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RACE AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION. In recent years, scholars have come to understand race not as a static, objective, or natural reality, but as a social construction. While human beings have exhibited tremendous physical variation for millennia, the meanings and significance attached to those differences are both culturally and historically specific, and constantly in flux. To be a woman or to be black has had a variety of connotations and expectations in different historical contexts, and across regional and class lines. Throughout American history, one's educational, political, and economic opportunities have largely been prescribed or circumscribed on the basis of gender and race, a matter of particular import for black women. As historian Deborah Gray White notes,

> the uniqueness of the African American female's situation is that she stands at the crossroads of two of the most well-developed ideologies in America, that regarding women and that regarding the Negro. . . . As if by design, white males have been the primary beneficiaries of both sets of myths which, not surprisingly, contain common elements in that both blacks and women are characterized as infantile, irresponsible, submissive, and promiscuous.
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> (White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*?, p. 27)

The social construction of race is fundamentally a story of power, in which those in positions of political, economic, and social authority create and recreate categories of difference and assign meaning and value on the basis of those categories to maintain and naturalize their own dominance. But it is also a story of resistance, in which African Americans have continually challenged pervasive inequality and negative stereotypes and in turn created identities for themselves.

The very concept of "race" as a means of categorizing people according to superficial physical characteristics is a relatively recent invention, one that both coincides with and shapes the history of America itself. In early modern Europe, race referred not to skin color and physical features—the characteristics it is most closely associated with today—but to human lineage. In a culture in which property rights and social status were inherited, bloodlines were the predominant way of categorizing people; descent determined the life they would live and the role they would play in society. Over time, as Europeans encountered people who looked quite different from themselves, during the age of exploration and colonization, this lineage-based concept of race as members of the same "stock" gradually gave way to one based on physical characteristics. However, exactly when and why this happened has been a source of major debate among historians since the 1950s.

Africans and Europeans have interacted to some extent since antiquity, and European art, literature, and culture includes both positive and negative depictions of Africans. Some scholars have noted that the color black often carried connotations of evil or darkness in early modern European culture, associations that may have influenced European perceptions of the darker-skinned people they came across in their explorations. Travel narratives written during this period have provided historians rich insight into those perceptions during initial colonial encounters. The reaction Europeans had to the Africans and Native Americans they encountered on their expeditions were complex and often contradictory, and much of their writing focused on the bodies of women. European travelers sometimes described black women as exotically beautiful and innocent, other times as grotesque, bestial, savage, and licentious. Both hinted at stereotypes of black women that would further develop under slavery. However, these early negative portrayals of Africans were more a symptom of xenophobia than what we would call racism today: Europeans showed nearly equal dislike and distrust of most foreigners, even other Europeans from different cultures. But chattel slavery is not the inevitable result of perceived difference. How and why Africans came to be enslaved in America has caused considerable disagreement among historians for decades, in what has become known as the "origins debate."

At the center of the debate is the question of whether racial prejudice predated and precipitated slavery or vice versa. Because Virginia was the first of the American colonies to institutionalize slavery, its history has often been at the center of this debate. Though Jamestown colonists had purchased twenty Africans from Dutch slave traders in 1619, the colony did not adopt slave laws until forty years later. The status of those Africans before the slave laws were enacted in the 1660s and 1670s is

NINE AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN at Atlanta University. From *Negro Life in Georgia*, compiled and prepared by W. E. B. Du Bois (Vol. 4, No. 341). Du Bois's albums of photographs of African Americans were exhibited at the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1900. (Daniel Murray Collection, Library of Congress.)

unclear, though for centuries historians generally assumed that Africans had always been enslaved upon arrival in the colonies. Beginning with a 1950 article in the *William and Mary Quarterly* by Mary and Oscar Handlin entitled "Origins of the Southern Labor System," some historians have argued that blacks were originally indentured servants, and were awarded with the same rights of liberty as Europeans once their indentures were completed. Only over time, as the needs and circumstances of colonial society changed, did they become lifelong slaves. Conditions in the early colonies were harsh, and the labor supply began to dwindle. In an effort to attract more Europeans to the colonies, their terms of indenture were shortened, while Africans were increasingly held in service for life. Furthermore, indentured servants of all creeds were prone to running away before their indenture was completed, and there was often little to be done. The physical distinctiveness that set the African servants apart from their European counterparts thus provided an added impetus toward racialized servitude, as skin color became a convenient marker of service that made running away all the more difficult. As servitude became increasingly racialized and lifelong, prejudice toward African Americans developed because they had become associated with the lowest possible economic status.

Critics of this interpretation have argued instead that racial prejudice preceded and facilitated slavery, contending that white and black indentured servants were treated differently from the onset, with blacks subjected to longer terms of service and punished more harshly when they attempted to run away. However, evidence of color prejudice from the onset does not fully explain the adoption of chattel slavery in the colonies. Ultimately, economic interests would fuel the transition from indenture to slavery, as it became the most profitable source of labor.

Slavery and Nation-Building

Economic imperatives would also ensure that slavery would become an institution reserved specifically for those of African descent, rather than other groups also distinguishable from Europeans by skin color or customs. One counter to the argument that the enslavement of Africans in the American colonies derived from entrenched aversion amongst Europeans to black physicality is the fact that the colonists also attempted to enslave Native Americans, for whom they held no long-established distaste that predated the colonial context and whom they often portrayed as physically attractive in travel narratives and diaries. Native American slavery failed because it was unsuccessful rather than unpopular. The Native Americans, predominantly from hunter-gatherer societies, proved ill-suited to agricultural labor and all too susceptible to European diseases, which decimated Native populations. By contrast, African slavery flourished for economic reasons. The British entrance into the trans-Atlantic slave trade ensured a never ending supply of slaves, and better living conditions that increased the lifespan of slaves in the colonies made the enslavement of Africans very profitable indeed.

In the mid-seventeenth century, Virginia gradually codified slavery into law. By 1670, Virginia had passed acts of legislation that declared all black women tithable as land laborers, and determined that all children born to black women would inherit their mother's status, which was more and more likely to be "slave" as the century drew to a close. This law of inheriting slave status through the mother did not only implicitly condone the sexual exploitation of black women at the hands of white men, it made it profitable by increasing the slave population. It also became clear that tolerance of miscegenation would only be one sided: legislation passed in 1691 declared that a white woman who bore an illegitimate mulatto child would be heavily fined, and that any white person who intermarried would be permanently banished from the colony, along with her black, mulatto, or Indian spouse. By the dawn of the eighteenth century, African Americans and slaves had become virtually synonymous under custom and law in Virginia, with the other colonies soon following suit.

Though European colonists had initially distinguished themselves from Africans and Native Americans on the basis of religious and cultural differences, it soon became clear that organizing society around differences that could be surmounted would not allow them to maintain their own power, authority, and dominance. People could convert, cultures could adapt; the colonists needed another basis for conferring status, one that was immutable and easily apparent. Color gradually became the basis through which difference was constructed and maintained. The colonists constructed themselves no longer as Anglo Christians, distinguished from the heathens in their mix, but over time as "white," an amorphous and inchoate category that was defined not so much by what it was as by what it was not—African or Native. It was also a category to which they increasingly attached the rights and privileges of citizenship, as they were being defined in a soon-to-be nation headed ever closer to war and independence.

The rhetoric of the American Revolution, with its language of equality, protection from tyranny, and the "rights of man," seems to conflict with the reality of a slave society, but many historians have argued that when envisioning a democratic society, the Founding Fathers had really intended that ideal to apply only to white, propertied men. Thomas Jefferson, who wrote so eloquently about the ideals of democracy in the Declaration of Independence, was himself a slave owner, and proposed in his widely read text, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, written in the 1780s, that blacks were most likely naturally and irreconcilably inferior. One of the most poignant ironies of American history is that the development of democracy coincided and coexisted with the expansion and entrenchment of chattel slavery. It was not an irony lost on African Americans during and after the Revolutionary period. Throughout American history, black intellectuals and activists would continue to invoke the language of the Revolution to demand their rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Scientific Racism

While slavery had been in place for over a century by the Revolution, and implicit beliefs in black difference and inferiority pervasive in American culture perhaps even longer, it was not until the early nineteenth century that a number of influential scientists set out to "prove" that alleged inferiority, often in the name of defending America's "peculiar institution." During the nineteenth century, a time period characterized by cultural conflict between religion and science, racial thought and ideology increasingly drew upon science for legitimacy and authority. However, this shift to a scientific mode of racial discourse represents a culmination of several broader trends in Western culture that had been taking shape over the

previous century. The eighteenth century has often been characterized as the "Age of Reason," a period also known as the Enlightenment. This period in much of European and American culture was marked by a growing belief that the universe was governed not by the daily involvement of God in all aspects of life, but by natural laws and universal truths, an understanding of which could be obtained through rational thought and science. People were increasingly cosmopolitan, moving away from a strictly agrarian society and clustering more and more in towns and cities, with more diverse populations living in closer proximity to one another. After centuries of feudalism and monarchy, philosophers and intellectuals now pondered such questions as the natural rights of man, the features of a just society, and emerging concepts of democracy. The concepts of reason and religion were by no means mutually exclusive, but rather deeply intertwined in the growing faith in a natural order, ordained by God and explicable through science.

As European exploration, colonization, and international trade persisted, the West continued to encounter new peoples and previously unknown and seemingly limitless species of plants and animals, resulting in an increasing interest in categorizing the natural world, including man. Swedish naturalist Carolus Linneaus developed a system of categorizing organisms according to physical characteristics and similarities, introduced in his 1735 text, *Systema naturae*. This system of Linnaean taxonomy, elements of which are still taught and used by scientists today, included man as a species that could be further divided into four categories based primarily on geographic origin: *Homo europeaus*, *Homo asiaticus*, *Homo afer*, and *Homo americanus*. Predating the concept of evolution by a century, Linnaeus seems to have intended merely to catalog plant, animal, and human variation, without necessarily any implication of hierarchy or change among the species over time. However, the issue of how and for what purpose to categorize human beings predominated racial thought in the century to follow, and persisted even into the early twenty-first century.

Scientists—both professional and self-declared—throughout the nineteenth century continued to divide humanity into subcategories, the number of which varied over time and among different scientists. Ethnology emerged as a field of scientific study that compared groups of human beings according to a number of physical and cultural characteristics, and extrapolated broadly about the character and abilities of each group on the basis of ostensibly objective findings. Over the course of the nineteenth century, various overlapping sciences of race—including anthropology, ethnology, and comparative anatomy, among others—emerged and began to look to the human body to reveal the true nature and fate of the races. Scientists endlessly compared the physical features of the races and ranked them hierarchically. Not surprisingly, white scientists, even those who did not use their findings specifically in the defense of slavery, consistently ranked Caucasians at the top of the order, and those of African descent at the bottom. However, nineteenth-century racial discourse was by no means monolithic or simple; it changed over time and there was considerable debate and contestation among scientists.

Starting in the early nineteenth century, arguments about race often centered on the debate between monogenesis and polygenesis. The traditional belief in monogenesis, or the single origin of the races, reflected both scientific and religious views. The biblical story of Creation describes all mankind as descending from Adam and Eve, and religious ideology was deeply entrenched in American culture, politics, and science. Samuel Stanhope Smith, an early and widely respected authority in the field, made a case for monogenesis in his *Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species*, originally published in 1787 and reprinted in an expanded version in 1810. He argued that all races of man were members of the same species and shared a common ancestry. Current physical differences resulted from environmental factors, particularly climate, and the divergent lifestyles of "savagery" and "civilization." Like most of his contemporaries who subscribed to the theory of monogenesis, he argued that other races had degenerated from the white, superior race—the human norm by which all others were defined as deviant or deficient. Smith believed that blacks could become equal to whites, subject to the same environmental and lifestyle conditions, but only by literally turning white through subsequent generations. For Smith, climate and environment could be used to explain both the physical and mental characteristics of man.

Smith's theories went relatively unchallenged in America until the publication of the book *Thoughts on the Original Unity of the Human Race* in 1830 by Dr. Charles Caldwell, who had begun to attack Smith's argument in essays dating back to 1811. Under the guise of scientific authority, Caldwell argued for polygenesis, or the separate creation of the races as distinct species, drawing on biblical chronology and asserting that the "superior" white intellect could not be due simply to differences in environment, but rather must be an innate "gift of nature." While Caldwell attempted to disavow the use of his work in defense of slavery, it made little difference and the ethnologists who followed him rarely bothered to make such disclaimers. Ethnographic studies were frequently utilized in the debate over slavery, and they would remain an important "authority" on the "Negro question" well past Emancipation and into the twentieth century.

The idea that the races had separate origins, which contradicted the Creation story central to Judeo-Christian religion, was widely considered heretical among American religious leaders, much of the general population, and even other scientists who disagreed not with the notion of black inferiority but with how it had allegedly come to be. The middle decades of the nineteenth century marked the emergence of the "American school of ethnology," originated by Dr. Samuel George Morton's *Crania Americana* and *Crania Aegyptiaca* (written in collaboration with an Egyptologist, George R. Gliddon), which claimed to put an end to speculation by relying instead on "empirical fact." In his study of human skulls, he concluded that each race had changed little, if at all, in regards to physical characteristics and, by implication, mental abilities. By his assertion, blacks were and always would be inferior to whites, and they had been created as a separate species most suited to a life of savagery in the wilds of Africa. *Types of Mankind*, an 1854 anthology of writings within the "American school," declared ethnology to be "eminently a science for American culture." This form of applied anthropology could thus be utilized in justifying the institution of slavery as a "benevolent" institution that actually "improved" the physical and moral conditions of African Americans, through their proximity to and containment within white civilization, representing the highest level of development that could be expected from this "primitive" and "inferior" race. After Morton's death, Dr. Josiah C. Nott of Alabama became the most enthusiastic, vocal, and venomous advocate of the new American ethnology. In an excerpt from his work included in *Types of Mankind*, he naturalizes the racial status quo as something unchangeable by human laws or charity, and describes the world as the eminent domain of the white race, which was destined and sanctioned by God to conquer and rule. The popularity and widespread acceptance of Nott's pseudoscientific theories sheds important light on the culture in which it was so readily received. Rather than simply a debate among scientists, the racist theories Nott and other ethnologists espoused were pervasive in various forms throughout American culture writ large and codified in law and public policy.

Evolution and Social Darwinism

The theory of polygenesis was never universally accepted, however. Blacks themselves challenged such negative assessments, especially the notion of different origins of the races, and continually evoked the biblical story of the Creation in defense of their place in the human family. Moreover, many white northerners and southerners alike, despite their overwhelming acceptance of Nott's claim regarding black inferiority, continued to object to his heretical tendencies, though it rarely stopped them from citing his findings in defense of slavery and racial inequality.

Nonetheless, Nott's argument, as articulated in *Types of Mankind* is representative of nineteenth century ethnology in its insistence on the "practical fact" of racial difference and hierarchy regardless of how it originated, and the firm belief that one's moral character and intellectual ability could be read through careful study of the body.

The 1859 publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, subtitled "The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life," marked a significant turning point in ethnological study and scientific racism. While Darwin's original text was not primarily interested in questions of race, it had obvious appeal and important implications for those who were. Furthermore, Darwin himself later applied his theory of "survival of the fittest" to human beings, arguing in the 1871 text, *Descent of Man*, that the extinction of "savage races" of man was no less inevitable or natural than the extinction of plant or animal species that are somehow inferior or without purpose, predicting that the "savage" races would eventually die out or be exterminated by the "civilized."

Initial resistance to evolutionary theory stemmed from the conflicts among ethnologists over mono- or polygenist origins of race. The American school of ethnology at first found Darwinism, with its insistence on species deriving from a common ancestor, to be incompatible with its own prevailingly polygenist beliefs. However, while Darwinism may not have advocated the belief that Africans were created as a distinct and inferior race, it did not deny the possibility that over the course of human history, they had progressed more slowly than their European counterparts and thus evolved as inferior in their capacity for rule or even survival. In other words, the "practical fact" of black inferiority remained unchallenged by Social Darwinist thought, as the application of evolutionary theory to human beings and society has become known among scholars. Races were ranked along a scale of evolutionary progress, with the "civilized" Anglo-Saxons on one end of the spectrum, and "savage," "primitive" races on the other. This hierarchical ranking of bodies according to physical characteristics provided the framework for "proving" social inferiority and the denial of legal rights on that basis. These racial rankings long outlived their original ideological function in defense of slavery. They continued to be utilized throughout the Reconstruction period to justify the ongoing oppression of the newly freed slaves, who were considered so low on the evolutionary scale that they were incapable of exercising the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

Race and gender were deeply intertwined in evolutionary theory, which argued that both women and Africans represented an earlier stage of evolution than white men, the pinnacle of human evolution. According to this theory, women and African Americans were at the same stage of

development as white male children. The latter, however, would progress and grow over the course of their lifetime, but women and blacks would remain stunted in intellectual and emotional childhood. Gender and sex had another essential role in the ranking of races according to evolutionary progress: sexual differentiation was seen as a sign of a race's status on the evolutionary scale. Ethnologists perceived Caucasian races to be more sexually differentiated in both body and social gender roles, and thus were more highly evolved—physically and morally—than black men and women, who were, in an inherently contradictory sense, often viewed as hypermasculine or hyperfeminine, respectively, and yet also nearly indistinguishable from each other in regards to sex.

Challenging Scientific Racism

Though it has often been portrayed as such by earlier historical scholarship, the debate over the character and abilities of the races that characterized ethnology was not simply a one-sided discussion. Rather than simply the subject of racial discourse, African Americans actively participated in defining themselves as possessing unique qualities and talents, while also arguing for the shared origins of the races. In attempting to defend the black race from pervasive racist ideology, they literally had to defend their humanity in a society determined to portray and treat them as animals. Moreover, black ethnologists completely turned the attacks against them back upon their attackers, whose ideology robbed African Americans of their past and attempted to justify denying them a future as full U.S. citizens. To counter the charge by white ethnologists that blacks had no history worthy of mention, black ethnologists presented an alternative narrative of a glorious black past and pointed to the accomplishments of early black societies such as Ethiopia. Black ethnologists also argued that the white race was generally angry and aggressive, turning the very "illustrious" history to which whites often pointed to assert their natural dominance and superiority on its head to argue instead that whites were barbarous, bloodthirsty warmongers. Against the "Angry Saxon" they constructed blacks as peaceful, artistic, and religious. And while still using masculinist rhetoric to assert their manhood rights, they often left black women out of the equation entirely. Ethnology, in many ways, literally became a debate over the "rights of man," and who exactly should count as a man. Though black ethnologists and intellectuals faced a Herculean task in attempting to develop a logical argument to refute the entirely illogical racist rhetoric of the day, they often fell prey to the same racial essentialism as their adversaries, and ended up reifying the category of race itself.

Another major, and ultimately quite successful, challenge to the tenets of ethnology came from anthropologist Franz Boas, himself a recent immigrant to the United States. Beginning in the 1890s, the founder of modern cultural anthropology argued that science had not proven any clear link between race and intellectual abilities. In the following decades, Boas and his supporters further argued against the existence of any innate differences between groups of people, and amassed considerable evidence in support of his claim. Through careful study, he concluded that physical traits varied greatly across generations and among peoples considered the same "race." Moreover, he emphasized the importance of culture and environmental factors in describing human variation, rather than innate characteristics that marked entire groups as irrevocably inferior.

Though the work of Boas and other cultural anthropologists presented a real challenge to scientific racism, it did not die overnight, nor did it ever disappear completely. Scientists continued their attempts to identify quantifiable differences between the races throughout the twentieth century, with social scientists joining the fray with comparative studies in every conceivable category, from intelligence to sexual behavior. The December 2003 issue of *Scientific American* took up the issue in its cover article, the title of which queried "Does Race Exist?," and declared, not unlike ethnologists a century ago, "Science Has the Answer." While science has not given up the issue of race, more and more scientists have come to conclude there is no biological basis for the concept of race itself. In particular, developments in DNA research have shown there to be more genetic variation within the traditionally constructed racial groups than between them, and that nothing beyond superficial physical traits such as hair or eye color can be genetically linked to those groups. At the turn of the twentieth century, however, science was gradually losing authority over the question of race, which increasingly would become a matter for the courts. As scientific theories of inferiority died out, they nonetheless remained imbedded in popular culture and codified into law.

Cultural Representations

From the antebellum period through the early twentieth century, the assessments of African American character and abilities espoused by racist pseudoscientists were also reflected in American popular culture, in which blacks were often reduced to several pervasive caricatures or stereotypes. Advertising, editorial cartoons, magazine illustrations, popular literature, and, later, films provided a visual counterpart to the image of African Americans painted in ethnology. Like most stereotypes, rather than reflecting real black life and experience, these tropes represented a convenient and self-serving means for white elites to justify and naturalize existing inequalities by

either denigrating blacks as deserving of nothing better or representing them as content with their lot in life. Black men in the antebellum era and beyond were often represented as subservient, docile, lazy, and childlike. The flip side to this "Sambo" character was the "black brute" stereotype, which gained particular currency around the turn of the century as black men, now emancipated from institutional slavery, sought their rights as citizens, thereby challenging white male dominance by their very presence in public and political life. Racist scientists and politicians alike promoted the idea that, freed from the supposedly civilizing bonds of slavery, the black man was reverting back to his "natural" state of savagery and licentiousness. Black masculinity was both denied by an anxious white patriarchy through infantalizing language, cultural representation, and treatment, and simultaneously feared as an animalistic, unrestrained, and savage lust that must be controlled.

At a time when "manhood rights" and citizenship were synonymous and implicitly white, the increasing economic and electoral power of enfranchised black men during Reconstruction threatened to undermine the deeply entrenched white patriarchal power structure in place for centuries. That political threat became highly sexualized in political and cultural discourse. Black men were impugned as savage beasts driven to rape white women as a means of intimidation to keep them out of the voting booths and from obtaining full citizenship rights. The trope of the "black beast rapist" was also used to justify lynching, which peaked in number around the turn of the century but continued well into the twentieth. However, even during that time, black journalist and anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett pointed out that many of the black men who were lynched were never even accused of rape, let alone convicted of it. She also exposed the sexual double standards along racial lines in which white men had for centuries raped black women with impunity, yet a black man could be tortured and killed for merely looking at a white woman or having a consensual relationship with her. Moreover, white women were put on pedestals as objects needing careful protection at any cost, yet black women were afforded no such protection of their bodies or reputations no matter how respectable their behavior.

That a black woman's reputation could be impugned so easily pointed to the fact that black women, like black men, were also often stereotyped as wanton and lascivious, and defined in large part by their sexuality. However, as was also the case with black men, black female sexuality in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American racial and racist discourse was marked by paradox, represented by contradictory stereotypes in which they were either hypersexual seductresses, manly workhorses,

or asexual Mammies. At issue in each of these competing—though intertwined and mutually reinforcing—tropes were black women's femininity and sexuality. The "Mammy" stereotype was invoked to some extent during the antebellum period as a justification for slavery, by presenting female house slaves as happy and fulfilled in their caretaker roles. It reached the height of its popularity after Emancipation through the 1940s as a nostalgic symbol of a time when white elites could expect to have their every whim attended to by an ever-present, eager to please Mammy. Though she may or may not have had children of her own, it was her benevolent white employers who were her real family, on whom she doted, and who in turn loved their loyal servant. The selfless, resourceful, and maternal Mammy figure, epitomized by Hattie McDaniel's role in the popular 1939 film, *Gone With the Wind*, was usually represented as older, obese, and most often very dark-skinned. More than likely this was a deliberate attempt to desexualize "Mammy" by presenting her as the opposite of mainstream standards of beauty and thus unappealing to white men who, in reality, were all too prone to preying sexually on black female domestics.

To the extent that Mammy was represented as asexual, the Jezebel stereotype of black womanhood was characterized as innately promiscuous, hypersexual, and lewd. The Jezebel character was portrayed as dangerous, for she was wildly seductive and capable of manipulating even the most "upstanding" men. Like the Mammy character, the Jezebel stereotype was largely a white invention to obscure or justify the sexual exploitation of black women. Whereas Mammy was created as an asexual maternal figure that no white man would ever desire to counter the all too real appearance of house slaves often chosen for the position for their likeness to white standards of beauty, the Jezebel was created as a hypersexual temptress who could not be raped because it was she who did the seducing. Black women were portrayed as so degraded, that they deserved neither protection nor respect. The Jezebel stereotype conveniently explained the preponderance of light-skinned slave children as the product not of rape or exploitation, but of willing seduction by calculating black women seeking status, lighter work, or material reward through their intimate relations with white men.

From the colonial period on, black women were associated with labor. Often this association translated into the belief that black women were more physically capable of and even divinely ordained for hard labor than their stereotypically delicate white counterparts. Even though in reality white women often worked alongside black women on farms and plantations before and after the shift from a system of indenture to racialized slavery, only black women were taxed as laborers, reflecting the

belief that white women's work was supplemental or temporary, and black women's labor expected or obligatory. In a vicious Catch-22, black women were forced to labor either under slavery or by economic necessity resulting from racial inequalities after Emancipation, then deemed manly or defeminized as a result. This characterization of black women as manly gave rise to another related stereotype, which historians have deemed Sapphire. Like Mammy, Sapphire is outspoken and tenacious, but whereas Mammy's maternal role keeps her within the bounds of Victorian gender ideals, Sapphire is portrayed as both emasculating and masculinzed, nurturing to neither white children nor her own kin. Sapphire is fundamentally a usurper of male privilege. Like the Jezebel character, Sapphire is represented as less than a woman, and thus undeserving of the protections afforded to proper ladies, yet not a man, despite her masculine persona, affording her none of the rights associated with (white) manhood.

While seemingly contradictory, each of these stereotypes reinforced one another and served an important ideological function in naturalizing, justifying, and maintaining white dominance and the sexual and economic exploitation of black women. More importantly, though they were perhaps most explicit in the early to mid-twentieth century, these stereotypes have not disappeared; each persists in a slightly updated and arguably more coded fashion today.

Class, Appearance, and Identity

In the last decade, historians have often focused on the turn-of-the-twentieth century as a period during which issues of class, gender, and race most acutely coalesced. Known among scholars as the "cult of domesticity," the Victorian era idealized both the home and women's supposedly natural place within it. The emphasis on maintaining separate spheres—public and private—along gender lines was encoded in nearly every aspect of American culture. It was a man's duty to be a responsible citizen and patriarch, protecting the virtue of white womanhood at any cost. Women were supposed to be weak, nurturing, delicate, and pure, ensconced in the home where they would derive great pleasure and fulfillment in their roles as wives and mothers. White women were increasingly idealized, constructed in opposition to the negative portrayals of black women in American culture, and in need of protection from the perceived threat of black male sexuality.

The gendered ideology of domesticity was both profoundly racialized and classed. White men responded to black emancipation and enfranchisement, and the surge in immigration from "less desirable" regions of Europe, by constructing manhood and citizenship as inherently "white." Yet who exactly counted as "white" was a point of near constant contestation and change during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. How that category came to be constructed and continually reconstructed has generated a rich interdisciplinary field of scholarship that has revealed important new insights into the interplay of race, class, and power in America.

Race and notions of "fitness for citizenship" had been inseparable since the eighteenth century, when the country's first naturalization law in 1790 limited naturalized citizenship to "free white persons." However, as groups of "undesirable" Europeans immigrated in larger numbers, peaking from the 1840s to the 1920s, the very basis for defining "race" came under intense political and scientific debate. When the Irish arrived, for instance, they certainly appeared white, if skin color was the determining factor of race, and thus of citizenship. Yet they arrived amid a xenophobic political climate that already held negative stereotypes of the group, and thus had to be constructed as nonwhite in order to be denied full citizenship rights. Such would be the case with immigrants from southern and eastern Europe as well.

At the same time that ethnologists were comparing Anglo-Saxon and African races, they were also constructing and comparing "races" within Europe, and assigning character traits and value to those categories. Amid this scientific debate, the United States passed numerous naturalization laws. Each shifted the boundaries of who was considered white, and thus eligible for citizenship. However, as each group assimilated into American culture, and was gradually perceived as less different, it "became white," with the full political rights afforded the name. "Whiteness," and the political rights and social status associated with it, is also fundamentally imbricated with class. Over time the European-descended lower classes, with considerable encouragement from ruling elites who feared the revolutionary potential of interracial class solidarity, chose the tenuous status afforded them by race rather than align themselves with working class blacks in similar economic circumstances. In other words, with little assets or property to their name, the working classes could at least cling to their status as "white."

Meanwhile, the turn of the century also saw a growing and increasingly visible black middle class, though it is a term they themselves never used. This group of African Americans adopted middle-class behaviors and ideals, and encouraged other blacks to do so, largely out of an abiding faith that they could prove through their accomplishments and respectability that they deserved equal treatment. Central to both black and white middle-class identity was the performance of gender. Whereas the Victorian ideology of domesticity demanded that women be "angels of the house," and avoid the taint of the public

NEGRO OFFICERS OF THE WOMEN'S LEAGUE, Newport, Rhode Island, c. 1899. This photograph is said to have been displayed at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900. (Library of Congress.)

sphere (the male preserve), many middle-class black women were very involved in activism on behalf of both their race and gender, and commanded a degree of influence and respect within their communities. Though they asserted their moral respectability in the terms and language of domesticity, they also saw themselves as the arbiters of racial uplift, through both their activism and example, a role that necessitated their presence in the public sphere. Education, a privilege denied them under slavery, became extremely important and valued among both African American men and women. Among whites, however, higher education for women was still considered largely unnecessary.

Other middle-class black families modeled themselves along more traditional gender lines, though there is some debate among historians as to whether they were adopting "white" values or constructing something else entirely. Having been denied power within their own families under slavery, after Emancipation many black men sought to claim their manhood rights, as constructed by elites, by acting the part of the patriarch. This often included attempting to assert authority over their wives, some of whom actively resisted the role of helpmeet, others adopting it willingly as the position of "proper" ladies. Some black men insisted that their wives not work outside the home, some out of a desire to protect the women from the sexual exploitation they often faced working for whites or to save them from the backbreaking toil they had performed under slavery, others to assert their manhood by maintaining a traditional, patriarchal household. Some women found this a welcome relief, whereas others found it limiting or unrealistic and instead continued to work, with or against their husbands' wishes. The performance of Victorian gender roles was irrevocably wrapped up in the performance of class, and the black middle class

saw themselves as uplifting the entire race, which often brought them into conflict not just with whites, but also with the black working class. However, even those black women who did compose the emergent black middle class all too often found that their class status and adherence to the tenets of domesticity did not protect them from attacks against their character or bodies.

The black middle class that emerged during this period has been the subject of disagreement among scholars. Some argue that the self-declared "better" class of African Americans was adopting "white" gender norms, values, and standards of beauty. Others have maintained that they were constructing a positive and distinct black identity to counter the negative assessments of blackness pervasive in American culture, and truly believed that their example of success and "moral" behavior could bring about racial equality. The class issues among African Americans that began to manifest during the early twentieth century were representative of a larger cultural conflict over assimilation and black identity. Standards of beauty, hair styles, and attitudes toward skin color have also reflected the complexities of black identity and its relationship to both African and American culture.

Skin color has been a source of some discussion and conflict throughout African American history. Lighter skinned slaves, often the illegitimate offspring of their white masters, were frequently put to work in the Big House, which saved them from the drudgery of field labor but also placed them under the constant scrutiny of whites and made them especially susceptible to sexual exploitation by the master and his male relatives. As a closer approximation to white standards of beauty, yet still maintaining the stereotype of licentiousness associated with blackness in general, light skinned black women were often sold specifically as prostitutes or concubines in the slave market. Moreover, they were often the object of hatred and abuse at the hands of the plantation mistress, who saw in them a living reminder of her husband's infidelity. To the slave population, mulatto slaves were a constant reminder of the sexual exploitation of slave women and of the one-way acceptance of miscegenation among whites, who generally publicly decried race mixture but tacitly accepted white rape of, or even to some extent consensual relationships with, black women, though never between white women and black men.

After Emancipation, light skin continued to be associated with power and privilege. Many of the original beauty products marketed specifically to African Americans at the turn-of-the-century were skin lightening creams and hair straighteners, yet black leaders of the time represented every shade and hue. In fact, dismayed that the success and shrewdness of lighter skinned public figures were often attributed to their white blood, African

Americans often promoted and celebrated leaders of darker countenance.

They also celebrated their African heritage and African American culture. Throughout much of his career in the public spotlight, Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican-born black nationalist leader, preached that blacks needed to have pride in their African heritage and, convinced they would never find justice in America, encouraged them to emigrate back to their ancestral homeland. The 1920s also saw a boom in black literature and the arts, known as the Harlem Renaissance, which also drew heavily on and celebrated African culture. Whites were often fascinated by these highly visible black artistic forms, such as jazz, and participated in Harlem nightlife as a signifier of the "exotic" and cosmopolitan.

Only a very few whites, however, were so inclined—most wanted no part of blackness. The "one-drop rule," which mandated that no matter what one's appearance, any "drop" of African ancestry made a person black, was designed to literally keep the races apart. The implications of the one-drop rule were often reflected in popular culture through the trope of the "tragic mulatto" character that was found in many early to mid-twentieth century films and novels. The "tragic mulatto" could be either male or female, though perhaps more often the latter, and in novels written by both blacks and whites, they were represented as conflicted, even suicidal, figures that did not truly fit in either the black or white world. Though they sometimes tried to "pass" as white, they could never escape the "taint" of their blackness, as it had been constructed in racist discourse. Passing was a frequent theme in film and African American literature, which poignantly reflected both the rigidity of the American racial system and the effects it had on the psyches of blacks. In one of the most famous examples of the genre, *Passing*, by Nella Larsen, the main character eloquently recounts the turmoil passing represented:

> Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and undeserved.
>
> (Larsen, *Quicksand* and *Passing*, p. 225)

By the dawn of the civil rights era, however, the passing narrative had waned in popularity, replaced instead by a growing activist consciousness that demanded equal rights for all blacks. The late 1960s saw a resurgence of the Afrocentrism that began to take shape in the 1920s, and by the 1970s, the "Black Is Beautiful" movement had pervaded American culture. Natural hair, afros, and African-influenced clothing became symbols of the pride

among African Americans of all hues, and black leaders began to speak of and promote a specifically black identity, which scholars have pointed out is itself also a cultural construction, albeit a far more positive one than those that had been constructed by whites in the centuries before.

(Re)Constructing Race in the Twenty-First Century

While it has become almost universally accepted among scholars that race is socially constructed, undeniably race still maintains considerable currency in American culture, politics, and society. As scholars continue to examine and debate the implications of race as both a cultural construction and a sociopolitical reality in history and modern times, the subject has reached well beyond the walls of the academy, as exemplified by controversies surrounding the 2000 U.S. census. While the census at first glance appears only to count, in the most scientific sense, it has actually proven instrumental in determining "who counts" and by what terms they are defined. Its ever-changing, always contested racial categories demonstrate the arbitrary nature of race itself. Furthermore, the modifications indicate that while the terminology and boundaries may have shifted over time, the need to categorize human beings in some way persists, sometimes with positive outcomes like increased visibility and a sense of community identity.

In 1993, under significant pressure from various lobbying and political action groups, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), a subset of the executive branch that manages the Census Bureau, began a comprehensive review of the racial categories on the U.S. census. The five standard categories they sought to review had been in place since 1977, and were defined as follows: American Indian or Alaskan Native (a person having origins in any of the original peoples of North America, and who maintains cultural identification through tribal affiliations or community recognition); Asian or Pacific Islander (a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asian, the Indian Subcontinent, or the Pacific Islands); Black (a person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa); Hispanic (a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race); and White (a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East).

Critics lodged a variety of complaints against these categorizations. Some argued that the category of "White" should be further broken down, with Arab or Middle Easterner as a separate category, and distinctions made for various ethnicities or regions of Europe. Others expressed concern with the "Hispanic" category, which raised questions about the definitions of race versus ethnicity, and what if any distinctions should be made between the two. One of the largest and most sustained critiques came from individuals self-identified as bi- or multiracial, an identification not reflected in the existing categories. In general, many organizations representing multiracial Americans maintained that having to choose one category alone was more indicative of the "one drop rule" that characterized nineteenth century racial thought than current understandings of race. Some multiracial organizations argued that census respondents should have the option of checking multiple boxes under the heading of race to more accurately reflect their heritage, while others argued that there should be a separate "multiracial" category.

Ultimately, the OMB decided on several changes, which it announced to the public in 1997. It made "Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander" a separate racial category and changed the definition of "American Indian or Alaskan native" to include people from South and Central America. The most significant change, however, was that in deciding against adding a separate "multiracial" category, the OMB, for the first time in the long history of the census, opted to allow respondents to select more than one race.

And the U.S. census has had a long history indeed. The census has both reflected and codified prevailing racial thought since its inception in 1790. In the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth centuries, the census categorized people by both "color" and status as free or enslaved. By the mid-nineteenth century, the census included the categories "Black" and "Mulatto." The 1890 census, reflecting the turn-of-the-century convention of categorizing African Americans by their percentage of Caucasian "blood," expanded the racial classifications even further into eight categories: "White," "Black," "Mulatto," "Quadroon," "Octoroon," "Chinese," "Japanese," and "Indian." Significantly, self-identification of race was not introduced until the 1960 census, during a decade in which the census held tremendous importance for civil rights activism. Prior to that date, census-takers were instructed to determine the race of respondents visually, and when necessary, ask questions for clarification, but ultimately the decision was left to the enumerators. The racial categories on the U.S. census, conducted every ten years, underwent some change between nearly every iteration. The story of those changes reflects not only demographic and immigration trends, but also the ever-shifting, variable nature of race itself. Moreover, the story of how race has been constructed and continually reconstructed is not peripheral to American history, but rather, as historian Matthew Frye Jacobson asserts, "Race and races *are* American history. . . . To write about race is to exclude virtually nothing."

12   RACE AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

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—MELISSA N. STEIN