

# Introduction

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Race in the United States is at once an utter illusion and a material reality, a fiction and a “scientific” fact. It is a political wedge and a unifying force. It is structured by legislation yet destabilized by judicial fiat, shaped by public opinion but also configured by academic consensus. Though historically contingent, it is constantly being transformed. The history and reality of race and racism in the United States force individuals to negotiate daily between the ideological pillars of democracy—justice, freedom, and equality—and stark racial inequality. Whether one looks to Alexis de Tocqueville or Studs Terkel, this negotiation is recognized as a fundamental character of U.S. society—what Terkel calls “the American obsession.”

In the United States, people use “commonsense” racial categories every day to identify strangers and social situations or to help form their own identities. Racial categories are often seen as “natural” or as having some inherent biological component. But some have understood for decades that categories of race in the United States have little to do with natural history and a great deal to do with social and political history.

Although they often seem immutable, racial categories are always in flux; indeed, sometimes they change rapidly. Racial categories are produced and reproduced ideologically and culturally: they are constructed. In turn, these categories structure the access of specific groups to opportunities and resources. Complex political, economic, and cultural processes on a global scale produce various racial constructs that vary during particular periods in history from solid and generally accepted to

tenuous and vigorously contested. The dynamics of this variation will become clearer as this narrative unfolds.

Since the founding of the Union, contests over what racial groups in the United States signify have been political enterprises. Though dating to the colonial period, the politics of race was woven into the Constitution and continues to dominate American culture and politics. As with most political endeavors in the United States, various individuals, groups, and coalitions simultaneously wield power, marshal authority, and sway public opinion. The construction of race is no different. No political party, interest group, or scientific organization has itself structured racial inequality. Although various interests worked in concert, the structuring of racial inequality was not orchestrated. Yet ideas about race are articulated in ways that reinforce legal, social, and economic relations among groups.

Historically, there has been a certain “resonance” between laws regarding race passed by Congress and upheld by the Supreme Court, ideas about race articulated in the mass media, and studies on race published by scientists. These institutions share specific notions about race that converge, are sometimes linked, and often influence one another. Researching, theorizing, and classifying racial groups has always been the province of anthropology.

In this book I explore the relationships and linkages between the shifting discourse on race within anthropology and the racial constructs undergoing transformation in the United States. One of my goals is to explore how anthropologists and the texts they produce contribute to the various dynamics involved in the formation of the racial category used for African Americans. I focus on the first half of the twentieth century because ideas about racial inferiority were supplanted by notions of racial equality in law, science, and public opinion; each arena played off and reinforced the other. Anthropology also matured as a discipline during these years and was affected by these changes, yet it helped to effect them. Simply put, I integrate the history of anthropology and the history of the African American experience, and by doing so I reveal intersections and linkages that have not been considered previously.

The first half of the twentieth century is bounded by two landmark U.S. Supreme Court decisions concerning the Fourteenth Amendment. Each codified a significant shift in U.S. race relations. In 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* upheld racial segregation and put forth the doctrine known as separate but equal, which allowed unequal segregated public facilities. In 1954 the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision essentially overturned

the separate-but-equal doctrine, and the Supreme Court began to mandate racial desegregation. This shift in the legal significance of racial categories coincided with a striking shift in anthropology, which provided scientific validation for first one, and then the other, interpretation of the U.S. Constitution. In 1896 Social Darwinist thought informed anthropological writings on race and offered scientific validation to proponents of racial hierarchies. By 1954, however, cultural relativism informed the anthropological research on race and culture and provided scientific support for champions of racial equality.

The relationship between the anthropological discourse on race and the prevailing racial construct has been close and often reciprocal. The processes that construct race have also helped to shape the field of anthropology; anthropology, in turn, has helped to shape various racial constructs. The social context from which turn-of-the-century constructs of race emerged—industrialization, poll taxes, public lynchings, unsafe working conditions, and Jim Crow segregation—at the same time gave rise to a professional anthropology that espoused racial inferiority and, as a consequence, supported and validated the status quo. Three decades later, social and political movements like the Great Migration, the rise of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Harlem Renaissance, the African American alliance with the Democratic Party, and the struggle for desegregation all contributed to the rise of a new paradigm in anthropology that espoused, and in turn quickened the struggle for, racial equality.

Between 1896 and 1954 anthropology played an integral role in helping to change the meaning and structure of race for African Americans. Although one can never adequately document all facets of how racial categories transform, one can identify how the justices on the Supreme Court incorporate changing scientific ideas about race in their various interpretations of the Fourteenth Amendment. The variance of the Supreme Court's interpretations of the equal-protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment is perhaps the best barometer of race relations and the changing significance of race in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Since its inception in the eighteenth century, American anthropology has been the science that takes the explanation of race and culture as its central charge. Anthropological explanations of race and culture have changed in step with larger social transformations. These explanations have not been left idle in an ivory tower but have become an active part of the social machinery that constructs racial categories, and that machinery has helped sustain the discipline of anthropology.

The anthropological discourse on race feeds into the larger discourses out of which it is itself constructed. For example, lawmakers have used anthropology to write legislation that shapes public policy, and journalists have used it to produce media that shape public opinion. The discipline of anthropology, in turn, is validated by this sort of appropriation.

Science and law continue to play a leading role in the formation of racial categories. Both fields are largely shaped by powerful elites yet checked or curtailed by public intellectuals.<sup>2</sup> Each contributes to the processes that form and reform the permanent, though flexible, social modality of race. Race contributes to the shape and tenor of political parties, federal and state agencies, labor and financial markets; it plays an undeniable role in what we sometimes sum up with the phrase “life chances.” In turn, these inspire cultural strategies, political initiatives, or organizational efforts to contest or reproduce these projects.<sup>3</sup> Science and law not only inform but also transform the boundaries of opportunity for the empowerment of racial groups. Science and law change over time, and individuals working with and within the methodologies and institutions of these disciplines actually effect the changes. Civil rights activists have used these fields to change how racial meanings are attributed, how racial identities are assigned or embraced, and what the various categories of race mean—psychologically, symbolically, and structurally.

During the first part of the twentieth century, scholars and activists engaged in fighting racial inequality were attracted to science and jurisprudence because the paradigms and doctrines of each field could ostensibly be changed with new arguments and evidence. They believed they could gather evidence to change scientific arguments about racial inferiority and gather evidence to change constitutional arguments for racial segregation.

Entry into the fields of law and science before World War II was difficult and almost exclusively limited to male members of America’s elite. Those who obtained degrees that gave them the authority to challenge the prevailing scientific and legal arguments on race were mostly African American and White (often Jewish) men; Native American, Japanese American, Latino, and Chinese American men, as well as all women, faced almost insurmountable barriers to these fields. While this study investigates the construction of racial categories, it focuses specifically on how certain Black men and White men fought together in an effort to obtain equality for African Americans by transforming science

and the law, which in turn changed how race was signified culturally and structured socially for all racial groups in the United States. The first four chapters generally show how anthropology became a professional and scientific discipline in the United States, in part because early ethnologists provided scientific support for widely held ideas about the racial inferiority of people of color and about the superiority of White American citizens.

The first chapter begins with some historical background of the dynamics that led to the unique construction of race in the United States. It also outlines the development of anthropology before it was an academic discipline associated with museums and universities. I review the racialized politics between the North and the South to demonstrate that sociobiological conceptions of racial inferiority served as an ideological glue to reunite these regions by 1896, when William McKinley was elected president and the Court handed down *Plessy*. Chapter 2 looks at John Wesley Powell, Daniel G. Brinton, and Frederic Ward Putnam, the American ethnologists who were the most instrumental in establishing anthropology as a professional discipline. I document how these men established anthropology through the articulation of notions of racial inferiority and a unique form of Social Darwinism. Chapter 3 details the role anthropology played in popular culture. I explore the world's fairs of 1893 and 1904 and then look at how journalists, editors, and legislators marshaled anthropological findings to shape opinions about racial inferiority in the media. I suggest in chapter 4 that the progressive movement, spearheaded by Theodore Roosevelt, merely recycled older notions of Social Darwinism; and I explain that the eugenics movement of the 1920s and 1930s was merely the practical application of ideas of inferiority by the state.

The fifth chapter shows the transition from an understanding of race embedded in evolutionist notions to a view grounded in concepts of racial equality and cultural relativity. I take up here how Franz Boas was instrumental in reshaping anthropological thinking about race and culture. Scientists steeped in Social Darwinism viewed race and culture as one and the same, arguing that cultural traits were merely race traits and tendencies. Boas built a heavily documented refutation of these ideas, asserting that culture was separate from biology and not reducible to it. I also show that Boas and W. E. B. Du Bois developed similar concepts of race and culture concurrently by detailing the often overlooked relationship between these two scholars. The final chapters discuss how members of the New Negro Movement used Boasian ideas about

culture to promote cultural achievement and how members of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund (LDEF) used Boasian theories on race to underpin arguments for school desegregation that culminated with *Brown*. Chapters 6 and 7 explore the role of anthropology “behind the veil” or within the cultural transformations that occurred during the New Negro Movement of the 1920s. Many intellectuals of the New Negro Movement or the Harlem Renaissance were interested in documenting African cultural continuities within the New World. Concurrently, Boas and several of his students were producing studies on Negro folklore doing the same thing. The *Journal of American Folk-Lore* (JAFL), under the editorship of Boas or one of his associates, was the vehicle in which these two enterprises converged. During the 1920s more than a dozen “Negro numbers” were published. These were special issues devoted to Negro life and culture and included contributions from Blacks and Whites in and outside of anthropology.

Chapter 8 discusses how Howard University emerged as the center for the study of race relations during the 1930s. While Boas and his students developed a tightly knit discourse on racial equality and cultural relativity, the scholars centered at Howard University unraveled it by jettisoning the idea about cultural relativity and embracing the idea about racial equality. The Howard scholars did not want to celebrate the African retentions in Negro culture; they argued that Negroes should assimilate so-called American culture. This same approach was incorporated in Gunnar Myrdal’s 1944 *An American Dilemma*. Myrdal’s work was influential and came on the heels of the Jewish Holocaust. Together they helped change the way in which many Americans thought about government-sponsored racism.

Chapter 9 examines the specific role anthropology played in the desegregation movement. The principal attorneys in the LDEF were trained or taught at Howard University. The arguments they employed during the late 1940s and early 1950s to fight against segregated schools in the court system rested on the social science produced by their colleagues from Howard. When *An American Dilemma* became widely acclaimed, the LDEF presented the premise of Myrdal’s study as Exhibit A to the Supreme Court in *Brown*. The Supreme Court, in turn, relied on this social science to justify its reinterpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment, which theoretically overturned *Plessy* with regard to public education. The role anthropology played in *Brown* is the role it played in *An American Dilemma*. It was the basis for asserting that the environment shaped cultural differences and that there was no proof of any

racial inferiority. This Boasian theme is a pillar for both the Howard studies during the 1930s and Myrdal's volume.

## Framing Contemporary Discussions

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In the late 1990s the United States is experiencing another racial realignment, in which, literally, the terms and conditions of being a member of any racial group are transforming. While anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists continue to embrace Boas's critique of racial categories, the critiques of race as a biological concept have led many to embrace a color-blind thesis that denies the existence of even socially constructed racial categories. This approach eschews the simple question: Why does *racism* continue to exist if there are no races in the natural world?<sup>4</sup> The denial of categories of race can support arguments for a so-called color-blind society that has been used to erode affirmative action programs and majority-minority voting districts. Faye V. Harrison has suggested that since the late 1980s and early 1990s anthropologists have been "overcoming denial" and contributing to an intensifying multidisciplinary discourse exploring complex dimensions of race, racism, and identities.<sup>5</sup>

As part of this movement anthropologists are rehistoricizing race and uncovering previously buried anthropological contributions by people of color. To appreciate the current revitalization of the anthropology of racial meanings, structures of inequality, and forms of resistance, the interpenetrating pasts of both race and anthropology must be rehistoricized.<sup>6</sup> What can we learn by rehistoricizing science and, more specifically, rehistoricizing how anthropology contributed to processes of racial formation? I hope that by better understanding how and why racial science was used in the past, we can better understand the force behind racial science and racial politics today.

In the following chapters I unwittingly address two specific threads in the contemporary discourse on race coming from two important institutions—the U.S. Supreme Court and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). I actually offer a counternarrative to Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and AEI Resident Scholar Dinesh D'Souza's use of the history of anthropology.

## Exposing the Right's Wrong

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U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thomas rewrote the role social science played in *Brown* in his concurring decision to *Missouri v. Jenkins* in June 1995. In so doing he bolstered conservative ideas about race and culture and formulated a powerful revision of the once-sacrosanct ideal of racial equality embedded in *Brown*.

*Missouri v. Jenkins* was one of three decisions delivered during the Supreme Court's 1994–1995 term that crippled federal legislation to equalize opportunity for people of color in public education, congressional elections, and federal affirmative action programs. While narrow majorities prevailed in each case (5–4), the decisions came on the heels of the Republican takeover of the House and the Senate, the House Republicans' "Contract with America," a national debate on the merits of affirmative action, and the meteoric sales of *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*.<sup>7</sup> In *Missouri v. Jenkins*, the Court ruled that a Missouri federal district court improperly ordered the state to pay for a program to desegregate Kansas City's public schools.

In his concurring decision, Associate Justice Thomas framed his seemingly persuasive opinion by stating: "It never ceases to amaze me that the courts are so willing to assume that anything that is predominantly black must be inferior. . . . The mere fact that a school is black does not mean that it is the product of a constitutional violation." Thomas supported halting the district court's desegregation plan because it cited *Brown* as its rationale. "In *Brown v. Board of Education*," Thomas argued, "the Court noted several psychological and sociological studies purporting to show that *de jure* segregation harmed black students by generating 'a feeling of inferiority' in them." He concluded that "this approach not only relies upon questionable social science research rather than constitutional principle, but it also rests on an assumption of black inferiority."<sup>8</sup> By using only the term *black*, Thomas skillfully blurred the line between race and culture. As well, he sidestepped explaining how the arguments in *Brown* were based on ideas of racial equality and ideas of cultural assimilation. Thomas simply collapsed the concepts of race and culture into an ostensibly commonsense idea about "black inferiority." Thomas's entire argument, however, falls apart when one puts it in historical context or simply asks: What do you mean by *black*? My research demonstrates that LDEF members clearly distin-

guished race from culture, and they did not employ ideas that African Americans were somehow inferior racially or biologically.

Clarence Thomas has not been alone in recent attempts to reinvent U.S. social science to bolster a conservative political agenda. Dinesh D'Souza, in *The End of Racism*,<sup>9</sup> attempted to argue that “multiculturalism is a political movement based on a denial of Western cultural superiority.”<sup>10</sup> He did this, in part, by leveling an indictment on Franz Boas and his students for challenging notions of Social Darwinism and advancing ideas of cultural relativism.<sup>11</sup> D'Souza suggested that “the logic of cultural relativism leads directly to proportional representation, which is the underpinning of American civil rights law.” He deplores the fact that “relativism generates an expectation of group equality.”<sup>12</sup> Like Thomas, D'Souza rewrote the history of social science that underpinned *Brown*. D'Souza argued that “Thurgood Marshall spearheaded a direct attack on segregation, and chose to premise it on the findings of Boasian relativism.”<sup>13</sup> This is where D'Souza is not accurate. My research demonstrates how D'Souza failed to comprehend that Thurgood Marshall only employed the Boasian notion of racial equality and not his ideas of cultural relativity in the arduous litigation leading to *Brown*. D'Souza's entire argument falls apart as well if one puts it in historic context or simply points out that the LDEF attorneys rejected Boas's ideas of cultural relativity but embraced his idea of racial equality. Although Thomas and D'Souza articulated similar ideas about a so-called color-blind society, they used different interpretations of the history of anthropology—and neither was accurate. Even though I do not explicitly engage these holes in both Thomas's and D'Souza's work, it is clear that the historiography of science and its role in racial formation remain salient today.

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