

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

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A Cultural History of Race documents the long history of the concept of race from antiquity to the present day. In the six volumes collected here, scholars from a range of academic disciplines engage not only with the historical, cultural and philosophical realities of race but also with its aesthetics, literary functions and representations. To capture the elasticity of race as a concept, one needs to travel widely, across historical periods and geographical locations, to examine texts and images, cutting through the multilayered fabric of culture, science and politics. Viewed on a broad timescale, the densely textured content of the history of race is approached intersectionally, with an understanding of race's complex relationship with other concepts such as gender, religion, class and nation.

Given these vast territories of knowledge, then, to harmonize so many different aspects of the history of race is not an easy task. Besides mediating between the localized traditions of race and their transnational framework, *A Cultural History of Race* highlights entanglements, disruptions and mutations. At the same time, various national traditions are examined from a global perspective, and, thus, their purported uniqueness is challenged. It is important to understand the long history of race, not only through references to past events but also through the prism of current systemic racism.

Engaging with the legacy of slavery, empire, colonialism and genocide, and not just with the overall historical trajectory of race, is another important aspect of this collective work. The concept of race cannot be decoupled from the very idioms that had been used throughout history to describe and classify humans, nor can it be expunged from projects of domination, subjugation and oppression. These projects were politically motivated, state sanctioned and often blessed by scholars and scientists. As adherence to a racial worldview became more explicit and formalized in culture, science and politics, however, its predatory ability widened. Scholars, politicians, artists, philosophers and poets were stirred by it. They created an impressive racial edifice that has, alas, endured until the twenty-first century.

A Cultural History of Race offers critical perspectives on the traditional paradigms of thinking about the concept. It reflects as much shifting methodologies in the scholarship as the need to engage publicly with the normative saliency of race in the production of various forms of knowledge. Yet this is not just another cultural history of race but a decidedly analytical attempt to dislodge race from the intellectual pre-eminence it had occupied for centuries, and to disclose racial conceptions, beliefs, values and practices that had been used throughout history to make distinctions among groups of peoples on the basis of the colour of their skin and/or their intellectual abilities. The concept of race manifested itself in different ways at different times, but it always had supporters as well as detractors. Acceptance of race was not always universal. It was often met with suspicion and occasionally rejected. Anti-race thinking occurred in numerous spheres, including but not limited to religion and science.

A considerable amount of literature exists on the history of race, particularly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But race had infiltrated major traditions of cultural, religious and philosophical reflection about human diversity already in antiquity. Elements of this discussion survived in the medieval and early modern periods, and new ones were added, particularly as colonial and imperial projects began to emerge in Europe. During the Renaissance and Reformation, and then more forcefully during the Enlightenment, race became a powerful concept, used not just to describe physical features of peoples but also to explain cultural achievements and behavioural attitudes. The subjugation and exploitation of non-European peoples, alongside slavery and extermination of Indigenous populations, only enhanced the power of race in defining white Europeans and their global expansion and dominance.

During the nineteenth century and, especially, the twentieth, horrendous atrocities, most notably the Holocaust, discredited the concept of race and eroded its tentacular grip on social and political discourse and realities. Yet, race survived into the early twenty-first century, continuing to impact the lives of millions with reference to their biological attributes, cultural traditions and historical experiences. Although developments in human genetics, particularly in the second part of the twentieth century, completely dismantled any pretention of scientific respectability appropriated by racists, current debates in genomics reveal how race continues to impact our scientifically informed worldview. Incredibly, the completion of the Human Genome Project, for example, even spurred attempts to define a concept of race that is scientifically credible.

A Cultural History of Race is timely. It provides not only academic guidance but, equally important, a nuanced and innovative critique of race and racism as well. These six volumes are informed by research and academic reflection and, equally, by lived experience. This is a critical moment to review how myriad assumptions and attitudes rooted in the history of race and its toxic ideology continue to affect our world in ways both obvious and hidden. To understand the past and present of race in all its different representations is essential in order to name and remove its symbols of discrimination, injustice, abuse and violence against Black, Indigenous and other peoples of colour. Any work on the history of race must unambiguously expose the extraordinary damage caused by racist thinking and practice.

While not exhaustive, *A Cultural History of Race* nevertheless provides numerous historical examples and options of interpretation for anyone who wants to engage, in an accessible way, with problems of race and racism characterizing the world today. Both together and separately, these volumes reassess historical traditions, scientific paradigms and political agendas put forward in the name of race. Equally important, the volumes' insights and clarity are accompanied by incisiveness and commitment to anti-racist scholarship. The overall aim is to strike a balance between scholarly detachment, empathy and direct participation in the current conversations about decolonization, whiteness, anti-racism and Black Lives Matter. In the twenty-first century, the assumption is that race as a meaningful category of analysis has been de-ritualized and de-politicized. The truth is that race continues to lend itself to theories of social, cultural and political inequality. Combined with an aggressive rhetoric of national protectionism and ethnicity, race continues to frame regional, national and international issues around immigration, social justice and gender equality.

Wide in scope and detailed in analysis, *A Cultural History of Race* is therefore strongly embedded in current conversations about race and racism. We are in a moment of global

reckoning. Presidents are banned from social media platforms, statues are being torn down, names of university buildings are being changed, museums are being decolonized and stolen artefacts are returned to their countries of origin. Continued scholarly engagement with anti-racist activism is critical, not just for understanding the decisions being made today but to help preserve the lessons learnt for future generations.