What Blood Won't Tell: A History of Race on Trial in America

Ariela J. Gross
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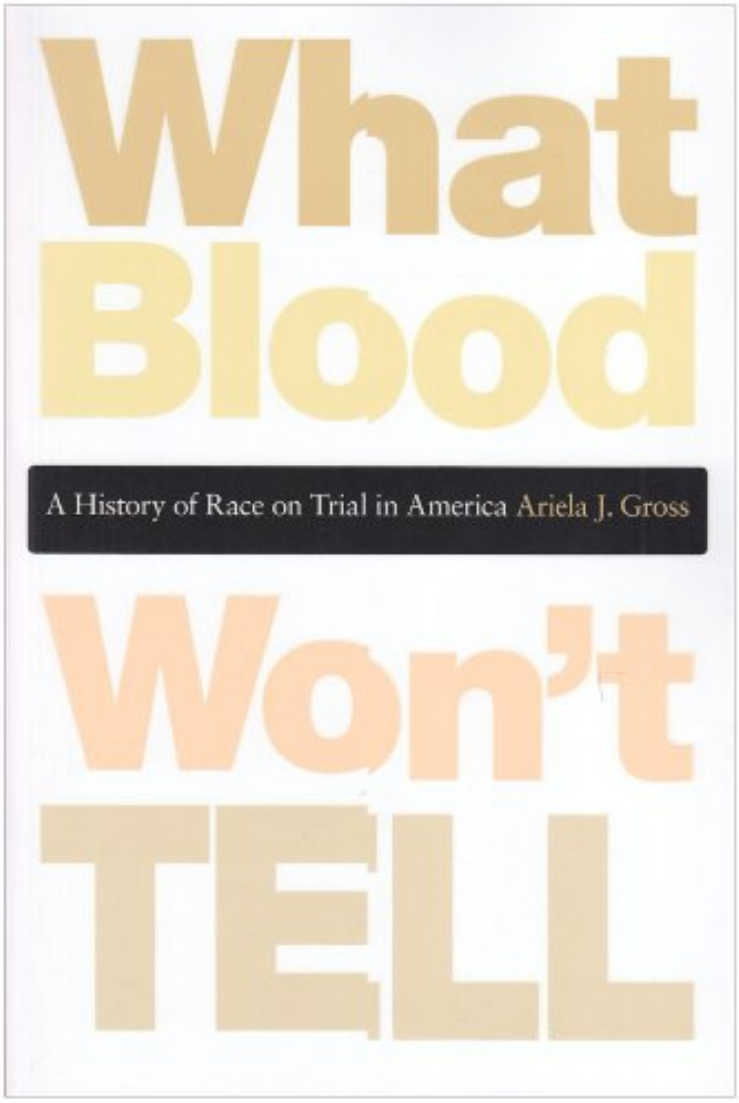

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Ariela J. Gross : What Blood Won't Tell: A History of Race on Trial in America before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised What Blood Won't Tell: A History of Race on Trial in America:

6 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Incredibly valuable history of race in multiracial AmericaBy michiganreaderEveryone interested in race, US legal history, citizenship, or immigration should read this book. It manages to combine close readings of freedom trials in the antebellum US, naturalization cases at the turn of the century, battles over the "freedmen," or members of African descent, of the Cherokee, Seminole, Choctaw, Creek and

Chickasaw tribes, Mexican American fights against segregation, and the ways race was used to limit Native Hawaiian land rights, and provides new information and perspectives on each. This fine book shows the way that race was not defined solely or even primarily by science or descent, but was defined importantly by the "common sense" intuition of those in the dominant race that the subject deserved inclusion and citizenship. The very flexibility of this common sense notion, however, allowed concepts of race to shift to exclude new groups in new ways as laws and times changed. It conveys these insights in a style that is a pleasure to read, and full of fascinating stories and facts (like the common viewpoint that a white person could be known by the high arches of her feet, or the sad reality that a South Asian man committed suicide when the Supreme Court reversed an earlier determination that South Asians were legally white and could become citizens of the United States). Highly recommended!0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. easy to read -By Patricia TrueI had to read it for class but it was an easy read and full of interesting info.,3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. How race trials reflected societal attitudes and confusionsBy gernabFascinating and informative survey documenting how race trials reflected varying attitudes and definitions of "race". At times trial decisions were/are based on science, pseudoscience, flawed concepts of "race", "common sense" (or non-sense), genealogy, or social "performance". And the results also varied by state, and were heavily influenced by the prejudices of the time and location and composition of the jury, or the background and personality of the judge. But outcomes can be viewed as generally maintaining and reinforcing the dominant white power structure. The book parallels, in reciting various race trials, the historical narratives elaborated in (recently deceased) Prof. Ron Takaki's works. It was almost worth going through the whole book to find, on page 305, a reference to a 1987 Supreme Court opinion by Justice Byron White: "...racial categories have no scientific basis, modern or otherwise [and]... the real test of whether a group is a 'race' is whether it has suffered racial discrimination - whether it has been 'racialized', as the academics would say...'racial classifications are for the most part sociopolitical, rather than biological, in nature'". That's what this book demonstrates about the cited race determination trials.

Is race something we know when we see it? In 1857, Alexina Morrison, a slave in Louisiana, ran away from her master and surrendered herself to the parish jail for protection. Blue-eyed and blond, Morrison successfully convinced white society that she was one of them. When she sued for her freedom, witnesses assured the jury that she was white, and that they would have known if she had a drop of African blood. Morrisons court trialand many others over the last 150 yearsinvolved high stakes: freedom, property, and civil rights. And they all turned on the question of racial identity.Over the past two centuries, individuals and groups (among them Mexican Americans, Indians, Asian immigrants, and Melungeons) have fought to establish their whiteness in order to lay claim to full citizenship in local courtrooms, administrative and legislative hearings, and the U.S. Supreme Court. Like Morrisons case, these trials have often turned less on legal definitions of race as percentages of blood or ancestry than on the way people presented themselves to society and demonstrated their moral and civic character. Unearthing the legal history of racial identity, Ariela Grosss book examines the paradoxical and often circular relationship of race and the perceived capacity for citizenship in American society. This book reminds us that the imaginary connection between racial identity and fitness for citizenship remains potent today and continues to impede racial justice and equality.

From Publishers WeeklyStarred . Through a close reading of racial identity trials in America, this book offers an eloquent contribution to ongoing debates over affirmative action, identity politics and the construction of a colorblind society. Historian Gross argues that racial identity trialscourt cases in which outcomes turned on determining a person's race and their concomitant rights and privilegesprovides an excellent basis for viewing the construction of whiteness and assessing the volatile category of race in American society. The author rigorously examines select cases including the outcomes of suits for freedom by onetime slaves like Abby Guy, who in 1857 convinced an all-white male jury that she was white and thus deserving of freedom. Upsetting the familiar notion of the one-drop rule in determining racial identity, Gross shows that in such cases the notion of what constituted race was itself as much in play as whether a particular individual could be identified (through some unstable combination of expert and common sense opinion) as one race or another. The social performance of identity is key, and enduringly so, as Gross periodically underscores by reference to various modern debates and trends. (Oct.) From BooklistChallenging the presumption of many scholars of the dominance of the one-drop rule in conferring black status, Gross argues that despite the rule, in court and by custom, racial boundaries were much more fluid and flexibleyet, primarily in the service of white supremacy. From slavery through the Jim Crow period to the twentieth century free-white phase, Gross focuses on several prominent trials involving racially ambiguous individuals or groups that challenged the one-drop rule and reflected the depth of the racial hierarchy. The drawing of lines between whites and blacks in associating slavery with race pushed middle- and lower-class whites to identify more strongly with white elites. Drawing legal lines between Indians and blacks racialized both groups, undercut any potential alliance, and helped facilitate the loss of Indian lands. For immigrants, the line helped facilitate the identification of America as a white nation, and undercut a potential alliance based on class. Gross also reflects on how this history of race determination fits into current efforts at a color-blind

approach that ignores the significance of race in American culture. --Vernon Ford What Blood Won't Tell brings us at long last a brilliant analysis of the changing meanings of race in American law from the colonial era to the present. It will be indispensable for any informed discussions of a subject that lies at the very core of both American history and identity. (David Brion Davis author of Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World)This exquisite inquiry into the complex and shifting ways in which the 'black-white' divide has been marked over the last three centuries excavates the deep roots of racial identification. (Patricia J. Williams, author of The Alchemy of Race and Rights)Through a close reading of racial identity trials in America, this book offers an eloquent contribution to ongoing debates over affirmative action, identity politics and the construction of a "colorblind" society. Historian Gross argues that racial identity trials--court cases in which outcomes turned on determining a person's "race" and their concomitant rights and privileges--provides an excellent basis for viewing the construction of "whiteness" and assessing the volatile category of race in American society. The author rigorously examines select cases including the outcomes of suits for freedom by onetime slaves like Abby Guy, who in 1857 convinced an all-white male jury that she was white and thus deserving of freedom. Upsetting the familiar notion of the "one-drop rule" in determining racial identity, Gross shows that in such cases the notion of what constituted race was itself as much in play as whether a particular individual could be identified (through some unstable combination of expert and "common sense" opinion) as one race or another. The social "performance" of identity is key, and enduringly so, as Gross periodically underscores by reference to various modern debates and trends. (Publishers Weekly (starred review) 2008-08-11)Gross' book, a history of cases in which people have challenged their official racial designation, eloquently demonstrates just how difficult it can be to say what race--mine, yours, anybody's--actually consists of...What Blood Won't Tell is largely a catalog of delusions and the strategies by which Americans tried to prop up those delusions in courts of law...The very fact that some people with African "blood" (not a biologically valid concept, but a common term, then and now) could pass themselves off as white betrayed the reality; blacks, whites and Indians had been marrying, having sex and producing mixed-race children from the very beginning...A book like What Blood Won't Tell--which is, after all, a history, not a prescription--may not offer much that's usable as a guide to the future. But it does provide us with plenty of evidence of how badly we can and have screwed up, and how much imagination and determination it will take to do it better. (Laura Miller Salon.com 2008-11-10)Argues forcefully that, for all the progress our public life has made toward the formal semblance of racial equality, the history and legal armature of white racism are much more stubborn, institutionalized features of our common life than a single presidential election, no matter how groundbreaking, can wipe away...Gross maps, through countless twists and turns, the extraordinary legal fictions enlisted to keep the formal workings of racial privilege on track. [The book] serves as a bracing reminder that "postracial politics," however captivating it may be as a catchphrase, is very nearly an oxymoron in American life. (Brian Gilmore Bookforum 2009-12-01)Challenging the presumption of many scholars of the dominance of the "one-drop" rule in conferring black status, Gross argues that despite the rule, in court and by custom, racial boundaries were much more fluid and flexible--yet, primarily in the service of white supremacy...Gross also reflects on how this history of race determination fits into current efforts at a "color-blind" approach that ignores the significance of race in American culture. (Vernon Ford Booklist 2008-10-01)What Blood Won't Tell chronicles the history of efforts to determine racial identity in the courts. Seldom, if ever, does science enter into the effort; rather, attorneys and others turn their attention to the evidence of skin color, social behavior, cultural customs, and other subjective and changeable evidence. The only thing that remains constant is the underlying assumption that white equals "full social and political citizenship" while anything else is inferior, less-than, and undeserving of Constitutional protection...The overriding opinion was that it's best to be white, but if you can't manage that, just don't be black. This shameful and ignorant American caste system is still as deeply entrenched in the nation's consciousness as ever, it seems...What Blood Won't Tell turns out to be a riveting overview of legal decisions regarding race and freedoms and a dizzying look at the insanity of social hierarchy and its ongoing impact on social development. (Deborah Adams Curled Up with a Good Book 2009-07-23)Gross [has written] an amazing book that addresses the relationship between race and citizenship in the U.S. Gross's presentation is both detailed and complex. The first half is devoted to establishing the role race and racism have played within the history and law of the U.S., as well as further developing the rich literature within whiteness scholarship. The strength of her argument lies in her ability to inject specific examples, oftentimes cases from the 19th century, into her whiteness discussions. The second half is equally impressive. Here Gross utilizes critical race theory to discuss black Indian identity, race in Hawaii, and other contemporary issues. This book is innovative, accessible, and valuable for undergraduates, graduates, and laypeople interested in a deep conversation on race and history. (A. R. S. Lorenz Choice 2009-06-01)