

Preface to the second edition

While race has always been a topic of great interest to anthropologists, historians, and other social scientists, its significance in the political and cultural discourse taking place in the United States seems to be even more pronounced in 2018 than at the start of this decade, when the first edition of this book was written and published. Numerous events in the past decade have made abundantly clear to any honest observer that, to paraphrase WEB Du Bois,¹ the problem of the twenty-first century continues to be the color line. An alarming number² of unarmed black men and boys have been shot and killed by white and black police officers as well as by self-styled civilian vigilantes in dozens of cities across the United States. The deaths of Trayvon Martin (2012), Eric Garner (2014), Michael Brown (2014), and Freddy Gray (2015) are only the most well-known and influential examples of this peculiarly American pathology. The most recent FBI Hate Crimes Report³ suggests that more than 7,000 hate crimes were committed during 2017, and that 60 percent of these crimes were the result of bias on the part of the offender with respect to race/ethnicity/ancestry. This reflects an increase of 17 percent over the previous year's total. Scholars, activists, and journalists have published ground-breaking research⁴ and poignant memoirs of life in America for people of color⁵ that reveal the continuing racial divide in the United States.⁶ Other authors have demonstrated that racial bias and injustice continue to plague many aspects of American life 50 years after the end of the Civil Rights Era, including our judicial system,⁷ patterns of residential segregation,⁸ and inequalities in wealth⁹ and health.¹⁰

My intention in writing and now in revising this book has always been to interrogate the history and meanings of race in America from a truly biocultural perspective. This perspective recognizes and attempts to resolve what I have called "the central paradox of race." This paradox refers to two seemingly contradictory claims that are often made by anthropologists: (1) that race does not exist and (2) that race is extremely important. The biocultural perspective resolves the paradox by clarifying that race fails (i.e., it does not exist) as a biological concept, but that race as a social phenomenon can sometimes hold life-or-death significances (i.e., it is important). While some chapters of this book cover primarily biological material and others deal with social or cultural matters, each chapter seeks to synthesize biology, culture, and history to understand how certain aspects of human biological diversity (i.e., skin color) have acquired the enormous cultural and symbolic import that race carries in contemporary American society. Race may not exist as biology, but the nexus of race, racism, and inequality is real and has always played an enormous role in our country. The central message of this volume, then, is that while race makes little sense as biology, it plays an important role as social or cultural construction, and it has very real consequences for the lived experience of all Americans. The legacy of

racism and continuing racial discrimination affects the lives of Americans of color in many ways, including significant health disparities, socioeconomic inequality, and structural violence. Although it is often unrecognized by its recipients, race affects the lives of white, Euro-Americans through the mechanism of what Peggy McIntosh¹¹ called “white privilege.” Like gender and kinship, race is a concept that provides rich analytical opportunities for anthropological inquiry into the complex ways in which biology (e.g., biological sex, genetic relatedness, and phenotypic diversity) is refashioned and reframed by societies into cultural constructs that can set limits to human expression and existence.

My approach to the study of human diversity and race is consistently dynamic and processual and is always informed by evolutionary theory and history. It is also informed by the knowledge of the persistent inequality and racism that, in spite of the soaring rhetoric so often associated with the American democratic experiment, have marked so much of American history. My hope is that students who read this book will gain new insights into how anthropologists approach the fraught terrain of race and human diversity, both in the past and today, and how racism has affected the lived experiences of many generations of Americans. My goal is for this book to contribute to clearer thinking about the social and biological meanings of race so that we can think and act more thoughtfully and intentionally to create a truly equitable, multiracial society in twenty-first-century America.

I would like to thank Marc Stratton and Katherine Ong at Routledge for suggesting and supporting this project. Joyce Kubiski has been my inspiration during the writing of this book and all my other scholarly work, my anchor, and my great love. Our children – Giancarlo, Wondimu, Helen, and Wondissen – and our grandchild Brailynn fill me with pride and hope for the future.

Notes

- 1 Du Bois, WEB (1903) *The Souls of Black Folks*. New York, NY, New American Library.
- 2 “Nationwide, police shot and killed nearly 1000 people in 2017.” John Sullivan, Zane Anthony, Julie Tate, and Jennifer Jenkins. January 6, 2018. In *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/nationwide-police-shot-and-killed-nearly-1000-people-in-2017/2018/01/04/4eed5f34-e4e9-11e7-ab50-621fe0588340_story.html?utm_term=.74f8e4f8524c
- 3 “Hate Crimes rose 17 percent last year, according to new FBI data”. Devlin Barrett, Nov. 13, 2018. In *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/hate-crimes-rose-17-percent-last-year-according-to-new-fbi-data/2018/11/13/e0dcf13e-e754-11e8-b8dc-66cca409c180_story.html?utm_term=.5fc74497b4b4
- 4 Kendi, IX (2016) *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. New York, NY, Nation Books; Bonilla-Silva, E (2018) *Race Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Inequality in America*. Lanham, MD, Rowman and Littlefield.
- 5 Coates, T-N (2015) *Between the World and Me*. New York, NY, Spiegel and Grau; Rankine, C (2014) *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Minneapolis, MN, Graywolf Press.
- 6 Dyson, ME (2017) *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America*. New York, NY, St. Martin's Press.
- 7 Alexander, M (2012) *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York, NY, The New Press; Butler, P (2017) *Chokehold: Policing Black Men*. New York, NY, The New Press.
- 8 Rothstein, R (2017) *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*. New York, NY, Liverwright Publishing Corporation.
- 9 Shapiro, TM (2017) *Toxic Inequality: How America's Wealth Gap Destroys Mobility, Deepens the Racial Divide, and Threatens our Future*. New York, NY, Basic Books.
- 10 Matthew, DB (2015) *Just Medicine: A Cure for Racial Inequality in American Medicine*. New York, NY, NYU Press.
- 11 McIntosh, P (1989) White privilege: Unpacking the invisible Knapsack. *Peace and Freedom Magazine*, pp. 10–12.