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James Farrell's Studs Lonigan Trilogy and the Anxieties of Race

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

James Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* Trilogy and the Anxieties of Race

Lauren Onkey (bio)

In the opening chapter of James Farrell's *Young Lonigan* (1932), Patrick Lonigan sits on his porch in Chicago's Washington Park neighborhood and reflects on his success. It is June 1916. His house-painting business is doing well, and he is confident that his children will inherit a bright future. He sings a verse of "Where the River Shannon Flows," popularized by John McCormack in 1913, a nostalgic, sentimental song about the beauty of Ireland, "where the three-leaved shamrock grows." Lonigan, an immigrant, has succeeded in America by adherence to two principles dear to the "lace curtain" Irish: hard work and dedication to the Catholic Church.

Life was a good thing if you were Patrick J. Lonigan and had worked hard to win out in the grim battle, and God had been good to you. But then, he had earned the good things he had. Yes, sir, let God call him to the Heavenly throne this very minute, and he could look God square in the eye and say he had done his duty, and he had been, and was, a good father. They had given the kids a good home, fed and clothed them, set the right example for them, sent them to Catholic schools to be educated, seen that they performed their religious duties, hustled them off to confession regularly, given them money for the collection, never allowed them to miss mass.

(19)

But Lonigan's fear of the many black families moving into the neighborhood undercuts his sense of satisfaction, as he worries that his family will have to move from Wabash Avenue, once "a nice, **[End Page 104]** decent, respectable street. . . . But now, well, the niggers and kikes were getting in, and they were dirty, and you didn't know but what, even in broad daylight, some nigger moron might be attacking his girls" (17–18). Such oscillation between security and fear, pivoting around the relative status of African Americans, characterizes Farrell's depiction of Irish Americans in the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy. His Irish characters in Chicago measure their status and potential for success according to how close

they are, literally, to African Americans. If these newcomers can live in the same neighborhoods as they do, then Irish Americans lose their hard won place in American society. Having "become white," Farrell's characters cannot or will not welcome the darker-skinned new arrivals.

Discussions on whiteness and Irishness in the work of David Roediger, Catherine Eagan, Kevin Kenny, and Noel Ignatiev encourage us to address how the Irish were depicted racially, how they dealt with existing race relations in the US upon arrival in the mid-nineteenth century, and how to interpret Irish violence against African Americans during such events as the 1863 New York City draft riots. Since the 1991 publication of *The Wages of Whiteness*, Roediger's argument that "it was by no means clear that the Irish were white" in northern cities in the period leading up to the Civil War has become widely accepted (134). But such scholarship remains controversial in Irish studies, especially as it focuses on whether or not post-famine nineteenth-century Irish immigrants could make alliances with African Americans.¹ As Kevin Kenny argues, the critical discussion on whiteness and Irishness will require "a better historical explanation of [Irish] racism—one that shifts at least part of the focus away from individual agency and toward the wider social and cultural structure in which both Irish immigrants and African Americans operated" (68). Although certainly not a historical document, *Studs Lonigan* helps us see that larger structure. **[End Page 105]**

Whiteness studies help us to understand the discourse on race circulating around Irish Americans—and also explain the complex affinities between Irish Americans and African Americans in such artistic forms as minstrel shows. But we cannot apply Roediger's argument whole cloth to later periods. For example, although anti-Irish discrimination still survived in the period depicted in *Studs Lonigan*, by the early twentieth century the Irish were no longer characterized as a simian, non-white race—as they sometimes were in the mid...

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