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Bruce Nelson: Divided We Stand

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Introduction

“SOMETHING IN THE ‘ATMOSPHERE’ OF AMERICA”

THE ELEVEN-YEAR journey that has led to the completion of this book began, more or less by happenstance, at the home of Ed and Betty Mann in December 1988. Ed Mann, who died in 1992, was a steelworker, cantankerously independent socialist, and legendary activist in the Youngstown/Mahoning Valley area of northeast Ohio. I met him through my friend and fellow historian Staughton Lynd, who had encouraged me to study Youngstown’s rich labor history and who regarded Ed as the best person to begin telling that largely untold story.¹

Although I had few clear ideas about where my research would take me, I was already committed to exploring the record of the unions affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) on issues of race, and I decided that questions about how white workers in the mills had responded to the struggle for black equality should be a major focus of my discussions with Ed. With characteristic candor and generosity, he shared his recollections with me for the better part of two days. This led to an extended series of interviews with workers, black and white, who had played a leading role in building the steelworkers’ union in the Mahoning Valley. I remember, in particular, my first meeting with Archie Nelson. By the time I met Archie, his health was failing, and as he lay on his living room couch or sat at his kitchen table, the pain he was suffering was evident—in his face, his voice, his body language. Nonetheless, he spoke of his experience in the mills with passion and eloquence, in a richly colloquial dialect that was rooted in his formative years in Alabama. To this day I can hear him recalling his arrival in “God’s country” during World War II. “As I looked around there,” he said of his first encounter with Youngstown’s steel mills, “every job I saw that was a decent job, it was held by whites. And all the greasy, nasty, cheap jobs was held by blacks.” In the coke plant, in the blast furnace, in the plate mill, wherever there was “nasty work, it was *loaded* with blacks.”²

What struck me most forcefully about my interviews with black steelworkers was that in describing the racial discrimination they encountered in the workplace, they rarely distinguished between steel



Fig. intro. 1. Ed Mann, Youngstown, 1989: “retired” but still walking the picket line. Credit: *Youngstown Vindicator*

management and white workers. When pressed, to be sure, they remembered whites who had been decent and honorable in their relations with blacks, and they readily acknowledged management’s overall responsibility for the structure of racial inequality in the mills. But to them management and white workers acted in tandem. The foremen they knew were often the brothers or cousins of white workers in the same departments; and, together, they actively defended the “wages of whiteness” on the shop floor. When black workers organized to challenge this regime, whites responded with wildcat strikes or with less overt but more tenacious forms of resistance that sometimes placed black workers’ lives in jeopardy. In other words, the “agency” of white workers was clear and direct, and there was no hint of “false consciousness” in their activity. Whites acted to defend an employment structure that benefited them, materially and psychologically. And although

local unions sometimes took a stand in support of racial equality, all too often the United Steelworkers—at the local, district, and national levels—served as the guardian of “white job expectations.”³

Listening to Archie Nelson—and to Willie Aikens, Jim Davis, Oliver Montgomery, James Trevathan, and other African American steelworkers—marked the beginning of my reeducation about the dynamics of class and race in American society and the first major step in an odyssey that has culminated in *Divided We Stand*. Of course, everyone this side of comatose knows something about race and racism in the United States. The “new” labor history with which I have been associated for twenty years emerged in the 1960s, at a time when race and the struggle for black equality were major motifs of the experience of an entire generation. For me, a product of suburbia, elite schooling, and conservative parents, the sixties represented a bracing challenge to the assumptions and mores that had shaped my parochial world, and the Civil Rights movement was the crucible in which I came of age politically. Unlike Bob Moses, Charles Sherrod, Jane Stembridge, and other heroes of mine from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, I was not a full-time activist in the South. But like many young people of my generation, I marched and picketed for civil rights, and in March 1965 I even had a brief but unforgettable moment on the front lines of battle in Selma. What was true for me must have been true in equal or greater measure for many cadres of the new labor history who were students and political activists in the 1960s. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer and Bob Moses, Stokely Carmichael and the Black Panthers, were our generational icons; they played a pivotal role in defining our values and shaping our politics. Surely *we* could not have lost sight of the centrality of race in American history.

Yet we have often been accused of doing just that. “The new labor history has a race problem,” Nell Irvin Painter charged in 1989 in a brief essay in which she concluded that some of its leading practitioners were guilty of “the deletion of black workers and white racism” from the historical record. Painter was adding her voice to that of Herbert Hill, a scholar at the University of Wisconsin and former labor secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), who has long engaged in a crusade not only against racism in American society but also against what he regards as the willful blindness of labor historians. “The tendency to deny race as a crucial factor, to permit questions of class to subsume racial issues,” Hill

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declared in 1988, “is based on a perspective that ignores racism as a system of domination, as it ignores the role of racist ideology in working class history.” As late as 1996 he charged that “with some noteworthy exceptions, . . . contemporary labor historians have failed to confront the fundamental issue: the historical development of working-class identity as racial identity.”⁴

Hill’s unrelenting critique of the new labor history has ruffled many feathers and engendered a vigorous counterattack.⁵ My own sense is that, for at least a generation, there *was* a widespread, and largely unconscious, tendency to portray the working class as white (and usually male)—either to minimize the importance of race in writing the history of American workers or to assign it a distinctly secondary role as an explanatory factor. As late as 1990, this tendency was all too evident in *Perspectives on American Labor History*, a volume of essays in which seven leading historians of the American working class attempted to sum up the state of the field. Although the essays by Mari Jo Buhle and Alice Kessler-Harris sought to provide a gendered perspective on working-class history, none of the authors made race central to their analysis, and several barely mentioned it. Indeed, Alan Dawley was so certain of the analytical primacy of class, and so sure capitalists were the prime movers in the generation of racism, that he asked with a rhetorical flourish: “Does anyone believe that if by some sudden magic 70 percent of the richest Progressive Era tycoons became Afro-American instead of Anglo-American, white supremacy would have lived another day?”⁶

No less than the distinguished authors of *Perspectives on American Labor History*, I was inclined to assume that although racism was an unfortunate obstacle to labor solidarity, the explanation for this problem was “rooted in the economic interests of dominant classes.”⁷ In fact, this premise was one of the foundation stones of *Workers on the Waterfront*, my book on the occupational culture and insurgent activism of longshoremen and seamen in the 1930s. After nearly a decade on the shop floor, I had returned to graduate school to study labor history, and there I belatedly encountered E. P. Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class*. Like most labor historians of my generation, I was deeply impressed by the sweep and grandeur of Thompson’s work and by what William Sewell has called his “revolutionary enlargement of the scope of working-class history.” I, too, devoured his articles and

essays and got lost—sometimes literally—in the 832 pages of the magisterial *Making*. “We can see a *logic* in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences,” Thompson declared in his book’s famous preface, “but we cannot predicate any *law*. Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in *just* the same way.” In the San Francisco general strike of 1934, in the formation of the Maritime Federation of the Pacific Coast, in marine workers’ political strikes and demonstrations in solidarity with Republican Spain, I found “consciousness of class.” I also encountered many fault lines—most notably, of craft, ethnicity, and race—that divided maritime workers. But in the Communist-led International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU), there were inspiring examples of interracial solidarity and thus an apparent validation of my long-standing conviction that where conditions were favorable, and the right leadership was in place, “class” would triumph over “race.”⁸

Workers on the Waterfront focused mainly on the 1930s, a time when issues of black-white relations remained relatively quiescent on the West Coast because a stagnant economy slowed the pace of the Great Migration and offered African Americans few opportunities to challenge the region’s racially segmented employment structure. But these conditions changed dramatically in the 1940s, and Nancy Quam-Wickham’s essay “Who Controls the Hiring Hall? The Struggle for Job Control in the ILWU during World War II” threatened to turn some of my most cherished assumptions upside down. During the war the Pacific Coast’s major port cities became vital hubs of the “arsenal of democracy,” and African Americans were drawn in unprecedented numbers to job opportunities that appeared to exist in shipyards, in aircraft manufacturing plants, and—more than ever before—on the docks. In examining this volatile environment, Quam-Wickham not only concentrated on the union leadership’s stated policies but also drew on extensive oral history interviews with veteran longshoremen in the port of Los Angeles that revealed a pattern of intense rank-and-file resistance to the influx of these black “strangers”; so much so, she argued, that the ILWU’s vaunted “rank-and-fileism” became “racism.” Faced with stubborn opposition at the grassroots, ILWU leaders responded cautiously, and sometimes with little more than rhetoric; for as Quam-Wickham observed, aggressively attacking racism would have

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required a head-on collision with the union's rank-and-file members and the control they had established at the point of production.⁹

For me, the key issue in Quam-Wickham's essay was not the failure or success of the ILWU leadership but the actions and beliefs of rank-and-file longshoremen. They were, after all, members of a Left-led union that was famous for its traditions of democracy and rank-and-file activism. Throughout the 1930s, often on their own initiative, dockworkers had aggressively expanded their control of the workplace. Their physical prowess and fearless assault on managerial authority transformed them into proud symbols of working-class manhood up and down the coast. Moreover, ILWU members demonstrated against fascism; they marched in May Day parades; in their "self-activity," they merged the themes of "porkchops" and politics. How could *they* have been a party to the exclusion of black workers?

Fortunately, at just the moment I began to address this question, a number of historians were developing new approaches and insights that have transformed our understanding of the ways in which class and race have intersected in the United States. African American scholars such as Joe Trotter, Earl Lewis, Robin Kelley, and Tera Hunter have taken the lead in creating richly textured portraits of black workers, thus restoring their agency in the larger black community and in the making of the American working class. These scholars emphasize the degree to which blacks and whites lived and socialized in separate worlds and argue that both groups' sense of themselves as racial subjects was closely intertwined with their identities as working people. Perhaps no one has explored these themes with more insight and imagination than Robin Kelley, especially in his rethinking of "black working-class opposition in the Jim Crow South." As the author of a book on Alabama Communists during the Great Depression, Kelley is keenly aware of the moments of interracial solidarity, large and small, that have enriched the history of the American working class. But far more typical of that historical experience, he argues, was the day-to-day interaction in the workplaces of the South that served to accentuate difference and hierarchy much more than it created a sense of common ground. He points out that "black workers endured some of the most obnoxious verbal and physical insults from white workers, their supposed 'natural allies,'" and concludes that "racist attacks by white workers did not need instigation from wily employers. Because they ultimately defined their own class interests in racial terms, white workers employed racist

terror and intimidation to help secure a comparatively privileged position within the prevailing system of wage dependency.”¹⁰

The most provocative and important book on how race has affected the development of white working-class identity is David Roediger’s *Wages of Whiteness*.¹¹ Roediger has sought to understand “the whiteness of the white worker in the broad context of class formation” and against the backdrop of chattel slavery. He has argued that relatively few white workers faced significant job competition from blacks in the nineteenth century, but the great majority measured their well-being against the cultural symbolism of “slaving like a nigger.” By daring to “explore working-class ‘whiteness’ and white supremacy as creations, in part, of the white working class itself,” he has issued a sharp challenge not only to classical Marxism but to many practitioners of the new labor history. But like Kelley, Roediger has resisted the temptation to pit race against class and to elevate the former above the latter in constructing the building blocks of consciousness. Debates about priority necessarily become a “zero-sum game,” he argues, and “an increasing emphasis on one ‘variable’ leads inexorably to a diminished emphasis on the other.” The key is to see how class, gender, and racial identities are intertwined, and to understand identity as a process of *becoming* that crystallizes at particular historical moments but also continues to change over time.¹²

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Although charting its own course, *Divided We Stand* attempts to build on the foundation that scholars such as Kelley and Roediger have constructed and to learn from, and engage in, the increasingly vibrant debates that reshaped the no-longer new labor history in the 1990s. The book focuses mainly on longshoremen and steelworkers, mostly in the twentieth century, and illuminates three central—and overlapping—areas of inquiry: first, the relative importance of employers and workers in shaping racially segmented hierarchies in the workplace; second, the relationship between organized labor and the struggle for black equality and the role of trade unions in diminishing or—in some cases—deepening racial inequality; and third, the question of working-class agency. What did workers want? What forces shaped what they could “do and dream”? What role did they play in forging the predominant patterns of race relations and racial subordination in American society?¹³

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It is necessary to acknowledge at the outset that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries capitalists were the decisive force in creating innovative occupational structures in auto, steel, meatpacking, and other mainstays of the new industrial regime. In large-scale, capital-intensive industries, it was the power of employers that mattered. They shaped and controlled their enterprises in accordance with their own profit-maximizing objectives, and when workers resisted they were usually crushed. But to conclude, therefore, that “racial prejudice” developed first and foremost in the workplace, as a result of the “deliberate policies” of capital, ignores the long-term process of class and racial formation and obscures vitally important questions of working-class agency.¹⁴ Long before the consolidation of corporate capitalism and the triumph of the robber barons, white workers were driving free blacks from their jobs, burning them out of their homes, and developing plebeian cultural forms that idealized the plantation South as a rural Arcadia. Thus it is necessary to understand how the larger society shaped workers’ perceptions of race and to be cognizant of the cultural baggage they brought with them to the workplace.

Although few workingmen were organized into trade unions in the first half of the nineteenth century, many could rely on their skill, and on ethnic, familial, and religious networks, to exert some power on the job. Indeed, the greater their skill and sense of group cohesion, the greater their power to determine who worked and who did not. Although unskilled laborers generally exercised much less control in the workplace than their skilled counterparts, they, too, were sometimes able to influence the complexion of the labor force. Nowhere was this more evident than on the New York and Philadelphia waterfronts, where Irish immigrants not only drove blacks from the docks but made their attempted return as strikebreakers appear to be an “invasion” of the “property rights” of others.¹⁵

Not that the Irish and other Europeans arrived in the United States with fully formed ideas about the meaning of whiteness and blackness. On the contrary, many immigrants were racially “in between” themselves, and only gradually did they internalize the prevailing racial mores and come to regard the wages of whiteness as an entitlement. For native and newcomer alike, moreover, the workplace was not the only, or even the most important, arena for learning these lessons. The minstrel show and vaudeville stage, the maelstrom of partisan politics, and the burgeoning culture of consumption played vital roles in rooting the racial self and its racialized antithesis in the fabric of everyday life,

making race omnipresent even when flesh-and-blood African Americans were not. Minstrelsy emerged in the antebellum era as a distinctively urban and working-class form of entertainment. It celebrated the lost rhythms and presumed innocence of rural life; it counterposed unrestrained male sexuality to the puritanical sexual mores of evangelical religion; above all, it affirmed the racial superiority of white men. Minstrel entertainers appropriated the music and dance of African Americans in order to portray the South and slavery in a benign light and to convey the slaveowners’ view of race to a northern plebeian audience.¹⁶

As a medium of education and entertainment, the Democratic party played a strikingly similar role. “The Democracy” won the allegiance of many urban workingmen and became a vitally important instrument for socializing the Irish and other European immigrants into the culture of white supremacy. Democratic politicians like Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois combined intense Negrophobia and an apologia for chattel slavery with an enthusiastic embrace of immigrants “from every branch of the Caucasian race.” Walt Whitman, a product of the artisanal culture of New York City and the Democratic party’s poet laureate, propagated the same themes in the pages of the staunchly partisan *Brooklyn Eagle*. “Who believes that Whites and Blacks can ever amalgamate in America?” Whitman declared in an 1858 editorial. “Or who wishes it to happen? . . . Is not America for the Whites? And is it not better so?”¹⁷

The emerging, and soon to be omnipresent, culture of consumption reinforced the same lessons and transferred them from the masculine arena of electoral politics to the household and other feminine spheres. At a time when black women—and in the North, black men as well—were largely confined to domestic service or some other niche in the broader service sector, the marketing of consumer products served to reify this pattern of subservience and reinforce the association of “blackness” with inferiority. Perhaps the most popular symbols linking African Americans with servitude were the packaged-food icons Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus the Cream of Wheat man. Aunt Jemima, who was adapted from a minstrel performance in Saint Joseph, Missouri, became a national mammy. As she served up “the romance of the old plantation” with her pancakes, she no doubt helped immigrant, working-class consumers recognize themselves as white.¹⁸

When emphasizing the power and apparent ubiquity of race, however, we cannot afford to portray whiteness and working-class racism as

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absolute, monolithic, and unchanging. The fact that race is historically constructed compels us to analyze a long-term process of development *and* to pay close attention to the particularity of time and place. In the making and remaking of the American working class, newcomers learned the lessons of race unevenly and only gradually, and the meaning of race was contested terrain. Always there were voices—among abolitionists and Radical Republicans, working-class socialists and middle-class feminists, mainstream Protestants and marginalized Pentecostals—challenging the prevailing racial mores and daring to envision a “more perfect union.” Above all, African Americans themselves refused to be mere clay in the hands of their oppressors. They fought, in diverse ways, to affirm their humanity and to achieve at least a modicum of justice—by building schools and churches, by starting their own businesses and organizing unions, and even by purchasing articles of mass consumption and thereby confronting whites with the “shock of sameness.”¹⁹

The unevenness and complexity of the process of class and racial formation is vividly evident in Chicago’s packinghouses and in the defeat of union-organizing campaigns there in the early twentieth century. Throughout this period the workforce in meatpacking was changing, as Poles and other eastern Europeans moved up to semiskilled jobs on the “killing floor” and thousands of southern black migrants took their place at the bottom of the industry’s occupational hierarchy. Any hope of unionization depended on forging unity among these disparate elements—above all, solidarity between blacks and recent immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. As the largest single group in packing town, not only were Polish workers enthusiastically pronion, but their attitude toward the African Americans with whom they shared the workplace was unusually (but by no means uniformly) benign. For Poles were still relative newcomers to America. Many of them regarded blacks as fellow sojourners—and fellow workers—in a larger environment that remained unfamiliar and often hostile. Blacks, however, were divided in their attitude toward the organizing campaign. On the basis of years of experience on the killing floor, “northern Negroes” were actively pronion and aware of the necessity of building interracial alliances in the workplace. But migrants from the South, who far outnumbered their northern counterparts, were inclined to credit the employers with providing jobs that offered a dramatic improvement in their standard of living. The vast majority of southern migrants refused to join the Stockyards Labor Council, which they viewed, with fear or

disdain, as the “white man’s union.” Thus the packinghouse labor force was bifurcated, but as much by the unevenness of workers’ experience of the factory regime as by race. In 1919 the balance was finally tipped toward racial polarization by conflicts that owed their destructive force mainly to the virulent antagonism of important segments of the Irish community toward African Americans. Acting as “the military arm of the Irish political machine,” a number of Irish “athletic clubs” were looking for an excuse to make war on Chicago’s black community. One of these clubs, in particular, acted as the catalyst. Based in the “shanty” Irish neighborhood of Canaryville and named for its sponsor, Democratic alderman Frank Ragen, Ragen’s Colts instigated the street battles that left twenty-three blacks and fifteen whites dead and in the process derailed the packinghouse organizing campaign.²⁰

Chicago in the “red” summer of 1919 highlights the essential fact that racial identity developed slowly and unevenly and that racism was, in historian James Barrett’s words, a “learned value.”²¹ In 1919 Poles had not yet inhaled the atmosphere of America and internalized its racial folkways; they were still racially in between. But the Irish were at a very different stage of their development as an ethnic group. They had come to the United States by the millions in the nineteenth century, and their Gaelic “backwardness,” Catholic faith, and formidable—sometimes overwhelming—numbers had provoked an intense nativist reaction. Indeed, their own status as white had been precarious for many years, and it was the coming of the next great wave of immigration, beginning in the 1880s, that had helped incorporate them into the White Republic. By then Irish Americans had pulled themselves up several rungs on the social ladder. Many had settled into jobs—as skilled craftsmen, foremen, union officials, and the proverbial cop on the beat—that put them in direct contact with the new immigrants.²² This positioned the Irish to play a dual role—as guides to the ways of America and as gatekeepers who were afforded the opportunity to harass and humiliate and to sharpen the lines between the hyphenated American and the “greenhorn.” Thus, in New York’s East Harlem, Robert Orsi noted in 1985, friction between Italian laborers and their Irish foremen “left wounds so deep that [they are] remembered to the present.” Similarly, in the steel valleys of western Pennsylvania, Slovak American Thomas Bell recalled in 1941 that his forebears had had “intimate contact” with the Irish, “in town as neighbors and in the mill as pushers and gang foremen, and to this must be ascribed much of the subsequent bitterness between them.” In the opinion of Slovak

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steelworkers, said Bell, “the outstanding Irish characteristic was a dirty mouth.” The novelist James T. Farrell also revealed the chasm that separated the old immigrants from the new in the Chicago of his youth in his unforgettable portrait of Studs Lonigan. The Lonigan family, which Farrell placed in the ranks of the arriviste middle class, was several steps removed from Canaryville and the world of Ragen’s Colts, but the adolescent Studs was nonetheless drawn to the streets, parks, and taverns where many young Irish American males prepared themselves for manhood by terrorizing Jews and equating “Polacks” and “Dagoes” with “niggers.” Although they regarded a “white Jew” as an impossibility, and Studs contemplated telling the maddeningly articulate socialist waiter at the local Greek restaurant to “get the hell out of a white man’s country,” the main focus of their fear and antagonism was the blacks who were trespassing on their turf. “One of these days,” they warned in a fantasy of the conflagration that exploded in 1919, “all the Irish from the back of the yards will go into the black belt, and there’ll be a lot of niggers strung up on lampposts with their gizzards cut out.”²³

There was, of course, a far more generous side to the Irish. In spite of Bell’s harsh assessment of his Hibernian neighbors, men named Maloy, McDonald, Mullen, and Murray would lead “Hunky” steelworkers into the promised land of industrial citizenship in the 1930s. And long before the thirties, Irish Catholics headed more than fifty of the affiliated national unions of the American Federation of Labor and were a major segment of the unions’ second-level and shop-floor leadership. In this capacity, Barrett writes, they often played the role of “Americanizers” for the foreign-born. At the same time, Irish American politicians made the new immigrants junior partners in New York’s Tammany Hall and other urban political machines and initiated significant legislative reforms that dramatically improved the quality of the immigrants’ lives.²⁴ There were even elements in the Irish community that actively supported the cause of racial equality. Patrick Ford, a native of Ireland’s County Galway who immigrated to Boston in 1845, was a leader of the Irish Land League in the United States and the founder and editor of the *Irish World and Industrial Liberator*. Calling the “colored brother” a “defrauded workingman,” Ford fought against racism in the Land League and the labor movement and sought to build solidarity between the Irish and other colonized peoples around the world.²⁵ Terence V. Powderly, whose parents emigrated from Ireland to Carbondale, Pennsylvania, in the 1820s, became the grand master workman of the Knights of Labor and by the mid-1880s the nation’s best-known labor

leader. (He was also a national officer in both the Land League and the Clan na Gael, a secret society dedicated to the violent overthrow of British rule in Ireland.) Powderly forthrightly championed biracial trade unionism in the South and insisted that “in the field of labor and American citizenship” the Knights recognized “no line of race, creed, politics, or color.” A generation later, William Z. Foster, whose father was a native of County Carlow and a Fenian political refugee in the United States, directed the packinghouse-organizing campaign in Chicago and encouraged the organization of black workers as a matter of principle and practical necessity. His patron in the Windy City was John Fitzpatrick, a native of County Westmeath who arrived in Chicago at the age of eleven, went to work in the stockyards’ killing pens at thirteen, and eventually became president of the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL). In the heady days of the postwar era, when all things seemed possible, Fitzpatrick and other CFL progressives combined aggressive advocacy of Irish independence and support for the recognition of the Soviet Union with a genuine commitment to interracial unionism in packing town.²⁶

More commonly, however, the Irish taught newcomers different lessons: that to become American one must become white, that American citizenship required the drawing of a racial line between “us” and “them,” and that whiteness was not only about skin color but also about ascribed characteristics separating the saved from the damned and from the purgatory of racial in betweenness. This, after all, had been their own experience in the nineteenth century. Through the agency of the Democratic party and blackface minstrelsy, and over against the social mirror of slavery, the Irish had learned who they were by learning who they were not. In part they had done so on their own terms, as their aggressive embrace of Catholicism in a Protestant nation signified. But when it came to race, they had seen no middle ground that offered any hope of redemption. They became so intent on laying claim to the wages of whiteness that for African Americans *Paddy* gradually emerged as a derogatory synonym for *white*.²⁷

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It is in this larger context of class and racial formation that we must evaluate the development of trade unionism and organized labor’s relationship to the struggle for black equality. Some unions, like the International Association of Machinists, explicitly limited their membership to “white, free born male citizens of some civilized country.” But

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even when they did not insert whites-only clauses in their constitutions, many labor organizations functioned as ethnic and familial job trusts whose benefits were passed down to the same narrow constituency from generation to generation. To be sure, the leadership of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) routinely voiced its opposition to racial discrimination but then argued, in 1901, that “the antipathy . . . some union workers have against the colored man is not because of his color, but because of the fact that generally he is a ‘cheap man.’” Already the onus was clear. Insofar as AFL unions excluded African Americans, it was because blacks allowed themselves to be used by unscrupulous employers as “an impediment to the attainment of the worker’s just rights.” And soon their activity became indicative of an ascribed racial essence and of the alleged lack of those attributes of “temperament such as patriotism, sympathy, sacrifice, etc., which are peculiar to most of the Caucasian race.” By 1905 AFL president Samuel Gompers was portraying trade unions as agents of “Caucasian civilization” and warning that “if the colored man continues to lend himself to the work of tearing down what the white man has built up, a race hatred far worse than any ever known will result.”²⁸

For the next half century, most AFL unions that organized black workers did so reluctantly, as a matter of practical necessity, and then consigned them to separate—and subordinate—locals. But in the mid- and late 1930s, the Congress of Industrial Organizations emerged as a formidable challenger to the AFL’s hidebound record and leadership. Given the inclusive character of industrial labor markets, CIO leaders knew instinctively that they had to organize blacks as well as whites if their unions were to survive. Moreover, the leavening presence of a substantial left-wing cadre meant that some sections of the CIO developed a deep ideological commitment to the goal of racial equality. Representatives of civil rights organizations were quick to hail the new federation as a “lamp of democracy.” Walter White, the executive secretary of the NAACP, declared during World War II that “the CIO has proved . . . it stands for Negro advancement. It has fought for our people within the unions and outside the unions.” This view has been reaffirmed recently by several leading historians of American labor. Robert Zieger, the author of a comprehensive overview of the CIO’s twenty-year history, argues that its willingness to address the concerns of African Americans was “unprecedented in the American labor movement.” In her widely praised study of industrial workers in Chicago, Lizabeth Cohen concludes that “the CIO . . . went further in promoting racial harmony than any other institution in existence at

the time.” At a deeper level, Nelson Lichtenstein argues, the overlapping CIO and Civil Rights eras were a time “when the fortunes of the movement for workers’ rights and civil rights were linked in progressive and fruitful synthesis.”²⁹

There was indeed a logic of solidarity that compelled the CIO to reach out to black workers and a leadership that combined a principled sense of obligation with an awareness of practical necessity. This led to remarkable breakthroughs, in the unionization of mass-production industries such as auto and steel and—at times—in addressing the concerns of African Americans. The hundreds of thousands of black workers who joined the CIO were at the forefront of efforts to transform race relations.³⁰ Radical activists from the Communist and Socialist parties offered vital support to this struggle, enhancing its interracial character and strengthening its trade union base. But white workers continued to make up the overwhelming majority of the CIO’s membership, and many of them demonstrated little or no interest in relinquishing the privileges that positioned them a notch or two above African Americans in the social order.

Here the CIO’s logic of solidarity came up against a different logic—of majoritarian democracy, which in the United States has always been deeply intertwined with racialized perceptions of self and society. Originally the CIO leadership had hoped to supplant the AFL as the representative voice of the American working class. Although that hope was quickly dashed by the AFL’s resurgence in the late 1930s, the intense rivalry between the two labor federations compelled the CIO to expand or die. The more the new federation succeeded in expanding its base, however, the more it was constrained by a membership majority that had little or no commitment to a broad-gauged social-democratic agenda.³¹ Institutionally, to be sure, the CIO remained a consistently liberal force. When bread-and-butter concerns were on the table, its mass base was often reliably liberal as well. But especially when racial issues came to the forefront, Lichtenstein’s “progressive and fruitful synthesis” often unraveled. Thus in Detroit, where the CIO claimed as many as three hundred fifty thousand members in 1945, attempts to forge a progressive labor politics continually foundered—on the rock of competition between the rival labor federations but also because of white workers’ growing opposition to black “invasion” of their neighborhoods. This issue hit so close to home that in the 1950s, when sociologist Arthur Kornhauser conducted a survey entitled “Detroit as the People See It,” he found that 85 percent of poor and working-class whites supported racial segregation; and CIO members were

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“even more likely than other white Detroiters to express negative views of African Americans.”³²

The CIO’s new immigrant constituency is especially important in this regard. Along with their American-born sons and daughters, immigrants from southern and eastern Europe constituted the vital core of the industrial working class and the largest single component of the CIO’s membership. In the context of the 1930s and 1940s, they finally solidified their claim to first-class citizenship. But as they became fully American, they also became unambiguously white. Just as the Irish had learned America’s racial folkways through the medium of blackface minstrelsy, so the new immigrants were Americanized through Hollywood movies, which adapted blackface to the silver screen and celebrated the glories of the melting pot while graphically excluding African Americans from the mix. Those who joined the armed forces during World War II, and even during the Korean War, learned the same lesson in a deeper way. Uncle Sam integrated Jews from Brooklyn, Poles from Chicago, and “rednecks” from Appalachia into the same units, but blacks remained segregated, and suspect as fighting men. Ironically, the Civil Rights movement, which drew on deep wellsprings of American and Christian idealism, helped to crystallize a countermyth of immigrant struggle and self-reliance and to give rise to a new phenomenon, the “white ethnic.” Increasingly, for white ethnics, the mythology of a shared historical experience across the once formidable lines of European nationality led to a common sense of entitlement for “us” in the face of a widening array of demands from “them.”³³

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Debates about the role of white workers in the creation of white supremacy and the consolidation of racial inequality in the workplace and the larger society have become especially contentious in recent years.³⁴ As that argument has unfolded, the experience of Irish immigrants in the nineteenth century has served as an important laboratory for analyzing the relationship between structure and agency, freedom and constraint, in the making of working-class whiteness. Few would disagree with the assertion that the Irish in the United States enthusiastically embraced white supremacy and quickly developed an almost maniacal antagonism toward African Americans.³⁵ But the question of how this happened and whether the Irish were free to choose another course remains contested terrain. In a pioneering article on the failure of William Lloyd Garrison and his coworkers to win Irish immigrants

to the cause of abolitionism, Gilbert Osofsky declared that “the working-class, Roman Catholic, poverty-stricken, and much-abused Irish immigrant could not afford the luxury of political radicalism.” According to Osofsky, the Irish were “too busy scraping together a simple sustenance” to pay attention to “extraneous issues.” More recently, Peter Way has characterized Irish emigration as “an ultimatum more than a free choice,” and he has argued that “by rescuing those at the bottom of society from historical limbo and conferring agency upon them, [labor] historians have abstracted the masses from their essentially powerless position.” Even Roediger maintains that “the ways in which the Irish competed for work and adjusted to industrial morality in America made it *all but certain* that they would adopt and extend the politics of white unity offered by the Democratic party.”³⁶

Hundreds of thousands of Irish men and women emigrated to the United States and developed a significant presence in the labor markets of industrializing America, long before the Great Famine. Inevitably, they encountered African Americans and competed with them for jobs in cities such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, because black men were often employed as waiters, boot cleaners, barbers, and common laborers, and black women worked in domestic service and several closely related occupations. Over time, however, Negroes became increasingly marginal economic competitors—not because they lacked skill or experience, but because the numerical preponderance of the immigrants and the growing virulence of color prejudice combined to overwhelm them. Thus by the 1840s native-born white Americans, Germans, and even other Irish men and women were much more likely to offer effective competition for employment. But no matter who provided the competition, Irish success in establishing one labor market niche after another is striking. Thomas Mooney, an itinerant Irishman from Cork and author of the guidebook *Nine Years in America*, observed in 1850 that his countrymen did “almost all the rude and heavy work” in New York City; and according to historian David Doyle’s calculations, by 1855 a majority of Irish males in New York had moved from “rude and heavy work” into skilled and semiskilled jobs.³⁷

One can hardly argue, then, that economic competition as such was decisive in creating and hardening Irish American antagonism toward African Americans. The Democratic party in its various guises, from the pragmatic politicians of Tammany Hall to roughneck Bowery radicals such as Irish-born Mike Walsh, offers a more compelling motive force, as does the Roman Catholic Church. The question of slavery divided

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Catholics, as it did Protestants. Leading Catholic spokesmen in Ireland—notably, Father Theobald Mathew, the great temperance crusader, and the even more famous layman Daniel O’Connell—were outspoken opponents of slavery. Father Mathew, whose main following was among the rural Catholic poor, apparently was “endowed in the popular mind with miraculous powers”; and O’Connell, the leader of the Catholic emancipation movement and, by reputation, Ireland’s liberator, “assumed the stature of a messiah who would deliver the Irish from bondage and usher in the promised millennium.” “Irishmen and Irishwomen!” these two icons of Irish society declared in a famous anti-slavery appeal to their compatriots in the United States, “treat the colored people as your equals, as brethren. By all your memories of Ireland, continue to love liberty—hate slavery—CLING BY THE ABOLITIONISTS—and in America you will do honor to the name of Ireland.”³⁸

But could the Irish in America “cling by the abolitionists” when, as even O’Connell acknowledged, some of them were “wicked and calumniating enemies of catholicity and of the Irish”? As Protestantism, nativism, and antislavery sentiment became more closely intertwined in the United States, O’Connell’s association with Protestant reformers sullied his image among many of his exiled compatriots. The problem was compounded by his criticism of America’s Manifest Destiny and the westward expansion of slavery in the 1840s. Many Irish men and women wondered how O’Connell could denounce the United States and appear to align himself with British opposition to American policy when it was clear that “notwithstanding the slavery of the negro, [America] is liberty’s bulwark and Ireland’s dearest ally.” Moreover, as the crisis of subsistence in the Irish countryside reached catastrophic proportions during the Great Famine, there was a widespread tendency to argue that the Irish people were treated as badly as American slaves. In 1845 even the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass could write from Ireland: “I see much here to remind me of my former condition and I confess I should be ashamed to lift my voice against American slavery, but that I know the cause of humanity is one the world over.” O’Connell also believed that the cause of humanity was one the world over, and for that very reason (although he wavered on occasion) he would not heed the growing number of critics who maintained that his opposition to slavery was interfering with Ireland’s vital interests. Increasingly, however, his voice was superseded by others, especially by the uncompromising nationalists in the Young Ireland movement of the 1840s, who argued that the Irish people could not allow themselves to

be diverted from the essential and immediate task of liberating their beloved homeland from hunger and oppression.³⁹

In the United States, the growing power of a nativism that was at once anti-Irish and proudly Protestant persuaded the Catholic Church to declare its loyalty to “American institutions,” and thus to embrace a Constitution that clearly countenanced slavery. When informed of the famous antislavery appeal that bore the signatures of sixty thousand Irish men and women, Irish-born Bishop John Hughes of New York at first declared it a forgery, then added that if it were genuine, every Irish American should nonetheless reject it as unwarranted interference in the internal affairs of the United States. Far more than they opposed slavery, Hughes and other Catholic leaders abhorred the Garrisonians—the “fanatics” and “nigger-worshippers”—who denounced the Constitution as “an agreement with hell.” Indeed, some Catholic bishops actually owned slaves, and many who did not became apologists for the “peculiar institution” and the political interests of southern slaveholders. Hughes himself defended the slave trade, asked only that slave owners treat their chattel humanely, and allowed the *Freeman’s Journal*, which served as the semiofficial voice of the New York diocese, to print crudely racist articles that routinely depicted African Americans as “ugly black niggers.”⁴⁰

But beyond the Catholic Church and the Democratic party, there was—as O’Connell discovered to his great sorrow—“something in the ‘atmosphere’ of America” that poisoned the well of human sympathy where white attitudes toward blacks were concerned. It derived in large measure from the centrality of chattel slavery in the American experience and from the close association between race and slavery in the popular mind. Even many who opposed the “peculiar institution” assumed that the enslavement of blacks was the result of their own predisposition toward “slavishness.” Blacks—whether slave or free—were widely viewed as degraded and dependent by nature, and “whiteness” emerged as a set of cultural attributes defined in opposition to “blackness.”⁴¹

Far more than British or even German immigrants, the Irish were at a disadvantage in adapting to this highly charged racial symbolism, for in the eyes of Anglo-Protestant America, their whiteness was very much in question. As early as 1818 an angry nativist lamented the presence of “Irish negroes” in New York City and expressed the fervent hope that the ships that imported them would “go to the bottom and be damn[ed].” By the 1840s the tendency to portray the Irish in “distinctly

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racial” terms—as apelike creatures who were laughably crude and lamentably violent—had become widespread if not universal, in Britain as well as in the United States. Thus a meditation on the “Celtic physiognomy” in *Harper’s Weekly* commented on “the small and somewhat upturned nose [and] the black tint of the skin.” The English journal *Punch* characterized the “Irish Yahoo” who populated “the lowest districts of London and Liverpool” as “a creature manifestly between the Gorilla and the Negro,” “a climbing animal [who] may sometimes be seen ascending a ladder with a hod of bricks.” As late as 1882, in the American journal *Puck*, Frederick Opper rendered the Irish peasant as the “King of A-Shantee,” a subhuman and distinctly simian creature. In his play on the word *Ashanti*, Opper linked Irish Celts to black Africans.⁴²

Thus, for the Irish, to “merge socially and politically with the American people,” as Bishop Hughes recommended, came to mean seizing the mantle of whiteness as their own and defining themselves over against the blackness of the free Negro as well as of the slave. In so defining themselves, they turned their backs on O’Connell’s appeal to the generous and humane dimensions of Irishness and chose the low road of white racial identity. Perhaps, as David Brundage has argued, their destiny was one of “closed avenues and limited options, fears and necessities.” But the choice they made had enormous consequences for the long-term development of the American working class, for the Irish were strategically positioned to point the way for the immigrant nationalities that followed. In so choosing, moreover, Irish workers were hardly the mere tools of capital. They acted in their own interests, as they understood them; and relative to their employers, they often represented the “hard” side of American racism. We can argue about the extent of their freedom but not about their agency or its effects.⁴³

In the final analysis, to play structure and agency off against each other is to create a false dichotomy. Workers were indeed “made”—by economic and technological forces, by urbanization and immigration, by religious institutions, political parties, and the state, and by the cultures of minstrelsy and mass consumption. But they also made themselves. To emphasize their agency is to suggest not that they were free to shape the world as they wished but rather that they were not merely acted upon. They acted on their own behalf, and like all historical actors they bear some moral responsibility for the choices they made. As historian Laura Lee Downs has argued in the British context, “The relative powerlessness of white workers is too easily taken to signify a



Fig. intro. 2. “The King of A-Shantee”: Frederick B. Opper’s cartoon drawing not only reinforced the image of the Irish as “white chimpanzees” but in its play on the word *Ashanti* linked them to black Africans (*Puck*, Feb. 15, 1882). Credit: L. Perry Curtis, Jr.

complete lack of agency, so that working-class racism becomes mere weak-kneed collusion with the powers that be. But . . . the white working class was present at and active in its making as a *white* working class. As such, it bears its own portion of responsibility for racism’s enduring grip in modern Britain.” Can we say any less with regard to racism’s enduring grip in the United States?⁴⁴

Unlike many of my fellow labor historians, I find this perspective most compelling—not in human or political terms but in terms of the weight of the historical evidence. I readily acknowledge, however, that this is a story of enormous complexity, and I readily concede the dangers inherent in referring, without qualification, to the white working

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class. Having spent many hours with Ed Mann and Marvin Weinstock in Youngstown over a period of years, having learned—from Mann and Staughton Lynd and others—the legend of John Barbero, who died in a tragic accident long before my arrival in the Mahoning Valley, I know something of the deep wellsprings of humanity that these and other men of steel embodied. I learned these lessons, in a more personal and sustained way, during my nine years of working as a truck assembler, machine operator, warehouseman, and even, on occasion, longshoreman during the 1970s. The generosity, humor, intelligence, and warmth I encountered in and around the workplace on a daily basis are forever etched in my memory.

For me, much about the long-term history of the American working class remains heroic and inspiring. Anyone who has studied the CIO era cannot help but marvel at the courage and solidarity that built the new unions in the steel, meatpacking, maritime, and auto industries. It was a time when “ordinary” people did extraordinary things and changed the course of American history for the better. It was also a time, lest we forget, when “white workers . . . not only struggle[d] side by side with Negroes, but . . . follow[ed] them as leaders and honor[ed] them as martyrs.”⁴⁵ Quite apart from these spectacular moments of solidarity, there were no doubt many small acts of kindness and humanity across the lines of race during this era. Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake recorded some of them in *Black Metropolis* (published in 1945); others remain hidden from history.

But when looking at the larger picture it appears undeniable that too often the center of gravity was not the small acts of kindness and spectacular moments of solidarity. Until recent decades at least, the history of the white working class, *in its majority*, was one of self-definition in opposition to an often-demonized racial Other and intense resistance to the quest of African Americans for full citizenship. In this sense white workers hardly constituted a class apart. Rather, many of them shared in the white supremacist cultural reflexes of the larger society and eagerly laid claim to the “public and psychological wage” that they hoped membership in the “ruling nation” would afford.⁴⁶

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Divided We Stand is itself divided, into two parts—the first is on longshoremen; the second, on steelworkers. When I chose to focus on these particular occupations, it was, initially at least, for reasons that were largely subjective and even—to some degree—accidental. But over

time it has become apparent to me that my decision to journey to Youngstown in 1988, with tape recorder in hand, has been especially fortuitous, for the steel industry and the waterfront both illuminate the historical process of class formation in the United States in clear and compelling ways. That process has been driven by economic imperatives, but it has also been shaped by a series of Great Migrations that began in the 1840s and have continued into our own time. In recent years the streams of this migration have flowed from all over the world. But for nearly a century they came overwhelmingly from Europe—cresting first, in the 1840s and 1850s, with millions of immigrants from Ireland and Germany; and then, from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, with a far larger wave from Italy, Poland, and other regions of southern and eastern Europe. From the beginning of the Great Famine in 1845 to the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, nearly five million Irish men and women emigrated to the United States.⁴⁷ In spite of the Catholicism that initially marked them as ominously different from the ethnoculture of Anglo-Protestant America, the Irish became the quintessential representatives of the old immigration. In New York, Boston, New Orleans, San Francisco, and Buffalo and other Great Lakes ports, the waterfront quickly became a distinctively Irish space. Indeed, the experience of Irish immigrants and their descendants on the docks illuminates several important motifs of the making of the American working class, above all, perhaps, the way a “race” of “strangers” emerged from the crucible of class formation as American and white.

There were plenty of Irish immigrants in steel, too. But the steel industry’s greatest growth coincided with the era of the new immigration, when “birds of passage” from southern and eastern Europe were coming to the United States by the millions. As Thomas Bell’s *Out of This Furnace* evocatively reveals, the human history of the steel industry is much less about Andrew Carnegie’s meteoric rise from his immigrant roots than it is about the gradual and uneven transformation of another, and more heterogeneous, “race” of “strangers” into Americans and white ethnics.

Vital to this process was yet another group of migrants—this time from within the United States for the most part, but with no prospect of becoming white. As freemen and slaves, African Americans worked on the docks of New York and Baltimore, Charleston and New Orleans, and in the iron mills of the Old South. After the Civil War, they headed North when they could get away. They came to Pittsburgh

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and Youngstown not as birds of passage but as permanent settlers and withstood the harsh taunts (and worse) of the Irish- and Welshmen who dominated the shape-up outside the mill gates. Thus black migrants were also a part of the making of the American working class. Although often pushed to the margins of the labor market, they nonetheless served as a vitally important presence—teaching European immigrants, old and new, what they must not be and what they must become. Together, these three migrations reveal that class has meant the long-term negotiation of identities and allegiances that have always been conditioned by race, gender, and emergent ethnicity. Are there better sites than the steel industry and the waterfront from which to witness the unfolding of this distinctly American process of becoming? No doubt—especially from the standpoint of gender—there are more representative industries and occupations, but few that would have changed the central components of the story.

Chapter 1 offers a portrait of dock labor and an overview of the nation's waterfronts, concentrating mainly on New York between the 1850s and the 1920s. Chapter 2 is almost entirely about the New York waterfront from the 1920s through the 1960s and relates the saga of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA). The port of New York was by far the largest in the United States. As late as 1936, it "handled approximately 54 percent by value and 21 percent by volume of the nation's grand total of foreign maritime commerce." Moreover, it provided employment for nearly fifty thousand longshoremen at a time when the West Coast's twenty ports employed a total of twelve thousand.⁴⁸ Because of the predominance of the Irish, and later the Italians, in the port's labor force, this is a story of ethnicity as much as of race. Indeed, the New York waterfront brings us face to face with ethnicity and—especially among the Irish—religion not as a problem to be lamented but as a pillar around which working-class life often revolved. It also casts a bright light on the uneven rhythms of working-class mobilization and protest, the coalescence of ethnic identities into a wider sense of white ethnicity, and the enormous disparity in the historical experience of African Americans and European immigrants.

Chapter 3 focuses mainly on the West Coast, where race relations ranged from San Francisco's aggressive egalitarianism to Portland's obstinately "lily-white" stance. It assesses how a Communist-led union responded to the struggle for black equality in several key locals. Above all, it analyzes how veteran white longshoremen in the port of Los Angeles effected and rationalized the marginalization of their African

American counterparts. For comparative purposes, the chapter also examines the port of New Orleans and the racial practices of the ILA in the Crescent City. From the vantage point of the Pacific Coast, General Longshoremen’s Local 1419 appeared to be an unfortunate survival of Jim Crow in the Civil Rights era. To its defenders, however, it was the nation’s “largest and most powerful all Negro union,” and it signified a rational determination on the part of black workers that their interests could best be protected by following the path of racial separation.⁴⁹

Chapter 4 examines the long nonunion era that preceded the successful organization of the steel industry in the late 1930s. It focuses on steel’s extraordinarily complex occupational hierarchy and on the ethnic and racial segmentation of the industry’s internal labor market. It compares the histories of black and new immigrant workers in steel and once again charts the remarkable differences in their experience. Chapters 5 and 6 examine the successful unionization of the steel industry during the CIO era—first through the agency of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), and then under the aegis of the United Steelworkers of America (USWA). The USWA was one of the CIO’s most centralized unions and, by reputation, one of its least democratic. Given the power of the steel masters and the authoritarian control union leadership exercised, it follows logically that rank-and-file workers would have played a very small role in shaping the racial practices of the industry and even of their union. Or does it? These two chapters look at the shop floor in steel mills across the nation to demonstrate how workers and managers colluded to maintain a complex pattern of ethnic diversity and racial subordination. They demonstrate, too, how black workers were compelled to organize autonomously and to link up with civil rights organizations such as the NAACP in the struggle against discrimination in the mills.

Chapter 7 brings us full circle—back to Youngstown, where the journey began for me. It is a case study of steel unionism and race relations in two of the most important United Steelworkers’ locals in the Mahoning Valley of northeast Ohio. More than any other chapter, this one tries to identify and flesh out larger patterns of development by focusing on individuals whose lives have remained hidden from history because—until the shutdown of the mills in the 1970s and 1980s made them visible, as victims and as scapegoats—they disappeared into an “iron house” every day and labored there in relative obscurity. Concluding with the shutdown of the mills compels me to end on a note

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of tragedy, and yet any history of race in America necessarily involves the tragedy of lives stunted by dehumanization and discrimination, of hopes for justice undermined by the power of the “aristocracy of the human skin,”⁵⁰ of visions truncated by the weight of racialized identities. But the story of race, class, and unionism in Youngstown is also filled with small triumphs, and, above all, with examples of humanity that nourish the spirit and compel admiration for the extraordinary courage and resilience of ordinary people.