"Dividing the World"

Who are you? It is a question that we have all been asked. In answering, we define ourselves by placing greater emphasis on some characteristics than on others. Most of us view our identity as a combination of factors, including physical traits and social ties—connections to a family, an ethnic group, a community, or a nation. Although this way of defining ourselves seems ordinary, it has consequences. "When we identify one thing as unlike the others," observes Martha Minow, a law professor, "we are dividing the world; we use our language to exclude, to distinguish—to discriminate." She goes on to say:

> Of course, there are "real differences" in the world; each person differs in countless ways from each other person. But when we simplify and sort, we focus on some traits rather than others, and we assign consequences to the presence and absence of the traits we make significant. We ask, What's the new baby?"—and we expect as an answer, boy or girl. That answer, for most of history, has spelled consequences for the roles and opportunities available to that individual.[1]

For most of history, a baby's gender has mattered. For the past 300 years, so has the color of his or her skin. Until about 50 years ago, many scientists in Europe and North America insisted that humankind was divided into separate and distinct races based primarily on skin color. Although they disagreed as to how many races there were in the world, they generally agreed that their own race—the white or Caucasian race—was superior to others. Author Jack Foley traces the history of that notion:

> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first appearance in print of the word white meaning "a white man, a person of a race distinguished by a light complexion" was in 1671. …The term *Caucasian* is even later: "Of or belonging to the region of the Caucasus; a name given by [Johann] Blumenbach (ca. 1800) to the 'white' race of mankind, which he derived from this region."
>
> "Through the centuries of the slave trade," writes Earl Conrad, in his interesting book, *The Invention of the Negro**, "the word race was rarely if ever used… Shakespeare's Shylock uses the word *tribe*, *nation*, but not *race*. The Moor in *Othello* calls himself black and the word *slave* is several times used, but not *race*. The word does not appear in the King James Version of the Bible in any context other than as running a race. The Bible refers to nations and says: 'God made the world and all things therein; and hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth.' The Bible, with all its violence and its incessant warfare between peoples, does not have racist references to tribes, groups, provinces, nations, or men."

> And again, on the subject of slavery: "The traffic grew with the profits—the shuttle service importing human chattel to America in overcrowded ships. It was on these ships that we find the beginnings—the first crystallizations —of the curious doctrine which was to be called 'white supremacy.' Among the first white men to develop attitudes of supremacy were the slave ship crews."[2]

By the time Americans declared independence from Britain in 1776, the color of a person's skin mattered throughout the new nation. Local, state, and federal laws regarded African Americans, whether enslaved or free, as inferior to white Americans. The same was true of Native Americans. Beliefs about racial superiority also affected how newcomers were regarded. In 1790 Congress welcomed "the worthy part of mankind" to the nation and established a process that would allow immigrants to become citizens. Each had to live in the nation for two years and provide proof of good character. Each also had to be white. Non-whites could not become citizens.

In 1868, the nation added a new amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The 14th Amendment states that anyone born in the United States is a citizen. Soon after its passage, Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts suggested that "all acts of Congress relating to naturalization be… amended" so that immigrants could become citizens with "no distinction of race or color." His colleagues in the Senate mocked the idea "that the Chinese coolies, that the Bushmen of South Africa, that the Hottentots, the Digger Indians, heathen, pagan, and cannibal, shall have equal political rights under this Government with citizens of the United States."

In 1870, Congress simply added to those eligible for citizenship persons "of the African race or of African descent." The change failed to address the question of who is white. It was a question that would be raised in the nation's courts for years to come. The first to do so was a Chinese immigrant named Ah Yup. In 1878, he asked the court whether a person of the "Mongolian race" qualified as a "white person." After quoting from the works of various "race scientists," the judge ruled, "No one includes the white, or Caucasian, with the Mongolian or 'yellow race.'"

In the years that followed, judges continued in their efforts to define "the white race." Were Armenians white? Hawaiians? Turks? Are people from India white? What about Mexicans? Were Native Americans white? In each case, judges relied on a combination of "race science" and "popular understanding" to determine who was "white." Two cases in the early 1920s illustrate how, as one historian notes, "race has served as a powerful instrument for jealously guarding privilege rather than as a neutral, coolly biological basis for understanding the relationship among the world's people."

In October 1922, Takao Ozawa, an immigrant from Japan, petitioned the courts for the right to become a US citizen. He argued that that the 1875 law that extended citizenship to "Africans" was inclusive rather than exclusive. He also cited cases where judges had ruled that anyone not black was "white." And finally, he observed, "The Japanese are 'free.' They, or at least the dominant strains, are 'white persons,'… a superior class, fit for citizenship. They are assimilable."

The justices on the Supreme Court ruled against Ozawa, arguing that he was "white" but not "Caucasian." A few months after the Ozawa decision, the court heard a similar case. This time the government wanted to take away citizenship from Singh Thind, an immigrant from India, because he was "not white." The same justices that denied Ozawa citizenship because he was "white" but not "Caucasian" now ruled that Thind was also ineligible because he was "Caucasian" but not "white." They stated, "It may be true that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences among them today."

In 1924, Congress passed a new immigration law based on race. It favored immigrants from Northern Europe over those from Southern and Eastern Europe. At the same time, the law cut off nearly all immigration from Asia and Africa. That law remained substantially unchanged until 1965, when Congress replaced it with one that favors refugees, people with relatives in the United States, and workers with needed skills. The result was a dramatic increase in immigration from Latin America and Asia.

In 1990, the law was revised. This time Congress set a limit on the number of people who could immigrate each year. It continued to favor people with relatives in the nation and highly skilled workers. At the same it set up a visa lottery for countries that did not take advantage of the family reunification or employment preferences. According to Angelo N. Ancheta, a civil rights attorney, the new law favored immigrants from Europe and Africa and deliberately excluded from the lottery Asian countries such as China, India, South Korea, and the Philippines, and Central American countries such as Mexico and El Salvador.

Who decides which differences matter? How is that point of view enforced? What do the Supreme Court decisions in the 1920s suggest about the meaning of race? About its relationship to power?

The table below is based on information from the U.S. Census. It shows where most of the nation's immigrants were born. What do the numbers suggest about the effects of the 1965 law? What do they suggest about the effects of the 1990 law? Angelo N. Ancheta believes that the 1990 law has racial and ethnic biases built into it.[3] What are those biases? How are they similar to ones held earlier in U.S. history? What differences seem most striking?

For generations, many Americans have viewed race in terms of the relationship between black and white Americans. How do you think recent immigrants to the United States may challenge those views? How may their experiences complicate discussions of race?

One way to look at identity is by constructing an identity chart. It contains the words or phrases people attach to themselves as well as the ones that others gives them. Create an identity chart for yourself by drawing a circle with your name in the middle. Around that circle, write the words you use to describe yourself. In a second color add the labels others attach to you. How is your chart similar to those of your classmates? To what extent is each chart unique? What part has race played in shaping your identity and those of your classmates?

Write a working definition of the word *race*. A working definition is one that grows as you read, observe, reflect, and discuss experiences and ideas. Begin your definition by explaining what the word *race* means to you. To what extent is your understanding of the concept based on experience? What role has your family played in your understanding? What role has the media played? Add to your working definition the meanings provided in this reading. As you complete other readings and watch MATTERS OF RACE, continue to add to your working definition.

Create a working definition of *racism*. Keep in mind that the ending *ism* refers to a doctrine or principle. Can you be a racist if you do not believe that humankind is divided into races?

Sources of Immigration 1980–2000

	1980 Census		1990 Census		2000 Census	
1	Mexico	2,199,000	Mexico	4,298,000	Mexico	7,871,000
2	Germany	849,000	Philippines	913,000	China*	1,457,000
3	Canada	843,000	Canada	745,000	Philippines	1,227,000
4	Italy	832,000	Cuba	737,000	India	1,027,000
5	U.K.	669,000	Germany	712,000	Cuba	922,000
6	Cuba	608,000	U.K.	640,000	El Salvador	796,000
7	Philippines	501,000	Italy	581,000	Vietnam	778,000
8	Poland	418,000	Korea	568,000	Korea	715,000
9	Soviet Union	406,000	Vietnam	543,000	Canada	688,000
10	Korea	290,000	China*	530,000	Dom. Republic	601,000
11	China*	286,000	El Salvador	465,000	Germany	598,000
12	Vietnam	231,000	India	450,000	Jamaica	488,000
	All Others	14,080,000	**All Others**	19,767,000	**All Others**	31,108,000

* Includes Hong Kong and Taiwan

[1] *Making All the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion and American Law* by Martha Minow. Cornell University Press, 1990, 3.

* The word *Negro* was commonly used in earlier centuries to refer to individuals of African descent. Its use reflects a particular time period.

[2] From "Multiculturism and the Media" by Jack Foley in *MultiAmerica: Essays on Cultural Wars and Cultural Peace*, edited by Ishmael Reed. Viking, 1997, 367-369. Originally published in *Konch* Magazine.

[3] *Race, Rights, and the Asian-American Experience* by Angelo N. Ancheta. Rutgers University Press, 1998, 38.

What Is Race?

Dictionaries often define the word *race* as "a group of people distinguished by genetically transmitted physical characteristics." According to most scholars today, those "genetically transmitted physical characteristics"—skin color, hair texture, shape of eyes, etc—have no scientific meaning. In 2001 the American Museum of Natural History opened an exhibit entitled "The Genomic Revolution." In a prominent place, the organizers featured the following statement:

> **The Only Race Is the Human Race**
>
> **No Biological Basis for Race**
>
> New data from the mapping of the human genome reveal that all humans are incredibly similar—in fact, we are 99.9% genetically identical. ***We are all members of one species,*** *Homo sapiens*. Scientists have confirmed, as they long suspected, ***that there is no genetic or biological basis for race.***
>
> Genetic variation between people within the same "racial" group can be greater than the variation between people of two different groups. Many people of African descent are no more similar to other Africans than they are to Caucasians. Genetic distinctions between Asians and Caucasians are less pronounced than those between groups from, for example, parts of East and West Africa.
>
> No matter how scientists today scrutinize a person's genes, they can't determine with certainty whether an individual is from one "racial" group or another. ***Differences of culture and society*** distinguish one group from another, but these distinctions are not rooted in biology.
>
> *"Mapping the DNA sequence variation in the human genome holds the potential for promoting the fundamental unity of all mankind."* –Dr. Harold P. Freeman.[4]

If race has no basis in biology or genetics, what is it? Poet Lori Tsang likens it to water: "Like water, it takes on the shape of whatever contains it—whatever culture, social structure, political system. But like water, it slips through your fingers when you try to hold it." [5] In the 1950s, Tsang's aunt and uncle took a trip across the United States. Aware of segregation laws in the South, they were careful to sit at the back of buses and in separate compartments on trains. In one southern city, however, a white bus driver ordered them to move to the front of the bus to sit with whites. Tsang says of the incident, "Race is the myth upon which the reality of racism is predicated, the wild card the racist always keeps hidden up his sleeve. The racist has the power to determine whether the card will be a diamond or a spade, whether a Chinese is black or white." [6]

Author John Edgar Wideman also views race as a "wild card." He writes:

> Think of a blank screen, then seat somebody at a keyboard controlling what appears on the screen. Race is whatever the operator decides to punch up. The meaning of race is open-ended, situational, functional, predictable to some extent, but a flexible repertoire of possibilities that follow from the ingenuity of the operator privileged to monopolize the controls.
>
> On the other hand, race signifies something quite precise about power, how one group seizes and sustains an unbeatable edge over others.[7]

Sociologist Barbara Katz Rothman views race as a set of physical differences that matter socially.

> We see race as this physical reality, this recognizable pattern of differences between people. It is foolish to try to persuade people that the differences don't exist. They do. It is pointless to try to convince people that the differences don't matter. They do.
>
> What confuses us is that the differences exist physically, but matter socially. There are physical differences, and even physical consequences. But there is not a physical cause-and-effect relationship between them. Take something relatively simple: There is a much higher infant mortality rate among blacks than among whites in America. The differences between black and white women are there, real and measurable. But those differences, the physical, biological characteristics marked as race—level of melanin in the skin, shape of the nose, or whatever—are not the cause of the different infant mortality rates. The darkness of the mother is a physical, biological phenomenon, as is the death of the baby. But the relationship between the two is a social reality; it is the social consequence of race….[8]

In what sense is race a "wild card"? How do the decisions reached by the Supreme Court in the 1920s (Reading 1) support that idea? How do those decisions support the idea that "race signifies something quite precise about power, how one group seizes and sustains an unbeatable edge over others"? How do your own experiences with race support both ideas? To what extent do they challenge those ideas?

During the years of apartheid in South Africa, hundreds of people officially changed their race each year by applying to a special government agency. In 1985, a government official reported:

702 Colored people turned white.

19 whites became Colored.

One Indian became white.

Three Chinese became white.

50 Indians became Colored.

43 Coloreds became Indians.

21 Indians became Malay.

30 Malays went Indian.

249 blacks became Colored.

20 Coloreds became black.

Two blacks became "other Asians."

One black was classified Griqua.

11 Coloreds became Chinese.

Three Coloreds went Malay.

One Chinese became Colored.

Eight Malays became Colored.

Three blacks were classed as Malay.

No blacks became white and no whites became black.

Why would a government have a procedure for changing one's race? To what extent does the procedure support the way Lois Tsang and John Wideman define race and racism? To what extent does it support the way you define the term?

What does Barbara Rothman mean when she writes, "differences exist physically, but matter socially"? How does she challenge the idea of a simple relationship between a physical difference and a physical consequence? What other examples in the local or national news support her view of cause-and-effect relationships based on race?

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[4] www.amnh.org

[5] Quoted in *Half and Half*, ed. By Claudine Chiawei O'Hearn. Pantheon Books, 1998, 209-210.

[6] Ibid.

[7] John Edgar Wideman, *Fatheralong: A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society.* Pantheon Books, 1994, xv—xvi.

[8] Barbara Katz Rothman, *The Book of Life: A Personal and Ethical Guide to Race, Normality, and the Implications of the Human Genome Project.* Beacon Press, 1998, 2001, 63.

What Is Culture?

How we see the world and how we interpret what we see are both cultural. A culture is the way that a group of people live together in a community or set of communities. It includes both written laws and the unwritten rules of a society. The way parents rear their children is cultural, as is the way a community educates those children. A people's past, its memories, and experiences are also a part of its culture. So are its values and beliefs. Race then is a cultural idea—a belief about difference. It is a way that some people have tried to make sense of the differences they see between themselves and others. Culture shapes identity in small ways and large.

Xuefei Jin was born in 1956 in a part of China then known as Manchuria. He came to the United States in 1985. Although English is his second language, he writes only in English under the pen name Ha Jin. In a poem entitled "The Past," Ha Jin reflects on the relationship between past and present, culture and identity:

> I have supposed my past is a part of myself.
> As my shadow appears whenever I'm in the sun
> the past cannot be thrown off and its weight
> must be borne, or I will become another man.
>
> But I saw someone wall his past into a garden
> whose produce is always in fashion.
> If you enter his property without permission
> he will welcome you with a watchdog or a gun.
>
> I saw someone set up his past as a harbor.
> Wherever it sails, his boat is safe—
> if a storm comes, he can always head for home.
> His voyage is the adventure of a kite.
>
> I saw someone drop his past like trash.
> He buried it and shed it altogether.
> He has shown me that without the past
> one can also move ahead and get somewhere.
>
> Like a shroud my past surrounds me,
> but I will cut it and stitch it,
> to make good shoes with it,
> shoes that fit my feet.[9]

What does it mean to view the past "as a shadow"? How does one "wall" the past "into a garden"? How does one set up the past as a "harbor"? What may prompt someone to "drop the past like trash"? To regard it as a "shroud," or burial garment? How does the poet view his own relationship with the culture in which he was reared? In what other ways do people see their culture? Which view is closest to your own?

What does Ha Jin mean when he writes, "the past cannot be thrown off and its weight must be borne, or I will become another man"? How does he challenge that idea in his poem? Why do you think he decides to "stitch" his past into "good shoes," "shoes that fit my feet"?

There are many different ways to live in a culture. What are the ways Ha Jin describes in his poem? What other ways might be added to his list?

[9] "The Past," in *Facing Shadows* by Ha Jin. Hanging Loose Press, 1996, 63.