

Regarding Race



Figure 1.1 “Seward Montessori Graduation” (part of Lake Street USA series, 1997–2000). Photograph by Wing Young Huie.

Is race real? Sometimes, it depends – obviously?

Talking about race or afraid to talk about race; talking too much or too little. It does not matter. We never seem to get very far.

How do we get out of this gridlock?

Our answer: start asking and resolving different questions about race. Most people think race is real, and they are obviously right. *Race is real*. But race is not real in the way we think of it: as deep, primordial, and biological. Rather, race is a foundational idea with devastating consequences because we, through our history and culture, made it so.

The purpose of this book is to lead readers to understand how race is and is not real. Simply focusing on diversity and acceptance, as is common today, misses the deeper roots of race, racial thinking, and overt racism. On the other hand, a purely scientific and objective approach fails to tell the full story of how race has shaped historical events and continues to be a powerful influence on individual lives. It certainly does not tell all about the variation in how race is experienced among individuals and over time and place.

In this book we aim to bring together a combination of science, history, and personal experiences. The result we are hoping for is surprisingly liberating. Race has come to be a knotted ball of history, culture, identity, and biology. We aim to untangle that ball. Once unraveled, one understands much more about the physical differences among us, and how race became such a powerful force.

We know that race seems obviously real to anyone immersed in North America's dominant culture. Race seems visually real. Every day, one can observe difference in outward form between individuals. Interestingly, rather than biology, race is real because of the everyday ways in which we interpret differences and invest *meaning* into those biological differences. It might seem counterintuitive, but race is also biological in that the idea of race, and specifically living in a racial society with differential access to resources, has effects on the body that are manifest in infant and adult mortality. If race is an illusion, then it is an unusually powerful one.

Yet, what we have internalized as evidence that we have seen with our own eyes of the “facts” of race such as differences in skin color and other so-called

markers of race, simply have no inherent or deeper sociopolitical significance other than what our culture attaches to them. There is human linguistic, cultural, biological, and genetic variation. But these variations are not racial in that they do not “naturally” partition individuals into races.

A key insight from anthropology is that what we see as real is often due to what our worldviews predispose our minds to see. In much the same way that we used to think the sun revolved around the earth, we see variation as race only because the idea is all around us and is unquestioned. As Spellman president Beverly Tatum says, race is like smog. If we are in it, it is all we see. Moreover, it obstructs clear vision of the true nature of difference. It is time to lift the smog.

In this book, the companion to an award-winning website and museum exhibit, we hope to show how the idea of race continues to have consequences, every day, for all of our lives. Race is not only a *social construct*, it is a powerful *social contract*. The Constitution of the United States listed enslaved Africans as three-fifths of a person. While the Thirteenth Amendment changed this formulation,¹ the racial contract is much deeper than laws and “official” statements. It is particularly enduring because the idea of race is deeply etched into our minds and institutions. We want to expose the social contract and thereby expose the deep roots of racial thinking. Just as weeds will return if they are not pulled out by the roots, we will not get beyond racism unless we pay attention to the roots – to its foundational ideas.

As fundamentally woven into our minds and institutions as the idea of race became and is still, we can change the way that we understand race, and even how race is embedded in institutions. We will not do so by avoiding race or pretending that it is not salient. Rather, we do so by engaging with the science of human variation, the history, culture, and politics of race and the everyday lived experiences of race and racism.

Our students and those who visit the exhibit often have “ah ha” moments in which they come to forever see race differently. Suddenly, race is seen to not be natural but an idea and product of culture. Amazing!

¹ Additional laws were also passed by most states against miscegenation (interracial marriage).

Fortunately, too, those insightful moments do not require advanced training in genomics, anthropology, philosophy, or any other discipline. Rather, the only requirement is openness to questioning assumptions that we thought were obviously true.

Imagine that you have lived your life in a landscape that has never led you or those around you to question that the earth is anything but flat. You go to a mountaintop and you look into the clear distance and notice that the horizon appears to bend down. That bend is a sign that the earth is round. It is time to pay attention to signs like that. However, be forewarned. The results are mind bending. Changes from seeing the earth as flat to round are what scientists call paradigm shifts. A paradigm shift, or a change in worldview, can be disorienting, and it takes a while to readjust.

In addition to making a novel argument, this book has another unique feature: it is a companion to the hugely successful national public education project, RACE: Are We So Different? Developed by the AAA, this project consists of a set of traveling exhibits,² a website, and additional educational materials. The project is organized around three powerful themes: (1) race is a recent human invention, (2) race is about culture and not about biology,³ and (3) race and racism are imbedded in institutions and in everyday life. The book is similarly organized with a section on history, followed by one on science and another on lived experience.

We hope that this book will be engaging to those who have visited the website or exhibit as well as to those new readers. For those who have visited the website and exhibit, here you will find more detailed explanations and the back stories that could not be explained in a walkthrough of an exhibit. With over one hundred images and photographs, we aim to capture the sense that images explain and illustrate and also enhance what can best be explained by succinct writing.

The book in your hands aims to be a fundamental primer on the idea and reality of race and how the idea connects to institutional and everyday racism.

² Currently, there are two 5000 square foot exhibit traveling around the country and a smaller exhibit of nearly 1500 square feet.

³ Paradoxically, race is not a biological or genetic construct, but it does have biological consequences. Some of these consequences of race, especially for health and wealth, will be highlighted in this book.

Human races, we argue, are not “out there in nature.” Rather, humans invented race.

Combining insights and examples from the realms of science, history, and individual stories, our aim was to write and assemble a book that is serious yet engaging and lively. Our main goal is to move readers beyond the false dichotomy of human races as being real or not. We want readers to appreciate *how* contemporary social and biological analyses show that race is real and ways that they show that race is surprisingly outmoded (chiefly as a way to think about genetic differences among us). We want this to be a book that deeply transforms its readers. We want everyone to have an “ah ha” moment.

Five central arguments of this book are as follows:

1 *The idea of race was invented.* Race was invented as a way to categorize and rank groups and by extension, individuals. The invention did not happen in an isolated laboratory or at one place in time. Rather, this scientific and social idea slowly took hold and became more and more real through European exploration and colonization and slavery in the Americas. In the 18th century race might have made sense because the physical (or phenotypic) differences between Europeans and others seemed to be great.

While just a human invention that is explored in the first section of this book, the idea was politically powerful because the belief in separate and unequal races was the only potentially moral and ethical justification for the inhumanities of colonization and slavery. In the first section of this book we will tell the gripping story of the interlinked social, religious, political, and scientific histories of race. Closely following the exhibit, the story is outlined in four parts.

2 *Human biological variation is real, obvious, wonderful, and necessary.* We do vary. The second section of this book provides a primer of human genetic variation; that is, how variation is patterned within individuals and among individuals and groups. Evolutionarily speaking, even if it is not the spice of life, variety is certainly a required ingredient for the survival of our species.

3 *The idea of race does not explain human variation.* The biggest myth of race is that we humans have biological races and that on a biological or, more precisely,

on a genetic level our race determines a good deal about how we differ from each other and our potentialities. The science of human variation, however, tells us otherwise. Race-as-genetic-variation is a myth. Race neither explains variation nor is a useful genetic construct. In this book, we will use a number of inter-related examples to show why this is so.

4 *Race is both stable and protean.* The idea of race is something we all share – to a degree. We argue that race today is much the same, on a fundamental level, as it was a hundred or even three hundred years ago. But the realities of race – how the ideas get into lived experiences – morph from place to place and time to time. Here, we have the opportunity to share how some of those diverse lives were lived racially. What was it like to be a Native American and to see

Europeans for the first time? What was it like to be a Japanese American during World War II? It is our expectation that understanding how race differs among diverse groups provides a deeper understanding of each group and about race itself.

5 *We own the future of race.* How we continue to understand and use race is up to us. We hold the core belief that our book will contribute to a fundamental overhaul of how various publics think and talk about race. By explaining how the power of race was used in the past to divide us, in this book we will show how this new knowledge is power to understand and reunite. Once we understand what race is and is not, race ceases to become a ready excuse for the intolerable differences in our wealth, health, and other core indicators of equality and experiences of life.

Race is a recent human invention.

It's only a few hundred years old, in comparison to the lengthy span of human history. Although not scientific, the idea of race proposed that there were significant differences among people that allowed them to be grouped into a limited number of categories or races. Yet, are we so different? All humans share a common ancestry and, because each of us represents a unique combination of ancestral traits, all humans exhibit biological variation.

From the beginning, the idea of race was tied to power and hierarchy among people, with one group being viewed as superior and others as

inferior. Despite disproving notions of hierarchy and removing social, economic and political barriers, the legacy of race continues to shape the lives and relationships of people in the U.S. and around the world.

This book may challenge popular understandings about race, raise questions, and spark critical thinking. We hope the exhibition, public website and educational materials produced by the *RACE* Project will foster dialogue in families and communities around the U.S. and help better relations among us all.

American Anthropological Association

RACE Exhibit Introductory Video Transcript

Race.

What is race?

What do we really know about race?

Here's what we do know: Race is a short word with a long history in the United States of America. Think of the history of America and our ideas of race together, mixed-up, and ever-changing. Just like this painting, race was created. It is a powerful idea that was invented by society.

Race is an enduring concept that has molded our nation's economy, laws, and social institutions. It is a complex notion that has shaped each of our destinies. Many of the ideas we now associate with race originated during the European era of exploration.

Europeans like Christopher Columbus traveled overseas and encountered, and then colonized or conquered peoples in Africa, Asia, and the Americas who looked, talked, and acted much differently from them. Naturalists and scientists then classified these differences into systems that became the foundation for the notion of race as we know it today.

In the American colonies, the first laborers were European indentured servants.

When African laborers were forcibly brought to Virginia beginning in 1619, status was defined by wealth and religion, not by physical characteristics such as skin color.

But this would change.

Over time, physical difference mattered, and with the development of the transatlantic slave trade, landowners began replacing their temporary European laborers with enslaved Africans who were held in permanent bondage. Soon a new social structure emerged based primarily on skin color, with those of English ancestry at the top and African slaves and American Indians at the bottom.

By 1776, when "all men are created equal" was written into the Declaration of Independence by a slaveholder named Thomas Jefferson, a democratic nation was born with a major contradiction

about race at its core. As our new nation asserted its independence from European tyranny, blacks and American Indians were viewed as less than human and not deserving of the same liberties as whites.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the notion of race continued to shape life in the United States. The rise of "race science" supported the common belief that people who were not white were biologically inferior. The removal of Native Americans from their lands, legalized segregation, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II are legacies of where this thinking led.

Today, science tells us that all humans share a common ancestry. And while there are differences among us, we're also very much alike.

Changing demographics in the United States and across the globe are resulting in new patterns of marriage, housing, education, employment, and new thinking about race.

Despite these advances, the legacy of race continues to affect us in a variety of ways.

Deeply held assumptions about race and enduring stereotypes make us think that gaps in wealth, health, housing, education, employment, or physical ability in sports are natural. And we fail to see the privileges that some have been granted and others denied because of skin color.

This creation, called race, has fostered inequality and discrimination for centuries.

It has influenced how we relate to each other as human beings. The American Anthropological Association has developed this exhibit to share the complicated story of race, to unravel fiction from fact, and to encourage meaningful discussions about race in schools, in the workplace, within families and communities.

Consider how your view of a painting can change as you examine it more closely.

We invite you to do the same with race. Examine and re-examine your thoughts and beliefs about race.

