Is race a biological subdivision of human beings or is it merely an illusion? If it is a biological subdivision, what precisely is the defining criteria and what relevance does that criteria have for explaining culture or social life? If it is an illusion, what role does history play in its production and perpetuation? Any scholar, including film historians and critics, must in some way grapple with these questions when writing about race.

If scholars assume that race is a natural taxonomy of Homo sapiens, a biological subdivision or subspecies, then their work is linked with a tradition of essentializing and discriminatory discourse that extends from eugenics and social Darwinism to studies of gene pool variances and the inheritance of intelligence quotients. While scientific approaches such as these purport to be objective, the identification and interpretation of biological or innate differences and their subsequent relevance to individual and social history is imminently – and ominously – subjective. Biological definitions of race all too often lead to a determinism that validates and promotes sociopolitical hierarchies. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., remarks, “Race, in these (scientific) usages, pretends to be an objective term of classification, when in fact it is a dangerous trope.” This is not to suggest that there are no useful reasons for dividing humans into categories, but that the criteria for justifying those categories and their relevance for explaining social formation or cultural expression is more a product of knowledge and ideology than it is of “nature.”

If scholars assume that race is merely an illusion or a fiction, then their work risks negating identity and social history. While arguments that characterize race in this way acknowledge the constructedness and thus the ideology of the term, they can fail to address fully the fact that race also names a profound sociocultural phenomenon. In other words, whether there are biological “races” or not (and I would argue there are none), there are historical “races” – or groups of individuals who share past and continuing experiences: from group solidarity and expression to forms of oppression and privilege. Thus, even if race is merely a fiction, it is a powerful fiction in that it systematically affects how we see the world, how we present ourselves to the world, who we associate with, and how we are conversely treated by people and by institutions.

One of the challenges in editing this anthology has been grappling with the various definitions and subsequent pitfalls of that “dangerous trope.” In some ways, I have an intuitive understanding of race as both an identity worthy of pride and as a maker for discrimination. As a Puerto Rican/Italian with a second father who is African American, I grew to accept my “mixed racial make-up” as something to be proud of as well as
something that separated me from dominant and so-called pure races. In grade school, I proudly wore the Puerto Rican flag on one shoulder and the Italian flag on another. In high school I was an actor for Ododo Theatre, an African American performing arts company in Tucson, Arizona. During these same years, “spick,” “guinea,” and “nigger lover” were slurs that I had occasionally to confront and deal with. Today, too many people assume I’m “white.” Thanks to these somewhat unique and utterly historical experiences, I have come to understand race as that which is simultaneously a point of solidarity and dignity and that which is a symbol for cultural Otherness and social privilege. Any definition of race, it seems to me, must take into consideration these seemingly disparate experiences.

Much of the current debate about race in cultural studies centers on the notion of identity, an approach which aptly recognizes that where we come from, how we see ourselves, and how we express ourselves are essential elements in the construction of race. Stuart Hall, a pioneer in theorizing the relationship between race and identity, has argued that identity is both real, in the sense of material and historical, as well as heterogeneous, or “crossed and recrossed” by such categories as gender, class, and ethnicity. Moreover, Hall describes how identity ebbs and flows, undergoing constant change and alteration: “identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation.” For example, Puerto Ricans, like most Latinos, are an amalgam of travelers, including Taino Indians, former African slaves, and past and current European and North American conquerors and immigrants. Our identity is informed by all of these “pre-sences,” as well as by class, sexuality, and other formations. And, this historically specific and multifaceted identity continues to evolve, as it has with Nuyoricans (Puerto Ricans living in New York). Identity, as Hall explains, “is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being.’ It belongs to the future as much as to the past.”

In studying and critically engaging the articulation of race in popular culture, particularly the ways in which cinema represents and narrates race, I have come to understand that this term also names a hegemonic way of knowing and seeing. Race is not only identity, but also a sociohistorical formation. In the United States, this amounts to what sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant call a “racial formation,” a ubiquitous and enduring color-line based on cultural and physiognomic differences that inform and at times determine our access to institutions, our social organization, our self-perception and our self-expression. “From a racial formation perspective,” the sociologists explain, “race is a matter of both social structure and cultural representation.”

Like identity, the racial formation shifts and changes with time and space. During the birth of cinema, for example, social Darwinism and eugenics paradigms dominated the meaning of race, promoting the notion of a natural hierarchy of human cultures and histories. At the top of the so-proscribed evolutionary ladder were people who counted as “Anglo-Saxons” and, then, the rest of the “Caucasians”; at the bottom: “Mongoloids” and “Negroids.” Today, though biological determinism is still with us, few people agree that these racial – or, more appropriately, racist – classifications actually exist. The meaning of race has shifted away from a singularly biological taxonomy restricted to
three subspecies of human beings.10 This suggests, as Omi and Winant note, that the racial formation is a socio-historical process in which “racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.”11

While the forms and veracity of the racial formation have shifted over the last one hundred years, its trajectory has not been so radical that racism has ceased or been eradicated. What remains a constant in the United States, and indeed in the West, is what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam call Eurocentrism: “the procrustean forcing of cultural heterogeneity into a single paradigamatic perspective in which Europe is seen as the unique source of meaning, as the world’s center of gravity, as ontological ‘reality’ to the rest of the world’s shadow.”12 Although some forms of colonialism have ended, Eurocentrism is still with us, defining and shaping the significance and the direction of the racial formation. Shohat and Stam find that “as an ideological substratum common to colonialist, imperialist, and racist discourse, Eurocentrism is a form of vestigial thinking which permeates and structures contemporary practices and representations even after the formal end of colonialism.”13 Though the manifestation of this “vestigial thinking” are relatively distinct from country to country and from region to region, in the United States, the physiognomic, legal, and representational marks of Eurocentrism have consistently been the degree to which an individual or a group counts or doesn’t count as “white.” As I argue in my contribution to this anthology, people unable to count as white remain marginalized, exploited, and degraded by this enduring order of things.

Culture is one of the main terrains where the white order is alternately supported and contested. In film, arguably the most popular and profitable form of culture in the last one hundred years, racist practices dominate the industrial, representational, and narrational history of the medium. Indeed, U.S. cinema has consistently constructed whiteness, the representational and narrative form of Eurocentrism, as the norm by which all “Others” fail by comparison. People of color are generally represented as either deviant threats to white rule, thereby requiring civilizing or brutal punishment, or fetishized objects of exotic beauty, icons for a racist scopophilia. This anthology aims to contextualize and critically engage the forms of these and similar practices in early U.S. cinema, investigating and analyzing such diverse subjects as exhibition, genre, intertextuality, narrative, reception, stardom, and stereotyping.

Film Historiography

Irrespective of the definition of race a scholar chooses, the subject is both contentious and volatile. Write about it to someone’s disliking, and you can be labeled politically correct or, worse, racist. Race is certainly not a safe or a straightforward subject for any scholar to grapple with. However, to bypass or ignore this term of differentiation is to bypass and ignore film history. The examples of racist representations are numerous, ranging from the Chinese Laundry Scene (1896) to The Birth of a Nation (1915), from The Searchers (1956) to the Latino drug and Vietnam revisionist films of the 1980s, among many others. Race has been and continues to be a fundamental part of U.S. cinema. And the fact remains that silence on this albeit contentious subject serves to perpetuate and
enforce one of the dominate ways whiteness persists from historical period to historical period, and from film to film.

Though slow to tackle rigorously the racial practices that inform U.S. cinema, film studies, thanks largely to the impact of cultural studies, has begun systematically addressing this important issue. A significant work of the late 1970s is Thomas Cripps’s *Slow Fade to Black*, which historicizes both the representation of African Americans and African American filmmaking from 1900 to 1942. A sampling of just the books published in the last few years on African Americans include Cripps’s *Making Movies Black*, Manthia Diawara’s anthology, *Black American Cinema*, Ed Guerrero’s *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, and Mark A. Reid’s *Redefining Black Film*. On Chicana/o cinema, there are Chon Noriega’s *Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance* and Rosa Linda Fregoso’s *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* and numerous articles and special issues of journals. Eugene Franklin Wong’s *On Visual Media Racism* was one of the first studies of Asian Americans in cinema. More recently, Kevin Brownlow’s *Behind the Mask of Innocence*, Sumiko Higashi’s *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era*, and Gina Marchetti’s *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* have contributed to this debate. Though much more sporadic, there have been a few published studies of Native American images, including most notably Kevin Brownlow’s *The War, the West, and the Wilderness*. These and other publications are slowly helping to revise both the film canon and the arguments about the history of U.S. cinema.

Most of these scholarly works focus solely on either African Americans, Chicano/as, Asians and Asian Americans, or Native Americans. In fact, there are relatively few books that address the experiences and forms of race that all these groups share and commonly endure. Unlike feminist research or even studies of class, film scholarship on race as a formation has yet to develop into a major critical movement. And, since the meaning of race constitutes a hegemonic formation in the United States that stretches beyond the experiences of any single group, this lack of scholarship is, in a word, problematic. While books that focus on specific racial groups are necessary and important, more historical, theoretical, and critical work on the meaning of race that these groups share is required.

While the aforementioned studies are beginning to make a difference, film books not devoted to the specificity of race, such as texts on aesthetics or the general history of cinema, have been negligent in addressing cinema’s racism (or, for that matter, work by filmmakers of color). Shohat and Stam’s *Unthinking Eurocentrism* is an exception. More common are books such as *Film Art, Film History: Theory and Practice, A History of Narrative Film, The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Modes of Production to 1960*, among others, which either neglect a discussion of race almost entirely or relegate their references to a sentence, paragraph, or a small section of a chapter. This silence and marginalization of race in film studies undermine both the impact that the racial formation has had on film history – from style to industry – and the impact that film history has had on the racial formation. More specifically, it directs
attention away from whiteness, the underlining logic of cinematic racism. As Clyde Taylor argues in his essay for this anthology, “By segregating the issue of racism of bracketed attention, the real issue – White supremacy – is avoided.”

In the last five years there has been a substantial growth in the critical and historical writings on early cinema. However, within this work there is surprisingly little attention given to the issue of race. There is not a single book on race in early cinema; there are only a few articles or book chapters (most of which deal with The Birth of a Nation). Yet, racial meanings are a significant, omnipresent part of the birth of cinema. Edwin S. Porter, D.W. Griffith, Oscar Micheaux, among other early filmmakers, employed race in both overt and implicit ways throughout their work. Genres such as the Western and the melodrama, and subgenres such as the Indian and “greaser” film, were very much about the “manifest destiny” of white civilization. Race marked the careers of such notable silent stars as Lillian Gish, Mary Pickford, Sessue Hayakawa, Al Jolson, Rudolph Valentino, Anna May Wong, to name just a few. Indeed, cinema’s invention and early development coincided with the rise in power and prestige of biological determinism, with increased immigration and immigrant restriction laws, and with the United States’ imperialist practices in the Caribbean and Asia. As the essays in this anthology point out, these and other sociopolitical practices insured that the articulation of race in early cinema crossed studios, authors, genres, and styles.

It is time to begin revising the revisionist, with an eye to expanding the history of U.S. cinema to uncover, deconstruct, or defamiliarize its racial practices. This anthology aims to do just that: to show how a discourse of race, one which was dominated by a white “ideal,” significantly, even profoundly, informed the history of early cinema.

The first section of this anthology, “Representation and Resistance(?)” includes discussions that range from racist images and narratives to attempts to resist and subvert such images. Clyde Taylor’s article, “The Re-Birth of the Aesthetic in Cinema,” tackles the formal and epic qualities of white supremacy in D.W. Griffith’s landmark film, The Birth of a Nation. Taking academic criticism to task for its “passive racism,” Taylor contextualizes Griffith’s “Negrophobia” by focusing on the filmmaker’s Southern background as well as his use of both minstrel show and lynching tropes. Thomas Cripps shows how a film like The Birth of Race (1918), though initially conceived as an antidote to the racist imagery of The Birth of a Nation, gets co-opted and reconfigured as a propaganda film supporting the United States’ efforts in WWI. Pointing to such historical events as the sinking of the passenger ship Lusitania by a German submarine, the “cold feet” of liberal Hollywood financiers, and divisions within Black efforts to respond to Griffith’s epic, Cripps unravels the racial politics that informed the making of this film. Next, Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence analyze the “biographical legend” of Oscar Micheaux, focusing mainly on one of his extant films, The Symbol of the Unconquered (1920). In the process, they reveal and question the many ways in which the filmmaker engaged the origins of white-capping (or the KKK), the politics of interracial relationships, and the ideology of “uplifting the race.” Finally, Donald Kirihara shows how Sessue Hayakawa struggled against the stereotypical nature of many
of the characters that he portrayed. Kirihara’s work is especially insightful for its focus on the narrative function of stereotypes.

The next section, “White Nationalism,” engages the forms and functions of whiteness and nationalism in early cinema. In my contribution to this anthology, I attempt to reveal the relationship between narrativization and racial articulations in Griffith’s Biograph films, showing how the racism in The Birth of a Nation and Broken Blossoms (1919) can be traced to the director’s early work. I argue that Griffith’s narrative system utilizes such stylistic techniques as mise-en-scène and editing to articulate an ideology of race that positions “whites” as normal and superior and “non-whites” as deviant and inferior. Next, Virginia Wright Wexman examines how Western tropes such as the body, the landscape, and the law are used to negotiate the racially based contradiction in early twentieth-century nationalism between an “imagined community” where all citizens enjoy parity and a community that supports a “hierarchy of group identities.” For Wexman, the image of the “ideal family on the land” forms the cornerstone of the Western’s contradictory and ambivalent articulation of the United State’s national identity. Finally, Dan Streible looks at the reception of the Jack Johnson fight films, showing how biological determinism informed and even determined both the exhibition and the reception of early films. Streible’s work on Johnson addresses representation, miscegenation, and the question of resistance, but perhaps best illustrates the machinations of American whiteness.

The third section, “The Fear of Miscegenation,” focuses on a particular discursive strategy within early cinema’s racial formation, that of interracial relationships. Chon Noriega investigates the various texts of Romona, from the novel by Helen Hunt Jackson (1884) to the film by D.W. Griffith (1910), showing how the discourses of race, gender, class, and nation shifted between the nineteenth and twentieth century. Nick Browne traces the intertextual history of Madame Butterfly (1915), focusing on Puccini’s opera, the original novel, and contemporaneous military and ideological tensions between Japan and the United States. One of Browne’s central points is that Madame Butterfly narratives, though shifting from novel and opera to film, are “sexed” in a complex of cultural difference particular to early twentieth century American representation of Asia, and ultimately underline the impossibility of racial assimilation of the Japanese into American society. Next, Gina Marchetti takes on the trope of miscegenation as it is constructed in The Forbidden City (1918). An insightful close reading, the article shows how the use of parallel interracial love stories uphold and condemn the film’s racial/sexual status quo.

The final section, “The Colonial Imagination,” also looks at a particular discursive field in early cinema, that of colonialism. Roberta Pearson examines films featuring the character of George Armstrong Custer, the white man’s martyr for “manifest destiny.” Pearson reveals the contradictory ways in which Native Americans, Custer, and “Custer’s last stand” were represented and narrativized. Next, Fatimah Tobing Rony focuses on the relationship between Flaherty’s Nanook of the North (1922) and the discourse of authenticity surrounding it. Concerned with what this relationship can tell us about anthropological knowledge and the role of film in legitimizing that knowledge, Rony
reveals the interdependence of three hunts: “the hunt for representations of the Inuit for science and popular culture, the hunt for cinematic images of the Inuit for the film *Nanook*, and cinema’s hunt for Flaherty as great artist and/or great liar.” Finally, Sumiko Higashi considers the ways in which the literary texts of Lafcadio Hearn, an influential interpreter of Japanese culture for “high-brow” readers, informed the films of Cecil B. DeMille. Careful to contextualize her arguments by pointing to social and international practices, Higashi shows how DeMille used the icons and ideologies of highbrow culture both to legitimate cinema and to articulate “an unambiguous message about white supremacy.”

These essays are an initial step in filling the gap in film studies on the enduring legacy of race and whiteness in U.S. cinema. However, the task is far from complete: There are gaps in this project. Not adequately addressed is the function of race in the earliest of film practices, what Tom Gunning refers to as the “cinema of attractions.” Nor is there an analysis of race in the silent comedies of Keaton or Chaplin, for instance. There is also a need for more focused attention on “greaser” films, a genre that was much more prolific during the development of early cinema than most accounts suggest. Further, while Jewish and Italian identities are broached by various contributors, no article specifically addresses the representation of ethnic immigrants – many of whom were considered “racial” Others at the turn of the century. Ideally, these and other subjects will be explored in subsequent projects.

What all the contributions to this study of race in early cinema have in common is the grounding of their analysis in history. Each contribution contextualizes the respective articulations of race that it addresses, linking this ideological practice to other forms of culture such as music and dime novels, to social and legal policy, to myths of nation and of evolution, to international politics and economic tensions. Though only a few address the workings of whiteness, they collectively reveal how race, and particularly racist practice, was very much a part of the birth of U.S. cinema.

Notes

I would like to thank Sumiko Higashi for her insightful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this introduction.

4. The appearance of circularity in arguments that link race with identity is necessary, it seems to me, because to divorce the meaning of race from a consideration of identity is to take real people out of the equation, something that seems wholly inappropriate and potentially hypocritical given the history of racist practice.


7. Ibid.


13. Ibid., p. 2, authors’ emphasis.


16. Chon Noriega, ed., Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); Rosa Linda Fregoso, The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); see also special issues on Chicana/o cinema in Spectator (Fall 1992) and in Jump Cut (June 1993; June 1994).


