The History and Philosophy of ‘Race’

This CAVE-funded workshop is designed to bring together Australian and international philosophers and historians of ‘race’ to nurture interaction and exchange on their shared research interests. Our aim is to create a platform from which a mutually beneficial dialogue between philosophers and historians of ‘race’ can be established.

Location: E7B Theatre 2, near the central courtyard (M21 on campus map)

Workshop Program

Thursday 17 November

9:00-9:15 am Opening remarks: Adam Hochman (MQ)

9:15-10:55 am

Sarah Walsh (USYD): “The Aesthetics of Whiteness: Race and visual Culture in Chile”

Andrew Gillet (MQ): “Race, Ethnicity, Others: Late Antiquity as a Site for Historical Recursion”

10:55-11:20 am Morning tea (provided)

11:20-1:00 pm

Victoria Grieves (USYD): “History in the Age of Humans: Time, Aboriginal philosophy and the Rise of Racism”

Adam Hochman (MQ): “Why the Metaphysics of Race Needs to Get Historical”

1:00-2:00 pm Lunch (provided)

2:00-3:00 pm Keynote: Robert Bernasconi (PSU): “Race, Religion, and Conversion”
Friday 18 November

9:00-10:40 am  Christine Winter (ANU): “Racial Ambiguity: Colonial Mixed Race Identity in the Asia-Pacific”  
Jennifer Mensch (UWS): “German Anthropology between Blumenbach and Kant”

10:40-11:00 am  Morning tea (provided)

11:00-12:40 pm  Albert Atkin (MQ): “Subaltern Prosopography and the Philosophy of Race”  
Alison Holland (MQ): “Counting Race: Aboriginal Natives and Immigrant Races. The Investment in, and Politics of, Race in Interwar Australia”

12:40-1:40 pm  Lunch (provided)


2:40-3:00 pm  Closing remarks: Albert Atkin (MQ)

Abstracts

Albert Atkin

“Subaltern Prosopography and the Philosophy of Race”

In this paper, I examine the way in which some philosophers have engaged with the history of the race concept and suggest that instead of attending to the history of the concept by deference to the historical writings of a privileged elite, we should take an alternative approach by looking more closely at the lived experiences of those for whom the concept of race had the most direct impact. Such a shift in how we make use of the history of the race concept, from expert biography to subaltern prosopography, will have a marked effect on how we understand many of the questions that concern philosophers of race. I will also trace out some of those effects.
Albert Atkin is a Senior Lecturer in philosophy at Macquarie University. His research interests are in race and racism, pragmatism, and the philosophy of C.S. Peirce. He is the author of two books, *The Philosophy of Race* (2012) and *Peirce* (2015), and various articles.

Robert Bernasconi

“Race, Religion, and Conversion”

Attempts to locate the beginning of racial thinking prior to a rigorous (scientific) conception of race have tended to focus on the moment when religious conversions were in one way or another discounted in favor of lineage: the idea is that whereas one can always convert from one religion to another, race is permanent. Hence the focus in the history of racism on the Purity of Blood Statutes in Spain in the fifteenth century or in Mexico in the seventeenth century, as well as on the laws introduced into Virginia and Carolina around 1700 that broke with the convention that Christians should not enslave Christians by allowing that even after baptism Negro slaves maintained their status as slaves. These were certainly decisive moments in the history of race thinking, but their precise significance is missed if we attribute to the people of that era a clear understanding of biological inheritance or if we try to read into them a shift from religion to race in the way society is organized. Not only was there at this time no clear understanding of race as an identity category distinct in its logical operation from religion, but also the very idea of races and religions as categories that could be universally and rigorously applied across all cultures had not yet been introduced. In fact, we can see very clearly, even in the late nineteenth century, how in the case of the so-called “Chinese heathens” of California, racial and religious determinations are scarcely separable. The paradigm case of an identity allegedly shifting from a religious identity to a racial identity is that of assimilated Jews in Germany in the late nineteenth century but, as the Nazis found, when they tried to determine who was or was not Jewish, they had to resort to the available data on religious observance because it was impossible to rely exclusively on a strictly biological concept of race. I argue in this paper that the emergence of a strictly biological concept of race is a twentieth century invention and one promoted more by antiracists than by racists. Today when debates about whether Islamophobia is a racism are sometimes addressed by declaring that being a Muslim is not a racial designation because one can convert to Islam, it seems important to think about identities less analytically and more genealogically.

Robert Bernasconi is Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Philosophy and African American Studies at Pennsylvania State University. He is a co-editor of the journal *Critical Philosophy of Race*. Much of his recent work has been in the critical philosophy of race: he has written extensively on the racism of philosophers and on the history of the concept of race, but he also addresses current issues, such as police violence and the way race is perpetuated through its spatialisation. In addition he is a specialist on Hegel and continental philosophy more generally and he has
written two books on Heidegger and one on Sartre. Among his current projects is a genealogy of the concept of racism. He is also engaged in a study of the ways in which most of those we consider the major philosophers of the eighteenth century addressed - or failed to address - the issues raised by the slave trade with a special concern for the implications of this knowledge for how the history of philosophy and ethics should be taught.

Andrew Gillett

“Race, Ethnicity, Others: Late Antiquity as a Site for Historical Recursion”

This paper considers the ways in which a period of history, in its academic and popular manifestations, embodies certain racialist concepts. The period now often called Late Antiquity – which incorporates historiographic tropes such as the ‘Fall of Rome’ and ‘the Barbarian Invasions’ – has served as a site for the construction of western European identities since the early Modern period. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, scholarly assertions of these identities, and the narrative paradigms that underwrote them, can be understood as proto-racial: they served key functions of racial ideology in constructing essentialist models of self and other, and they operated to justify exclusionist and exploitationist situations. These historicised constructs operated not to separate Europeans from Muslim or New World others, but to differentiate amongst European ‘peoples,’ and they provided a mode of understanding both past events and present political conditions. In the current century, after reactions against the ‘high racism’ of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, aspects of these constructs remain uncomfortably embedded in the templates of how scholarship continues to talk about the transition from late classical to medieval periods.

Andrew Gillett is Associate Professor of Late Antiquity in the Department of Ancient History, Macquarie University. He holds a BA Hons in Australian Social History from the University of Queensland, and MA and PhD in Medieval Studies from the University of Toronto.

Victoria Grieves

“History in the Age of Humans: Time, Aboriginal philosophy and the Rise of Racism”

Western history making has its internal critics - Keith Jenkins proved himself to be more of a philosopher when he argued that (big) history is dead in the late C20th and in so doing also exposed the gulf between history and philosophy. Different cultures have embedded in their foundational philosophies a view of the past, of time and of the function of history-making from that of the west. Aboriginal cultures for example have an inherent and profoundly different view of time and the function of history that is seldom discussed or understood. Aboriginal views of race for example, includes an understanding of the redundancy of “race” and knowledge of the
ways in which racism has played out in this settler colonial state. While more recent Australian histories have concentrated on exposing the colonialist crimes of the past in an attempt to deliver human rights and social justice in the present, this approach is thrown into relief by insights into Aboriginal philosophy and what it can achieve in this country. As we move into the Anthropocene the relevance of history will be more under challenge than ever, as will race relations - historians will change approaches and the theory of history will need to develop in order to retain function and relevance.

Dr Victoria Grieves is Warraimaay from the midnorth coast of NSW and an historian. Currently ARC Indigenous Research Fellow at the University of Sydney, her research interests include gender and race in settler colonial societies, the development of critical Indigenous knowledges and implications for approaches to the Anthropocene. Her book *Aboriginal Spirituality: Aboriginal Philosophy and the Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal people* is widely accessed and cited. She is currently developing a book about critical Indigenous knowledge for Australia.

Adam Hochman

“Why the Metaphysics of Race Needs to Get Historical”

In this talk I make the case that the metaphysics of race – the study of the nature and reality of race – would benefit from greater engagement with the history of race. I show how arguments for the reality of race – both as a biological and as a social kind – become less convincing once we take into account longue durée history. As an alternative to racial ontology, I defend a version of anti-realist reconstructionism about race. I argue that ‘race’ is not real, but that racialised groups are. I call my view ‘interactive constructionism about racialised groups’. Racialised groups (and identities) emerge out of the ongoing interaction between a number of factors: administrative, biological, cultural, economic, gendered, geographic, historical, lingual, phenomenological, political, psychological, religious, social, and so on. The role and strength of such factors will be context dependent. The metaphysics of racialised groups – like the metaphysics of race – would benefit greatly from interaction between philosophers and historians.

Adam Hochman is a Macquarie University Research Fellow, specialising in philosophy of race and philosophy of biology. He is best known for his arguments against the new wave of racial naturalism (the view that there are human biological races). His work has been published in *The Journal of Philosophy, Philosophical Studies, Philosophy of Science,* and *Biology & Philosophy,* among other venues. Adam’s forthcoming article in *ERGO* will introduce his theory of ‘interactive constructionism about racialised groups’.
Alison Holland

“Counting Race: Aboriginal Natives and Immigrant Races. The Investment in, and Politics of, Race in Interwar Australia”

Mapping population has been a key part of Commonwealth data collection from the early 1900s. Records are detailed and include variants such as gender, age distribution and density, as well as a host of others. Up until the 1970s race was also a category. The key racial signification of the Australian population to 1939 was that it was divided into two main groups: Aboriginal natives (exclusively ‘full-blood’) and immigrant races. Between 1939 and 1960 this had become Indigenous and non-Indigenous and, from 1960, European and non-European with only the latter required to designate their ‘race’ (including Aboriginals). Throughout this period Aboriginal natives were simultaneously excluded from the body count and included in the data. Those designated ‘half-caste’ Aboriginal were counted with the general population from the start. While these shifting designations tell us much about the changing face of ‘race’, this paper is primarily concerned with the contradictions around Aboriginality in interwar Australia against the backdrop of a vibrant politics of race.

Dr Alison Holland is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Modern History, Politics and International Relations at Macquarie University. She specialises in Australian and Indigenous history and also teaches Australian Environmental History. She researches in the fields of Indigenous history, as well as race and colonialism, humanitarianism and citizenship. She has published a variety of book chapters and articles in national and international journals on these themes. She is the editor of Rethinking the Racial Moment. Essays on the Colonial Encounter (Cambridge Scholars) in 2011. Her monograph, Just Relations. The Story of Mary Bennett's Crusade for Aboriginal Rights (UWA Publishing, 2015) was shortlisted for the NSW Premier’s Australian History prize.

Ron Mallon

“On Accumulation Mechanisms”

Accumulation mechanisms mark, aggregate, and sometimes amplify the effects of past events upon particular groups of people. They provide a mechanism for explaining group-based differences and group-based disadvantages, and they also allow the explanation of large scale differences by appeal to micro-scale causes. I distinguish accumulation mechanisms from what is often called “structure” (in the structure/agency divide), and I then go on to argue that accumulation mechanisms are of many different kinds: some of them are biological or psychological, others are artifactual or geographic. I note further that different kinds of
accumulation are operative in connection with different human categories, for example race and sex. I conclude that further attention to accumulation mechanisms should provide perhaps the best means of overcoming group-based disadvantage.

Ron Mallon is a Professor of Philosophy at Washington University in St. Louis. His work engages experimental philosophy, moral psychology, social ontology, and the philosophy of race, and his work has appeared in a wide range of venues including Cognition, Mind, Mind and Language, Nous, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, and Philosophical Studies. His book, The Construction of Human Kinds, is just out from OUP.

Jennifer Mensch

“German Anthropology between Blumenbach and Kant”

Although Immanuel Kant is best known for his works on epistemology and ethics, researchers have spent the past two decades recovering the work done by Kant in natural history. Between Kant’s own writings and his student’s lecture notes from his courses on anthropology and physical geography—the 18th-century term for physical anthropology—scholars have close to 3000 pages worth of material to consider, much of it available in English translation. Now that research has firmly established Kant’s role in establishing a scientific theory of race, there is work remaining to be done in properly assessing Kant’s position within the nascent field of German anthropology. This essay considers Kant’s relationship to Johann Blumenbach, a professor of medicine and comparative anatomy who would go on to become Germany’s leading anthropologist. While it is well-known that Kant was appreciative of Blumenbach’s theory of generation, this essay will lay out the historical case for a broader assessment of Kant’s relationship to Blumenbach. The results of this inquiry will suggest that Kant’s real interest was in gaining support for his own approach to natural history, enlisting Blumenbach as his aide in combatting the counter-narratives provided by both Herder and Forster. Blumenbach was a scientist Kant hoped to shape in line with his own views on generation and race, and history demonstrates the real extent to which Kant was successful in achieving this goal.

Jennifer Mensch is a Kant specialist working at the intersection of philosophy and science during the long eighteenth century. The author of numerous essays and contributions, her publications aim to expand the interpretive boundaries that have long framed traditional philosophical discussions of this period. In her book, Kant’s Organicism: Epigenesis and the Development of Critical Philosophy (University of Chicago Press, 2013), she displaces traditional narratives of Immanuel Kant’s philosophy by tracing the decisive role played by eighteenth century embryological research for his theories of mind and cognition. Before moving to Western Sydney University in 2015, Jennifer Mensch spent twelve years at the Pennsylvania State University where she taught philosophy and the history of science and medicine.
Sarah Walsh

“The Aesthetics of Whiteness: Race and Visual Culture in Chile”

This paper examines the representation of whiteness in Chile to consider the conceptual flexibility and limits of race in Latin America. Specifically, it uses a variety of different images of Chileans to illustrate how whiteness was considered a defining feature of Chilean identity. These images highlight not only Latin American ideas about race, but also help to break scholarly assumptions about who possesses whiteness. Additionally, the paper will use Chilean ideas regarding whiteness to reveal how ideas about race in the early twentieth century were informed not only by biological determinism, but also notions of fluidity. To do this, it will discuss images produced in the context of fine art, commercial art, and medical evaluation. In all cases, these images will demonstrate what “normal” Chilean phenotypes were expected to be.

Sarah Walsh is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Sydney in the Center for Race and Ethnicity in the Global South. She is a historian of modern Latin America with research specialization in the history of science, race, and gender. Walsh’s most recent work has focused on racial thought in Chile, race science in the Latin world, and whiteness and masculinity across the Global South.

Christine Winter

“Racial Ambiguity: Colonial Mixed Race Identity in the Asia-Pacific”

In this paper, part of my ARC Future Fellowship research project, I contextualise Mixed race Pacific Islander Germans within a wider scope of colonial mixed race people from the Asia Pacific. I argue that identity expressions changed due to political developments: depending on the circumstances Germanness was actuated or submerged and rendered invisible. Further that 'Germanness' as part of a colonial mixed-race identity destabilised notions of race, and situated families as neither British nor Indigenous. German-Pacific Islanders, as are other colonial mixed race populations thus complied with and challenged colonial categories.

A/Prof Christine Winter is ARC Future Fellow and Matthew Flinders Fellow at the school of history and International relations at Flinders University, Adelaide. She has written widely about legacies of colonialism, National Socialism, and scientific racism.