**Science and Prejudice**

Reading 4

Petrus Camper believed in monogenesis, the idea that all people share a common ancestry based on the Biblical account of Adam and Eve. At the same time, he was convinced that some groups or “races” had declined further than others from their Biblical origin. He also suspected that there were intellectual and moral differences among the races as well as physical ones. In the mid-19th century, an American anthropologist, Samuel George Morton, extended Camper’s work. But unlike Camper, Morton believed in polygenesis—the idea that each race was created separately. He also maintained that each race is fixed, intrinsically different from all others, and incapable of being changed.

Morton, a professor of medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, held two medical degrees and served as president of the Academy of Natural Sciences. According to the *New York Tribune*, “Probably no scientific man in America enjoyed a higher reputation among scholars throughout the world.”1 Like many scientists of his day, Morton believed that intelligence is linked to brain size. He therefore tried to rank the races according to skull size. After measuring a vast number of skulls from around the world, he concluded that whites have larger skulls than other races and are therefore “superior.” He was not sure if blacks were a separate race or a separate species, but he did insist that people of African descent are different from and inferior to whites.

The following quotations are from Morton’s *Crania Americana*, published in 1839. They suggest how physical differences can become markers that predict a group’s intelligence, personality traits, even morality.

**Europeans**

The Caucasian Race is characterized by a naturally fair skin, susceptible of every tint; hair fine, long and curling, and of various colors.

The skull is large and oval, and its anterior portion full and elevated. The face is small in proportion to the head, of an oval form, with well- proportioned features. . . . This race is distinguished for the facility with which it attains the highest intellectual endowments. . . .

The spontaneous fertility of [the Caucasus] has rendered it the hive of many nations, which extending their migrations in every direction, have peopled the finest portions of the earth, and given birth to its fairest inhabitants. . . .

**Asians**

This great division of the human species is characterized by a sallow or olive colored skin, which appears to be drawn tight over the bones of the face; long black straight hair, and thin beard. The nose is broad, and short; the eyes are small, black, and obliquely placed, and the eye-brows are arched and linear; the lips are turned, the cheek bones broad and flat. . . . In their intellectual character the Mongolians are ingenious, imitative, and highly susceptible of cultivation [i.e. learning].

So versatile are their feelings and actions, that they have been compared to the monkey race, whose attention is perpetually changing from one object to another. . . .

**Native Americans**

The American Race is marked by a brown complexion; long, black, lank hair; and deficient beard. The eyes are black and deep set, the brow low, the cheek-bones high, the nose large and aquiline, the mouth large, and the lips tumid [swollen] and compressed. . . . In their mental character the Americans are averse to cultivation, and slow in acquiring knowledge; restless, revengeful, and fond of war, and wholly destitute of maritime adventure.

They are crafty, sensual, ungrateful, obstinate and unfeeling, and much of their affection for their children may be traced to purely selfish motives. They devour the most disgusting [foods] uncooked and uncleaned, and seem to have no idea beyond providing for the present moment. . . . Their mental faculties, from infancy to old age, present a continued childhood. . . . [Indians] are not only averse to the restraints of education, but for the most part are incapable of a continued process of reasoning on abstract subjects. . . .

**Africans**

Characterized by a black complexion, and black, woolly hair; the eyes are large and prominent, the nose broad and flat, the lips thick, and the mouth wide; the head is long and narrow, the forehead low, the cheek-bones prominent, the jaws protruding, and the chin small. In disposition the Negro is joyous, flexible, and indolent; while the many nations which compose this race present a singular diversity of intellectual character, of which the far extreme is the lowest grade of humanity. . . .

The moral and intellectual character of the Africans is widely different in different nations. . . . The Negroes are proverbially fond of their amusements, in which they engage with great exuberance of spirit; and a day of toil is with them no bar to a night of revelry.

Like most other barbarous nations their institutions are not infrequently characterized by superstition and cruelty. They appear to be fond of warlike enterprises, and are not deficient in personal courage; but, once overcome, they yield to their destiny, and accommodate themselves with amazing facility to every change of circumstance.

The Negroes have little invention, but strong powers of imitation, so that they readily acquire mechanic arts. They have a great talent for music, and all their external senses are remarkably acute.2

Morton’s ranking of the “races” had very real consequences. After meeting Morton and viewing his skull collection, Louis Agassiz, a noted biologist who joined the faculty of Harvard University in 1846, taught his students that Africans are a separate species. In evaluating Agassiz’s career, anthropologist Lee Baker observes: “Agassiz’s legacy is not only the statues, schools, streets, and museums in Cambridge [Massachusetts] emblazoned with his name but also the bevy of students who were under his tutelage at Harvard University. He trained virtually all of the prominent U.S. professors of natural history during the second half of the nineteenth century.”3

Morton’s rankings also shaped the way many politicians, journalists, and ministers viewed two of the most pressing social and political issues of the day: the expulsion of Native Americans from their ancestral lands and the expansion of slavery. Between 1816 and 1850, over 100,000 Indians from 28 tribes were forced from their homes east of the Mississippi to western lands that white Americans considered useless. At the same time, about 3.5 million African Americans were held in bondage. Their enslavement prompted a heated debate between slave-owners and an international community of abolitionists, opponents to slavery. Morton’s writings played a part in both debates by promoting the idea that the Constitution does not apply to Native Americans or Africans because they are not the sorts of people for whom the document was written.