

## Race Matters

### *Interrogating Race and the global writing of history*

#### Abstracts

1. Nira Wickramasinghe (Leiden), *The murder of a Dutch fiscal in 1723, Colombo: Interrogating the categories of 'slave', 'black' and 'kaffir'*

There is an enduring belief in Sri Lanka that at some undetermined point in history 'kaffir' slaves rebelled, creating such havoc in Colombo that it led to them being severely suppressed and then confined to a ward of the city, that then became known for posterity as 'Slave Island'. There was in, fact, no slave rebellion. The less well known murder of the Dutch fiscal, Barent de Swaan and his wife by their Asian domestic slaves, in the city of Colombo in 1723 is intimately connected to this apocryphal story. The reverberations of this violent event across three centuries, offer a key to tracking shifts in the manner in which 'slaves,' 'blacks' and 'kaffirs' were represented and their lives and deaths recorded during successive colonial and postcolonial regimes. This presentation will explore the gradual blackening of slaves in texts and in the collective memory of the people of Sri Lanka. It addresses the re-writing of history around the space called 'Slave Island' in Colombo where a murder committed by Indonesian slaves gets transformed into a 'kaffir' slave revolt in popular memory and guide books. This lecture will explore the social and political conditions that produced taxonomies and the political and moral projects that were served by the appearance and disappearance of certain categories of classification.

2. Santanu Das (Oxford), *The Colour of Memory: the racial politics of the centennial WW1 commemoration*

One of the important legacies of the centennial commemoration of the First World War will be the greater recognition of the contribution of non-white colonial troops. But this much-needed expansion has been accompanied, I argue, by a process of double sanitisation: the erasure of the ignominies of race and colonialism as well as the cleansing of the violence of combat. As the war is being reinvented in Europe as the grand stage to play the laudable anthem of multiculturalism, the responses from the former colonies as well as from the ethnic communities abroad have often bordered on triumphant valorisation, as if the only way to recover the non-white soldier is by turning him into a war hero. My talk will examine the poetics and politics of this process through a focus on the commemoration of the South Asian contribution to the war: whose memory are we talking about, what is the relation between racial memory and a 'global war', and why is it in the sphere of colonial war remembrance that the tension between ethical and instrumental uses of memory - is at its most intense? I shall here look at a range of material with reference to South Asia - from official centennial events to commemorative art work, censored letters, video installations, and literary imaginings - to examine questions of race, amnesia and multiculturalism as well as the meaning of commemoration itself, and reflect on how and what we remember.

3. Gabriela Ramos (Cambridge), *Race, Law and Institutions in the Colonial Andes*

Spanish claims to sovereignty over the Americas (aka "the New World") involved the need to count on a legal framework to deal with unknown societies and their customs. The Papacy granted the Spanish Crown the right to take possession of the newly "discovered" territories with the condition that their inhabitants would be brought to the fold of the Catholic Church.

These circumstances set Spanish colonisation apart from other experiences of colonialism in global history, as the Spanish crown had as a duty securing the conversion of the indigenous people of the New World to Christianity. Spanish material interests notwithstanding, relations between rulers and ruled were established within legal and religious obligations. This presentation discusses how, as the Spanish state made use of the law to define the status of the indigenous people, categorised them as “wretched”, thus deserving royal protection. My research on the links between religion, health, and the body in the colonial Andes has taken me through the study of the legal framework and institutions set up to regulate relations between sovereign and subjects. Regarding the sovereign, prevalent ideas and practices about his role in early modern Spain were extended among the peoples of the New World. As for the ruled, the Spanish monarchy used both old and new criteria to define who they were and decide what was their place in society. Although not exactly “racial” or “racist” from the onset, the criteria Spanish colonialism applied in the New World gradually led to racial and racist ideas and customs.

4. James Poskett (Warwick), *Skulls, Books, and Busts: Writing the Global History of Racial Science, 1815-1920*

Rammohun Roy passed away during the night of 27th September 1833 in an upstairs room at Stapleton Grove, a Georgian manor on the outskirts of Bristol. This proved an opportune moment for Rammohun’s English physician, John Estlin. He called for Stapleton Grove’s mason, who soon returned “with an Italian and took a cast of the Rajah’s head.” Before long, a copy of this cast had found its way to the Edinburgh Phrenological Society. From here, further copies were reproduced and circulated by the Scottish firm O’Neil and Son, reaching as far as the United States and India. This paper takes the plaster cast of Rammohun Roy’s head as a starting point for rethinking the global history of science and race. In doing so, I make three methodological arguments. First, I argue that we need to move beyond intellectual histories of racial science, and instead ground our accounts in material culture and scientific practice. Second, I argue that we need to recognise the role of colonised people in the making and remaking of racial science. And third, I argue that the global history of science needs to be understood as a project in which race plays a fundamental role.

5. Michell Chresfield (Birmingham), *Tri-racial Isolates and Racially Ambiguous Others: DNA Ancestry Testing and Race-Marking in 20th Century America*

In October 2018 Senator Elizabeth Warren released a campaign-style video publicizing the results of her ancestry DNA test, thereby reinvigorating a highly charged debate over who has the power to determine Native American identity. In recent years DNA testing firms like 23 and Me and Ancestry have claimed this power for themselves, but not without significant challenge. The problem with DNA testing, critics assert, is that it allows the presence of Native ancestry to stand in for tribal affiliation, a move which undermines hard-fought battles for tribal sovereignty. Thus, at the heart of this debate are questions about identity as well as culture and belonging.

But what options are available for persons who, like Warren, come from multiracial backgrounds and lack the historical documentation that has legitimated the identity claims of current federally recognized tribes? For scores of individuals of multiracial ancestry, particularly those with African ancestry, because one drop of black blood was enough to render all other ancestry irrelevant, they’ve found themselves often lacking the evidence needed to affirm their claims. Thus, DNA testing, with its promise of certainty and objectivity, is not only the sensible but in some cases the only solution to the problem of historical erasure. This paper examines the 2005

DNA study of the Melungeons, a multiracial group from eastern Tennessee and their efforts to prove their Native ancestry. Though the 2005 is the most recent, the 20th century saw the Melungeons as both active participants and unwitting subjects in various other attempts to determine their racial composition and by extension, the biological basis of race. This paper is interested in how DNA and blood group genetics have been positioned as diagnostics capable of revealing "racial truths," while paying special attention to what happens when these revelations contradict community and self-developed notions of identity.

6. Caroline Bressey (UCL), *'The global in the local: multi-ethnic stories from Victorian England'*

This paper is based on my current book project remapping multi-ethnic England in the late nineteenth century. Seeking to place Black Victorians into the broader communities of which they were a part, the project is focused on tracing the experiences of working class men and women, their family lives and their experiences of work from domestic service to the circus high wire. This is not only a project of recovery but also a project that aims to suggest ways to radically re-think the history of multi-culturalism in Britain and confront the still widely held perceptions within political, policy and popular arenas that 'multi-cultural' Britain began with the arrival of Caribbean migrants after World War Two.

This paper will particularly focus on the lives of English barmaids. Understood to be an essential part of local life and a beloved British institution, these, mostly young, women were also perceived as a disturbing sexual and alluring presence. For many these complexities meant they were the embodiment of "the modern woman" emerging at the end of the nineteenth century. Intertwined with these ideas of modernity, barmaids could also find themselves entangled with globally informed ideas of exoticism, and how different forms of 'Blackness' should be performed. This paper traces the existence of black women who worked behind the bar including the story of one local barmaid who, for a short time, worked at the White Hart pub in Chesterfield.

7. Jonathan Schroeder (Warwick), *"John Swanson Jacobs: Mariner, Renegade, Castaway in Victorian London."*

John Swanson Jacobs was protégé of Frederick Douglass and brother of Harriet Jacobs, the most famous African American man and woman of the nineteenth century and the authors of slave narratives that hold signal importance for the study of slavery and the literature of the Black diaspora. These connections only begin to suggest why John Jacobs deserves historical recognition, however. As a Black radical sailor and author of an autobiographical slave narrative published in 1855 in Australia under the powerful title, *The United States Governed by Six Hundred Thousand Despots*, John Jacobs led a life that deserves to be put on the historical map for the new horizons it opens up about race, ethnicity, and migration in the global nineteenth century. This talk will survey Jacobs's long life as an African American expatriate, with particular attention to his residence in England between 1857 and 1872, a period that saw him start a blended family with a white British widower on Saffron Hill and resume his career as an abolitionist and board member of the London Emancipation Society, in between sailing to every corner of the world, touching down at far-flung ports of call like Piraeus, Constantinople, and Odessa, Elsinore and St. Petersburg, Bangkok and St. Kitts, even working in India for an entire year.

8. Matthew Allen (Warwick), *'Anténor Firmin and the Haitian anti-racist critique of historical diffusionism'*

Haitian writer and statesman Anténor Firmin has been recently rediscovered by scholarship and celebrated for his strident critique of scientific racism and his commitment to the decolonization of the Caribbean. His enduring concern in his writing and in his diplomatic manoeuvrings on behalf of the Haitian Republic was to secure a place for his country in the concert of nations, and to re-inscribe Haiti in grand historical narratives from which it had been excluded. Firmin's 1885 magnum opus *De l'égalité des races humaines*, with its subtitle 'anthropologie positive', leaves little doubt as to its author's endorsement of one such narrative: Comtean positivism. Auguste Comte's emphasis on the universal and uniform action of a finite set of laws allowed Firmin to unseat the prejudice underlying scientific racism. However, this is not the whole story. As a philosophy of history, positivism was hostile to difference. In its unilineal model of evolution, the apotheosis of history comes about through the universal imposition of European modernity. Firmin is highly attuned to these tensions. In *De l'égalité*, we see him advance a critical reading of Comte which embraces the French thinker's emphasis on law while dispensing with his eurocentrism. Drawing on readings from an array of thinkers in various fields, such as Broca, Hegel, and W.D. Whitney, Firmin articulates a theory of parallel historical evolution originating independently in multiple centres. It continued to inform his thinking about the history and geopolitical situation of Haiti over the course of his career. I wish to examine Firmin's readings of contemporary debates and recover the originality of his theory of multilinear evolution. This theory consisted in isolating historical law from its realization in any specific cultural form. It allowed Firmin to conceptualize the coexistence of multiple developmental trajectories, and to rescue Haitian modernity from the charge of mimicry of Europe.

9. Somak Biswas (Warwick), *Making Hinduism Respectable: Vivekananda, Vedanta and the (Racialised) Dialectics of a World Religion, 1890-1910*

This paper looks at the dialectics and deployments around 'Hinduism as a World Religion' in late 19th century India and U.S. Initiated by the prominent Bengali Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda and a critical cast of western and Indian collaborators and disciples, it looks at how Vedanta, or a particularly monist form of Hinduism was presented as a 'universal'. Looking at an interlinked set of sites, actors across India, Europe and the U.S, I argue how an eager avowal of 'learned audiences' in the West, generally affluent, almost always white and upper/middle class, was instrumental in consolidating Vedanta's claims making as a world religion. The avowal of cultured, respectable white audiences was key to settling Hinduism and through them, an idealised India. Within a context of intensifying anti-immigration and racist legislation in the U.S, I ask: what kind of normalising work does networks of white discipleship do? I argue that through these networks, Vedanta and Hinduism became a site to produce an idealised, high cultured India, posited in stark contrast to the steady stream of unskilled agricultural labour migrating from the subcontinent.

In an attempt to settle Vedanta as well as Hindu Indians as examples of Indian high culture and civilisation, Vivekananda and his Western disciples were influential in producing a transnational image of the tolerant and 'mild Hindu'. Vedanta performed the dual task of universalising Hinduism abroad as well as bolstering a powerful narrative of cultural nationalism in India, moves that converged in projecting and producing narratives of respectable India for consumption at home and abroad. I analyse how hierarchies of race, class, caste and religion formed important constitutive grids in making Vedanta respectable, in ways that often re/produced the very logic for anti-Black racism and continuance of upper-caste/class Hindu hegemony.

10. Liana Beatrice Valerio (Warwick), *Mira á Esta Hija Predilecta...: Cuban Annexation and Coerced Masculinity in the Mid-Nineteenth Century Atlantic*

Both the Atlantic powers of the early nineteenth century and traditional anglophone historiography have, in different historical moments, interpreted Cuba's continued loyalty to Spain during the nineteenth century as having been an indication of political passivity when compared to the rebellious new republics of Latin America in the same era. In antebellum South Carolina, Cuba's hesitancy to claim independence from the metropolis was interpreted as an effeminate lack of political decisiveness. Building upon David Sartorius' examination of the political uses of demonstrating loyalty to Spain for Cubans of colour during the nineteenth century, this article will argue not only that professing loyalty to Spain was strategic, serving the interests of white pro-slavery actors in Cuba, but also, that by cannily manipulating the same effeminacy which was derided in the U.S., Cuba's supplications to Spanish national honour and masculinity compelled the Crown to defend the island against the bold challenges of greedy young annexationist America and the empire-building impulse of Britain, as a father would protect his beautiful daughter from the designs of a covetous scoundrel. That daughter, though, was more vulnerable for her whiteness. The notion of Cuba falling prey to the savage customs of Africa increasingly perceived to have been consuming the island as a result of its growing free population of colour, and white culture being displaced by black, was a commonly repeated threat among proslavery voices seeking to push Spain to take more decisive action when protecting the island. Neighbouring Haiti, equally, became the geographically reified trope of the black man ravaging the white woman, with defenceless Cuba presented as unshielded from being stolen away from white hands by the rebellious new black republic, allegedly plotting similar scenes of white massacre in Spain's most valuable colony. Informing this article will be South Carolinian periodicals wherein the masculinity of colonial Cubans was disparaged, and the question of annexing the island to the U.S. was deliberated. Alongside these public materials will be analysed private letters sent from Cuba to Spain, which emphasised the feminised vulnerability of the island when seeking to coerce the paternal protection of the Crown.