts to locate the origins and historiography of the critical study of whiteness—some of which are found in Roediger's excellent collection of pithy essays titled *History Against Misery* (2006), especially "Section Three," which covers five essays that "get after whiteness."[1] Some scholars will feel as if Roediger finally presents the history of the critical study of whiteness that predates his 1991 *Wages*. He writes at length about the importance of Alexander Saxton's work and observations as "an organizer in the railroad and construction industries" in the 1930s (13). In 1997, Saxton wrote that he had "never heard of any shop steward on any railroad who defended black workers" (14). Like a number of the organisers and scholars about whom he writes, Roediger's personal experiences played a substantial role in his writings and actions over the years, as he tells us both in the insightful and oft-cited introduction to *The Wages of Whiteness* and here (17-19), despite Roediger's multiperspectival education, he did not initially "get it." He was not conscious of, as Noel Ignatin put it, "the white blindspot" (22). Writes Roediger,

> As much as I now regard the two problems [the racism of both the "employing class" and the "white worker"] as inextricably linked, the emphasis on the white worker's centrality to the racial order was a hard-won insight available in few places on the left, save those dismissing white workers altogether(19).

A number of influences spurred on the thinking and writings on the critical study of whiteness. According to Roediger, "the impact of African American struggles and thought, especially in the moment of Black Power, shaped the critical study of whiteness decisively" (20). Theodore Allen's 1960s pamphlet, "Can White Radicals be Radicalized?," as well as the 1970s "'civil war in the mind' of some white workers as they reacted to the appeals of the energy and success of Black workers' struggles," also played a critical role in the current and ongoing scholarship. But it is the debt owed to W. E. B. Du Bois and his formulation of the "wages of whiteness"—what Du Bois called the "'public and psychological wage' afforded to poor white Southerners after the Civil War" in

his classic work, *Black Reconstruction* [1935]—that is most significant for it shaped, indeed "structured [*The Wages of Whiteness*] multiply and even entirely" (23).

The second essay in this volume is titled, "Racist Symbolic Capital: A Bourdieuian Approach to the Analysis of Racism." Author Anja Weiß, by utilising the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, investigates the "cultural and symbolic dimensions of social inequality" and offers suggestions for future research. Of all of the essays in this volume, Weiß's intersected the least with *Wages of Whiteness* and actually seemed out of place. What is surprising is that Weiß, in an essay that focuses mostly on Germany as a place for understanding "race relations research on the basis of a more general theory of social inequality," failed to consider Roediger's excellent critique of Loïc Wacquant and the limits of Bourdieu in two 2006 essays, as well as the fact that Bourdieu and Wacquant ignore imperialism and colonialism—among other things—in the essays that Weiß cites (49).[2]

An essay by Wulf D. Hund, the main organiser for this volume, follows next. The most fascinating passages in Hund's essay focus on American Indians; Indigenous people in Australia; and white convict labourers against Chinese gold rush diggers in Australia. Hund writes, "Within the classist internal relations of the settler society, the convicts [in Australia] themselves were victims of violent assaults and a great number of them were humiliated and whipped. In the racist climate of violent land seizure." at the heart of all global history, "however, like the growing number of free wageworkers, they had the experience of belonging to the 'white' colonial society through the authorisation for them to use violence against 'blacks'." As Hund argues, "The racist symbolic capital obtained through this was no possession but a social relation" (76, 87). As Australia ended its reliance on convict labour and turned to imported labour from India, China, and the Pacific islands, Hund tells us, "wide sections of the lower classes linked the racist symbolic capital which they were allegedly entitled to with the demand for wages of whiteness" (75, 76). As Hund's sources make clear, the goals in Australia were both racist and classist and clearly displayed the "wages of whiteness": the maintenance, as one Prime Minister put it, "of the purity of the race and the equality […] of its standard of living" (79).

Stefanie Affeldt offers the first case study of the book. In her essay regarding "white" labour, nation, and sugar in Australia from the early days of Queen Victoria's reign through the 1930s, Affeldt presents a clear argument by looking at a massacre of Aboriginal peoples, as well as a handful of important strikes. The Seaman's Strike in the late 1870s "against the ASN [Australasian Steam Navigation Company] was the first inter-colonial dispute for white workers' racial rights," according to Affeldt (109). "During the first half of the twentieth century," Affeldt writes, "the sugar industry proved to be a model plant for the achievements for 'White Australia' and white sugar became a symbol for white consumerism acting as 'ethnic communal whiteness' put into practice"

(120). She notes that the racial hierarchy that placed convicts above Aboriginal peoples in Australia culminated in a "'highly unusual […] concern for convicts' which led to a 'closing of the ranks, a solidarity on the crucial tests of race and skin colour'." Indeed, her work confirms that vigilante actions against Indigenous peoples in order to preserve and promote whiteness are a trope globally (104). (As an aside, Affeldt could have extended her metaphor regarding "white" sugar by including a sentence about the parallels to "white" soap and other "pure" commodities as well as the process invented in 1812 of "decoloriz-ing" or "lightening" sugar by using bone char).

Jeremy Krikler utilises fascinating legal cases, statutes, and examples that effectively display his main argument regarding the Masters and Servants Act—nineteenth-century labour laws designed to control relations between employers and workers in South Africa. Krikler is most interested in ferreting out the "primacy of politics" in apartheid South Africa, notably the pass laws and the extreme cost of policing pass laws, and the regular efforts to keep out or halt "the growth of the black population in the cities" (154, 155). By studying twentieth-century segregationist laws, their desired outcomes, the significance of their enactment, other projects of white supremacy, and possibilities for future research, Krikler raised some missing aspects regarding our understanding of race and class in South Africa.

There is some significant crossover/overlap between the last two case studies. Dagmar Engelken presents a fascinating study of white responses to the introduction of 60,000 Chinese labourers "imported" during the early years of the twentieth century into Transvaal, South Africa, as a result of a so-called labour shortage arguably "engineered by the mining houses" to protect white labour (185-186). Her essay includes one of the few examples in the book where whites supported non-whites, but only for trade and retail transactions, not mine working (171). Unlike most other contributions in the collection, Engelken also provides a greater indication of the responses from white trade union leaders (175). Nevertheless, Dagmar points out that "ideological consistency" among white workers was "not a precondition for the popularity of racist movements" (173).

In the last case study, Elizabeth Esch draws on her years of experience studying the global reach of the Ford Motor Company and its policies to raise some significant reasons for examining and understanding Ford's transnational efforts and social policies through race and white supremacy in Detroit and South Africa during the 1920s and 1930s.[3] During these years, "Ford promoted the idea of whiteness having added value, a psychological or other kind of wage: contradictory, because the content of that whiteness differed across the global social contexts; powerful because Ford had been thought of … as the capitalist who equalized wages" (199-200). As Esch explains, "The Detroit of South Africa reflected the characteristics of Detroit of USA back at it in dramatic and

tragic ways—via deepening rather than receding poverty, segregation, racial and anti-union violence and, ultimately unemployment" (216). Ford, Esch tells us in her conclusion, "was equally and simultaneously the product and producer of racial differences and uneven development within *and* between nations" (216).

Some readers will not appreciate the use of single (› ‹) and double arrows (» «) in place of English quotation marks throughout. Book and journal titles are not underlined nor italicised nor set off from the text in footnotes and references; commas are used in place of colons in book titles and in sentences. Although I became used to these quirks by the end of the book, I had still not mastered these changes. All four case studies in the book focus on former British colonies, yet there is no specific reason stated for this choice. The book lacks a desired contributor's page. There are also a number of editing and proof-reading errors ("much such," 30; a period inserted after "90s," 31; and no possession for "schools Police," 24; "Federal" or "Federated" Housewives' Association, 124; "Lord Milner" followed later by "Alfred Milner," 167, 168; missing words, 178; et cetera), as well as places where the same quotation is awkwardly repeated verbatim and without justification on a subsequent page (117, 118). These mistakes, as well as space and stylistic decisions, do not detract from the book, however.

Although I liked this collection overall, especially because of the logical consistency of the entire "Studies" section in which I was able to consider and evaluate various approaches to "wages of whiteness" globally, my one major criticism is that the voices of African American, Aboriginal, Chinese, and rank-and-file workers are relatively silent throughout. With the exception of Roediger's essay and a few comments from Du Bois, we never learn what racialised workers have to say about white supremacist thought processes, as well as governmental and employment policies. Instead, readers hear the voices and ideas of white union leadership, political leaders, and owners of sugar plantations, mines, and automobile plants. What was also odd to me is that the authors in *Wages of Whiteness and Racist Symbolic Capital* failed to cite any of Roediger's studies and writings, aside from *The Wages of Whiteness*.

There are still so many unanswered questions regarding the critical study of whiteness. For example, are there other places, aside from former British colonies, where Roediger's theories can be furthered in creative ways? Soon after the Organization of American Historians' 2011 conference offered a topical session titled, "State of the Field: Revisiting Whiteness Twenty Years after *The Wages of Whiteness*," historian Jennifer Guglielmo wondered if it was possible to "reflect on the way Dave's work entered a conversation about race and whiteness that was initiated and sustained by people of colour (not only Du Bois, Baldwin, and Morrison but also bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldua, Cherrie Moraga, and other feminists of colour)"? Indeed, few references in *Wages of Whiteness & Racist Symbolic Capital* were made to gender as an area of investiga-

tion (30). Guglielmo asked where is this field of inquiry these days?[4] Was it just a fad in academia, as many critics have argued, or has it had the ability to last? What areas—perhaps gender and women's history—are still underexplored "blind spots" in the literature? Where is the critical study of whiteness now? This collection of essays is just a beginning of efforts to answer these questions, but in a transnational way.

NOTES

[1] David Roediger, *History Against Misery* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 2006), 133-180.

[2] See David Roediger, "A Reply to Eric Kaufmann," *Ethnicities*, vol. 6, no. 2 (June 2006), 254-262, http://www.sneps.net/OO/images/REPLY%20TO%20KAUF-MANN%20-%20ROEDIGER.pdf, accessed 8 June 2013; David Roediger, "The Retreat from Race and Class," *Monthly Review*, vol. 58, issue 03 (July-August 2006). See also, Michael Hanchard, "Acts of Misrecognition: Transnational Black Politics, Anti-imperialism and the Enthocentrisms of Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant," *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 20, no. 4 (2003), 5-29; Mark Alan Healey, "Powers of Misrecognition: Bourdieu and Wacquant on Race in Brazil," *Nepantla: Views from the South*, vol. 4, issue 2 (2003), 391-402.

[3] See Elizabeth Esch, "'Shades of Tarzan!': Ford on the Amazon," *Cabinet Magazine*, issue 7 (Summer 2002) http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/7/shadesoftarzan.php; Elizabeth Esch, "Fordtown: Managing Race and Nation in the American Empire, 1925-1945" (PhD dissertation, New York University, 2004).

[4] Jennifer Guglielmo to author, personal communication, 2011.