In the introduction to his 1916 masterwork, "The Passing of the Great Race," Madison Grant counseled his contemporaries to repudiate their pledge to "acknowledge no distinction in race, creed, or color." If they didn't eliminate "inferior types," he warned, history would soon record "Finis Americanae."

Praised by Theodore Roosevelt for his fearlessness "in assailing popular and mischievous sentimentalities," Grant was by no means alone in presenting bigoted views as scientific truths.

As Nell Irvin Painter, a professor of history emerita at Princeton University, reminds us, theories of race, grounded in heredity, that today seem bizarre, confusing and contradictory, were widely accepted throughout most of American history. And, although biologists and geneticists no longer believe in the physical existence of "races," the concept lives on, along with racism.
Designed for a popular audience, Dr. Painter's book is a useful synthesis of the evolution of ideas about "white races" from the ancient Greeks to the modern age.

Taxonomists, she demonstrates, never clearly defined race. They sometimes acknowledged the role culture and climate played in determining physical appearance, even as they claimed that the distinctive characteristics of groups were fixed and unalterable.

Sometimes, following the lead of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who in 1795 gave us the term "Caucasian," they transformed their own standards of beauty (like blue eyes and blond hair) into scientifically certified racial traits.

And sometimes, "even when the judgment of sound scholarship did not suffice," they turned languages into peoples, applying the word "arya," meaning noble or spiritual in Sanskrit, to an imagined superior race of Aryans.

Dr. Painter doesn't hide her contempt for her subjects. With the possible exception of Ralph Waldo Emerson, most of them deserve it.

Weighing in at 624 pages of text, 86 maps, tables, and graphs and a bibliography of more than 2,000 sources in several languages, William Z. Ripley's "Races of Europe" (1899), she snarls, was actually a "cloudy perversion of Darwinian evolution and Mendelian inheritance" that "blinded readers to its incoherence."

Open Lothrop Stoddard's "The Revolt Against Civilization" (1922), she snaps, and "hordes of vicious, stupid, fast-breeding, Alpine brachy-browns pour out" in a "mishmash of degenerate-families-Jews-Bolsheviks-intelligence-test-heredity-arianism."

More important, however, is Dr. Painter's summary of the evidence that race is, well, a pigment of our imagination. Sexual habits, she points out, have always over-flowed racial lines.

In the United States, more than one-seventh of whites, one-third of blacks, four-fifths of Asians and nineteen-twentieths of Native Americans are closely related to someone from a different racial group.

Among whites, more than three of four marriages cross ethnic boundaries that were once deemed racial.

Molecular genetics drove "the longest nail into the theory of race." Each person, it turns out, shares 99.99 percent of the genetic material of every other human being.
People from the same race can differ from one another as much as people from different races. And the interplay between the environment and genes further subverts the "heredity is destiny" gospel.

Race talk, of course, hasn't gone away. As the category of whiteness has expanded (to include Irish, Italians, Slavs and Jews), the white-black binary endures. It rests, once again, on skin color, even though people can get lighter or darker climatically, cosmetically or sexually.

"Ideally," Dr. Painter concludes, we should realize that "incessant human migration has made us all multi-racial."

And maybe even acknowledge, with J. Craig Venter, the former head of Celera Genomics, that we all evolved from people who 100,000 years ago migrated out of Africa and colonized the world. But we're not there yet. Not by a long shot.

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