The Archaeology of Race and Racialization in Historic America
Charles E. Orser, Jr.
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Historical archaeologists have come a long way from equating the study of race in the archaeological record with the identification of objects as ethnic markers. This is in part due to Orser’s extensive and intellectually rigorous catalog on race that has encouraged scholars to see race as a complex structural process rather than an artifact associated with a particular ethnic or racialized group. Orser’s most recent contribution to the archaeology of racialization processes, The Archaeology of Race and Racialization in Historic America, continues in this vein of thought. In this text, Orser operationalizes several of the theoretical perspectives and concepts proposed in his previous book, Race and Practice in Archaeological Interpretation (2004, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia). Central to Orser’s new book is a consideration of how two seemingly disparate cultural groups (Chinese Americans and Irish Americans) occupying two entirely different social and historical milieus (California and New York) were racialized in a remarkably similar fashion. In making this claim, Orser attempts to demonstrate the incongruencies and contradictions inherent in racial categories that continue to be perceived as “natural” or “biological” in contemporary American society.

Drawing upon interdisciplinary research on race, Orser advocates an archaeology of racialization, not race, to insure archaeologists refute rather than reify racist conceptions of the racialized communities they study. The study of racialization processes, he explains, “holds significantly more promise for archaeologists who want to investigate the historical roots and manifestations of racial classification” (p. 13). As Orser demonstrates, seeing race as a process rather than a discrete, identifiable, and static entity such as a blue bead or an opium pipe requires a reconceptualization of the methodologies employed in historical archaeology. As he illustrates, this mode of interpretation—seeing race in objects—is conditioned by Western thought, which for centuries has posited race as being biological in origin and therefore easily translatable in the archaeological record. Although most if not all contemporary historical archaeologists would agree that race is a social construct with material realities, this way of thinking about the archaeological record continues to impede critical discourse and analysis of racialization processes in the United States.

The first contribution Orser makes to archaeologies of racialization is not new to his readers. In typical Orser fashion, he looks for transatlantic and global linkages between Irish citizens subjected to British governance and Irish settlements in the United States. He argues that archaeologists can unravel what Donald Donham terms “epochal structures of the modern world” (p. 127) by looking at multiple scales of analysis and by tacking back and forth between the “colony” and the “metropole” (chap. 3). Mapping the global flow of commodities, and in some cases the resultant homogenization of identities across the globe, however, is not the only contribution archaeologists can make to an archaeology of racialization: tracing the international trafficking of racial categories and stereotypes across borders, cultural groups, and time periods can lead to new insight into how “broad trends” (p. 186) in racial categorization are constructed in relationship to one another.

Here is where Orser makes his most significant and innovative contribution to the archaeology of racism and racialization; he takes a comparative approach to understand the transnational exchange, or in his own words, “networks” (pp. 54–56) of racial ideologies. This is doable, he argues, because “U.S. elites (whites) created and maintained an epochal racial structure” that “placed each new immigrant group within that structure based on racialized characterizations” (p. 181). Because of this national structure, Orser finds utility in comparing and contrasting archaeological
assemblages recovered from two seemingly divergent racialized groups inhabiting opposite sides of the United States. He first looks at Irish tenement quarters at Five Points, New York City, occupied from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s (chap. 4). Here, he explores how Irish immigrants were initially racialized as an immigrant community. Caricatures of Irish immigrants found inspiration in both historic and contemporaneous cartoons denigrating African workers (compare p. 96) in Europe. These stereotypes depicted Irish immigrants as idle, ignorant, and indignant. This case study is particularly significant because it demonstrates that “racialization is not strictly about skin color and physical characteristics. Cultural traits can also be racialized” (p. 124).

On the other side of the country at nearly the same historical moment, Chinese immigrants living in northern California seeking employment opportunities at fair and equal rates were encountering hostility from local farm workers (chap. 5). Though Anglo-Americans perceived themselves as racially superior to Chinese Americans and went out of their way to make this stereotype visible in the media (cartoons, silent films, photographs), the trash collected from Asian American and Anglo-American communities painted a different picture of worker life: that “Chinese men and women in Stockton appear to have consumed the same basic items as their non-Asian neighbors” (p. 170). Though caricatures presented Asian Americans as biologically deficient, wasteful, and unclean (pp. 153–158), these characterizations were not invented solely for Asian Americans or Chinese Americans. Rather, they were recycled from an earlier rhetoric that racialized and dehumanized the inhabitants of Europe’s colonies in Ireland and South Africa to justify the colonization of these areas. This is an important point, as it links the racism found in the United States to international political and economic structures. Thus, archaeologists wishing to study racialized communities in America cannot and should not limit their historical and archaeological research to their region or even nation. Rather, historical archaeologists must take into account the global and transnational spheres of influence that shape racial thought in North America.

Prefacing these case studies are two chapters that bear a close resemblance, albeit updated, to chapters in Orser’s former volume, Race and Practice in Archaeological Interpretation. For example, The Archaeology of Race and Racialization’s “Chapter 1—Race, Racialization, and Why Archaeologists Should Care” summarizes and updates what Orser wrote in Race and Practice in Archaeological Interpretation’s “Chapter 2—The Prehistory of Race and Archaeological Interpretation, Part I: Inventing Race for Archaeology.” These chapters outline the discipline of archaeology’s historically contentious and at times downright racist engagements with past peoples and interpretations of ancient and historic sites. The former chapter offers a succinct and polished version of what was published in Race and Practice in Archaeological Interpretation.

While Orser’s concluding thoughts provide a strong foundation for asking nuanced questions about racial identities, the reader is left yearning to know more about the specificities of racialization processes as they pertain to different vectors of identity. For example, the children of Mexican immigrants living in the early-20th-century western United States were racialized much differently than their parents. Born in the United States, these children were conferred citizenship upon birth while many of their parents and relatives remained noncitizens. As citizens of the United States who would harbor voting privileges in the future, social reformers paid special attention to the children by placing them in separate schools, many of which resembled concurrent Native American boarding schools across the West and Southwest. Perceived as noncitizens, adults of Mexican heritage received less tutelage and instruction. Orser provides a compelling framework to approach these problems. The next step then, is to examine how gender, sexual orientation, age, and other social categories crosscut and shape racial identities in historical America and abroad.

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