



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

---

Volume 30  
Issue 3 *September*

Article 15

---

September 2003

**Review of *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past*. David R. Roediger. Reviewed by Kurt C. Organista**

Kurt C. Organista  
*University of California, Berkeley*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

---

**Recommended Citation**

Organista, Kurt C. (2003) "Review of *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past*. David R. Roediger. Reviewed by Kurt C. Organista," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 30: Iss. 3, Article 15.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.2927>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol30/iss3/15>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



to include all the meaty descriptions from the SPCC records, the amount of detail sometimes obscures the book's major themes. The detour to the topics of infanticide and abandonment in the chapter on baby farming does not seem to serve a purpose, for example, other than the chance to share more material from the records. The relationship of infanticide and child abandonment to baby farming is not clearly explained. On the whole, however, this is a useful addition to our understanding both of the nature and effects of poverty, particularly through the eyes of the poor, as well as a fascinating discussion of expectations regarding gender roles and family relations in the late nineteenth century.

Leslie Leighninger  
Arizona State University

David R. Roediger, *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002. \$29.95 hardcover.

One of the minor revolutions in multicultural or human diversity studies has been the recent development of what has been termed 'critical white studies'. The manifold agenda of this recent area of inquiry includes 'de-centering' whiteness, from its powerful location in society, and placing it squarely under the social science microscope the way we would (and have) any other ethnic and racial minority groups in the United States. In fact, the title of Roediger's book reminds us that to continue rising above the trappings of our racial past, we must begin by fully recognizing that white is a color after all (despite what is implied by the term 'people of color'), and one overly linked to power, privilege, and the racial divide in so many ways, both subtle and complex, far beyond the obvious.

Indeed, Roediger's breadth of knowledge on this topic is staggering, ranging from fascinating nuances of American history to the many strands of current pop culture including rock music, movies, hip-hop magazines and television. His writing proceeds at a dizzying pace, in several directions that readers could not possibly anticipate. Chapter 1 launches Roediger's project by debunking the many scholarly and popular writers who insist that the concept of race is increasingly antiquated

given the blending and blurring of race and ethnic boundaries in society. The chapter even includes a full color reproduction of beautiful 'Eve', the computer generated futuristic morphing of different American race groups, who graced the 1993 cover of a special issue of Time magazine, entitled "The new face of America" (she looks a lot like Natalie Woods, by the way). Roediger's main criticism of the 'beyond race' argument is not that it isn't appealing, in some overarching humanistic way, but that such shallow discussions are short on salient U.S. history, social context, and sorely lack an essential critique of the ways in which power has historically become equated with whiteness, resulting in a tenacious investment in whiteness that impedes progress in race relations. The point is, what's to celebrate if social justice remains a half truth for too many?

Over the next dozen chapters a wild ride ensues over topics that include an analysis of how white politicians make racist appeals to conservative constituencies through coded communications that contain no explicit references to people of color but which powerfully intimate and imply the need to control them. Examples are George Bush's prototypical 'Willie Horton' ad of 1988; how white power is reflected in Rush Limbaugh post-minstrel TV show antics; a critique of how affirmative action debates are spun to under-recognized white beneficiaries (such as women, veterans and disabled people); and how race-neutral politics actually perpetuate racism. There's even a chapter on O.J. Simpson's pre-murder trail formula for success which included distancing himself from the black community while striving to be a non-threatening 'colorless' media darling.

While the above and other chapters mostly succeed in taking white studies beyond the academy, and into the lived realities of many readers, the esoterica of some chapters can be difficult to follow at times. One example deals with the pursuit of whiteness as reflected in the Lincoln-Douglas presidential debates. Further, the six page piece on John Brown's non-white radicalism, and the eight page piece on a 1929 anti-Eurocentric surrealist map of the world, convey single ideas that don't seem to merit book chapter status. Which brings to mind the question of intended audience. On the one hand, the presumption of considerable reader general knowledge, as well as the frequently abstract level

of writing, seem to weigh the book down as a possible trade publication. On the other hand, only some chapters seem college classroom-friendly. With regard to the latter, there are two excellent chapters on how turn-of-the-century European immigrants evolved from a status 'in between' white and non-white, to fully white (and powerful). Another focuses on how the use of the slavery metaphor by early wage/labor reformers ('white slavery'), as well as by early women's movement ('sex slavery'), resulted in a missed opportunity to forge coalitions with black slavery abolitionists who were highly offended by the insistence of white labor reformers that their brand of slavery was as bad as or worse than black slavery and therefore a larger priority. These latter chapter reminds us of the need to transcend separate single group conceptions of oppression (such as class struggles, racism, and sexism), to recognize the links between all forms of human oppression, and, by extension, to pursue broad-based, cross alliance coalitions as the ultimately strategy to "transcend our racial past". In this sense, the book succeeds in demonstrating how essential the area of critical white studies is to our evolving social justice based study of human diversity.

Kurt C. Organista

University of California, Berkeley