n a revealing passage in *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), the famous reform photographer Jacob Riis self-consciously identifies himself as a white American in contrast to the “othered” half. With paternalistic praise for “the negro,” Riis declares that “he may . . . promise, after all, with fair treatment, quite as well as the rest of us, his white-skinned fellow-citizens” (119, emphasis mine). Even as he marks a shared national identity with his “fellow-citizens” of color, Riis simultaneously distinguishes his position from theirs by deeming himself part of a “white-skinned” American “we.” Riis draws his own color line in the thirteenth chapter of his book titled, ironically enough, “The Color Line in New York.”

The “white-skinned” American community that Riis proclaims as his own was, at the time of his pronouncements, a contested and shifting category of national privilege. As a Northern European immigrant, Riis could aspire to belong to that class, but he could not necessarily presume inclusion in the community of white (supremacist) Americans jealously guarded by nativists. Indeed, I would like to argue that one of the many functions of Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* is the projection of Riis himself as a “white” American through the performance of a “white” gaze.

Jacob Riis’s life and work were inextricably linked to the history of immigration in the United States. The New York slums he so powerfully condemned and helped to reform were home to a rapidly expanding immigrant population in the late nineteenth century, a group to which Riis himself belonged. Riis emigrated to the U.S. from Denmark in 1870, at age 21, and his early attempts to participate in the American dream left him homeless and hungry in the very neighborhoods he would later document as a police reporter for the New York *Tribune*. Indeed, even though he fashioned himself an American in his autobiography, *The Making of an American*, his fellow reporters always knew him as “the Dutchman,” a nickname that served incorrectly to mark the Dane’s ethnicity while nevertheless reinforcing his foreign status in the eyes of his colleagues (41–42, 130–131).

Declaring his “white-skinned” Americanness in 1890, Riis staked claim to a privileged national identity widely open to debate. As Matthew Frye Jacobson has argued, “the newly urgent question of European immigration prompted a redefinition of whiteness” in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (72–73). How whiteness was to be defined – as vis-
ible, physical, heritable, cultural, or historical—and according to which authorizing institutions—science, the law, tradition, or “common sense”—was a matter of much contest, and also of great import, for the vague category of “whiteness” determined an immigrant’s eligibility for U.S. citizenship according to the Naturalization Law of 1790. As a Dane, Riis would have been perceived by some as a “desirable” Nordic immigrant at a time of increased immigration from southern Europe, but he was an immigrant nonetheless, and the “white skin” he claimed as vehicle to a privileged national identity could be recast in the eye of a nativist beholder.

Riis tellingly evokes his “white-skinned” citizenship in a chapter devoted to “the negro,” and thereby participates in a process through which ethnic whites have claimed an exclusive national identity by disavowing their own difference through the evocation of a black/white racial dichotomy. It is in contradistinction to “the negro” that Riis identifies himself as a white-skinned American. He incorporates himself into the white American community of his imagined viewers/readers—a white-skinned “us”—encouraging Anglo-Saxon nativists to see the differences between themselves and the immigrant Riis as negligible in contrast to the more visible differences between those of light and dark complexions (Jacobson and Rogin).1

Riis’s famous representations of New York City’s impoverished confirmed the privileged position of his “native” Anglo-Saxon, middle-class audience. As Maren Stange has argued, Riis’s photographs posed “the controlling gaze as a middle-class right and tool” and implicitly suggested that the middle classes were “the ‘half’ designated by history and progress to colonize and dominate” (23,18). Riis’s photographs transform the inhabitants of New York’s slums into an ethnic spectacle (Gandal), and his text imagines a literal color map of the city’s nationalities with “more stripes than on the skin of a zebra, and more colors than any rainbow” (Other Half 20). As Riis confers “color” on the “other half,” he confers whiteness on the middle-class viewers authorized to gaze, and also on the primary witness who has made these views—the photographer—Riis himself. The privilege of a middle-class gaze is also the privilege of a white gaze in late-nineteenth century New York.2

Riis made many of the famous photographs that are now included in How the Other Half Lives during his tenure as a police reporter for the New York Tribune. He sometimes entered the homes of his subjects with an armed entourage of policemen, catching people in compromised positions. The power dynamics that inform these visual encounters are thus heavily skewed in favor of the photographer (Stein 14).3 But that does not mean that the images are fully controlled, nor their possible meanings fully contained. As Riis himself suggests in his autobiography, he was not extensively trained in photography before he began his urban surveillance, and he had several dangerous accidents using the recently invented flash powder that illuminates many of his scenes (Making American 172–177).4 Indeed, what is most interesting about Riis’s photographs is their somewhat chaotic quality (especially the indoor and night scenes taken with the flash). Some of the subjects appear startled; some are bemused, and some are simply amused. As Riis set up his camera and arranged
the tray of flash powder, his subjects, even the most recalcitrant, had a moment for some self-fashioning for the camera (unless they were asleep).

While the photographs result from acts of looking technologically performed and ideologically reinforced, the images remain less controlled than Riis's framing text. It is in the text, a kind of voice-over for the images, that Riis instructs us what to see and not see in the photographs, how to look at the subjects who squint and scowl and grin (and variously interact with the camera), how to consider ourselves as viewers, and perhaps most importantly, how to consider the photographer who has brought us these views.

The photographs show the devastating poverty and squalid conditions of the tenement districts, as befitting Riis's primary aim, namely that of encouraging reform. His text elaborates on the brutality of landlords and the shaping influence of the environment he hopes to transform. But the photographs do not show the racial attributes that Riis's text proclaims, the stereotypes about various national characteristics that he so often relies upon to describe tenement scenes. Amid the sometimes dirty, sometimes drunken, sometimes clean, and sometimes smiling faces that populate Riis's photographs, one cannot see the supposed contentiousness of the Irishman, the "constitutional greed" of the Jew, nor the "stealth and secretiveness" of the Chinaman (Other Half A3, 98, 78). These qualities are not available in the view, but only in the frame, in Riis's text, in the manner in which he draws on existing prejudices to shade the perception of his images.

It is only through the combination of photographs and text that we discern Riis's reform agenda and his own racialized American self-fashioning. Through his texts he directs our reading of the images and of himself. The spectacle of the "other half" is racialized in his writing, and Riis's own position behind the camera is brought to light in the text as well. Richard Dyer has famously argued that whiteness secures its privilege in part through its invisibility and its diffusion, by being everywhere and nowhere. In this sense, whiteness permeates the position of the gazer, and not the gazed upon. But it is precisely this position that Riis seeks to make visible, this privilege of a white gaze that he seeks to possess and make manifest. The photographs alone cannot secure this privilege for him, for they reproduce his relative absence, revealing him only indirectly through his choices in framing. It is in the combination of image and text in How the Other Half Lives that whiteness resides and is made visible, and it is in this interplay that Riis claims "the half" of white middle-class Americanness for himself.

But whiteness is not only invisible in How the Other Half Lives. Indeed for Riis part of the complexity of attempting to claim an exclusive whiteness lies in the exceedingly visible place of many different whites—the Italians, the Germans, the Irish, the Bohemians, the Polish Jews—in his photographs and text. How is Riis to be distinguished from these "other" whites? In "The Color Line in New York," Riis distances himself from them via relative proximity to "the negro." He demarcates a hierarchy of whiteness, deeming "the Italians and the Polish Jews" "the lowest of the whites" (116). Praising "the negro" above those
whites in certain respects, Riis nonetheless evokes the color line to elevate his own whiteness, distinguishing himself not only from “the negro” but also from “low whites” in terms of a privileged white national identity.

Riis is especially at pains to distance himself from the image of whiteness projected in the “black-and-tan” saloon. One of Riis’s photographs of such an establishment presents a slight African American man sitting with legs outstretched on a large barrel, propped in the nook made between his impromptu seat and the ledge of a tattered wall. His suit and boots are soiled, but his hat is stylishly placed on his head. Looking not directly at the camera, but perhaps at the flash gun that illuminates his face, he stares quizzically out of the frame, his expression on the verge of alarm. To his right one sees the back of a figure whose skirt announces her as a woman, although a plaid shawl obscures her head from view. To his left, just at and perhaps touching his boots, one sees a white woman, her expression cross or befuddled, looking down toward the man’s boots, or perhaps beyond them in contemplation of the floor. The woman’s hair is matted, her face dirty; she has bags under her eyes.
Sores or smudges mar her chin below the corners of her lips. One cannot see her companion, but someone close by is registered by the presence of a dark hand on her shoulder.

Such an image of racial mixing Riis cannot abide; he shuns this vision of whiteness in close quarters with “the negro.” Riis describes the “black-and-tan saloon” as “the border-land where the white and black races meet in common debauch,” a site that permits the “commingling of the utterly depraved of both sexes, white and black” (119). While part of his disgust is clearly aimed at the drunkenness and dirt all around, one cannot omit the “commingling” of races and sexes from Riis’s censure. It is in part their relation to “the negro” that distinguishes, for Riis, the “low whites” from the high, the debased from those “eligible” for a privileged place in a “white-skinned” American community.

Calling his autobiography The Making of an American (1901), Riis frames his life story to suggest that some “white-skinned” European immigrants can successfully transcend the ethnicity Riis underscores in his depictions of the “other half,” to become “the half” of a privileged white, middle-class America. Riis’s life and work suggest that a Northern European immigrant was “made into an American” by learning to identify with and perform a white, nativist gaze that could discern the color line dividing not only “white” from “black” but also “low white” from “high.” In a brief introduction to the autobiography added in 1914, after Riis’s death, Theodore Roosevelt, himself a proponent of an exclusive white American stock, proclaims that Jacob Riis “had a white soul” (xi). While meant, surely, to suggest Riis’s honesty, and straightforward fairness, the statement nonetheless resonates startlingly with Riis’s own declarations about himself and his “white-skinned fellow-citizens.” Roosevelt ends his accolades by pronouncing: “He did not come to this country until he was almost a young man; but if I were asked to name a fellow-man who came nearest to being the ideal American citizen, I should name Jacob Riis” (xi). Finally, Riis’s naturalization is complete, and exemplary, as the president idolizes “the Dutchman” within an American community of his “white-skinned fellow-citizens.”

Shawn Michelle Smith
School of the Art Institute of Chicago

NOTES
1 Bill Hug, in his essay “Walking the Ethnic Tightwire: Ethnicity and Dialectic in Jacob Riis’s How the Other Half Lives,” suggests that Riis’s racial and ethnic stereotypes should be read as rhetorical performances through which Riis self-consciously plays to the prejudices of his Anglo-Saxon audience, winning them, to later chip away at their ethnic beliefs (52). I am interested in reading Riis’s racial and ethnic stereotyping as rhetorical performances that seek to win Riis a privileged white American identity in the eyes of his Anglo-Saxon audience.

Susan M. Ryan, in her essay “‘Rough Ways and Rough Work’: Jacob Riis, Social Reform, and the Rhetoric of Benevolent Violence,” highlights Riis’s use of “military images and metaphors” to describe his work, not simply as police reporter, but as “war correspondent” in *How the Other Half Lives* (195).

Peter Bacon Hales, in his work *Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839–1915*, encourages one to read Riis’s declarations of incompetence as crafty projections of a persona designed “to lull viewers into believing themselves witnesses to an unrehearsed and unstaged confrontation with the raw grit of a previously hidden world” (193).