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Doing race in Europe: contested pasts and contemporary practices

In this introduction to the special section on 'Doing Race in Europe' we take up the notion of race as an 'absent presence' to deal with two related issues. First, we consider the historically contested position of race in the discipline of anthropology. Second, we think through the notion of an 'absent presence' conceptually and methodologically so as to develop a relational approach enabling us to analyse race in practice. We take as a point of departure the idea that we cannot know race in advance, and that we therefore need to study how it comes about, and how it is made and unmade in specific situations. We therefore call for renewed ethnographic attention to how race is made absent and present in multiple ways. This special section is the first joint publication of the EASA network for the anthropology of race and ethnicity (ARE).

Key words absent presence, ethnography, Europe, practice, race/racism

Race in Europe has been evocatively described as an 'absent presence' (M'charek et al. 2014) – buried, yet haunting; often un-named, yet effective; slippery and difficult to grasp, yet manifest in specific configurations. In the introduction to this special section, we take up this powerful image to address two related issues. First, we briefly consider the contested position of race as an absent presence in the discipline of anthropology in historical perspective. Second, we take up the notion of absent presence in theoretical and methodological terms, thereby advocating a relational approach that allows us to analyse race *in practice*. Most importantly, for us, the notion of absent presence indicates that we cannot know race (or any object of study for that matter) in advance, but rather need to study how it comes about, how it is made and unmade in specific constellations. To conceptualise race as an absent presence requires a renewed *ethnographic* attention to when and how it surfaces as well as to the multiple ways in which race is made relevant – or irrelevant (Hirschauer 2019).

The vantage point from which our discussion emerges is Europe. On the one hand, our conversation marks the founding of the Anthropology of Race and Ethnicity Network (ARE) of the European Association of Social Anthropology. On the other hand, thinking race from Europe also means to draw attention to the specific role of locality and temporality in racial formations, to take up Omi and Winant's (1994) evocative terminology.

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So what about our first point, i.e. the legacy of race in (European) anthropology more broadly? Current calls for the decolonisation of academic canons and intellectual practice have brought renewed attention to the role of anthropology in the formation and stabilisation of race in colonial encounters. Structurally and epistemologically

entwined with regimes of colonial governance, early 20th-century anthropology also re/produced racialised understandings of bodily and cultural difference with lasting effects. The recent political and academic debates about the fate of ethnographic museums and collections in Europe are but one expression of this spectre of race and colonialism at the foundation of our discipline.¹

For example, the controversy around the re-opening of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium (de Block 2019) has brought the complex entanglement of ethnographic collections, colonial conquest, racial epistemology and the disciplinary formation of anthropology freshly into public view. The museum refurbishment promised a decolonial approach, yet it failed to provide 'a more nuanced image of the history of Africa, removing the museum's racist image, the discriminatory pedagogic project that it helped instill for over a century' (de Block 2019, 276). The Humboldt-Forum in Berlin is another case in point (von Bose 2016; AfricAvenir 2017). Like in Tervuren, its ethnographic collection will be housed in an architectural edifice of imperial power, namely the reconstructed former Prussian castle. Protests have not only been directed at matters of provenance and restitution, but have brought public attention to Germany's long-denied colonial history and its impact on ideas of national belonging, the representation of 'other' cultures and the problem of epistemic power and violence. Moreover, the co-presence of large numbers of colonial human remains alongside ethnographic objects in museum and university depots (Roque 2010; Van Dartel 2009) has highlighted the early links between physical anthropology and social-cultural anthropology and their various contributions to racial thought (Zimmerman 2001).²

Anthropology has certainly been involved in racialisation, but we also know that much of the critique of the 'fallacy of race' as 'man's most dangerous myth', as Ashley Montagu famously entitled her 1942 book (Montagu 2001), has been shared and voiced loudly by (social and cultural) anthropologists (see Stocking 1968; UNESCO 1961).³ Especially after the Second World War and the racial terror of the Shoah, there was a growing consensus that race itself was an ideology, based on 'false' scientific ideas (Gould 1981; Stepan 1982), an error of the past.

However, this rejection of race did not end racism as a social reality, albeit often in new forms (Balibar 2007; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Lentin and Titley 2011). Right-wing extremist political parties such as Front National in France, Alternative für Deutschland in Germany or Partij Voor de Vrijheid in the Netherlands all embrace racialised notions of identity and alterity, but they often use encrypted language to evade sanctions. In the words of André Gingrich, this situation requires an ethnographic position that carefully analyses the phenomenon of 'race vanishing, racism rising' (Gingrich 2004,

¹ These discussions gained traction through the report by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy on the restitution of ethnographic artefacts from Africa in French collections, which they combined with a broader call towards a new *relational* ethics (Sarr and Savoy 2018).

² This connection was as pronounced in French, British or US anthropology as in Germany, despite the different trajectories of these national 'schools'. On the relationship between nation-building and disciplinary formation as well as the different national pathways emerging from that linkage, see Barth et al. (2005).

³ In biological anthropology, this consensus is less clear, as there is ongoing controversy about the validity of broad racial typologies in the description of human biological diversity. For a critical review, see Armelagos and Goodman (1999).

156). Such 'racism without races', as Étienne Balibar (2007, 84) has called it, dwells less on the legacies of race science, eugenics and racial annihilation, but rather on identitarian ideas of belonging and cultural demarcation.

Some anthropologists working in and on Europe have advocated giving up on the idea of race and racism altogether, because in their mind it could not explain the specificities of exclusions and discriminations based on cultural and ethnic 'markers' (or ideas thereof). Thus, Verena Stolcke has argued that

culturalist rhetoric is distinct from racism in that it reifies culture conceived as a compact, bounded, localized, and historically rooted set of traditions and values transmitted through the generations by drawing on an ideological repertoire that dates back to the contradictory nineteenth-century conception of the nation-state. (1995, 4)

Others have argued strongly against what they regarded as the import of US racial categories (and notions of blackness and whiteness in particular) into other localities, since the notion of race would blur local expressions of social distinction, discrimination and difference-making.⁴ This rejection makes sense when considering the highly problematic language of race, its dominant association with hierarchical bodily difference and the often murderous violence it entails.

Critics of these positions, however, have pointed out that the reluctance to deal with race, its complex formation and multi-layered articulations and consequences, has also created vast gaps in anthropological analyses of power relations, leading anthropology to turn a blind eye to structural forms of racism (French 2000) as well as global racial hierarchies (Pierre 2013). Kamala Visweswaran even argued 'that the failure of the discipline to be in the vanguard of such debate [on race and racism] stems in part from a belief that it has, all along, been the vanguard' (Visweswaran 2010, 52). According to her, precisely the invocation of the founding fathers of cultural relativism such as Franz Boas often leads to a somewhat complacent assumption that race is no longer a relevant category, either scientifically or socially.

Conceptualising race as an absent presence then helps us to address the complex and subtle reasons for anthropologists' reluctance to engage race as an object of study, from the 'moral and legal ban' of the term racism in German-speaking countries and Scandinavia to positive national self-images that pre-empt a self-critical stance (Hervik 2004). While acknowledging the importance of semantic differences between Anglo-Saxon and non-English-speaking contexts (Gingrich 2004), we argue that it is not sufficient to simply abandon race from our analytical vocabulary, but rather we need to draw careful attention to the heterogeneous, fluid and often surprising ways in which race may surface in concrete practices. Through this ethnographic focus, the concept of race as an absent presence also helps us to make distinct contributions to understanding the multi-fold resurgence of race in the current rise of populism and racist sentiment across Europe (Bangstad et al. 2019; Shoshan 2016).

⁴ See famously the controversy between Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant against Michael Hanchard. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999) accused Hanchard of misrepresenting the Brazilian politics of race in his book on the Brazilian Movimento Negro (Hanchard 1994). In their response, however, they reproduced the dominant state ideology of a racial democracy based on mixture (*mestizaje*) which has since been widely critiqued and dismantled (Hanchard 2003; dos Santos Soares 2019).

As anthropologists who continue to grapple with the discipline's complex involvement in European imperialism, we cannot ignore the intensifying controversies about the afterlives of European colonialism that are sweeping across Europe today. On the contrary, we should take an active and critical role in these debates. In this effort, we can draw on the rich anthropological traditions of thinking critically about race, including critiques of anthropology's own – ambivalent – involvement in imperial racism (Asad 1973; Harrison 1997).

Here, we come to the second dimension of thinking about race as an absent presence, namely the articulation of race through relations, i.e. in practice. Ethnography as a crucial method in anthropology has the potential to draw attention to the complex and often messy lived realities and ambiguous practices that are sometimes overlooked both in public debates and in conceptual scholarship. To give one example, the categories of 'blackness' and 'whiteness' today tend to appear as stable, and often opposed, identities that have been rather fixed over time. The ethnographic investigations collected in this themed section provide fine-grained analyses that show how such categories are historically contingent and the products of ongoing negotiation. Anthropological analysis can therefore be a powerful tool to deconstruct narratives of 'white innocence' (Wekker 2016), and to investigate the implicit or tacit colonial afterlives in everyday life (Balkenhol 2014, 2016; de L'Estoile 2008).

The challenge, then, is how to study race without reifying it. How, in other words, to account for its absent presence in analytical and critical terms? Two strands of thought are important for us in this enterprise. The first influence is Stuart Hall's theorising of *articulation* as a way to account for the historical and material specificity of post-colonial capitalism and racism. Hall's (1980) discussion in 'Race, articulation and societies structured in dominance' powerfully reminds us that racism (and race for that matter) cannot be explained as purely determined by economic forces nor as a sociological construction or even a psychological problem. Instead, he calls for an analysis that helps to understand how different elements interrelate to *articulate* race as a particular category of difference. Hall pays close attention to locality and history, thereby showing how race has evolved (or has become articulated) in very specific settings. While the racial regime of apartheid, the racism of chattel slavery or the imagination of European nations as 'white' communities share dynamics of discrimination and hierarchisation, they also need to be analysed as contingent formations.

The second influence on our thinking about race in Europe comes from science and technology studies (STS), in particular from its take on practice and material-semiotic configurations (Haraway 1991; Law 2009; Mol 2002). A whole strand of anthropology working with concepts aligned with STS-debates has contributed significantly to a better understanding of race and its articulation in scientific projects and technological assemblages. Significant work has been done on the re-articulation of race as the 'molecularization of difference' (Abu El-Haj 2007) in the new genomics (Koenig et al. 2008; Schramm et al. 2012; Wailoo et al. 2012). Other works have focused on race in forensics (M'charek 2008), or on the distributed presence of race in biometric technologies (Kloppenborg and van der Ploeg 2018; Pugliese 2010) as well as in border management regimes (Moffette and Walters 2018).

These works have emphasised the continuous co-production (Jasanoff 2004; Reardon 2005) of science and politics in practice. They demonstrate that 'saying "socially constructed" is not enough' (Hartigan 2008), because such a statement implies that science and ideology, or 'facts' and 'fiction', can always be neatly distinguished. It

is more useful to understand science as producing rather than discovering facts, a view that allows us 'to see that objects [like race] come in many versions' (M'charek 2013, 423). Such an approach underscores our focus on the question of how race is made and unmade in practice.

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What do we mean when we say 'race in Europe' or Europe as a 'vantage point'? Let us briefly reflect on how we understand geography within a praxeological approach.

Édouard Glissant, in his *Poetics of relation* (1997), proposes the notion of *errantry* to rethink an analytical emphasis on territory, rootedness and bounded identities. Errantry, literally the quality, condition or fact of wandering, establishes identities and a sense of place through relations. Similarly, we view geography and race as *mutually* constitutive. To us, neither geography nor race can be regarded as given but are always *done* and co-constituted in relations. In line with our emphasis on articulation and practice, we understand race as a situated (absent) presence. Situatedness, here, does not refer to a particular, already existing location – whether geographic, historical, political or embodied. Instead, we seek to characterise it as a topology: 'a spatial model with which we can conceive of fluidity and concreteness concurrently' (Schramm 2014: 53). In this framework, Europe as a historical, political, geographic and embodied entity becomes a 'node' through which 'the multiple connections between different sectors and their racializing effects become visible' (2014: 53).

David Theo Goldberg speaks of 'racial Europeanization' (2006) to mark the specific ways in which race is enacted (and debated) in European settings. In our view, this racial Europeanisation takes place not as a perspective from an already established entity called Europe, but as a globalised circulation that itself brings about the very idea of Europe. Racial Europeanisation can thus be investigated, as Elena Calvo-Gonzalez does in this special section, among Galician immigrants in 19th-century Brazil. Or, conversely, as Marleen de Witte demonstrates, it becomes noticeable in the ways young people of African descent 'style' claims to European citizenship as black identity in Amsterdam today. Ethnographers, too, are subject to racial Europeanisation, as Paul Mepschen and Sinan Çankaya show in their discussion of the relational production of whiteness in their research settings.

The contributions in this themed section seek to understand how race is thought and done (as well as undone) in practice. This approach brings into view the processes of racialisation, thus highlighting the processual and relational, not the substantial character of race. Moreover, it draws attention to the inconspicuousness of the everyday, thereby moving away from a focus on the exceptional and incidental. Processes of racialisation and the normalisation of race, these contributions show, are often very ordinary and mundane rather than excessive. For example, de Witte shows how in the production and appropriation of self-styled categories of 'black' and 'African', young Afro-Dutch people in Amsterdam negotiate a fine line between offering counter-narratives to colonial categories and reproducing them. Similarly, although in an entirely different geographic and historical context, Calvo-Gonzalez demonstrates how Galician immigrants to Brazil in the early 20th century navigated an ambiguous position of whiteness that produced both privilege and stigma.

We opt for an understanding of race in terms of practices, as something people do *and* undo in different constellations. Such an approach helps us to understand what Ann Stoler (1997) has called the 'polyvalent mobility' of race, i.e. how race can serve as both an instrument of power as well as a site of contestation. Race, in this

understanding, is powerful precisely because of its slipperiness and indeterminacy. In order to critique and potentially undo race, we need to study it ethnographically – in its mundane articulations and through its multiple spatial and temporal circulations.

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Ethnographic research involves people of flesh and blood, and therefore the embodied location of both researcher and interlocutors plays a crucial role in the production of anthropological knowledge. This question has gained renewed significance at a time when universities and research institutions are pushed to decolonise teaching, research and publication. Our focus on race as an (embodied) practice echoes this context, and it is reflected in the contributions to this section, as well. Some contributions share a concern with the importance of materiality as part of the assemblage through which race gets articulated. The body, of course is the central ‘material’ through which race is made and remade. The body and other materials are central in de Witte’s contribution about African self-styling in Amsterdam. In the case she discusses, media, artefacts, clothing and a particular understanding of style play a major role in the performance of Blackness/Africanness. Mepschen and Çankaya show how race becomes manifested as an affective presence. Taking ‘discomfort’ as a starting point, they argue, allows them to ‘shed light on the ethnographic experience as an affective experience – on the role of discomfort in the relationship between the anthropologist and their object’.

To sum up, the focus on practices helps us to demonstrate the pervasiveness of processes of racialisation, as it marks the sometimes implicit ways in which race is made into a socially effective phenomenon. In our minds, theorising of race as an absent presence also has the potential to increase the importance of race as an anthropological object of study beyond a disciplinary niche, connecting it to wider anthropological inquiries including kinship, religion, gender and sexuality, queerness, mobility, medical anthropology, the arts, security, peace and conflict, to name a few. This special section is the first joint publication of the recently established EASA network for the anthropological study of race and ethnicity (ARE). The network was set up as a platform for anthropologists of Europe working on issues of race, ethnicity and related topics to more easily find each other and to facilitate exchange through joint panels at the EASA conference, an active mailing list and Facebook page, and extracurricular biannual meetings. Questions on these meetings have included the public role of anthropology in debates about immigration and rising populism in Europe, as well as decolonising the classroom. As a second objective, then, this special section advances the aims of the network to establish race as an object of anthropological inquiry in a more systematic manner.

We also seek to launch a fruitful debate on race across the Atlantic and in other global settings. Therefore, we are delighted to have Faye Harrison, the former president of the International Union of Anthropological & Ethnological Sciences (IUAS) as our discussant. The conversation has only begun.

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Faisant la race en Europe: passés contestés et pratiques contemporaines

Dans l'introduction de ce dossier intitulé « Poser la question de race en Europe », la notion de race se conçoit comme une « présence absente » nous permettant d'aborder deux problématiques connexes. D'une part, celle de la contestation historique de la place de la race au sein de l'anthropologie ; d'autre part, celle permettant au lecteur de réfléchir de façon conceptuelle et méthodologique à la notion de la « présence absente », afin de développer une approche relationnelle facilitant l'analyse de la race dans les pratiques. Nous prenons comme point de départ l'idée que l'on ne peut pas connaître d'avance ce qui constitue « la race » : il faut étudier les processus responsables de sa genèse ; ceux par lesquels il se fait et se défait dans des situations spécifiques. Ce dossier est un appel donc à renouveler l'attention des ethnographes aux multiples façons dont la race est rendue absente et présente en même temps. Il s'agit de la première publication conjointe du réseau EASA pour l'anthropologie de la race et de l'ethnicité (ARE).

Mots-clés présence absente, ethnographie, Europe, pratiques, race / racisme