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As the only white presenter at the recent MAAFA—the Day of Remembrance of African dispersal and enslavement—I took as my theme a comment in Ta-Nehisi Coates's "Between the World and Me." Race is not the father of racism, Coates writes; rather, it is its child. In other words, racial prejudice came first. Slowly it formalized into a notion of race, a social construct that takes differences in skin pigment and hair texture as an excuse to discriminate against people who comprise "the other," whoever "the other" may be as concerns hereditary descent—Asian, South American, African, indigenous American.

I began with a family anecdote. My eldest daughter-in-law is Portuguese on her mother's side. Now, the Portuguese do not consider themselves anything but Portuguese. Many left the Azores for America when a volcano erupted which destroyed the island's agriculture. In California they found the agricultural work that had sustained them back home. My daughter-in-law's mother arrived at sixteen to work for the nuns of Mission San Luis Obispo. Years later, when she married an Irishman (who, incidentally, grew up on an Indian reservation), she became known as the one who "married the white boy."

The irony is, the Irish never thought of themselves as "white," for they were indigenous island inhabitants who spoke variants of Gaelic, as did the Welch and the Scots. Much of the Irish isle suffered the hegemony of the British, who forced its inhabitants to raise potatoes to help sustain the kingdom of England.

The potato had lately been imported from South America, where it existed in varieties from blue potato to yam. The Irish, however, were allowed to raise only the variety preferred by their overlords. When a potato fungus developed that spread from field to field, it all but destroyed the islanders' subsistence. They starved by the millions, with no humanitarian aid coming from the wealthy kingdom on the neighboring island.

Some Irish families scraped together enough to send a son or daughter across the ocean in hopes of American earnings that might sustain the family left behind. When these youngsters arrived in New York and other coastal cities, however, they found signs in shop windows advertising for help, "No Irish Need Apply."

In this context I mentioned Noel Ignatiev's treatise, "How the Irish Became White." How did immigrants to the United States come to see themselves as white? The author argues that European immigrants had to "learn their whiteness."

How did it happen that I, an immigrant born in East Germany, was rehearsed in "whiteness"? The application forms did it. Every one of them, college to credit card, requires the applicant to answer questions about his or her "race." If nothing else fits, you simply check the category "Caucasian."

For me, “Caucasian” seems particularly odd. The Caucasus is a chain of mountains forming the border between Russia to the north, Georgia to the south, and Azerbaijan to the southeast. The “Lesser Caucasus” extend southeastward from Georgia into Armenia. Why these mountains would give birth to a so-called white race is beyond me.

David Roediger examines the history of American labor in his study of racism in working-class nineteenth-century America, “The Wages of Whiteness.” He extends it in “Working Toward Whiteness,” which continues this history into the twentieth century. Ethnic groups that are considered “white” today, including Jewish-, Italian-, and Polish-Americans, once viewed as undesirables by the WASP establishment, became part of white America through the labor movement and a rise in home buying. Once assimilated, many adopted the racism of those who formerly looked down on them. From ethnic slurs to the real estate agreements that ensured all-white neighborhoods, the mechanisms abounded by which immigrants became “white” in America. Today, even though few immigrants arrive from Europe the scheme remains.

In my presentation I wondered why, when “race” is known to be a fabrication, it is used in application documents. The answer lies, I think, in economics. What the requirements seek to determine is the applicant’s access to wealth.

How much do you earn in a week? How much is the monthly combined income of your parents? If we offer you admission, will you pay back your student loan, your credit card debt, and the loan on your home purchase?

These questions, which cannot be posed overtly, seem to be behind inquiries into “race,” as if an individual’s heritage were any indicator of a possible default on credit. Often the credit schemes themselves ensure the borrower’s perpetual poverty (and likely default), but someone desperate to get into college or provide for a family is not likely to consider how she or he will end up in destitution as a result of the effort.

My next column will consider the subject of another speaker, who examined how European subjugation, aka colonialism, affected the African continent.