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Introduction: Race and Ethnicity

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This issue of the *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* explores several scenarios in which people in America as well as outside American national borders struggle against the influence and institutions of what might be called American racialized ethnicity. The concepts of race and ethnicity are not themselves politically charged, in that they, technically, do not connote, as Shelby Steele has written, "a pursuit of power in relation to the other" (Steele 5). Through the early twentieth century, around the world, race was a concept for the division of humans into a few distinct groups. Insidiously, however, in America as well as elsewhere in the world, race became the basis for categorization of some races as innately superior, and some innately inferior. In the United States, basically two groups—as opposed to, say, in the Caribbean region and Brazil, where several racial categories emerged—became socially constructed: the racially superior group "white," and the racially inferior group, "black." Americans' growing ancestral diversity by the late nineteenth century obviously complicated the plausibility of these terms, although, until the civil rights movement of the twentieth century, their cultural power largely was a basis for the organization of American society and government.

Today the racist ideas of a century ago have been scientifically discredited. As used by geneticists, race refers merely to a group whose gene frequencies differ from those of other groups in the human species. However, there is still disagreement among social scientists between genetic explanations of human group differences and cultural or environmental explanations. And, in their search for social distinctions, as George Fredrickson has observed, Americans may often still construct racially distinctive group characteristics that are used as a basis for status hierarchy of groups who are thought to differ in ancestry or descent (Fredrickson 84).

The concept of race, though having a longer history, seems simple in comparison to the phenomenon of American ethnicity. The *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* lists fourteen variables, each alone, all together, or some combination of which could constitute an American's ethnic identification with others: common geographic origin; migratory status; race; language or

dialect; religious faith or faiths; ties that transcend kinship, neighborhood, and community boundaries; shared traditions, values, and symbols; literature, folklore, and music; food preferences; settlement and employment patterns; special interests in regard to politics in the homeland and in the United States; institutions that specifically serve to maintain the group; an internal sense of distinctiveness; an external perception of distinctiveness (Thernstrom vi). Such complexity, plus the pattern in American history that ethnic groups largely have changed, merged, or dissolved over time, suggests that in America the social role of ethnicity has been changing, but of race, unchanging.

The essays that follow both confirm and complicate these generalizations about Americans' understanding of race and ethnicity, and the social impact of these concepts. The contribution of Punyashree Panda emphasizes the personal nature of struggle against ethnic hierarchy, once an individual begins to be socialized into that hierarchy. Panda interprets the character of Pauline in Louise Erdrich's novel *Tracks*. Pauline, as a postcolonial native character, is able to exercise some choice in her identity: either to assimilate to the normative social group, or to remain within her displaced but distinctive indigenous community. Panda interprets Erdrich to show that the costs of Pauline's choice are greater than the reward, challenging arguments for the possibility of elective ethnic identity by Lynell George and David Hollinger.

Where Punyashree Panda shows us the cost of one Native American character's choice of assimilation, Meaghan Kozar reviews scholarly literature concerning not individual experience or prototypical characters, but the group experience of Asian Americans, who were historically stereotyped, both positively and negatively, thus deterring their entry into mainstream American consciousness as merely ordinary people. Behind the World War II internment of Japanese Americans lay decades of stereotypes of Japanese and Chinese immigrants, although literature on the subject indicates that those stereotypes were constructed from different ethnocentric assumptions or predispositions. Moreover, Kozar observes, scholarship shows that selective memory of the internment suggests such patterns of stereotyping still persist.

Two other articles, by Demir Barlas and Daniel Byrne, introduce a transnational aspect to the study of American race and ethnicity. Barlas reveals surprising evidence of how American abolitionists attempted to exploit positive images of Ottoman slavery to disrupt American complacency over slavery at home. Barlas's writing reminds us that slavery was a global institution. His focus on the American antislavery movement thus shows the movement's cosmopolitan character. In his demonstration of how abolitionists interpreted Middle Eastern

slavery as being far less oppressive than its American counterpart, Barlas suggests a challenge to the traditional argument of Edward Said about the overriding "orientalist" view of the East among westerners. The appeal implicit in this essay is welcome for comparative or analogous study of American and Middle Eastern concepts of slavery, racial prejudice, and opposition to these institutions.

Daniel Byrne, meanwhile, provides an analysis of modern American foreign relations, focusing on American officials' attitudes and policies towards the states of North Africa in the post-World War II era of decolonization. Byrne shows that despite their frequent public professions of opposition to European colonialism in North Africa, American officials in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s often resisted anti-colonial initiatives by Algerians, Egyptians, Moroccans, and Tunisians. Byrne shows that a range of reasons lay behind this resistance. Factors included racial ideology as a carry-over from American domestic opinion towards peoples of color; suspicions that communist intrigues by the Soviet Union lay behind the North Africans' nationalist assertions; and, ironically, "orientalist" attitudes, which Americans inherited from Europeans, towards North Africans as Middle East peoples. Byrne's argument effectively complicates other monocausal explanations of American policy in the Middle East and North Africa during the Cold War.

Finally, Page Laws writes about the broad meanings and possible consequences of American racial thought and actions as explored in the 2005 film *Crash*, directed by Paul Haggis. Where earlier in American history, "race" organized American society into "whites" and "blacks," the tense city of Los Angeles, the setting for *Crash*, shows a much more complicated postmodern American society, where little is what it seems to be, irresolvable shades of gray dominate, and racial and ethnic tension run rife. Laws focuses on this ambiguity in her analysis of the film, which she sees as an allegory on the difficulty of ethical behavior, as was prescribed by the ancient writers Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates. *Crash*, says Laws, teaches by asking its audience, "what is the right thing to do? Who is right?" The film, of course, yields no easy answers to these questions. Obviously, as Cornel West, wrote, "Race matters" in America. As expressed by *Crash* and all of the contributors to this issue of the *Journal of American Studies of Turkey,* our question is, "okay, how?"

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