

## WHITENESS, A BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

by Judy Helfand: <http://academic.udayton.edu/race/01race/white11.htm>

If I say "I am white," most people in the U.S. would think, "That's obvious, of course you are." But the obviousness of my being white has been shaped by a history of cultural beliefs and practices and social, legal, and economic policies. My Jewish immigrant ancestors of 100 years ago were seen as white by the immigration and naturalization service in the U.S., enabling them to come here and become citizens. But my Pennsylvania Dutch and English ancestors, who were already here, probably saw my Russian Jewish ancestors as Jews, not white. As did my Jewish grandparents themselves, who lived and struggled in Jewish ghettos, not in "white" neighborhoods. I am using this simple example to show that how and when we place someone in the category "white" and the consequences of being in that category --or being excluded from it-- is a complex historical story, one I refer to as the history of the social construction of whiteness.

In this paper, I hope to show that whiteness consists of a body of knowledge, ideologies, norms, and particular practices that have been constructed over the history of the American colonies and the U.S. with roots in European history as well. The knowledge, ideologies, norms, and practices of whiteness affect how we think about race, what we see when we look at certain physical features, how we build our own racial identities, how we operate in the world, and what we "know" about our place in it. Whiteness is shaped and maintained by the full array of social institutions--legal, economic, political, educational, religious, and cultural. As individuals and in groups, affected by whiteness, we in turn influence and shape these institutions. Thus, whiteness is constantly evolving in response to social forces and the constellation of people who are seen as white may change over time.

According to Theodore Allen, the knowledge, ideologies, norms, and practices of whiteness and the accompanying "white race" were invented in the U.S. as part of a system of racial oppression designed to solve a particular problem in colonial Virginia. Prior to that time, although Europeans recognized differences in the color of human skin, they did not categorize themselves as white. I will

