RACE AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

RESISTING THE "PSEUDO-SCIENCE" OF RACE
- Pamela R. Fletcher Professor of English and Co-Director of Critical Studies of Race and Ethnicity

- Nancy A Heitzeg, Professor of Sociology and Co-Director of Critical Studies of Race and Ethnicity

- Debbie D. Wygal Professor of Biology
OVERVIEW

- RACE AND RACISM AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS, SOCIAL REALITIES
- BRIEF HISTORY OF THE “SCIENCE” OF RACE
- THE PERSISTENCE OF RACIAL REIFICATION IN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH
- STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE
“RACE” AND RACISM
“Race is an exceedingly slippery concept. Although it appears in social life as ubiquitous, omnipresent and real, it is hard to pin down the concept in any objective sense, this is because the idea of race is riddled with apparent contradictions. While it is a dynamic phenomena rooted in political struggle, it is commonly observed as a fixed characteristic of human populations; while it does not exist in terms of human biology, people routinely look to the human body for evidence about racial identity; while it is a biological fiction, it is nonetheless a social fact.” James 2008
Race is not biologically real - it is socially and politically constructed via law, public policy and social practices.

“What we call ‘race’ is an invention not of nature but of our social institutions and practices” Graves 2002

“Race, as other social categories such as class and gender, is socially constructed…but it has a social reality. This means after race- or class or gender- is created, it produces real effects on the actors racialized as ‘black’ or ‘white’.” Bonilla-Silva 2006
There are no subspecies or “races” in the human population.

The biological reality of race is a myth.

“All of America’s racist thinkers have relied on three unchallenged assumptions: that races exist; that each race has its own genetically determined characteristics; and crucially, that social hierarchy results from these differences.” Graves 2005
RACISM

- Racism is structured and systemic.

- “There is a tendency on the part of many Americans, especially white Americans, to see racism as an individual matter, as something only outspoken white bigots engage in. Yet racism is much more than an individual matter. It is both individual and systemic. Indeed, systemic racism is perpetuated by a recurring patterns of discrimination within institutions and by individuals but also an alienating racist relationship – on the one hand, the racially oppressed, and on the other, the racial oppressors.” Feagin 2000
• The history of racial classification, of individual and systemic racial stratification, is the history of white supremacy.

• “When race emerged in human history, it formed a social structure (a racial social system) that awarded systemic privileges to Europeans (‘whites’) over non-Europeans (‘non-whites’). Racialized social systems, or white supremacy for short, became global and affected all societies where Europeans extended their reach. ..a society’s racial structure is the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege…the task is to uncover the particular social, economic, political, social control and ideological mechanisms for the reproduction of racial privilege in a society.” Bonilla-Silva 2006
THE “SCIENCE” OF RACE

THE RACE MYTH
Why We Pretend Race Exists in America
Joseph L. Graves, Jr.
AGE OF EXPLORATION

- The rise of colonialism, capitalism and science
- The naturalists, polygenists and early racial classification schemes
- Exploitation and exoticization of non-Europeans
Suzan-Lori Parks, *VENUS*
U.S. - RACE-BASED SLAVERY

- Slavery and the race questions as foundational to U.S. Constitution
- White as free persons and black as slave property
- Slaves as subject to “scientific” study, research, and “breeding” programs
RACE: THE POWER OF AN ILLUSION
Episode 2
The Story We Tell
THIRTY DOLLARS REWARD:

RUN-AWAY from the Subscriber, the 16th of September last, a Negro Man named BOOD, about 38 Years old, 5 Feet 10 Inches high, yellow Complexion, thin Village, has had the Small Pox; his great Toes have been froze, and have only little Pieces of Nails on them: He is much addicted to strong Liquor, and when drunk very noisy and troublesome. Whoever takes up said Slave, and brings him home, or secures him in Gaol, so that his Master may get him again, shall be intitled to the above Reward of THIRTY DOLLARS, paid by

Any Person who takes up said Slave must be particularly careful that he is not killed, as he is a remarkable Scout, ou
U.S. - EUGENICS

- “Good birth”
- “Better breeding” – positive and negative social engineering
- Widespread impact on U.S. social policy and law – immigration, birth control, sterilization, institutionalization, and research such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study
RACE: THE POWER OF AN ILLUSION
Episode 1
The Difference Between Us
White Things

Anne Spencer (1920)

Most things are colorful things--the sky, earth, and sea.
Black men are most men; but the white are free!
White things are rare things; so rare, so rare
They stole from out a silvered world--somewhere.
Finding earth-plains fair plains, save greenly grassed,
They strewed white feathers of cowardice, as they passed;
The golden stars with lances fine
The hills all red and darkened pine,
They blanched with their wand of power;
And turned the blood in a ruby rose
To a poor white poppy-flower.
They pyrred a race of black, black men,
And burned them to ashes white; then,
Laughing, a young one claimed a skull,
For the skull of a black is white, not dull,
But a glistening awful thing;
Made, it seems, for this ghoul to swing
In the face of God with all his might,
And swear by the hell that sired him:
"Man-maker, make white!"
THE PERSISTENCE OF RACIAL REIFICATION
RACIAL FALLACIES

“Despite what we have been taught, despite what we seem to see, race isn’t gravity. It is a social construct, a myth in the service of social dominance.” Graves 2005

- Race, Health, Mortality, and Disease
- Racial Medicine and Pharmacogenomics
- Race and Mental Illness
- Race and IQ
- Race, Sexuality, Reproduction, and Athletic Ability
- Race and Participation in Crime
STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE
DERACIALIZING RESEARCH

- Critical Race Consciousness v. Color-blindness
- Recognition that “race” is not fixed but fluid
- Critical analysis of oppressive systems of social stratification
- Awareness of the intersection of race with class, gender, sexual orientation, age and ability in the production of life chances

“WE REJECT THE VIEW OF THOSE WHO WISH TO ERASE DIFFERENCE WITHOUT FIRST ERASING THE STRUCTURE THAT PRODUCES DIFFERENCES IN LIFE CHANCES AND IDENTITY”

Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva 2008
REFERENCES


