



Arab American National Museum

Description:

- This lesson aims to promote open and safe discussions about whiteness and race in Arab American communities. It looks at historical definitions of whiteness and the relationship of Arab Americans to race in the US. It also asks students to think about the ways racial identification effects life for minority groups and what is lost and gained when Arab Americans are rendered white or non-white by various social and political institutions. The lesson is especially helpful for non-white students and Arab American students who may find themselves uncertainly navigating the racial waters of US society.
- Part one of this lesson can be performed in the classroom prior to a museum visit, though a museum visit isn't strictly necessary as a follow-up. If a museum visit DOES occur, part two asks students to think about what defines culture and ethnicity and compare these attributes to their previous discussions about what defines race and the question of "whiteness" as race and culture.
- HSKEs and ELAs: K1.3, K1.5, K1.7, P1.1, P1.2, C5.1.1, C5.2.3, CE 2.1.1, CE 2.1.2, CE 2.3.1, CE 2.3.4, CE 2.3.6, CE 3.1.7, CE 3.1.8
- Common Core: RI 2, RI 3, SL1

Part One

Materials:

- Article online, "What does the census tell us about race?" Linked below and included as PDF. http://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-03-01.htm
- Excerpt on George Shishim and Costa Najour from *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* by Sarah M.A. Gualtieri. Included as PDF, available on AANM website.
- "Ten Things Everyone Should Know About Race" via Community Connections Project. Included as PDF.
- Clip from *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, Episode Three 1:00:51 - 1:23:49. This DVD is available at many libraries, available for purchase (as streaming and hard copy) here: <http://newsreel.org/video/RACE-THE-POWER-OF-AN-ILLUSION>.

Procedures:

- Have students complete the three readings listed above in Materials. Facilitate a discussion about race, where the students respond to the questions below using what they have learned in their readings (these questions are taken from the Teaching Facilitation Guide for *Race: The Power of an Illusion*):
 - How would you define race? What does it mean to you?
 - How many races do you think there are? What are they? How do you decide which race someone belongs to?
 - Where do your ideas about race come from? What are the sources of your information?

- Does race affect your life? Why or why not? If so, in what ways?
- Jot down some of the students' responses—if they have mentioned whiteness, be sure to point out the ways their comments on whiteness compares and contrasts with their definitions and comments on race. It is MORE likely that students did not mention whiteness as a racial category. If this is the case, ask them to consider why whiteness is not discussed when people think about race. Ask them to explicitly consider if white is a race, and if so, where their ideas about it comes from, and if whiteness affects their lives and in what ways.
- Underscore how any discussion of race must be relational between the alleged “different” races.
- Watch the excerpt from *Race: The Power of an Illusion* and ask students to attend to the classifications of people of color as white or non-white.
- Lead discussion on the film and the readings (particularly, the Gualtieri excerpt with the following questions:
 - What made someone white according to the documentary?
 - Why were Ozawa, Thind, and Costa non-white while Shishim was declared white?
 - Reconsider the pre-screening discussion: What makes a race? How is whiteness defined?
 - Why is defining race and whiteness important? What positive benefits come from being white, according to the readings and film?
 - Do you see benefits or drawbacks to belonging to different racial groups? (It is important to be clear here that we are not saying being white is good and being non-white is bad, nor are we blaming either group. Rather, emphasize that we are interested in the way that the large concept of race, which has been historically defined through whiteness, works in our society).
 - Do you think we “need” race? Why or why not? Why do we continue to have racial classifications? What purpose do they serve? Think about the census reading here, too.
- Conclude with a reiteration of some of the major points of the discussion, which may be around: 1) the relativity of racial classification, 2) the use of race as a justification for privilege or denial of benefits, 3) the similarities and differences between different non-white groups in their relationship to whiteness and/or power.

Part Two

Description: This is an optional extension of part one, which uses the Arab American National Museum’s emphasis on “Arab American Culture” as a jumping off point for thinking about what makes a culture and what the relationship of culture is to race.

Materials:

- An array of old magazines/news sources for a physical collage, glue sticks, scissors, construction paper/poster board.
- OR Access to the Internet and Tumblr to create a virtual collage.

Procedures:

- Visit the Arab American National Museum. Ask students to pay special attention to the “Living in America” exhibit on the second floor. Ask them to note what they consider important or interesting elements of “Arab American Culture.”
- After, foster an open discussion around the relationship between “race” and “culture.” Use the following questions:
 - What does “Arab American culture” look like? Is it diverse? What are some common and divergent threads?
 - Does culture seem to emerge out of a racial group? Why or why not? (Note here that no where does the AANM define Arabs as a racial group—Arab nations, for example, share language, membership in the Arab League, and common culture.)
 - If culture doesn’t come from race, is the reverse true? Or, what do you think the relationship between race as we understand it and culture is?
 - If there isn’t a tidy relationship between a group and its culture, might there multiple Arab American cultures? If culture can be plural, what might be the definition of culture?
 - What makes “culture”? Do you feel like you are part of one culture or another? Do you feel like you are influenced by and/or belong to multiple cultures?
 - Which ones? What marks your influence or belonging to these groups?
- At this point, allow students to browse their magazines in order to select images and type they feel influences their culture or represents its. Encourage them to continue discussing their understandings of culture and race as they aggregate and create their collages.
- After, have students present their “culture collage.”
- When students have finished, note trends amidst their collages. How does race factor in, if at all? If it does, does it vary across students who allegedly share the same race? What does culture look like based on their representations?

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Background Readings

What does the census tell us about race?

It was not an accident that in the census of 1930, persons of Mexican birth or ancestry were classified as 'nonwhite'. This was a policy decision, not a mistake of enumeration.

- census historian Hyman Alterman

From the beginning, the census was not just about counting. It was tied to important political questions - how much tax each state would owe, how many Congressional representatives they would have - and race played a key role in answering these questions. The first official census took place in 1790, the same year that Congress passed the first Naturalization Act (restricting the right of adopted citizenship to "free white" persons only).

The census has always reflected and helped shape social divisions. Until 1850, only heads of households were counted. Slaves were listed on the census as numbers, not names, and Indians were not counted at all until the late 1800s. Between 1850 and 1870, 6.5 million Europeans entered as immigrants. During that same time, 60,000 Chinese entered. Despite the greater number of Europeans and the popular belief that Italians, Irish, Germans, English and Jews belonged to different races, only the Chinese were categorized separately, beginning in 1870, followed by other Asian groups in the early 1900s. Mixed race categories for blacks were also recorded during this time.

Why does it matter?

Historically, being counted as a separate group was not a matter of choice or preference, but a way to target that group for discrimination or restrictions. Laws regulating Native Americans, African Americans, and Asians were passed around the time that certain census categories were introduced: for example, the 1883 Dawes Act, Jim Crow segregation laws, and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, along with many other local and state laws restricting housing, marriage and jobs.

Census classification also helped fuel racist science. At the turn of the century, census "enumerators" were instructed to be especially careful when counting Native Americans and blacks of mixed ancestry, because "important scientific results" depended on the result. Racial classification, however, was determined in a very unscientific way - according to the opinion of the enumerator, who based his conclusion on appearance alone. (Self-identification was not allowed until 1970.) Eugenicists, who believed in selective breeding and preserving the purity of the white race, used census results to lobby for social policies restricting groups' rights.

Sometimes the census played a very direct role in social policy. The 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, which limited immigration from Europe and Asia, was tied directly to the census numbers of 1890. The Census Bureau also contributed directly to the internment of Japanese Americans beginning in 1941, by providing a special hand tabulation of names and addresses for Japanese living on the West Coast.

Changing Roles

Since the civil rights movement, the Census has reversed its role - rather than counting in order to exclude, census numbers help us measure who is being excluded and what we are doing about it. This is because the laws have changed, since passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and other laws to address inequality. In fact, Directive 15, issued in 1977, which outlines the federal government's definitions of race, was created specifically to help determine whether Hispanic students were being denied educational opportunities.

Since the 1960s, individuals have also become more involved in defining how they are categorized. Not only is self-identification the new norm, but groups now lobby to be categorized in specific ways. Although the census has always been a political tool, it is now more explicit because groups recognize its power. In 1980, the first pan-ethnic umbrella categories, Asian Pacific Islander and American Native, were introduced. Although these lumped together people from different countries who speak different languages, the categories were created to reflect a common experience of discrimination here in the U.S. In 1997, the Asian Pacific Islander umbrella category was split in two - "Asian" and "Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander" - in order to address the different needs and concerns of the members of these groups.

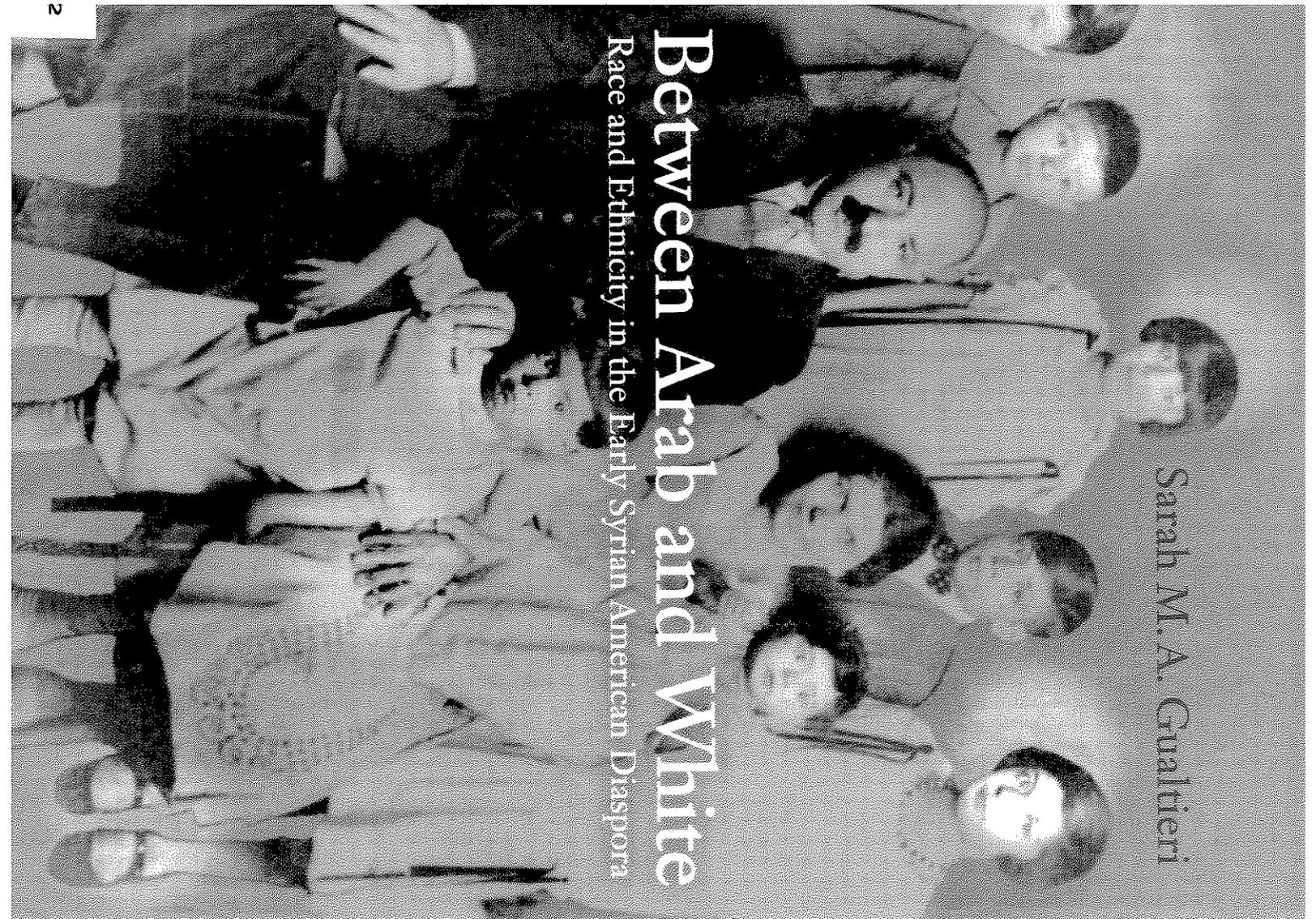
In recent years, there has also been a move to eliminate racial classification altogether and to allow individuals to acknowledge more than one race. Traditional civil rights groups have resisted this, because they fear a loss of support for programs that track discrimination and help remedy inequality.

The role of the census will always reflect and define not just how we view ourselves, but where we place our political priorities.

Jean Cheng is the series co-producer for RACE - The Power of an Illusion and on the staff of California Newsreel.

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Between Arab and White

Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora

AMERICAN CROSSROADS

Edited by Earl Lewis, George Lipsitz, Peggy Pascoe, George Sánchez, and
Dana Takagi

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*Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian
American Diaspora*

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*For my brother Mark, 1963-2007
and our precious mother, Peggy, 1924-2008
"Go well, stay well"*

When this treatment was completed, Coffin issued certificates to each Syrian attesting to the fact that he or she was now cured of trachoma. Kouy then took the Syrians back to Sinks, who allowed them entry into the United States. An undercover agent for the Bureau of Immigration discovered the scheme, and Sinks was brought under investigation. He was replaced in January 1907 and spent the next six months treating trachoma in Juárez. Coffin died of meningitis in 1908, but the smuggling and extortion schemes did not. Investigators discovered that Syrian immigrants avoided the scrutiny at El Paso by entering at other border communities such as Piedras Negras and Eagle Pass.¹⁹

Syrians did, then, find ways to evade authorities, but trachoma separated many of them permanently from members of their family and sent them sailing out of U.S. ports of entry to South America and even as far away as Australia.²⁰ As Alan Kraut has argued, the “disease status” of a particular immigrant group, whether real or imagined, served as a gauge of the desirability of their entry both into the country and into the polity.²¹ In this context of heightened nativism, bureaucratic reform, and concern with disease, Syrian racial identity began to be challenged by politicians, academics, and, eventually, lawyers and federal judges.

One of the pillars of the nativist movement was the literacy test, a test that would restrict entry into the United States to literate persons only. Like much proposed legislation aimed at curtailing immigration, however, its proponents linked illiteracy (in English) to other undesirable traits. Popular Alabama congressman John L. Burnett, for example, proposed the literacy test as a means to control the entry of nonwhite persons into the United States. Of particular concern to him were the Syrians, Jews, Poles, and Russians, who he argued “belonged to a distinct race other than the white race.” His comments did not fall on deaf ears, and in response, a leading member of the Syrian community in Birmingham generated the first significant argument in favor of Syrian whiteness. In a carefully worded letter to the editor in the *Birmingham Age-Herald*, H. A. Elkourie, a physician and president of the Syrian Young Men’s Society in Birmingham, Alabama, challenged Burnett’s views on the literacy test and on racial difference.²² Elkourie argued that the test was an inadequate measure of a person’s qualifications, and he added in good humor that “my experience has shown me that scoundrels exist amongst the educated in greater proportion than amongst the uneducated.”²³ The most important issue for Elkourie was Burnett’s claim that Syrians “belonged to a distinct race other than the white race.” Elkourie responded by emphasizing Syrian compatibility with Western civilization and by re-

lying on a religious argument that would become key to Syrian understanding of whiteness.

The first step was to argue that the Syrians were Semites. Then, citing “authorities” from Edward Gibbon to *Webster’s Dictionary*, Elkourie placed the Semites within a branch of the “white race.” But his argument went beyond the purely ethnological, for at the core of his defense of the Semitic peoples was a description of their contribution to Western civilization. From the Phoenicians to Jesus Christ, he wrote, the “Semitic was the original civilizer, developer and intermediator of culture and learning.”²⁴ The power of this argument derived not from a claim to any special racial phenotype but from a reclaiming of a Semitic origin for the Syrians and an emphasis on the Syrian connection to the Holy Land and to Christianity. However, Elkourie’s argument was not merely an attempt to emphasize religious affinity with southern whites (a difficult argument to sustain given that southerners were unfamiliar with the Eastern rite churches to which most Syrians belonged); it was an attempt to understand difference—in this case racial difference—the way Syrians had traditionally done so, that is, in religious terms. Thus Elkourie made his argument for inclusion in the “white race” on the basis of membership in the Christian fold. Alone, this argument would not hold up in a court of law as constituting decisive proof of whiteness, but it became a pillar of Syrian legal argumentation and community self-construction. The sense of Christian entitlement to share in whiteness became markedly evident in a series of naturalization cases that soon followed the controversy around Syrian racial identity generated by Congressman Burnett.

LITIGATING WHITENESS

Scholars of the Arab American experience have tended to assume that Syrians encountered difficulty in the naturalization process only in the “color-conscious” South, with its culture of racial segregation and Jim Crow laws. This was not the case. Syrians litigated their racial status in Massachusetts, Oregon, Ohio, Missouri, and California, in addition to South Carolina and Georgia. In fact, the first Syrian racial prerequisite case to provoke a coordinated response by Syrians was that of George Shishim, which was heard in the Los Angeles Superior Court in 1909.

George Shishim immigrated from Zahle, Lebanon, to the United States in 1894. As a young man, he traveled with the “Streets of Cairo” exhibit and later settled in Venice, California, where he became a police

officer. His legal battle to prove his whiteness began after he arrested the son of a prominent lawyer for disturbing the peace. The arrested man claimed that Shishim could not charge him with the crime because he was not, and could not become, an American citizen since he was not of the white race. This argument echoed the one made by a white defendant in *People v. Hall* in 1854. Convicted of murder, Hall appealed to the California Supreme Court on the grounds that the testimony against him by a Chinese witness was invalid under the provisions of an 1850 statute stating that “no Black, or Mulatto person, or Indian shall be allowed to give evidence in favor of, or against a White man.”²⁵ The court ruled in favor of the defendant, reasoning that *black* was a generic term encompassing all nonwhites and that it thus included Chinese persons.

Leading members of the Syrian community in Los Angeles, including Phares Behannesey, Mike George, Elias Shedoudy, Nick Baida, Saleem Sawaya, and John Safady, pooled their resources to hire an attorney, Byron C. Hanna, and defend Shishim. Judge Frank Hurton, who ruled in the case, based his decision primarily on legal precedent. He argued that “the courts of this nation, both state and federal, have whenever called upon for more than a century, construed the term ‘white person,’ or members of the white race, to include the Syrians.”²⁶ According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the decision in Shishim’s favor “made every feature of his dark, swarthy countenance rosecare with pleasure and hope.”²⁷

Judge Hurton’s argument that the courts of the nation had decided and would continue to decide in favor of Syrian whiteness was quickly undermined in the case of Costa Najour, heard in Atlanta, Georgia, in December 1909.²⁸ Najour was from the coastal town of Batroun, situated north of Beirut in present-day Lebanon. He immigrated to the United States in 1902, following the lead of his mother, who had come twice before with her brothers and had returned to Batroun. After working as a clerk in Atlanta (where he had cousins), Costa purchased a dry goods store.²⁹ He petitioned for citizenship in the fall of 1909 but was denied on the basis of the argument that he did not meet the requirements of the revised statute. Najour appealed, hired a lawyer, Willis M. Everett, and formed an association to assist in his effort to gain American citizenship. His case generated considerable attention in the Atlanta papers, which began covering the story in November and carried frequent articles through to the December rehearing. “Atlanta Syrians Fight for Rights,” announced an early article in the *Atlanta Journal*. “[They] have formed a league and employed counsel to resist the efforts now afoot in many parts of the United States to deny their race the right of



Figure 7. George Shishim, Los Angeles, ca. 1909. Courtesy of the Arab-American Historical Foundation.

becoming American citizens on the alleged ground that they are not Caucasians.³⁰

After the first day of arguments at the Fifth Circuit Court, the same paper noted that "Costa Najour . . . is still in the dark as to whether or not he is a white man."³¹ On December 3, however, after hearing arguments of both sides and listening to the lengthy questioning of the petitioner until, as Najour phrased it, "I became as a drunk," Judge William T. Newman granted him naturalization on the basis of membership in the "white race." The rationale for Judge Newman's decision fell overwhelmingly on the side of what he considered "scientific evidence." He cited, for example, A. H. Keane's *The World's People*, which divided the world's population into four classes: Negro or black, Mongol or yellow, Amerinds, and Caucasians. According to Keane, Caucasians hailed from "North Africa, Europe, Iran, India, Western Asia, and Polynesia." Newman relied on Keane's classificatory scheme to argue that Syrians belonged to "what we recognize, and what the world recognizes, as the white race."³² He rejected the idea that the naturalization statute referred to skin color and was adamant that "fair or dark complexion should not be allowed to control [the decision]."³³ This construction would be used in other rulings where the judges argued that race was not to be determined by "ocular inspection alone."

Judge Newman's decision in the *Najour* case helped alter the discourse on racial classification by distinguishing between skin color and race.³⁴ It is important to note, however, that he followed his statement on color with this caveat: "providing the person seeking naturalization comes within the classification of the white or Caucasian race."³⁵ In other words, color didn't necessarily matter if it could be determined by some other rationale that the applicant was white and possessed the personal qualifications deemed necessary for naturalization. In cases where personal qualifications were in doubt, and the applicant was deemed unworthy of citizenship, color continued to serve as an additional marker of ineligibility. When, for example, Judge Smith denied Syrian applicant Faras Shahid naturalization in a South Carolina district court in 1915, he emphasized that Shahid was "somewhat darker than is the usual mulatto of one-half mixed blood between the white and the negro races."³⁶

Even Judge Newman, whose ruling in the *Najour* case seemed to move away from color as the defining marker of race, began his decision with a description of Najour as "not particularly dark." He may have distinguished between skin color and race, but a basic pattern persisted in the racial prerequisite cases: the ascription of darkness increased the

chances of ineligibility, while that of lightness decreased them. The lawyer for the government in the *Najour* case knew as much. After four hours of testimony by Costa Najour that seemed only to confirm his eligibility to naturalize, the exasperated lawyer, desperate to prove that Najour was not white, asked him to take off his shirt and show his body to the court. Najour began to comply but was stopped in the early stages of undress by Judge Newman, who wanted no such theatrics in his courtroom.³⁷ What was perhaps more important in Judge Newman's ruling—as far as altering the legal discourse on racial classification goes—was his use of the category "Caucasian." Using the literature on ethnology, he reached the conclusion that Syrians were "part of the Caucasian or white race."³⁸ The use of *or* was significant, for it indicated that being Caucasian and being white were held to be one and the same thing. This equation had been used in combination with other rationales in previous racial prerequisite cases.³⁹ What was different in the *Najour* case was that Judge Newman made it possible to use membership in something called the "Caucasian race" as the sole criterion for judging whether someone was white for the purposes of naturalization.

Several judges followed Judge Newman's lead, but an equal number rejected this formulation and dismissed altogether the relevance of "scientific evidence." Judge Henry Smith, for example, ruling in the *Shahid* case cited above, ridiculed the idea that being Caucasian automatically meant someone was white. The very idea of a Caucasian race was suspect to him, the result, he would later write, "of a strange intellectual hococus pocus."⁴⁰ The ultimate test of whiteness, in his view, was one of geography, and the deciding factor was whether the applicant was from Europe or a descendant of a European immigrant. There was, therefore, no need to "examine his [the applicant's] complexion with a microscope nor measure his skull or his limbs and features."⁴¹ Since the Syrians were, in his estimation, clearly not European but "Asiatic," they were not entitled to the privileges of citizenship.⁴² To arrive at this ruling that whiteness was linked to European descent, Judge Smith relied on two other rationales that would become increasingly popular in the racial prerequisite cases: common knowledge and congressional intent.

The term *congressional intent* referred to the meaning of the Naturalization Act as it was first formulated by Congress in 1790. In Judge Smith's words, "The real question is: What does the statute mean, to whom did the terms 'free white persons' refer in 1790, in the understandings of the makers of the law."⁴³ He answered the question through

Ten Things everyone should know

Ten Things Everyone Should Know about Race

There's less—and
more—to race
than meets
the eye.



- 1 Race is a modern idea.** Ancient societies, like the Greeks, did not divide people according to physical differences, but according to religion, status, class or even language. The English word "race" turns up for the first time in a 1508 poem by William Dunbar referring to a line of kings.
- 2 Race has no genetic basis.** Not one characteristic, trait or even gene distinguishes all the members of one so-called race from all the members of another so-called race.
- 3 Human subspecies don't exist.** Unlike many animals, modern humans simply haven't been around long enough, nor have populations been isolated enough, to evolve into separate subspecies or races. On average, only one of every thousand of the nucleotides that make up our DNA differ one human from another. We are one of the most genetically similar of all species.
- 4 Skin color really is only skin deep.** The genes for skin color have nothing to do with genes for hair form, eye shape, blood type, musical talent, athletic ability or forms of intelligence. Knowing someone's skin color doesn't necessarily tell you anything else about them.
- 5 Most variation is within, not between, "races."** Of the small amount of total human variation, 85% exists within any local population. About 94% can be found within any continent. That means, for example, that two random Koreans may be as genetically different as a Korean and an Italian.
- 6 Slavery predates race.** Throughout much of human history, societies have enslaved others, often as a result of conquest or debt, but not because of physical characteristics or a belief in natural inferiority. Due to a unique set of historical circumstances, North America has the first slave system where all slaves shared a common appearance and ancestry.
- 7 Race and freedom were born together.** The U.S. was founded on the principle that "All men are created equal," but the country's early economy was based largely on slavery. The new idea of race helped explain why some people could be denied the rights and freedoms that others took for granted.
- 8 Race justified social inequalities as natural.** The "common sense" belief in white superiority justified anti-democratic action and policies like slavery, the extermination of American Indians, the exclusion of Asian immigrants, the taking of Mexican lands, and the institutionalization of racial practices within American government, laws, and society.
- 9 Race isn't biological, but racism is still real.** Race is a powerful social idea that gives people different access to opportunities and resources. The government and social institutions of the United States have created advantages that disproportionately channel wealth, power and resources to white people.
- 10 Colorblindness will not end racism.** Pretending race doesn't exist is not the same as creating equality.