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# Morton, Agassiz, and the Origins of Scientific Racism in the United States

by Louis Menand

*Editor's Note: In the years before the famed Columbia University anthropologist Franz Boas established the then radical position that mental aptitudes were largely a product of environment and cultural upbringing, Harvard professors Samuel George Morton and Swiss-born naturalist Louis Agassiz had convinced American scholars of the inherent inferiority and subhuman status of the black race. Here a distinguished American scholar tells the story of how the racist academic consensus was established at Harvard University.*

IN THE MONTHS between his arrival in Boston in October 1846 and his delivery of the Lowell Lectures that winter, Louis Agassiz had made a quick tour of the Northeast for the purpose of introducing himself to the American scientific establishment. He ended up spending most of his time in Philadelphia, where he was in the frequent company of a man named Samuel George Morton. Morton was the most famous American anthropologist of his day. He had two medical

degrees, one from the University of Pennsylvania, the other from the University of Edinburgh, and he had made his name by analyzing the fossils brought back by Lewis and

Clark. His special passion, though, was human crania — skulls — which he began collecting around 1830. Morton's health was poor and he never went into the field himself; but he let it be known that he would be glad to receive skulls, and people all over the world began sending them in. By the time Agassiz paid his visit, the collection housed more than 600 skulls. It was known as "The American Golgotha."

Morton had published two major works on his skulls. *Crania Americana*, which appeared in 1839, was a study of the skulls of Native Americans; *Crania Aegyptiaca*, published five years later, analyzed skulls that had been retrieved from ancient Egyptian tombs. Morton's method, like Agassiz's, was empirical and comparative: he measured the interior capacity of the skulls and then he compared the results by race. His conclusions, collated in a cat-

alogue of the entire collection that was published in 1849 and reprinted many times, ranked the human races (as Morton classified them) by cranial capacity. In descending order of volume, these were: Caucasian, Mongolian, Malay, Native American, and Negro. Subdivisions within the five categories showed that Teutonics — Germans, English people, and Anglo-Americans — had the largest cranial capacity among all groups, and that American-born

Negroes, Hottentots, and aboriginal Australians had the smallest. Morton correlated these measurements with generalizations about the attributes of the different races as he had gleaned them from anthropo-

logical and travel literature. The Caucasian race, for example, was noted to be "distinguished by the facility with which it attains the highest intellectual endowments"; the American (that is, Native American) is "averse to cultivation, and slow in acquiring knowledge; restless, revengeful, and fond of war, and wholly destitute of maritime adventure"; the Ethiopian (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."

Morton's data were completely unsound. Since he possessed only the skulls and whatever information their donors chose to send along with them, he had no way of checking the reliability of his racial attributions. He failed to factor gender and overall body size — information he sometimes did not even have — into his calculations. And he dealt with skewing in his samples by making seat-of-the-pants adjustments. Some of his Caucasian skulls, for example, had belonged (as one might expect) to men who

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*"The Negro is joyous, flexible, and indolent; 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."*

— Samuel George Morton

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\*Louis Menand is professor of English at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. This article is adapted from "Agassiz" in Professor Menand's book *The Metaphysical Club*. Copyright © 2001 by Louis Menand. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.

had been hanged for murder; Morton argued that the Caucasian mean should therefore be adjusted upward, on the assumption that murderers have smaller cranial capacity than law-abiding persons. He dropped Hindu skulls from his calculation of the Caucasian mean because the Hindu figure brought the overall average down, but he retained a disproportionately high number of Peruvian skulls in his calculation of the Native American mean, even though the Peruvian average was the lowest within that category. And he made elementary statistical errors. But his studies, published in oversized volumes with elegantly designed plates and charts, were widely circulated, and his results were cited as authoritative by scientists in the United States and Europe. . . .

Two theories of racial difference predominated in Western science in the century before Darwin; neither was egalitarian. People who believed that all humans are descended from a common origin (a position known as monogenism) attributed racial inequalities to differing rates of degeneration. The entire species had declined since the creation, monogenists thought, but some groups, due (usually) to the effects of climate, had declined farther than others. Polygenists, on the other hand, believed that the races were created separately and that they had been endowed with different attributes and unequal aptitudes from the start.

Polygenists rejected the degeneration theory on the grounds that archaeological evidence indicated no change in racial types over time. Their usual proof was the statues, drawings, and remains found in ancient Egyptian tombs. This is why Morton published his second volume on human skulls, *Crania Aegyptiaca*: he wanted to show that

the capacity of the crania of sub-Saharan blacks found in those tombs (Morton classified Egyptians as Caucasian) was just as small, relative to Caucasian crania, 3,000 years ago. The depiction of blacks as servants in ancient Egyptian art, Morton argued, indicated that secondary racial characteristics had not changed either. (Since sub-Saharan blacks in ancient Egypt were people who had been captured in battle and made into slaves, it is not surprising that they were portrayed as such in Egyptian art. Polygenists did not consider this a point: "It is said that when the Negro has been with other races, he has always been a slave," one of them explained. "This is quite true; but why has he been a slave?")

There will not seem, in the end, to be very much to choose between monogenism and polygenism. Both assume the existence of deeply ingrained racial differences, and both are hierarchical. But polygenism is the more radical theory, because it supports the contention not just that black people and white people have evolved (or devolved) at different rates, but that they belong to entirely different species. And this is the view to which Samuel Morton converted Louis Agassiz.

The effect on Agassiz was visceral. In December 1846 he wrote a long letter to his mother about his American tour. The visit to Morton was the high point: "That collection alone was worth the trip to America," he told her. It was also in Philadelphia, he continued, that he had come into contact with actual Negroes for the first time in his life. "All the servants at the hotel I stayed in were men of color. I scarcely dare tell you the painful impression I received, so contrary was the sentiment they inspired in me to our ideas of the fraternity of humankind



Professor Louis Agassiz

**“Put Every Obstacle Possible to the Crossing of the Races”**

“The brain of the Negro is that of the imperfect brain of a seven month’s infant in the womb of a White.” (Agassiz lecture in Charleston, South Carolina, 1847)

“Human affairs with reference to the colored races would be far more judiciously conducted, if, in our intercourse with them, we were guided by a full consciousness of the real differences existing between us and them, and to foster those dispositions that are eminently marked in them, rather than by treating them on terms of equality.” Agassiz, “The Diversity and Origins of the Human Races.” *Christian Examiner*, 1850)

The government ought “to put every possible obstacle to the crossing of the races, and the increase of half-breeds. It is immoral and destructive of social equality as it creates unnatural relations and multiplies the differences among members of the same community in a wrong direction.” (Source: Agassiz letter to Samuel Gridley Howe, August 9, 1863)

“While I believe that a wise social economy will foster the progress of every pure race according to its natural dispositions and abilities . . . I am convinced also that no efforts should be spared to check that which is abhorrent to our better nature, and inconsistent with the progress of higher civilization and a purer morality.” (Source: Agassiz letter to Samuel Gridley Howe, August 9, 1863)

“We ought to beware how we give to the blacks rights by virtue of which they may endanger the progress of the whites. . . . Social equality I deem at all times impracticable. It is a natural impossibility, flowing from the very character of the negro race. . . . They are incapable of living on a footing of social equality with the whites, in one and the same community, without becoming an element of social disorder.” (Source: Agassiz letter to Samuel Gridley Howe, August 10, 1863)

and the unique origin of our species. But,” he says, “truth before all”:

As much as I try to feel pity at the sight of this degraded and degenerate race, as much as their fate fills me with compassion in thinking of them as really men, it is impossible for me to repress the feeling that they are not of the same blood as us. Seeing their black faces with their fat lips and their grimacing teeth, the wool on their heads, their bent knees, their elongated hands, their large curved fingernails, and above all the livid color of their palms, I could not turn my eyes from their face in order to tell them to keep their distance, and when they advanced that hideous hand toward my plate to serve me, I wished I could leave in order to eat a piece of bread apart rather than dine with such service. What unhappiness for the white race to have tied its existence so closely to that of the negroes in certain countries! God protect us from such contact!

Agassiz had been in the United States just two months; his observations of black people were limited to the staff of a Northern hotel. And it is surely almost instinctive, in most people, to find human beings of a kind one has never encountered before unpleasantly alien. The interesting thing about Agassiz’s reaction is that he grasped immediately its political implications. The abolitionists (or “the philanthropists,” as he called them) and the defenders of slavery were both in error:

The philanthropists who want to make them citizens of their community constantly forget that in according them political rights, they cannot give them either the African sun to favor their full development, nor a domestic hearth among them, for they would refuse them their daughters if they demanded them, and none of them would dream of marrying a negress. The defenders of slavery forget that for being black these men have as much right as we do to the enjoyment of their liberty, and they don’t go into the question except as a question of property, a heritage which is protected by law and the loss of which would be their ruin.

Agassiz delivered his inaugural Lowell lecture later that month, and in it he announced, for the first time in his career, that although Negroes and whites belonged to the same species, they had had separate origins. Ten months later he went to South Carolina and repeated the lecture to the Charleston Literary Club at a meeting attended by local scientists and theologians eager to hear Agassiz on just this point. Pressed by his audience, Agassiz now stated that Negroes were, physiologically and anatomically, a distinct species. The response was gratifying to many of his listeners, and it was promptly reported back to Morton in Philadelphia. Agassiz became a regularly invited visitor to Charleston.

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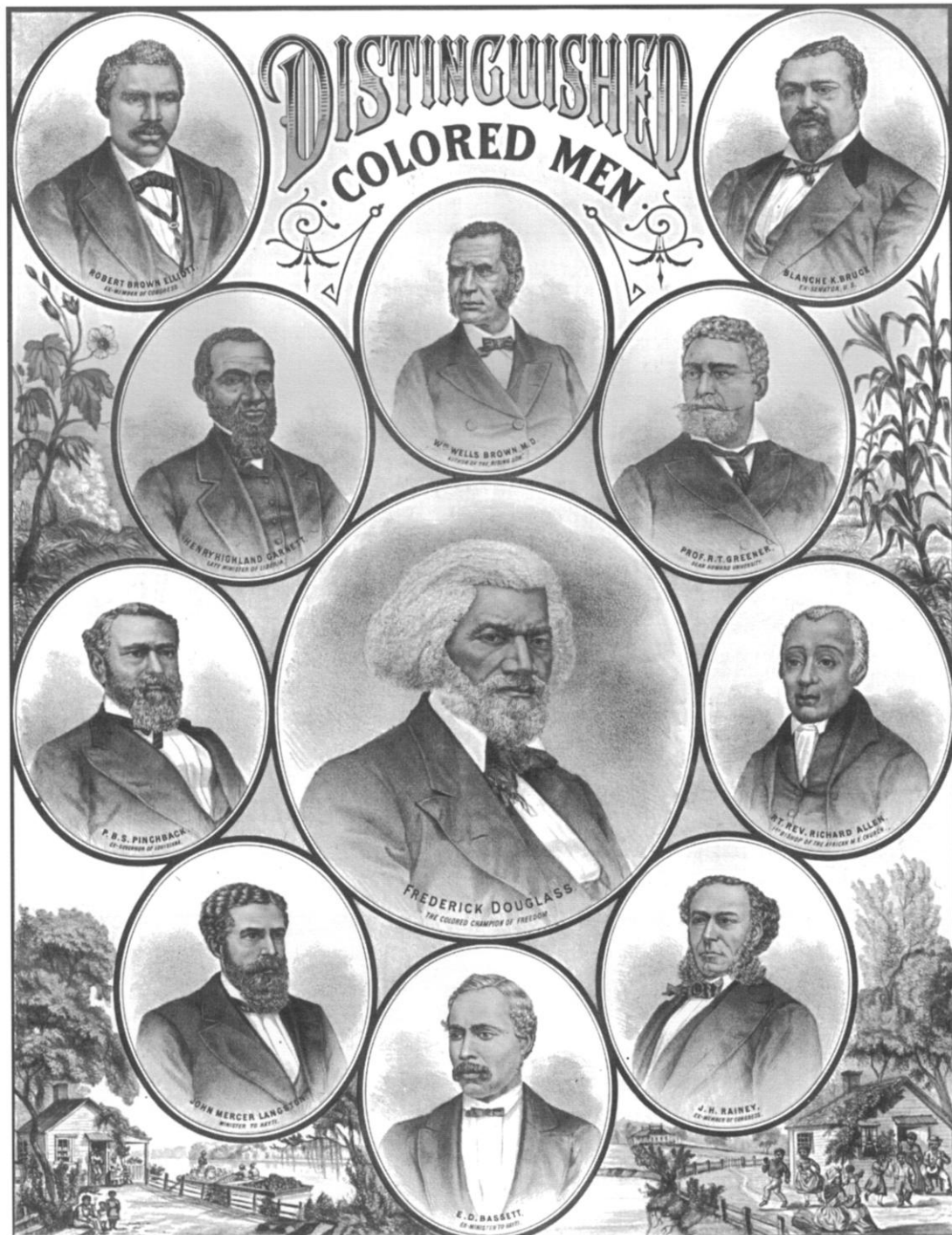
*“What unhappiness for the white race to have tied its existence so closely to that of the Negroes in some countries. God protect us from such contact.”*

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Morton’s skulls had made an impression. But Morton’s ideas about race were also appealing to Agassiz because they were entirely consistent with his own theory of natural history. For Agassiz not only believed that every species was created separately — which was, of course, the orthodox pre-evolutionist view. He also believed that all life forms had been created in the same numbers as currently inhabit the planet, and in the same geographical locations. Nothing had changed since the creation. “Time,” as he put it, “does not alter organized beings.”

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## The Distinguished Colored Men of 1883



While Louis Agassiz was preaching the inferiority of the black race to students at Harvard University, black politicians were beginning to make their mark on American society.

Pictured here is an 1883 lithograph by George F. Crane depicting famous black men of the day. The portrait of Frederick Douglass is the most prominent among the 11 men pictured.