

Northeast Historical Archaeology

Volume 37

Article 9

2008

Book Review of "The Archaeology of Race and Racialization in Historic America" by Charles E. Orser

Paul A. Shackel

Follow this and additional works at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha>

 Part of the [Archaeological Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shackel, Paul A. (2008) "Book Review of "The Archaeology of Race and Racialization in Historic America" by Charles E. Orser," *Northeast Historical Archaeology*: Vol. 37 37, Article 9.
<https://doi.org/10.22191/neha/vol37/iss1/9> Available at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha/vol37/iss1/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Northeast Historical Archaeology by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF RACE AND RACIALIZATION IN HISTORIC AMERICA, by Charles E. Orser, Jr., 2007, *The American Experience in Archaeological Perspective Series*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 213 pages, ill., maps, \$25.00 (paper).

Reviewed by Paul A. Shackel

While the United States was founded on the principles of liberty and freedom, Charles E. Orser Jr., shows that this concept did not hold true for African Americans and the many new immigrants that arrived from Europe and Asia in the 19th century. American nativists manipulated racial categories to benefit themselves and subjugate the new immigrant to a second-class status. *The Archeology of Race and Racialization in Historic America* is a compelling book that skillfully delves into these issues and shows how race is socially and politically constructed. Orser uses several archaeological examples to extend the dialog of race to include the Irish and the Chinese.

Orser explains how the creation of racial categories is usually based upon biophysical characteristics that can be easily identified. Therefore "the other" can be perceived as biologically inferior. The concept of racialization first appeared during the age of European expansion at about 1500. It helped to create a ranked society that allowed Europeans to justify colonialism. While scientists have shown that race does not exist, the concept of racial classifications in America has tremendous staying power as we move into the twenty-first century.

Orser provides an overview of some of the early historical archaeology projects that addressed issues related to race. Robert Asher and Charles Fairbank's pioneering work published in 1971 examines the everyday lifeways of enslaved people with information from a cabin ruin on Cumberland Island in Georgia. John Otto's Cannon plantation work published in 1980 explores the racial and legal status of planters, overseers, and enslaved people. David Gradwohl and Nancy Osborn's work in the early 1980s at the mining town of Buxton, Iowa, explains how former African American

residents remember the place as a "black utopia." Later Terrance Epperson made the study of race central to his work and in 1990 he insisted that racial ideology was an important concept to discuss when examining how plantations operated. The African Burial Ground project in New York City expanded the work on racialization while also dealing with descendants and the local community. Later in the decade Paul Mullin's work showed how 19th-century African American consumers were never free from racism. Therefore, they developed strategies to participate in a consumer society without threatening the social order. The construction of race cannot be disentangled from issues of class.

Orser explains that racialization in the United States was not confined to one group or one region and it was not simply constructed based on biophysical characteristics. Cultural traditions, place of birth, and religious beliefs were also used to create racial categories. In the case of the Irish, racialization began in mid-17th-century Britain, although it was perfected in the United States. By the middle of the 19th century, the Irish were not considered white. Many descriptions of the Irish exaggerated their features and they became simian-like. While these comparisons faded at the turn of the 20th century, and the Irish were "granted whiteness," some social scientists, like Carton Coon, as late as 1939 continued to describe the Irish Catholics as descendants of Cro-Magnons, while the Protestant Irish were descendants of the Nordic group.

Orser uses the well-known archaeology of a crowded tenement at Five Points in New York City to help explain the changing racialization of the Irish in the second half of the 19th century. He describes the archaeological assemblages from the households of Irish immigrants that had been in the country for at least a decade. It looks very similar to contemporary Anglo assemblages and is somewhat different from an earlier tenement assemblage of Irish immigrants. Adopting a similar material culture allowed these Irish immigrants to gain acceptance from their American neighbors and it was also a way to conform to the perception of what it meant to be white. Orser also provides other thought provoking examples of the racialization of the Irish.

Many of the Chinese who migrated to the west coast came from Guangdong Province, which contains the well-known ports of Canton, Macao, and Hong Kong. Much like the Irish, Chinese people from different social classes were forced to migrate due to shortages of food. In 1853, a total of 758 foreign-born Chinese lived on the west coast. Ten years later the number increased to over 35,000. The Chinese endured substandard housing and living conditions. They worked for less money and longer hours, creating a threat to white laborers. In fact, a northeastern industrialist imported 100 Chinese workers from California to break a strike and keep wages low in a shoe factory in Massachusetts.

People began to refer to the "Chinese problem," claiming that the Chinese were "among the most corrupt" people on earth. Contemporaries believed that they could not be "Americanized." They fell below whites in the evolutionary hierarchy and many believed that they were in a stalled state of cultural development. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prohibited the immigration of Chinese through 1943.

Orser uses an archaeological example from the excavations of a Chinese laundry in Stockton, California to look at the concept of racialization. He notes that Chinese businesses were not listed in the city directory until 1926, even though they existed well before that time. The archaeological assemblage shows a mix of Asian and non-Asian artifacts. The findings show that the Chinese did not live in isolation as many had previously thought. Also, finding prepackaged goods in the archaeological assemblage is an indication that the residents avoided purchasing loose goods from local merchants. It was a way to avoid being taken advantage of because of their racial category. While there is no one artifact that is an indication of racialization, context is important for helping to uncover its total dimensions hidden within capitalism.

Issues of race still plague American society today and *The Archaeology of Race and Racialization in Historic America* provides an important historical context that describes the racialization of America. The book emphasizes the development of African American archaeology and focuses on the Irish and the Chinese. This work is timely since the United States is

currently debating a new immigrant "problem" with the large influx of people from south of the border.

Charles E. Orser, Jr. has made many significant contributions to the study of race in historical archaeology and *The Archaeology of Race and Racialization in Historic America* is a welcomed addition to this important discussion. There are many thought provoking concepts worth noting. Important for any reader is Orser's contextual analysis that shows how race is a social and political construction. The definitions of race are fluid and groups compete with each other to climb the hierarchical ladder with the ultimate goal of reaching whiteness. The book is well written and will serve as a nice companion to any introductory course. It can also be used as a supplement in any historical archaeology class. It is accessible to a large audience and is an important book that shows how immigrants negotiated discrimination in their new home country.

Paul Shackel is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Maryland. He has worked on issues related to race and labor. His upcoming book, *New Philadelphia: An Archaeology of Race in the Heartland* (University of California Press, 2011), describes the archaeology that helped to uncover a multi-racial town in the ante-bellum era as well as working with the local and descendant communities.

Paul A. Shackel
Department of Anthropology,
1111 Woods Hall
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742
pshackel@anth.umd.edu.