

Charles E. Orser, Jr. *The Archaeology of Race and Racialization in Historic America*. The American Experience in Archaeological Perspective Series. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007. 232 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8130-3143-9.



Reviewed by R. Scott Baxter

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Charles E. Orser Jr.'s stated goal is to explore "how modern-world archaeologists might investigate the subject of racialization as it pertains to immigrant groups" (p. xv). His study provides an overview of the concept of race throughout the history of American archaeology, and shows how it has changed over time. It follows with a discussion of the current standing of race in the field, and offers a handful of examples of recent studies of race and racialization through the means of historical archaeology. He concludes the text with a brief discussion of how the concept of race remains a strong influence in our current culture and scholarly pursuits.

In the preface, Orser initiates his analysis of the topic by noting that American archaeology was derived from the study of race. He further states that "race has not been a major focus even of historical archaeology" (p. xv). This statement is one with which many historical archaeologists would take exception. Race has been a pivotal element of many archaeological studies. On reading the complete text, however, it is apparent that the

author is attempting to pursue a deeper level of analysis, one in which the concept of race has shaped both past cultural interactions and the study of these interactions by modern archaeologists.

While most modern anthropologists would acknowledge that race is a cultural construct with no biological basis, Orser points out that it nevertheless shapes our thinking and the mind-set of society at large. To make his point, he discusses nineteenth-century Irish immigrants, a group of people who, by modern standards, would be considered "white." Through text and imagery, Orser demonstrates how nativist Americans viewed Irish immigrants as "non-white" and even subhuman. He follows up his analysis of Irish immigrants with an example of Chinese immigrants in California.

A key point of the book is to acknowledge not only that the concept of race has existed throughout American history, but that it also influenced interactions between racialized groups. Orser

points out that it is the obligation of the archaeologist to address the implications of this construct when interpreting a site or assemblage. He also notes that, despite the efforts of many to eradicate or simply deny it, race still plays a part in our modern thinking.

The volume has some shortcomings. The verbiage of the text is rather dense, jargon-filled, and at times obtuse and difficult to read. Some of the archaeological examples of “racialized” groups are either obscure or appear to provide little more than anecdotal evidence to support the author’s thesis. The text would have benefited from more archaeological examples for the groups in question or sites richer in material culture.

Overall though, Orser’s study provides a much-needed reevaluation of the role of race and the racialization of prescribed groups from the view of historical archaeology. His analysis sheds new light on the social interactions of the many different immigrant communities brought together in America’s urban centers during the nineteenth century. This fresh review of race may provide urban scholars with a new set of analytical tools to study how the racialization of certain groups shaped the perceptions of those both inside and outside of these circumscribed parties. Orser’s text holds particular relevance at this time as the United States swears in a president whose heritage brings our society’s definitions of race into question and prominence.

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