

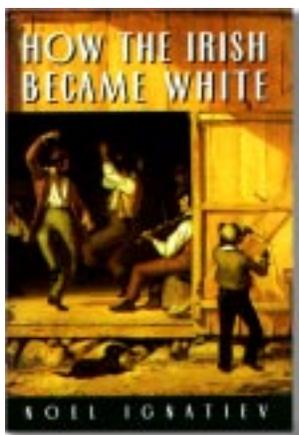
Z Magazine: An interview with Noel Ignatiev

*"In the historical literature on race relations, there is much that safely can be ignored. However, from time to time a study comes along that truly can be called path-breaking, seminal, essential, a must-read. **How the Irish Became White** is such a study. Noel Ignatiev has produced that rare work of historical scholarship that, while firmly grounded in past events, also speaks forcefully to current concerns."*

**Prof. John Bracey, W.E.B. DuBois Dept. of Afro-American Studies
University of Massachusetts at Amherst**

Danny Postel

Q: What exactly do you mean by your book's title? How did the Irish become white?



A: In the epilogue to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Alex Haley tells a story about being with Malcolm at the airport when they saw a plane landing from Europe. The east European children getting off the plane were dressed in their traditional clothing. Malcolm turned to Haley and said, "Pretty little children. Soon they're going to learn their first English word: nigger."

What my book is about is how an earlier group of immigrants, the Catholic Irish—the first non-Protestant, non-Anglo group of European immigrants to arrive, at the beginning of the 19th century, around the period when industrialization was beginning to take place—learned the American racial set-up and found their place in it.

When I say that the Irish "became" white what I hark back to is that in Ireland the Catholics were victims of a kind of discrimination which in many respects was parallel and analogous to what we, in the United States, call racial discrimination—although there's no visible, physical type difference between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland. Notwithstanding this, if there were any people who were racially oppressed in Ireland it was the Catholics, who then came to the United States and found a new situation in which there was a color line—something they weren't familiar with, something they had no experience with. It was something they had to learn. They had to learn what it meant, how it operated, and how to find their own place in it.

So what I'm really talking about is how the Irish went from being members of an oppressed race in Ireland to being members of an oppressing race in the United States. The period that the book covers begins in the 1790s and closes in 1877, but the real heart of the book is the 1830s and 1840s, when I think the decisive elements fell into place.

Q: In the book you compare the situation of the Irish prior to their emigration to that of black folks in the U.S. during the same period. Just how oppressive was it for the Irish in Ireland?

A: Ireland was governed by the penal codes for most of the 18th century and into the period where my study begins. Catholics were not permitted to vote or serve in

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Parliament or hold public office of any kind; they weren't allowed to practice law or serve in the military or civil service; they couldn't open or teach at a school, or serve as tutors; they weren't allowed to attend universities or send their children abroad to school; they weren't allowed to manufacture or sell arms, newspapers or books, or possess them; they couldn't own a horse worth more than a few pounds; they were barred from apprenticeships in most of the trades; they were limited in the kind of land they could rent; they had no inheritance rights (a Catholic could convert to Protestantism and disinherit his father, in fact his entire family); priests were not allowed to travel in Ireland; Bishops were banned from the country; and the list goes on.

I suppose it can be captured best by citing an 18th century Anglo-Irish Protestant judge who said that "the law presupposes no such person to exist as an Irish Roman Catholic"—which is parallel, of course, to Judge Taney's dictum in the Dred Scott case that "a Negro has no rights that a white man is bound to respect." In all important respects, the Irish Catholics were treated as an oppressed race in Ireland. This is the background they were coming from when they arrived on American soil.

And there was a kind of "life among the lowly." In the early minstrel stage, along with the stock black characters Jim Crow and Jim Dandy, there were the Irish characters Pat and Bridget—objects of scorn and ridicule.

Q: You describe in the book how this background provided a context for interaction between the Irish and the blacks they encountered in America. But things changed dramatically from the Irish initially identifying with black Americans and their situation to later violently dis-identifying with them. What was responsible for this shift?

A: During the period I examine in the book, from the 1820's onward, the Catholic Irish who came over here came from the poorer classes. Not necessarily the poorest and most desperate—that emigration didn't really begin until the famine in the mid 1840's. But they certainly came from the poorer classes of society, and when they came they were, in the words of Mr. Dooley—the old Chicago columnist Peter Finley Dunn—given a shovel and told to start digging the place up as if they owned it.

They were used for dangerous, brutal labor on the railbeds and canals, sometimes working alongside black laborers. In the South, they were sometimes used in dangerous situations where it didn't make good sense to risk the life of a valuable slave. As one person put it, "Let the paddys do the work—if one of them gets thrown overboard or breaks his neck, it's nobody's loss."

As they moved into the big cities, they were thrown into the same districts with free black folks in the North, and in the South—New Orleans, the Irish channel, the rookeries. And there they socialized. They fought each other, they fought with the police, they fought with everybody—everybody fought with everybody. That was the American city of the 1820's and 1930's: a war of each against all.

In a lot of respects they developed a common culture, as well. There was some intermarriage. And there was a kind of "life among the lowly." In the early minstrel stage, along with the stock black characters Jim Crow and Jim Dandy, there were the Irish characters Pat and Bridget—objects of scorn and ridicule.

Q: You point out that at one point the Irish were known as "white Negroes"

and black people were referred to as “smoked Irish.” What did those terms reflect?

A: They reflected the scorn and disdain with which both were regarded by the better situated, by the leading elements of American society. There was speculation that there would be some “amalgamation,” that is, that Irish and black would blend into each other and become one common people. That didn’t happen; in fact, the opposite happened.

Q: What exactly happened?

A: Essentially what happened was the Irish became white. That is, rather than aligning with black people—free and slave—to overthrow the system of slavery and racial oppression which prevailed in the United States, they chose, by and large, to find a way to gain for themselves a favored position within it.

In 1841, the Irish political leader (in Ireland) Daniel O’Connell—he was something of a combination of Martin Luther King and Gandhi, the most popular figure among Irishmen throughout the world—issued an appeal—he and 70,000 others in Ireland—to the Irish in the United States, calling upon them to join with the abolitionists in America, to join the struggle to overthrow slavery. Treat the Negro everywhere as your equal, your brother, he said, and in doing so you will bring honor to the name of Ireland. O’Connell was speaking from a situation where Catholics in Ireland were members of an oppressed race. He was the leader of their movement to overturn that kind of subjugation. So he naturally reached out for alliances with the struggle against racial injustice everywhere.

The Irish in America rejected him. He went so far as to say if you don’t do this, then we won’t recognize you as Irish. They thought about it and concluded, okay, if you force us to choose between our love for Ireland and our attachment to the institutions of our new country, then it’s South Carolina forever. What they decided to do was integrate themselves into American life as citizens, invoking the privileges of whiteness.

Having fair skin made the Irish eligible to be white, but it didn’t guarantee their admission. They had to earn it.

Q: And how were they supposed to earn it?

A: There were two things they had to do. First, they had to distance themselves as much as possible from the black population of North America. They had to do whatever they possibly could to create barriers, to insulate themselves, to separate themselves from the black population.

The second thing they had to do was overcome the resistance to their own civil rights coming from the people who were better off than them—that is, the native Protestant, bigoted, anti-Catholic, anti-foreigner establishment that was running the country.

There was a relationship, in fact, between these two tasks. To the extent to which they could prove themselves worthy of being white Americans—that is,

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by joining in gleefully in the subjugation of black people—they showed that they belonged, that they deserved all the rights of citizenship. On the other side, to the extent to which they were able to force their way into the white polity of this country, they were able to distance themselves from black people.

What my book is about, then, is how the Irish used the different institutions of American society to accomplish these tasks: the Democratic Party, early labor unions, the church, forms of urban social disorder—race riots, for example. It's about how they managed to implement and carry out an agenda which finally gained them admission into what I like to call the white race in America.

In the book I'm studying how a group of people who were not white became white, that is, became members of the white "club." In the journal I'm trying to explore how people who now think of themselves as white, or who are white, or who act white, might become un-white. So in a sense it's a way of studying how the film might be run backwards.

Q: Is there any one event of the several you go into in the book—a particularly explosive episode—that you would point to as a dramatic turning point in the relationship between the two communities?

A: One that I think is an especially interesting and important one was what came to be known as the New York City Draft Riots, probably the most violent urban riots in American history. They took place in July 1863. They began as a protest by the Irish and others against the social inequities of the Civil War draft—the fact that poor people had to serve while the rich could buy their way out by paying for a substitute.

But this quickly linked up with the Irish effort to exclude black workers from the docks, and from other jobs on which they felt they had a right to establish a monopoly. It led to a week of rioting in New York, in which the Irish raised the confederate flag, they cheered the name of Jefferson Davis, they attacked, lynched, burned a colored orphanage. Nobody knows for sure how many black people were killed in those riots, but the estimate has gone up as high as 1,000. In fact, Lincoln had to withdraw federal troops from Gettysburg and elsewhere in order to repress that rebellion.

What that was about, it seems to me, was, first, to establish an Irish-administered white monopoly of jobs on the docks and in the civil service. The Irish also wanted to make it clear that while they favored the Union (they did not want to see the country split; they did not support the secession of the South), they also did not want it to become a war against slavery or a war for racial justice. They were fighting to defend the white Republic and to make sure that they were a part of it—not to make it an inclusive and racially free Republic.

Let's talk about your publication *Race Traitor*, which you call the journal of "the new abolitionism." Appearing across its cover is the slogan "Treason to Whiteness is Loyalty to Humanity." There's some pretty provocative language packed in there. What, precisely, do you mean to convey with all this? And how does the journal's purpose relate to your aims in *How the Irish Became White*?

A: The relationship between the two projects is this. In the book I'm studying how a group of people who were not white became white, that is, became members of the white "club." In the journal I'm trying to explore how people who now think of themselves as white, or who are white, or who act white, might become un-white. So in a sense it's a way of studying how the film might be run backwards.

Q: Of course this raises the question of exactly what you mean by “white.”

A: Indeed, I’m not referring to people of fair skin, straight hair, or any of the other physical characteristics which we normally think of as white. No one has any control over how they were born, how they look, or any of that. So far as I’m concerned those things make no difference. I’m talking about what’s going on in people’s minds. To me, being “white” means being part of a club, with certain privileges and obligations. People are recruited into that club at birth, enrolled in that club without their consent or permission, and brought up according to its rules. Generally speaking, they go through life accepting the rules and accepting the benefits of membership, without ever considering the costs.

Q: What are the costs?

A: The cost of membership in the white club is that it requires a loyalty and conformity to official American society in a way that’s making life very uncomfortable and even dangerous for all of the ordinary folk in this country—those who are called white, as well as those who are called black. The project of our journal is to break up that club. Essentially the way we think the club can be broken up is by disrupting the conformity that maintains it.

In our view, the country needs some reverse oreos: a whole bunch of folks who look white on the outside but don’t act white. So many, in fact, that it will be impossible for those in power in this country to really be sure who’s white merely by looking. When that happens the value of the white skin will diminish.

Q: What sorts of things might result from this?

A: I think political issues and conflicts and divisions would take place on normal bases, having to do with people’s interests in terms of wealth versus poverty, for example, and questions of that kind, which would open the door for all sorts of social and political changes that haven’t happened yet, largely because some people settle for being white rather than take a chance on being free.

It seems to me that culturally, the United States is not a white country. Culturally, the United States is, at the very least, as Albert Murray once put it, “incontestably mulatto.” Every American, merely by virtue of landing on these shores, becomes culturally part Yankee, part American Indian, and part black, with a little pinch of ethnic salt. In a certain sense people know this. Just think of the music we listen to, the dances we do, the sports we admire, the dress, the rhythms of speech, certain attributes of Protestantism and even, in some places, Catholicism—all of these things indicate a black influence in American life. And Americans by and large enjoy this—although they’re not quite willing to admit it. They prefer to deny it. But even insofar as it’s acknowledged—and this is crucial—they want to separate all of this from questions of political rights and citizenship. So what I like to say is that the United States is the largest country in the world of people who pass for white. There are a couple hundred million of them who are denying the black presence within their own souls and hearts.

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The result is that people accept a lot of abuse and a lot of suffering—and I’m talking about so-called white people now. Everybody knows that black people are oppressed. I’m talking about the white people who accept a lot of abuse and a lot of mistreatment—from the government, from their employers, from their landlords, from the people in authority—because at least they have the consolation of being white, or thinking that they’re white. I want to see that broken apart.

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Q: How could that happen?

A: I think the way to break it apart is to attack and disrupt the structures that reproduce the color line in the United States.

Q: Which structures are we talking about then?

A: I’m not talking about racists. I assume that there’s a small number a white people in the United States who are dedicated, ideologically committed white supremacists. And there’s a small number of white people in the United States who are really, genuinely against white supremacy and want to overturn it. And I assume that the majority of white people in this country probably mean as well as most human beings have since the beginning of time. They lead their ordinary private lives, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. They don’t wish ill to people of color, but on the other hand aren’t willing to take chances to change anything about it. And by and large they function like the “good Germans” during World War II: they don’t know what’s going on because it’s more comfortable for them in many ways not to know.

So I’m not talking about Tom Metzger or hard-core white supremacists reproducing racial oppression. I’m talking about the ordinary mainstream institutions of this society—the labor market, the school system, the police and the court system, the social work industry, the housing authority. All of these various social mechanisms, which in many cases are operated and administered by well-meaning folk who would be horrified at the suggestion that they are, in fact, reproducing the structures of racism.

Q: How are they reproducing the structures of racism?

A: Well, for instance, tracking in the public schools, which has a clear racial characteristic. We are not dealing here with two groups of people who are coming out of the same history. It becomes an excuse for dividing black from white. People are channeled, even from the first grade; they get sent directly onto one track that’s going to lead them into skilled jobs, into better situations, into a certain kind of occupational future. And on the other hand, we have people who are being sent, being channeled, directly into the army, prison, the warehouse, or the most menial jobs available. The schools do this under the guise of what are considered to be objective, fair kinds of testing. But, as a whole number of people have pointed out, these standards and these tests are race-loaded.

Another example is the job market and the implication of the unions in controlling the job market and maintaining a kind of father-son system of continuity—particularly in some of the remnants of the skilled trades industries,

where plumbers and carpenters, and so forth, can pass on what amounts to the right to work in these industries from father to son, uncle to nephew, in a way that excludes black people. And again, it's not done openly as a matter of color—it's done through the family—but the result of it is that there are still many of these trades that are restricted to people who are called white.

Another example, of course, is the courts and the criminal justice system, which has attracted the most attention recently. The institution which involves the greatest amount of participation of black males—in particular, those in their twenties—is the criminal justice system, far outweighing the higher education system. Drugs provide the most illuminating case study on this score. The penalty for using even a tiny amount of crack are far more severe than the penalty for using or possessing a similar amount of powder cocaine—crack cocaine being the drug of choice for black folks in the ghetto, powder cocaine for white folks in the suburbs.

The result is the prisons are filled with people who are in for a paltry amount of crack, while the folks in the suburbs enjoy impunity. Drug use has now filled America's prisons with poor, by and large black, people.

Congress, in fact, voted down a law that would have eliminated this discrepancy in the severity of the respective penalties—although the words “black” and “white” were never mentioned in the law—thus making it clear that young black men will continue to be channeled into prison, while the law will wink at cocaine use by white folks in the suburbs.

Q: The other day you described a poignant example from your own experience of this apartheid-like double standard so deeply entrenched in our legal culture. Would you share it again?

A: That sort of experience poses us with a question: How do we break out of this? The last time I was in New York, I made an illegal right turn on a red light. I didn't know that you can't do that in New York City. A cop stopped me. I gave him my license. He looked at it courteously and admonished me, told me not to do it again, and let me go.

I tried to say to myself, what was going on here? It seems to me that they looked at me—I look white—and they said, okay, we can let this guy go, he's not a danger to us, he seems okay. He violated the law, but no big deal, we'll cut him a little slack, give him a break.

Q: He's part of our club.

A: Exactly. Now people know that had I been black, the outcome might have been different. I might have gotten a ticket. I might have been taken down to the station and been worked over. I might have been Rodney King by the time they were done with me. Most black Americans have anecdotes—it's a standard thing, the cops stopping black people for the well-known crime of DWB: Driving While Black.

This was a small example of the maintenance, you see, of the white club. Recruiting me. Holding me. It works subtly. It's a reward to me for assumed

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What would make them treat me differently if they couldn't be sure whether I was white merely by looking at me. And what would make them think twice if there were enough people who were acting—in a public way—defiantly, flagrantly un-white.

All over the world, cops beat up poor people, That's their job. What has to be explained is not why they beat up Rodney King—they do that in all countries in the world. The question isn't why they beat up black people, but why they don't regularly and routinely beat up people who look white. The reason for that is this club that exists.

past good behavior, and an incentive for assumed future good behavior. So I think to myself: What am I gaining and what am I giving up? What I gain from it, obviously, is that I don't get a ticket; I get released with a little bit of courtesy. But what I gave up is my ability to struggle against those people: the cops and the judges and the landlords and the employers and the political officials, who are reducing the American economy to a shambles and destroying the quality of American life—all because at least I have the privileges of club membership.

So I say to myself, well, what could I do to get out of the club? How could I break apart the club? What would make the cops treat me differently?

What would make them treat me differently is if they couldn't be sure whether I was white merely by looking at me. And what would make them think twice is if there were enough people who were acting—in a public way—defiantly, flagrantly un-white. Then the cops really could no longer be sure. They'd have to start examining each person's individual behavior. Or else they'd fall back on the standard that governs police conduct all over the world where race is not the issue—that is to say, social class: speech, dress, the usual tokens.

All over the world, cops beat up poor people, That's their job. What has to be explained is not why they beat up Rodney King—they do that in all countries in the world. The question isn't why they beat up black people, but why they don't regularly and routinely beat up people who look white. The reason for that is this club that exists. Well, whites gain something from this club, as I've pointed out, but they also lose something from it. They also pay a price for membership in this club, and the price is living in a society which is going to hell in a hand basket and everybody knows it.

Q: When you talk about not acting white, and therefore not being assumed into this club, what concretely do you have in mind? Are you talking about particular forms cultural behavior? Are you thinking along the lines of people developing a new political and intellectual framework? Or are you suggesting a more total sense of existential identity—something that would go to the core of someone's being? How are you suggesting, in other words, that people express to the managers of the race-class system in this country: I'm not part of your club.

A: I'm talking about a number of different things—all of the above. What if I had had a bumper sticker on my car that said AVENGE RODNEY KING? Then the cops would have responded to me differently. I'm not sure that would have been the wisest thing to do. I might have wound up as just another statistic in the middle of the night—I don't know.

One possibility of a program that I know some people are beginning to implement is what they call a "Cop Watch" program. These are people who look white, and they walk around on the street with big signs saying "Cop Watch." Or they drive around in a well-marked car, targeting neighborhoods where the police are known for stopping black people and roughing them up or catching them on Saturday night as they come out of the joints. And they're there with a video camera, taking notes and observing the police.

Now this is a perfectly legal program; these people are within their rights to observe public officials. And yet it's clear that this kind of program drives the cops c-r-a-z-y. They do not wish to be scrutinized or observed in their malfeasance. It seems to me that people doing this sort of thing are, in a sense, using the protection of the white skin, but rejecting it. Because in undertaking this kind of a program it's clear that they're placing themselves outside of the protection of the white skin. They're saying to the cops, and to the society in general: We are not on your side, and, moreover, we intend to hold you accountable.

I think something like this, people taking this kind of action—it's not violent, it's not even illegal—is disrupting the way the police and the court system normally function: to channel black folk into prison and white folk off to college, or at least to a tolerable situation in the world. And there's a need to think of some kinds of analogies that might apply in other spheres of society.

It seems to me that the fundamental point of it is that people who look white have to go beyond merely sympathizing with the sufferings of people of color; they have to identify with them. If they do that, then we can talk about breaking apart the scene.

Q: What, for you, constitutes the difference between merely sympathizing versus actually identifying with other people's situations?

A: Let me give you an example. Every person who looks white in this country has heard race jokes, anti-black jokes—a hell of a lot of them. I'm speaking now of people who do not consider themselves bigots. I'm talking about the majority of the people reading this interview, and the majority of my friends. Most of the time, we don't say anything. Somebody makes some crack about one of them, and we say nothing. In our silence, we're engaging in a process of white bonding. We're validating that experience. We don't have to go along; we just have to keep quiet about it.

An alternative response is the liberal approach. The response is a lecture: prejudice is wrong, and you shouldn't talk that way about them. That's sympathy. It's beyond neutrality. It's an expression of sympathy, but it's not yet an identification.

A third way, which would get my vote, would be to respond to the person by saying: Oh, you probably said that because you think I'm white; that's a mistake that people often make because I look white. That's a step beyond sympathy. That's already an identification. As I said to one guy: What if you responded to slurs against black people as if they were directed against your mother? How would you respond then? Just apply that same rule to people talking about black folks and you will find that you've gone beyond sympathy—you've reached the point of identification.

What you might also discover in that situation is that you find yourself outside of the white club. If you do this regularly and consistently, you will find yourself outside of the privileges of whiteness. That's what I mean by "reverse oreos": people who look white but are not white. I would suggest that when there comes into being a critical mass of these people in the United States, the white race itself will self-destruct.

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That's what I mean by "reverse oreos"—people who look white but are not white. I would suggest that when there comes into being a critical mass of these people in the United States, the white race itself will self-destruct.

White skin is the official currency of this society... Now if there were five or ten per cent counterfeit whites around—people who looked white but really weren't—then, I think, the white skin would lose its value. The judge, the school principal, the cop, the social worker, the personnel officer at the plant—and all of the other people who implement and carry out the racial tracking of our society—would no longer be sure about how to perform their function.

Q: On what scale do you envision this “critical mass”? What size block are we talking about?

A: The example I like to think of is the counterfeit money example. How much counterfeit money has to circulate in order to undermine the value of the official currency? Well, studies have been done of this. It turns out that it's nowhere near half. Five or ten per cent of counterfeit money circulating is enough to destroy people's confidence in the official currency of the society.

White skin is the official currency of this society. It buys admission to neighborhoods, to schools, and so on. This what I call white skin privilege. The white skin is the currency.

Now if there were five or ten per cent counterfeit whites around—people who looked white but really weren't—then, I think, the white skin would lose its value. The judge, the school principal, the cop, the social worker, the personnel officer at the plant—and all of the other people who implement and carry out the racial tracking of our society—would no longer be sure about how to perform their function. The white race would undergo some kind of fission or self-destruction, and we would open up to the possibilities that could transform this country from the nightmare that it has been into the dream that it might be.

Q: You've said that the two options you foresee in the immediate future of this country are fascism, on one side, or the dissolution of the white race, on the other. Why do you see these as the only two possibilities right now?

A: One thing is that it's clear to me that for many poor, so-called white folks, the privileges of the white skin are not doing as much for them as they have done in the past and as they think they ought to be doing. There's a whole lot of white folks who are in dead-end jobs, whose schools are going nowhere, who find themselves being hassled by the cops. They know that, for the first time, their situation isn't going to be as good as their parents' was.

And what's happening is that the fascists—the white supremacists, the skinheads, the Aryan brotherhood, and various groups like that—are making attempts to recruit these people into groups around the project of: We are going to restore the white race to its position of prominence—its proper position—through a violent, poor white man's revolution. That's fascism. In a certain sense, the fascists are recruiting and gaining influence among the angriest, the most dispossessed, the most alienated, and potentially most radical sections of white America.

I'm convinced that the middle way is dead. The possibility of minor reforms and patching things up and so forth is defunct. There is no possibility of the opening of a new Great Society or the passing of any great reforms that are going to change people's lives. There's going to be some kind of fundamental, very dramatic change in the United States. It's evident to me from all of the things I see in popular culture and from listening to how people talk.

Either the fascists are going to lead people into a poor white man's revolution, which would open the doors to horrors beyond anything that we've seen—

from which I do not exclude Germany in the 1930's and 1940's. Or these people are going to say: To hell with this. We do not wish to be white. We wish to recognize that other people, those fighting hardest against the injustices of this society, the most extreme victims of it—the black youth—who are doing their best to resist what American society is doing to them: therein lie our closest potential allies. In other words, we are not going to be white anymore. We're going to take a chance on being free.

In a sense, this gets me back to the situation of the Irish: landing here in the 1820s and '30s, being thrown on the bottom of the pile, next to the slaves and free black people, and this time saying no—we will not try to enter the white race. Instead, we will try to bring down the whole system of racial, economic, and cultural injustice, and build ourselves a new world on the ashes of the old one.

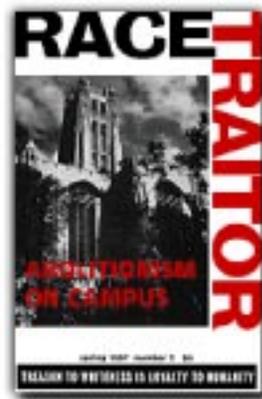
Noel Ignatiev worked for over twenty years in steel mills, farm equipment plants, and machine tool and electrical parts factories. He is the co-founder and co-editor of *Race Traitor: Journal of the New Abolitionism*, the author of *How the Irish Became White* (Routledge, 1995), and co-editor, with John Garvey, of the anthology *Race Traitor* (Routledge, 1996). He teaches history at Harvard University.

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This interview was originally broadcast on St. Patrick's Day of 1996 on WZRD-FM in Chicago. [Interview copyright Z Magazine, 1997. All rights reserved.]

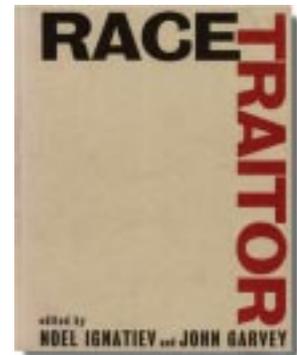
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