Other than apartheid South Africa, there is very little contemporary discussion of or engagement with race – as concept, ideology, identity, and practice – on or about the African continent. Yet, “Africa” itself is a racialized construct, and African peoples have been the primary foil for the modern construction of race. The emergence of racial science depended on particular notions of African difference, a difference deemed inherent, absolute, and inferior. “Africa” has served as scaffolding for an entire intellectual tradition promoting the idea of European and “western” superiority. As anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot pointed out, it was constructed as the antithesis of Europe,” the “savage-object” of the so-called “west 1991”. The deployment of the view of the African continent as the source of all or most that is peculiar, nonsynchronous, and fantastical remains. To think and write about race in any part of Africa today is to engage with this legacy. How is it, then, that historically and materially, “Africa stands in for race but yet, paradoxically, race does not exist in Africa” (Pierre, 2013, pp. xii-xiii)?

In this short essay, I analyze ways to examine race about and within the African continent. I focus on Ghana to demonstrate how a local site is structured through racial meanings as well as how such meanings are variously mapped onto individuals, communities, and national identities – all the while linked to global structures of race and power. Doing so, however, requires a broader discussion of not only the historical and contemporary centrality of race in Africa, but also the intellectual legacies that shape the ways that race is understood while remaining understudied in contemporary Africa. Specifically, I argue that it is not so much that race does not matter on the African continent in places outside of South Africa. It is, instead, that research and scholarship on Africa have been unable to address the complexities of race making particularly key distinctions between race, racialization processes, and practices of racism. This essay, thus, is in two parts. In the first section, I lay the groundwork by demonstrating the ways that early anthropological writings actually depended on studies of race and Africa. Here, the work of anthropologist Charles G. Seligman evidences a particular trend of the early racializing and racist scholarship that served as justification for the violence of the slave trade and the colonization of the African continent. Consequently, I briefly link this early legacy of racial science to the epistemic regimes in the production of knowledge within African studies that ensure that race is not considered a significant site of study for most of the continent. In the second section, I use examples from my ongoing research in Ghana to present a theory and method of studying race in Africa that depend on the recognition of the long arc of European empire making, and on a theory of race that exposes its complex and multiple articulations – even as race continues to rely on the presumptive superiority of whites/Europeans. The ultimate effort is to recast Africa within a modern frame so that we may see the experiences and practices of its populations as part of broader ideological, political, economic, and sociocultural terrain established and continually updated by racial legacies of European hegemony (Pierre, 2013).
Race, “Hamites,” and the western construction of Africa

In 1930, physician and ethnologist Charles G. Seligman¹ published the first edition of the book *The Races of Africa*. In introducing the text, Seligman states that he is adopting a “somewhat mixed classification” that includes physical, cultural, as well as linguistic criteria. He then posits his measures for the study of race: “colour of skin, quality of hair, stature, headshape, character of face including prognathism, and shape of nose” (1930, pp. 10-11). Seligman then proceeds to delineate what he believes to be the existence of four distinct races on the African continent: “Hamites,” “Bushmen,” “Pygmies,” and “Negroids.” Along with these, he argues, is a range of race mixtures that includes a group he names “Hottentots” (considered to be a “mix of Negroids, Bushmen, and Hamites.”). Recognized as one of the first detailed ethnographic surveys of Africa, *The Races of Africa* is where, as Howard University historian Joseph Harris notes, “Seligman applied the concept of Social Darwinism to African ethnography, which amounted to the attribution of absolute values to white and black physical types, with the latter at the lower rung of advancement” (1987, p. 24). Indeed, Seligman was known as a staunch advocate of the “Hamitic Hypothesis.” The Hamitic Hypothesis was the theory that all aspects of “civilization” – language, technology, and certain cultural practices – on the African continent came from a “superior” race, the so-called Hamites. Seligman believed that, “the Hamites – who are ‘Europeans’ – belong to the same great branch of mankind as the ‘Whites’” (1930, p. 97).

Originally deployed as a theory that evoked the biblical story of Ham and his presumed punishment of racial Blackness and servitude for sinning against his father, Abraham, the Hamitic Hypothesis acquired new meaning in 19th century anthropology (Sanders, 1969). With the “discovery” of Egypt by Napoleon and his scientists, and the claiming of Egypt by Europe as the foundation of western civilization, there became the need to explain its actual geographical position on the African continent. The Hamitic Hypothesis and racial science served this function. European scholars argued not only that there was a superior (and white) “Hamitic” race in the northern part of Africa that was distinct from “Negroid” (later called “Black” or “Sub-Saharan”) Africa, but that this Hamitic race had migrated southward on the African continent, mixing with the “Negroid” populations and providing them with civilization.

Samuel Morton, the foremost figure of the American School of Anthropology and proponent of the theory of polygenesis, used crania gathered from the Nile Valley to argue that Egyptians were not Africans but Caucasians (and therefore “white”) (1844). Thus, Seligman’s ethnographic study of Africa contributed to this era of European engagement with the African continent through racial science. He argued that the “true Negro” race was immobile and backward and needed the Hamitic influence to advance: “The incoming Hamites were pastoral ‘Europeans’- arriving wave after wave – better armed as well as quicker witted than the dark agricultural Negroes” (Seligman quoted in Sanders, 1969, p. 521).

By the time we are confronted with Seligman’s work on Africa, of course, most of the African continent was under European colonial rule. Racial science (including the Eugenics movement) had already taken hold in the context of the expansion of the transatlantic slave trade in Africans, the entrenchment of slavery in the New World, and the struggle among European nations for global hegemony (which eventually led to the Berlin Conference and the partition of the African continent in 1885). The history of this racial science is well known. Less discussed, however, is the epistemic and methodological legacy of this history. Seligman is credited for shifting British social anthropology to Africa. British social anthropology, however, focused less on race than on “tribes.” This is so because

¹ Seligman trained a number of notable anthropologists including, Bronislaw Malinowski, E. E. Pritchard, and Meyer Fortes.
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its practitioners, seeking to make anthropology relevant to British imperialism as African cultural groupings were being “pacified,” stressed the interpretation of local practices and institutions (Stauder, 1993). Anthropology’s relevance to British imperialism in Africa was in its vast production of monographs on a range of topics on African societies – on the politics, kinship, religion and myth, economics, and folklore. To be sure, it is not that racialist ideas about Africans retreated among the European scientific community – ideas about African primitivism and inferiority stayed. Rather, presumed African racial inferiority was an *apriori* assumption within research about learning African local practices for the sake of empire (ibid; see also Gough, 1968). And except for the expressed fear of racial conflict in settler colonies, such as South Africa and Kenya, the entire theoretical apparatus for anthropological studies of Africa depended upon the “tribal” model.

I detail the history and politics of this model in an earlier work (Pierre, 2013). And I contend that the racialist theoretical and methodological scaffolding that undergirded the establishment of the study of Africa and its phenomena remains in place. For example, there is the North Africa/Sub-Saharan Africa divide (a clear racial distinction, even if denied), the primary and excessive focus on African cultural particularity through the tropes of “ethnicity,” “tribe,” etc., and, as well, the quiet assumption that African communities are not impacted by historical and current global processes of race. Indeed, I argue that African Studies remains primarily concerned with what I call horizontal relations (“ethnicity” among Africans) but not vertical ones (African and European relationships). A focus on race in Africa would necessarily acknowledge Africa’s low structural position in what Trouillot calls the “worldwide hierarchy are races, religions, and cultures” (1994, p. 146). What we have then, is a particular traditional construction of Africa that is at least partly responsible for the continent’s ironic exclusion from contemporary analyses of race and racialization processes. In other words, there is a particularist treatment of Africa “without acknowledging that African distinctiveness is produced within a field of power relations of race” (Pierre, 2013).

**Race and racial formation in West Africa: the case of Ghana**

In my ethnographic study of racial formation in Ghana, I focused on Ghanaian engagement with histories, politics, discourses, and practices of race and racial difference and privilege. These, I demonstrated, occurred within a broader set of processes where local relationships expose recent histories of imperial domination and the resultant global configurations of power. The goal was to acknowledge that, as a post-colonial space, Ghana’s contemporary relations – as all relations in all modern societies – depend on the long history of imperial “racecraft.” A modern postcolonial space is “invariably a racialized one; it is a space where racial and cultural logics continue to be constituted and reconstituted in the images, institutions, and relationships of the structuring colonial moment” (Pierre, 2013, p. xii). Thus, in a place such as Ghana, the history of the science of race is felt in terms of its material, ideological, and cultural legacies on local populations – people’s self-conceptions, views of others, as well as views and practices of racial difference that are built upon the palimpsest of colonial conquest and domination.

With a decade long intellectual and political industry at its disposal, South African *apartheid* was deemed the primary site of continental African racial processes. *Apartheid* was racialization, and racialization was apartheid, and, despite evidence to the contrary, race seemed to matter only in South Africa. This narrowing of the study of race in Africa depended upon a clear distinction in the understanding of the role of colonialism in southern Africa compared to the rest of the continent. But it is accepted wisdom, for example, that colonialism involved racism

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2 As an example, Seligman’s *Races of Africa* went through multiple editions and was published until 1979.
and the making of racial subjects (Fyfe, 1992; Go, 2004). And during colonial occupation on the African continent and elsewhere European colonizing groups were granted, “political, economic, and social privileges denied to the colonized and the hierarchy was typically sustained by claims that the latter were racially inferior” (Go, 2004, pp. 35-36). Curiously, while there is agreement that there is a relationship between colonialism and racism, it is not clear what happens at the end of colonialism. In my work on Ghana, I have used a rearticulation of the history of the racialization process of colonization to deploy a theory of racial formation that helps demonstrate the continued significance of race in postcolonial Africa. Thinking about race in postcolonial Africa requires two significant shifts. On the one hand, we have to understand that the ideas and practices of race that emerged with European expansion and colonization of the world have impacted all modern societies. This is even as I am fully sensitive to the particularity of historical experiences and their impact on various localities. On the other, we need an understanding of race not as biology, of course, but as socially constructed. That race is socially constructed is a common perspective. But what is less common is the view of race as a set of processes that is historically situated and of racial meanings as fluid, decentered, and continuously made and remade by changing sociopolitical and economic relationships (Omi & Winant, 1994).

For Michael Omi and Howard Winant, racial formation is a set of processes – often multiple and sometimes contradictory – that give race its constant and shifting social, cultural, and political meanings and determine how such meanings are deployed through various ideologies, practices, and institutions.

In this sense, it is not enough to understand that colonialism was racist; it is also important to understand how race worked in different ways in different colonial contexts on the African continent. In their colonies, for example, the British were explicit in their disavowal of racist discourse. Colonial officers rarely mentioned “race” or “racial difference” and instead focused on “culture” and “tradition.” Thus, clearly racialized policies of residential segregation in Accra (the colonial capital) were explained away through the language of “sanitation” and differing cultural practices, and the need to create “a European feel or atmosphere” (Pierre, 2013, p. 27). And unlike the colonial policy of “direct rule” – employed by the French and Portuguese in Africa, Britain’s shift to its new policy of “indirect rule” in Africa worked perfectly to obfuscate a racialized rule – even as white supremacy was assumed.

In trying to analyze the structures of racial formation in Ghana, I focused on British indirect rule in West Africa and the colonial practice of “making the native” – what I call “nativization.” The categorical distinctions between “native” and “nonnative” represent a fundamental method of ordering colonial society. These distinctions were conceived in terms of absolute physical difference within a racial frame and consolidated through cultural discourse, legal practices, and social convention. In particular, “Native” for British colonial agents not only indicated a strictly biological identity, but such reference was only significant in as much as it was linked to a distinguishing set of cultural practices and “customs.” The “Native,” therefore, is more than just a category marking a subject of rule, it is a distinction of ethnological proportions linking beliefs about the subjects’ physiological, emotional, and mental character to, ultimately, capacity for rule. Through colonial discourses about the “native” and practices of native making, the institutionalization of racialized rule came to be hidden beneath local articulations of power.

Colonial domination in Africa was distinctive. It was the site of a significant shift in British colonial policy from the “zeal of a civilizing mission” to, according to Mahmood Mamdani, a hegemonic cultural project of incorporation, “harnessing the moral, historical, and community impetus behind local custom to a larger colonial project” (1996). With the expanded

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3 This discussion in this section is based off of chapter 1 of my book, The Predicament of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the Politics of Race (Chicago, 2013).
focus on the notion of the “customary,” we see the marshaling of indigenous culture (real, perceived, and invented) for authoritarian rule. In dealing with the “Native Question” — that is, the most effective way for a small number of conquerors to rule a majority — colonial powers followed two paths: direct rule and indirect rule. Direct rule came first and was aimed at providing a small local elite access to European “culture” and “civilization” in return for strong allies in the colonial enterprise. Indirect rule, on the other hand, was about incorporation of the colonized masses - without assimilation. Key to this incorporation, and to indirect rule, is the configuration of “racial” and “tribal” identities — for Africans as well as for Europeans. The colonial state had a two-tiered structure: on the ground, the subject population was ruled by a constellation of ethnically defined “Native” institutions which were, in turn, supervised by non-Native/European officials “deployed from a racial pinnacle at the center” (Mamdani, 1996, p. 287). But this two-tiered rule constructed and reproduced these two sets of identities in a dual move for Africans. In the first instance, there was the distinction between “Native” and “non-Native” (or European) — and later, others such as those of “Asiatic origin” — that was based on notions of absolute racial and cultural difference. In the second movement, the “Native,” while categorically representing the racialized mass of subjects under rule, was further subdivided into distinct (and presumably culture-bound) “tribal” groupings. The “Native,” in this configuration, was actually fragmented as a singular subject group. In practice, each “tribal” group was said to be governed by its own set of rules framed under its specific cultural patterns, however defined. Moreover, “tribal” identities were associated solely with the natives.

Significantly, the European, in fact, was racialized but not tribalized (or “ethnicized”). The “native,” on the other hand, was both tribalized and racialized – but its racialization was subsumed under its “tribal” affiliations. In this social patterning of indirect rule, there emerged a dual set of consequences. Whereas the European/non-Native political, cultural, and civic identity presented itself as a singular racial power controlling the group of “natives,” the force of this power was diffused through the various cultural “authorities” of the Native tribal groupings. In practice, this worked through the distinctions between “civil society” and “customary society,” juridically enacted through notions of “civil law/ rights” and “customary law” respectively. Similar to “native” identity, customary law was not singular; it was a set of laws based on a varied set of customs and practices believed – and often rendered – by colonial authorities, to be customary. What “customary” meant, how the Native Authority enforced a set of “customary laws,” and how these were set up against the “civil society” made up of the European group, all reflected the solid racial structure of colonial power as well as assumptions of the native’s cultural alterity. Most significant, however, was that the crude violence of colonial rule was also disseminated through the Native Authorities, where “custom” also became the language of force in everything from land distribution to forced labor and direct taxation to the colonial state. In late 19th and early 20th century thinking, this biological and “racial” distinction was also a cultural one and would define political status since race identity was assumed to determine cultural as well as behavioral tendencies (Stocking, 1968). If the Native was rendered racially distinct from the European ruler, it also meant that she was culturally distinct, and this was marked by distinctions made between “custom” and “civilization.”

The conflation of race and culture deployed within the structure of colonial rule also meant that, on the ground, the actual contours of white racial power were often obfuscated. Colonial power was diffused through various Native Authorities — with seemingly disparate groups of “tribes” enacting individual and unique sets of laws. In other words, the racial character of colonial rule was hidden beneath constructed “tribal” differences.

The historical processes of constructing “natives” as the racially inferior opposite of “European” allow us the room to understand discussions about race and identity in Ghana — and
the rest of the African continent (both settler and non-settler states). Nativization concretized the shifting modes of African self-conception that had begun at the moment of contact and submergence within the forces of European empire making (the slave trade and colonialism); it gave Africans “race” and shaped them culturally, politically, and materially as “Black” within a global hierarchy of (white) privilege and (black) powerlessness. At the same time, the mode of implementation of the process of nativization localized that self-conception; Africans were also naturalized (and primarily represented) as “tribal” with seemingly autochthonous traditions. This predicament – of the interrelation of race and “tribe” configured within white supremacy – is cemented in how scholars approach African phenomena: through the discourses of “tribe” (and, now, “ethnicity”) but not through the enduring practices of race and global white supremacy.

Studies on colonial racism have recounted the numerous ways that the colonial state apparatus established white supremacy and maintained power. Yet it remains important to explore how the creation of the (particularly Black) “native” and the (white) European depended on the racecraft of indirect rule that set the foundation both for a structural white supremacy and anticolonial racial consciousness among Africans. This anticolonial racial consciousness emerged both despite colonial authorities’ attempts to divide and conquer through tribalism, and because it created a group of “native” racial others. But while this anticolonial racialized consciousness – articulated through political and cultural movements of nationalism and Pan-Africanism – ultimately led to nominal political independence, it did not succeed in completely dismantling the structures of white supremacy. Significantly, notions of race and its myriad articulations and practices remain ensconced within all cultural, political, economic and social sectors of postcolonial African society.

In Ghana, as in every modern society, there are competing sets of “racial projects” that work to continue to give race meaning on the ground. The transatlantic slave trade and colonialism are two such projects – as the viability of African enslavement depended upon the construction of a scientifically justified notion of race and the making of Africans as “Black.” Formal colonial rule of the African continent also depended upon the deployment of racial projects to sustain the ideology of white supremacy. Political independence from British colonialism did not mean the end of racial processes; rather it shifted some of the relationships while cementing others. For example, Ghana’s independence allowed for a coexistence of a number of competing racial projects that continue to make race significant. I have focused on a number contradictory “racial projects” in Ghana. They include, among other things, ethnographic rendering of: 1) the superior position, in Ghana, of a transient but nevertheless important foreign white population (primarily in the aid and development, and commercial industries) and the significance of the tropes of whiteness as always already associated with technology, advancement, and superiority; 2) the near epidemic practice of chemical skin bleaching practices that point directly to the

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4 The concept of “tribe” is no longer as popular as it once was. “Ethnicity” has become the acceptable replacement. But as I show in the discussion of “nativization” (Pierre, 2013, chapter 1) and its racializing processes, ethnicity comes after the Boasian revolution in which “culture” replaces “race” as terms of analysis of difference. However, as scholars such as Stocking (1968), Trouillot (2003), and Visweswaran (1998) demonstrate, culture (and, later, ethnicity) is applied without both acknowledgement of the sociopolitical context of its current usage (still through essentialist notions of “tribe”) or a clear theoretical framework that exercises the racial logic upon which the term was originally deployed (Trouillot, 2003). As a result, as ethnicity becomes a stand in for culture (which, itself, came to be a stand in for race), culture and ethnicity are often essentialized and biologized.

5 Omi & Winant (1994) rightly argue that racialization processes are multiple and entail the interplay of often contradictory “racial projects” each of which works to advance its own conception of race. So, “racial formation” entails a number of competing racial projects that are simultaneously interpretations, representations, or explanations of racial dynamics.
valorization of lighter skin; and 3) state-sponsored cultural productions that deploy the country’s long history of Pan-Africanism to encourage heritage tourism from people of African descent outside of Ghana. The interplay of these projects – along with various other projects that create and/or challenge racial meanings – will continue to make Ghana a site of racial formation processes.

I would be remiss if I did not make clear that arguing for a theory of race and race formation in Ghana (and throughout the African continent) is not to deny the significance of other processes of political and identity formation such as ethnicity, religion, class, and gender. I do want to stress, however, that even in the postcolonial moment, and because of its historical legacy, race continues to be one of the modalities through which these other identifications are rendered (Hall, 1980). In a world made interconnected through the violence of European conquest and domination, the sedimentations of racial difference are difficult to extinguish. And since the established hierarchies of conquest remain entrenched in sociocultural, intellectual, and political relationships, all societies have to contend with the realities of race. In this sense, confronting race in Ghana, and other parts of the African continent, means both acknowledging these societies’ banality and universality – and their connection to the rest of the world structured through race and power.

References


