

The Story of Whiteness

By [Sarah C Stewart](#)

Whiteness has been used throughout the histories of America and Europe to praise desirable groups of people and exclude undesirable groups. But “whiteness” is not an ethnic group, a cultural group, or a nationality. In the United States, the Supreme Court legally defined what it meant to be “white” in a pair of decisions in 1922. In other words, whiteness was created by law to let some people in and keep others out.

Soon after becoming a nation, the United States passed a law that only free, white immigrants could become citizens. In 1868, the 14th Amendment to the Constitution expanded citizenship to anyone born in the United States, including African Americans. But immigrants seeking naturalized citizenship still had to prove they were “White,” and the courts soon found themselves in the position of having to decide who was White.

In 1909, the U.S. Court of Appeals in Massachusetts ruled that Armenians, classified as Asiatic Turks, were legally White. This led to the conclusion that other Asiatic races, such as Filipinos, Japanese, and Syrians, might also be White.

In 1922, a Japanese man named Takao Ozawa petitioned for naturalized citizenship. He had spent his adult life in the U.S. In 1920, people who were not citizens could not own land — but Ozawa wanted to become a citizen and own property.

Ozawa wrote his own brief and made two arguments. The first was that his skin was just as pale as the skin of White people. If pale Armenian Asiatics could be White, he argued, then he, a Japanese man, should also be White. But his second argument was more profound: Ozawa argued that race shouldn’t matter for citizenship. He argued that character and a commitment to the United States should be what mattered. The Supreme Court ruled unanimously against Ozawa, finding that Japanese were not White. They said their decision was scientific, because to be White was to be Caucasian, not Asiatic.

Then, in 1923, Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian immigrant to the U.S., petitioned for citizenship as an Aryan/Caucasian. He made the sound scientific argument (as science was understood then) that the Aryan or Caucasian people had originated in North India, and that he was therefore both Caucasian and White. But the Supreme Court, again ruling unanimously, denied Thind’s petition. This time the court said that race is not something defined by science, but is instead something intuited by the “common [White] man.” Thind may be Caucasian, the court ruled, but he was not White.

These Supreme Court decisions were unanimous. A prominent Unitarian, William Howard Taft, was Chief Justice of the U.S. for both the Ozawa and Thind decisions. We have to own the history of Whiteness as part of our Unitarian Universalist history.

America is once again facing pressure for people to align along racial lines. We do not need to do that. Resist other people’s categories. Share your values in conversation, in protest, in petition, in assembly. We are all kin. We do better when we work together. We need all of us, in all our diversity, to build the world we dream of.