

RACE

Martin Orkin and Alexa Alice Joubin



the NEW CRITICAL IDIOM



CONCLUSION

RACE IN THE WORLD

Humans come to know and experience the world through various categories that organize it into knowable fragments. All rational beings understand the world in terms of space and time, and deploy categories such as cause and effect, substance, unity, plurality, necessity, possibility, and reality. That is, whenever we think about anything, we do so in certain ways; for example, as having causes, as existing or not existing, as being one thing or many things, as being real or imaginary, as being something that has to exist or doesn't have to exist. We think this not simply because we passively reflect the way the world is, but rather because that is the way that our minds order experience. There can be no knowledge without sensation, but sense data alone cannot provide knowledge. Throughout history, people tend to think in terms of categories that help them to demarcate difference. In the process, we also shape the world with the language we use to describe it.

Inevitably some narratives privilege the storyteller's own cultural location as a superior center and the rest of the world as inferior and peripheral. This is a tendency that is especially evident in myths about

the origin of human races in various cultures. For example, according to a Chinese myth, different skin tones are related to accidents in the creation process. When the gods created humans out of clay figures, they initially left the clay in the kiln for too long. The figure came out burned and black. The gods threw it as far as they could, and it landed in Africa. They took the second figure out of the kiln too soon, which is pale and white. They threw it away, and it landed in Europe. Once the gods determined the correct timing, they created the perfect figure in gorgeous yellow, who became the ancestor of the superior East Asian yellow races. Along a similar vein of constructing racial hierarchies, early modern Europe devoted significant social energy to the idea of “blue blood,” an idea about racial purity, or *sangre azul* in Spanish. The nobility’s “blue” veins are visible through their fair skin, because, according to this ideology, their lineage has never been “contaminated” by Moorish or Jewish blood. There can be no knowledge without sensation, but sense data alone, as we have already suggested, cannot provide knowledge either. Throughout history, people tend to think in terms of categories that help them to demarcate difference, and people tend to privilege their own cultural locations. Racialized thinking is often a projection of one’s desires, ambitions, anxieties, or ignorance.

Word made flesh

The *Oxford English Dictionary* shows that the word race comes from the twelfth century French word *haraz*, which refers to horse breeding: “an enclosure in which horses and mares are kept for breeding.” The word race therefore refers to breeds of horses. In English, race is initially used to indicate a whole range of human differences that include gender and class. It simply refers to differentiated communities rather than specifically to people of different skin colors or heritage, such as “the bounteous race/Of woman kind” in Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. As such, men and women might be said to be the first races. As the word evolved, it came to denote not only broad categories of human difference but also ethnicity and national origin, as in such expressions as the race of “the Britons” and “the Spanish race” in Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles* in 1587.¹ By the seventeenth century, race began to describe complexion and even

physiology, though the alignment of positivity, negativity, and particular skin tone is not always obvious. It is notable that the relative hierarchical positions of various races were fluid and mobile depending on contexts. While Shakespeare's *Othello* ascribed positive and negative traits to the Moorish general's cultural and religious origin, Ben Jonson attached positive value to blackness in his 1605 *Masque of Blackness* when he describes the "Fair Niger" and "all his beautiful race."² Moreover, the word race was used to refer to various species beyond human beings. The Clown in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* uses the word race when he means root, as in "a race or two of ginger" at a sheep-shearing festival.³ It is not surprising that race is associated with root, because root is a term often used to refer to lineage, heritability, and familial origin. Ayanna Thompson and Jason Demeter refer to this feature in early modern writing as a form of "lexical convergence."⁴ Shakespeare, specifically, used "race" to evoke breeds of horses, species of plants, and categories of humans. The overlapping meanings and connotations provide occasions for rich poetic expression and food for thought.

In contemporary American culture, race, too, has multiple and contradictory meanings. On the one hand, race commonly refers to heritable traits of skin color and hair type. On the other hand, race is associated with culturally inflected mannerisms, such as what one eats, how one speaks, and how one carries herself or himself. In current American cultural discourses, race often brings to mind people who are not white, while whiteness remains unmarked and serves as a benchmark category—as if white is not a race. The second feature in American racial discourses is the alignment of a race-based social group with innate or inner qualities rather than class. Third, the focus on black and white sometimes obscures other groups within the United States, such that Hispanics, Latinos, Chicanos, and Native Americans often fall under the rubric of ethnicities rather than "race."

Throughout this book, we have discussed biological markings of difference (Chapter 2), religiously inflected boundaries (Chapter 1), geographical determinism, socially inflected understanding of race (Chapter 3, for example), and intersections of race and gender (Chapter 5). What is important to bear in mind is that, ultimately, race as a concept is profoundly constituted by language, by narratives, and by attempts to codify what exactly the term includes and excludes.

While individuals manifest various qualities and markers of identity, these differences will only emerge once they are noted. In medical science, race is a factor in the study of genetics, statistics, public health, and the calculation of the probability of vulnerability, as in the case of the susceptibility of a certain group to suffer from a particular disease. However, as Kim Hall argues, “The easy association of race with modern science ignores the fact that language itself creates social differences ... and that race was then ... a social construct that is fundamentally more about power and culture than about biological difference.”⁵ In this regard, one may say that race is a red herring, a signifier that accumulates meaning by a chain of deferral to other categories of difference such as gender, class, education. These categories of difference are dependent upon access to financial resources and the freedom, or lack thereof, to inhabit various forms of subjectivity. In short, the possibilities of social mobility and immigration complicate a society’s racial landscape. Race seems to be predicated upon upbringing, which is probably what was meant by the comment that President Obama was “not black enough” by Ben Carson, a candidate for President of the United States in the Republican primaries in 2016. Carson suggested that his upbringing differs dramatically from that of Obama, and therefore Carson will be better able to represent the black experience. Obama was “raised white” and is therefore an “African” American rather than an African-American.⁶

The issue becomes complicated when skin color enters into dialogue with those categories that are dependent upon material circumstances (economics, education). Physiological difference has no cultural meaning until it enters into the discourse of race and the cultural differentiations that it carries with it; that discourse inheres in language and the act of noting. It facilitates racial difference. To this extent, it is not possible to describe race and histories of race without leaving the trace of the observer. In invoking various markings and boundaries, descriptions of racial histories bring these differences to the fore, and can prepare the ground for the possibility of political intervention.

Ocular proof

However, race may exemplify an age old question of which comes first, the chicken or the egg. Race, and the cultural differentiations that it implies, comes into being through language, as language and the act of noting enable racial differences. One cannot describe race and histories of race without the observer leaving her or his mark.

Literary works show us that racial differences emerge once they are noted and narrated. In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Mark Antony tells Cleopatra that they are about to "wander through the streets and note/The qualities of people" (1.1.55–1.1.56). The race of a homogeneous group may be unremarkable, but the race of a minority group would be a matter of note. Othello's blackness makes the character stand out in his adopted Venetian society, because "blackness" signals a wide range of positive and negative attributes once it becomes notable. Furthermore, Othello is notable for being a white man in blackface make-up. The fact that Othello was a role created for and played by the white early modern English actor Richard Burbage sets the character apart from others in the play.⁷ Sethe, a mother who escapes slavery in American novelist Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), carries the burden of past suffering on her back. She has been whipped as a slave, and the scars on her back become a marker of her race and identity. The novel follows her recovery from the emotional and physical scars. In Sethe's own words to Paul D, her scars resemble a tree which turns her body into soil for new life: "I got a tree on my back and a haint [ghost] in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms."⁸ Amy, the white girl who saves Sethe's life during her escape, identifies the scars as a chokecherry tree.⁹ The tree mainly grows in Virginia and Caroline. Othello's blackness becomes notable in contrast to his new communities, and Sethe's tree both marks her suffering and root part of her identity in geographic centers of slavery. Sethe's tree is most likely not notable when she is a slave before her escape, for scars are taken for granted as part of a slave's life. Not only can skin color and scars become notable when contexts change, but eye colors, too, are often the object of the gaze. In Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970),¹⁰ Pecola, a poor black child, believes that possessing blue eyes would give her white

privilege and enhance her life. She would literally see the world differently through blue eyes. Ironically, for Claudia blue eyes do not symbolize the cachet of whiteness. She resents the blue eyes on her white dolls. In contrast to what is commonly termed “people of color,” as we noted in Chapter 5, whiteness often goes unmarked and unremarked, because it is considered the norm in, for example, modern day United States. As the norm, it is not notable and, when an idea goes unnoticed, it is taken for granted and becomes invisible.

Locations of race

Locations of race matter. In contrast to the continuing Anglo-European West remarking on non-white people, whiteness as a value in contemporary East Asia has become a yardstick of intelligence, beauty, and desirability because even in the post-colonial world people still tend to internalize colonial categories of difference. Nonetheless, race is marked differently in different cultural locations, and, depending on the geographical location of the observer, it is sometimes, as Edward Said has shown in his book *Orientalism* (1978),¹¹ intertwined with a projected exoticism. The effect does not lead to a positive experience of the racial minority in East Asia. Bulgarian-French feminist Julia Kristeva describes her experience of being othered while visiting the village of Huxian in her *Des Chinoises*: “The villagers stare at the white visitors fixedly, as if they are discovering strange or funny animals that are harmless.” The animals are so strange that they do not make sense. Kristeva notes that “I don’t feel like a foreigner ... I feel like an ape, a martian, an other.”¹² The villagers’ curiosity does not derive from the European visitors’ skin color alone. What Kristeva experienced was a post-revolutionary Chinese response to the Caucasian presence in the context of a general Chinese communist censorship of the democratic West. The villagers showed genuine curiosity towards white foreigners. The story would have been quite different in pre-revolutionary China. Since the late nineteenth century, the unfolding of Western exoticism in modern Chinese culture was linked to the presence of Chinese intellectuals returning from abroad and the rise of Western enclaves in Chinese urban centers. In

Republican China during the early twentieth century, dogs and Chinese were regularly banned in semi-colonial enclaves ruled by various European countries in Shanghai.¹³ Thus, the Chinese interest in exotic commodities was fraught with ambivalence, and race in this context is associated more with exotic objects and wealth than with lineage.¹⁴ For the European powers in Shanghai, the Chinese alterity posed a threat. Genuine self-reflection is an important moment for members of otherwise dominant social groups. We are not aware of the category of “race” until we are confronted with otherness, with alterity and with the gaze of others.

Furthermore, location matters in our historical understanding of racial formations. First, our understanding is skewed by our own dominant cultural locations and biases. Second, notions of race themselves are inflected by political locations. As we showed in Chapter 1, two of the predominant approaches to cultural difference, historically, are (1) the geo-humoral theory which posits that a person’s features and temperament are determined by geographic location as well as climate; and (2) a theory that focuses on lineage and descent, which draws on a notion of biologically fixed racial lines of difference. Rooted in Hippocrates’ and Galen’s works, the humoral theory holds that a balance of bodily humors leads to healthy individuals. Climate was thought to be connected to the overall composition of individuals’ humors. People living around the Mediterranean were thought to have the most harmonious balance of humors due to the region’s moderate climate, while black Africans were believed to be disadvantaged by extreme heat because they lived closer to the Equator; their excess of black bile produced a friendly demeanor, but also cowardice. It was also believed that moving between different climate zones could lead to changes in complexion and physiology.¹⁵ Geo-humoral theory seems to posit that race is impermanent, while the theory of lineage is fixated upon heritability, as manifested in the Nazi era’s fixation upon the relative merits and weaknesses of the German “Aryan” race and marginalized others such as Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals.

From our own historical and political vantage points, these approaches are no longer credible or creditable. They do, however, remind us that we should be wary of “positing a simple opposition between nature and culture, or suggesting that a ‘cultural’ understanding of race is somehow benign or flexible [because] what we call

‘race’ and what we call ‘culture’ cannot be readily separated.”¹⁶ That said, the cultural relativism that has sometimes been posited is not without its own difficulties. Adopting a discursive notion of race does not obscure embodied, lived experiences of difference, nor does it relegate differences to the realm of abstraction. As UK-based Jamaican-born cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1932–2014) cogently argues, “what matters are the systems we use to make human societies intelligible.”¹⁷ Instead of focusing on a tree, even if it is Sethe’s chokecherry tree (an individual’s experience), and missing the forest (a society’s attitude towards race), we should pay attention to the social infrastructures in place to mark and regulate racialized experiences.

A recent example of how narratives can move beyond both biology and heritage is the Oscar-winning film *Twelve Years a Slave* (dir. Steve McQueen, 2013) which focuses on Solomon Northup (Chiwetel Ejiofor) who is kidnapped from New York and sold into slavery in Louisiana. While race and negritude determines one’s social position in the film’s universe, the film examines race without routing the concept through biology. Instead, the film critiques capitalism and slavery. It also draws attention to the interconnected histories of people of African descent’s movement across national borders. Racial identities are thus framed by local markers that are fluid and not biologically determined. However, such high-profile films inevitably draw attention to the identity of its creators. During a press conference at the Toronto International Film Festival, McQueen was asked that if he was an African-American, rather than a black British, director, would the film be different. He responded by emphasizing the collective history of slavery: “It’s not about me being British. It’s about me being part of that history [of people of African descent in the black diaspora].” He pointed out his own Grenadian descent, and the diasporic backgrounds of the film’s actors: Chiwetel is British Nigerian and Lupita Nyong’o (Patsey) is Mexican Kenyan. While the question from the journalist was a well-intended and valid one, it reveals a limiting, philosophical investment in the alignment of one’s racial identity and work, as if an African-American director would necessarily tell a better story of slavery. By the same token, as we pointed out in Chapter 5, cultural location matters more than racial and ethnic coordinates. Similar to the journalist’s unspoken

assumption, the Anglophone academy often assumes that scholars located in, for example, Asia, or who are of Asian descent, would necessarily be better equipped to understand Asian cultures regardless of their academic training. One's blood relations should not have any bearing on the scientific and intellectual inquiry into any particular culture.

Disowning race

If race is a central part of human identity, can one own or disown one's race? To which community would a multiracial person, immigrant, or diasporic subject belong? We would like to offer three cases with open-ended questions to conclude the present study.

In her 1893 short story, "Désirée's Baby," American writer Kate Chopin thinks this complex question through fiction. An adopted child with unknown parentage, Désirée, grows up to marry Armand. Their baby, as it turns out, is part black, which is seen as scandalous in antebellum Louisiana. Infuriated and assuming that Désirée is the culprit, Armand sends his wife and the baby away, going so far as to burn the cradle. It is revealed at the end that in fact Armand is the one who is part black. The moral seems ambiguous. One may ask: is this instance driven by Armand's refusal to recognize his own racial identity, or the fear of being othered—hence his need to cast Désirée as the deceiver? Multiracial subjects are often suspect because of their assumed multiple allegiances to different and even opposing communities.

More recently, in 2015, Rachel Dolezal, the head of the Spokane, Washington, chapter of the U.S. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), has been exposed by news media as having misrepresented herself as African-American when her lineage seems to be Czech, Swedish, and German. Notably Dolezal does not align herself with white supremacist ideologies, and, based on what we know so far, she has not done the NAACP any harm. The incident raised a storm over social media and major news outlets in the United States, initiating debates about the notion of passing and racial and cultural authenticity.¹⁸ In *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, Elaine Ginsberg offers a social theory of the phenomenon of a mixed-race or biracial person identifying as, or being seen as, members of different

racial groups.¹⁹ Light-skinned African-Americans during periods of racial segregation “passed” for white as a strategy of survival. Members of a minority group may adopt a new accent, grooming habits, and names to blend in with members of a privileged, majority group. While it is often a form of self-preservation, the notion of passing as members of a different race, gender, class, and even dis/ability status is problematic in that it pitches presumably essential, innate, authentic identities against identities in borrowed robes. The notion presupposes that some identities are more authentic than others.

Such cases prompt the question: is there any substance to racial identity or does it depend upon the capacity to perform it? The public anxiety surrounding this case shows that race is often, if not exclusively, defined in relation to an other. If Dolezal can be black, what is black, and who is white? As Mark Orbe argues, this case reveals “implicit ways in which social constructions of race are not natural, logical, or irrefutable.”²⁰ Race is not intelligible when it is not visible or exhibited in some palpable form of cultural practice. In Elaine Ginsberg’s words, the Dolezal incident exposes a “category crisis” that “destabilizes the grounds of privilege founded on racial identity.”²¹ In a broader context, the Dolezal incident reveals deep-seated anxieties about the diaspora, immigration, cultural appropriation, and passing—circumstances in which one’s heritage is not readily visible or legible. As an identity marker, race is seen by many as proprietary. It is personal and cannot be appropriated, nor can it simply be adopted by performative gestures.

Last, but not least, if race is understood in popular culture in terms of both cultural practice and genetic expression, what future is there for race as a viable analytical concept? Might race become a broader or narrower category of genetic difference and class? Andrew Niccol’s 1997 sci-fi dystopian film *Gattaca* imagines a post-racial scenario, one that goes beyond eugenics. Vincent Freeman (Ethan Hawke), a genetically inferior man—one of the few who are born naturally—takes on the identity of a genetically designed man born in the laboratory as most humans are in the film. Freeman has been categorized as a member of an underclass suitable only for menial jobs due to his inferior genetic make-up. Aspiring to travel to space, Freeman takes on a form of racial passing by assuming the identity of Jerome Morrow. The film portrays discrimination against the

“genetically unenhanced” as similar to racism and classism in our times; after all, the underclass is labeled by such derogatory names as “in-valids,” “faith births,” and “defectives.” As critic David Kirby observes, “rather than leading to the racial utopia as depicted in *Gattaca*, the acceptance of a genetic basis of race will only further segregate society.”²² *Gattaca* turns the premise of a utopian “post-racial” society on its head and shows the dystopian tendency of a biology-driven understanding of race.²³ The vocabulary of race matters, because the vocabulary at one’s disposal determines the nature and quality of the inquiry.

Race, like many identity markers, is social shorthand for articulating differences.²⁴ Race is as personal as it is political. People feel a sense of possession over their race, and can be offended by any act of appropriation. As shown throughout this book, which focuses largely but not exclusively on race in the Anglo-European West, projects to conceptualize race are complicated by a symbiotic relation between definition and self-fulfilling prophecy, between typology and racism. Thinking through race estranges what is taken for granted. The construction of race is a process that emphasizes subjection and responsiveness to the demands of others. We study race historically not only to find roots of modern racism, but also to discover other views that may have been obscured by more dominant ideologies such as colonialism. Literary and historical texts contain traces of these alternative perspectives and past debates. Reading histories of race may be a passive act, but if it leads to recognition of one’s self in others, then our job as critical analysts is done.

Notes

- 1 Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles*, 1587, 14: 1088.
- 2 Ben Jonson, *Masque of Blackness*, 1605, 2.81–2.82.
- 3 William Shakespeare, *Winter’s Tale*, 4.3.46. All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, Second Edition, ed., G. Blakemore Evans, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996.
- 4 Jason Demeter and Ayanna Thompson, “Shakespeare and Early Modern Race Studies: An Overview of the Field,” in Jill L Levenson and Robert Ormsby, eds., *The Shakespearean World*, New York: Routledge, 2017, 574–589, 581.

- 5 Kim Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995, 6.
- 6 Ben Carson: "Many of his formative years were spent in Indonesia. So, for him to, you know, claim that, you know, he identifies with the experience of black Americans, I think, is a bit of a stretch." Jonathan Capehart, "Ben Carson and Cornel West actually Agree: Obama's 'Not Black Enough'," *Washington Post*, February 23, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2016/02/23/ben-carson-and-cornel-west-actually-agree-obamas-not-black-enough/?utm_term=.98cbdbd1ffc4, accessed July 20, 2017.
- 7 Dymna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage*, New York: Routledge, 2000, 75–96.
- 8 Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, New York: Plume Fiction, 1988, 15.
- 9 Morrison, *Beloved*, 79.
- 10 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994 (1970).
- 11 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage, 1978.
- 12 "Comme s'ils découvriraient des animaux bizarres et drôles, inoffensifs mais insensés [...] Je me sens singe, martienne, autre." Julia Kristeva, *Des Chinoises*, Paris: Pauvert/Fayard, 2001, 26.
- 13 For an informative account of expatriate life in the treaty ports, see Frances Wood, *Nog Dogs and Not Many Chinese*, London: John Murray, 2000. For an analysis, see Julia Lovell, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams, and the Making of Modern China*, London: Picador, 2011.
- 14 Frank Dikötter, *Exotic Commodities: Modern Objects and Everyday Life in China*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, 2–3. On how Chinese discourses of race emerged at the end of the nineteenth century under the guise of science, see Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, London: C. Hurst & Co., 1992, xiii.
- 15 Jean E. Feerick, *Strangers in Blood: Relocating Race in the Renaissance*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010, 110.
- 16 Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, 38.
- 17 Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: Sage Publications and the Open University, 1997, 10.
- 18 Among those who support "transracialism" is Rebecca Tuvel. See Rebecca Tuvel, *Hypatia*, 32:2, Spring 2017, 263–278.
- 19 Elaine Ginsberg, *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.
- 20 Mark P. Orbe, "The Rhetoric of Race, Culture, and Identity: Rachel

- Dolezal as Co-Cultural Group Member," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 6:1/2, 2016, 23–35.
- 21 Elaine K. Ginsberg, "Introduction," in Elaine K. Ginsberg, ed., *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1996, 8.
 - 22 David A. Kirby, "Extrapolating Race in *Gattaca*: Genetic Passing, Identity, and the Science of Race," *Literature and Medicine*, 23:1, Spring 2004, 184–200, 198; and David A. Kirby, "The New Eugenics in Cinema: Genetic Determinism and Gene Therapy in *Gattaca*," *Science Fiction Studies*, 81:27, July 2000, 193–215.
 - 23 David Theo Goldberg posits that the fantasy of post-raciality is structured around the ability to live "outside of debilitating racial difference." A post-racial society, by definition, would not allow "the key conditions of social life" to be predicated on "racial preferences" (*Are We All Postracial Yet?* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015, 2).
 - 24 The term social shorthand comes from Terence Hawkes, *Meaning by Shakespeare*, London: Routledge, 2012, 4.

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We would like to dedicate whatever value this book may have to all those who suffer from racial discrimination and persecution.

Martin Orkin and Alexa Alice Joubin

RACE

Race offers a compelling introduction to the study of ideas related to race throughout history. Its breadth of coverage, both geographically and temporally, provides readers with an expansive, global understanding of the term from the classical period onwards. This concise guide offers an overview of:

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This clear and engaging study is essential reading for students of Literature, Culture, and Race.

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