In 1701, the Conestoga Indians and William Penn negotiated a landmark treaty, the terms of which called for “a firm & lasting peace . . . and that they shall forever hereafter be as one head & one heart & live in true Friendship & Amity as one people.” A Quaker traveler, who apparently witnessed this council, recorded his impressions and gives some insight into what the Conestogas intended. He wrote, “they never first broke Covenant with any People; for, as one of them said, and smote his Hand upon his Head three times, that they did not make them there in their Heads, but smiting his Hand three times on his Breast, said, they made them (i.e. their Covenants) there in their Hearts.”

For the Conestogas, the metaphors of heads and hearts must have captured the essence of their agreement with the colony of Pennsylvania because at subsequent councils they recalled that “when Governour Penn first held Councils with them, he promised them so much Love and Friendship that he would not call them Brothers, because Brothers might differ, nor Children because these might offend and require Correction, but he would reckon them as one Body, one Blood, one Heart, and one Head.”

Three years later, in 1723, Civility (who may also have been speaker at the earlier council) delivered nearly the same speech, albeit paraphrased slightly differently: “They remembered that William Penn did not approve of the methods of treating the Indians as Children, or Brethren by joining Hands, for in all these cases, accidents may happen to break or weaken the ties of Friendship. But William Penn said, We must all be one half Indian & the other half English, being as one Flesh & one Blood under one Head.”

The Conestogas not only repeated the terms of the 1701 “Articles of Agreement” at later councils; they also kept a written copy of the treaty for more than fifty years, until 1763, when after a mob of unruly Pennsylvanians massacred the townspeople of Conestoga, the treaty was found among the Indians’ papers. Some residents of Pennsylvania thought the massacre a justifiable purge; others felt guilt and shame. Of the latter, the most famous and enduring account of the events at Conestoga appeared in Benjamin Franklin’s A Narrative of the Late Massacres, in Lancaster County, of a
Number of Indians, Friends of this Province, By Persons Unknown (1764). Franklin recounted how when the Conestoga headman heard the rumor that “some English might come from the Frontier into the Country, and murder him and his People,” he denied its veracity, believing that “the English will wrap me in their Matchcoat, and secure me from all Danger.” Even more memorable were Franklin’s prescient words that diagnosed the cause of the massacre as racism:

In Europe, if the French, who are White-People, should injure the Dutch, are they to revenge it on the English, because they too are White People? The only Crime of these poor Wretches seems to have been, that they had a reddish brown Skin, and black Hair; and some People of that Sort, it seems, had murdered some of our Relations. If it be right to kill Men for such a Reason, then, should any Man, with a freckled Face and red Hair, kill a Wife or Child of mine, it would be right for me to revenge it, by killing all the freckled red-haired Men, Women and Children, I could afterwards any where meet with.8

For all of Franklin’s outrage, he and the other Pennsylvanians who decried the Conestoga massacre still knew that it marked the end of the “one head & one heart” union formed in 1701. What had happened between 1701 and 1763? Where previously Indians’ and Europeans’ shared natural history of the body united them, now the body divided them.

Perhaps William Penn coined the actual wording of the 1701 agreement, but the metaphor of an international alliance resembling “one head & one heart” probably originated with the Conestogas. Before Penn even planted his colony in America, a Delaware Indian speech to Swedish colonists used similar phrasing, and references to one head, one heart, and one body frequently appear in other northeastern Indian speeches.7 As a Quaker, Penn might have appreciated the phrase’s intimation of equality and balance, but this metaphor differs from how body metaphors were often used in European traditions. In the New Testament, presumably a foundational text for Penn and other Christians, the mutual dependence of eyes, ears, hands, and feet models a diverse yet unified community in which each member has a particular contribution to make. Significantly, the New Testament elevates the head as an especially important body part by ascribing to it authority over other “members.”8 However, in Indian country, the phrase “one head & one heart” did not imply different roles or hierarchies within an alliance.

It may not matter who originated which metaphor. Because council participants saw the human form as so evidently something Indians and Europeans shared, they could all use the body to circumnavigate their more obscure and difficult cultural differences. Whether Iroquois or Cherokee, English or French, everyone seems to have found body metaphors handy devices for communicating ideas to foreigners. The shared experience of the body gave Indians and Europeans a mutually intelligible language that helped bridge the cultural divide: they understood each other’s metaphors.9 However, at the same time, the body became the means to organize new understandings of difference. The body’s multiple parts—mouths, lips, eyes, ears, limbs, hearts, guts, breasts, wombs, penises, flesh, and skin—were the basis for a host of metaphors devised by Indian and European speakers to clarify abstract points. Usually, these body metaphors stood for interests in common, but by the mid-eighteenth century, one particular body part—skin—emerged as the primary index of difference.

Body Parts in Common

When Indians and Europeans came together in council, they already had some comparable ideas rooted in their understandings of the body’s form and function. For example, the Cherokees and the British both used the metaphor of the right hand to explain political authority and diplomatic rank. Headmen of Cherokee towns each had an assistant known as his “righthand man,” and when the Cherokees received visiting dignitaries from other nations, they strategized the seating arrangements because sitting on someone’s right denoted a higher status than sitting on someone’s left. When the Cherokees met other Indian nations and the British in council, they might disagree about what position they held in relation to other nations, but they could agree on how the seating arrangements would visibly demonstrate their relative rank.10 Right-handedness as a metaphor for superiority was not a biologically determined universal belief, but as Robert Hertz noted for the prevalence of right-hand symbolism in religious ritual, a slight biological preference for the right hand could be elaborated into a mental construct useful for explaining status and dominance in more abstract situations.11

Most often, however, body metaphors in council diplomacy served the same function as kinship metaphors and modeled what it meant for nations to be allies. Thus, at a 1732 council with the British, the Iroquois described their long-
standing attachment to the colony of New York this way: "Corlauer [New York] is our Brother, He came to us when he was but very little, and a Child, we suckled him at our Breasts; we have nursed him & taken Care of him till he is grown up to be a Man; he is our Brother and of the same Blood. He and We have but one Ear to hear with, One Eye to see with, and one Mouth to speak with." This speaker used several analogies to explain the nature of the diplomatic tie between the Six Nations and New York. They were like a family: like brothers and, then, like mother and child. They were also like a body, and what one party observed or heard was to become known by the other. They were, in other words, united.

This particular Iroquois speaker may have picked up the phrase "we suckled him at our Breasts" from the French because French officials frequently offered to "give suck" to Indians "to give them nourishment." The image of Frenchmen nurturing Indians at their breasts probably had origins in a medieval Christian, by this time Catholic, tradition of a feminized, nurturing Jesus Christ. Indian speakers more often talked about having sucked the same milk, an expression intended to invoke familial bonds. They generally did not claim the role of mother to other nations. Whoever originated the suckling-at-breast metaphor is inconsequential, however, since those who said it or heard it understood that it meant nurturing. Although the French may have intended their nurturing to include a spiritual dimension, breast milk in the language of diplomacy meant trade goods: guns, ammunition, cloth, and alcohol.

Indian and European speakers endowed these body parts with the same functions: tongues, mouths, and lips spoke; ears listened; eyes saw; wombs and breasts gave life and sustained life; hearts were the source for the deepest feelings of sincerity, truth, and affection. When doubting someone's word, speakers wondered whether they were speaking from their mouths or lips and not from their hearts. Putting hands on another nation's head, gathering that nation under one's arms, keeping that nation in view under one's eyes were figurative offers of protection. Having one ear, one eye, and one mouth conveyed the idea of shared interests and knowledge. To have one flesh, one blood, one heart, one head, one body expressed a desire to act in unison. As the Delaware headman Tedyuscung said at a 1755 council with Pennsylvania officials, "As God has given Us, our Uncles [Iroquois confederacy], and You the English one Heart, We desire We may all act as one People, see with the same Eyes, hear with the same Ears, speak with the same Tongue, and be altogether as one Man and actuated by one Mind." Although body metaphors were in a sense just the packaging for a nation's diplomatic agenda, metaphors derived from the body had the added advantage of making an alliance seem part of the natural order.

White People

With so much of the human body jointly possessed by all peoples, it is especially interesting, then, that only one body part came to symbolize irresolute differences: skin color. At the start of the eighteenth century, Indians and Europeans rarely mentioned the color of each other's skins. By midcentury, remarks about skin color and the categorization of peoples by simple color-coded labels (red, white, black) had become commonplace.

The eighteenth century appears to have been a crucial moment when the myriad of human physical differences collapsed into simple types privileging skin-color differences. Although color prejudice may have ancient origins in Western thought, the transatlantic slave trade seems the likely beginning point for race and racism as known and experienced in the United States today. One of the first racial labels to be applied to any of the world's peoples was negro or, in English, black. White emerged later, long after the death of Christopher Columbus who, like his European peers, identified himself foremost as "Christian." The earliest claims to a "white" identity appear to have originated in major slaveholding regions. In the early 1700s, Carolina colonists, many of whom had emigrated from Barbados, already divided their world into "white, black, & Indians." The first British colony to develop a plantation economy dependent on slave labor, Barbados may also have been the first British colony to experience the transition in identity from "Christian" to "white." One mid-seventeenth-century visitor to Barbados, who wrote of "Negroes," "Indians," and "Christians," told an anecdote that foreshadows why "white" replaced "Christian." A slave wished to become Christian, but the slave's master responded that "we could not make a Christian a Slave . . . [nor] a Slave a Christian . . . [for] being once a Christian, he could no more account him a Slave, and so lose the hold they had of them as Slaves, by making them Christians." By the end of the seventeenth century, Barbadians who were neither black nor Indian were well on their way to becoming "white." When they left Barbados for Carolina, they brought "Negro slaves" and an emerging "white" identity with them.

"Christians" in the Northeast lagged several decades behind their Southern counterparts in self-identifying as "white." The Dutch in New Netherlands called themselves "Christian" for the duration of their control over the colony, and British colonists also were "Christian" until about the 1730s, when "white people" appears more frequently in the records. As in Barbados, black slavery seems to have caused the transition from "Christian" to "white." In the 1740s, Sir William Johnson, British superintendent of Indian affairs in the
Northeast, wrote most often about relations between “Christians and Indians.” However, when Johnson solicited an acquaintance to buy him some “Negroes,” he also asked for an indentured servant, “a good Oliver lad of a white man.”

Red People

The history of “red” Indians traveled a more convoluted path. When Europeans first met Indians, Indians were most simply not Christians. Increasingly, however, the anomaly presented by the very existence of Indians rattled standard assumptions in European thought, especially the verity of biblical truths. Did Indians descend from Adam and Eve or were they a separate creation? Were Indians the lost tribe of Israel? Were they on the ark with Noah? Indians similarly puzzled Europe’s natural historians as they organized the wealth of new knowledge flooding into Europe in the age of expansion. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europeans who had met Indians personally were convinced that they were born white and, from the sun’s rays or body grease and paint, darkened as they aged. When European explorers and settlers commented on Indian skin color, they contributed to a diverse palette of tawny, brown, yellow, copper-colored, and occasionally red. Not until Carl Linnaeus’s 1740 edition of Systema Naturae did the notion of red Indians begin the trajectory toward widespread acceptance. How Linnaeus arrived at “red” remains a mystery. He may have heard of red-painted Indians, or perhaps Galen’s medical philosophy of the four humors served as inspiration, since in the 1758 edition of Systema Naturae, Linnaeus attached telltale descriptive labels to each color of people: red people were choleric, white sanguine, yellow melancholic, and black phlegmatic. He probably adapted an existing system of color-based categories to account for differences among the world’s peoples.

Linnaeus was not, however, the first person to categorize Indians as red. By the mid-1720s, from Louisiana to South Carolina, Indians were claiming the category “red” for themselves in the arena of Indian-European diplomacy. In 1725, the French asked a group of Indians in council at Mobile, whether they would like to become Christian and recorded a Taensas chief’s response:

“Shall I see them allMixed blood-red” and the uk (the civil leader of a town) “painted milk white” shared political authority within towns, and towns themselves were designated “white” or “red” as a means to delegate intratribal responsibilities in times of peace and war. Red and white were metaphors for moieties, or complementary divisions, within southeastern Indian society, suggesting that Indians might have thought red a logical rejoinder on meeting these newcomers who introduced themselves as white people.

Notably, it was southeastern Indians who first adopted a self-identification as red people, while southeastern European colonists were also early pro-
claimers of a white identity. In the Northeast, Indians' own names for Europeans, "hatchetmakers," for instance, predominated in diplomatic dialogues. In English translations of Indian speeches, Indian speakers seem to be using "Christian." In the seventeenth century and "white people" by the mid-eighteenth century, but probably it was the interpreters who changed, first interpreting the Iroquois word for "hatchetmakers" into "Christians" and later into "white people."  

Another possible explanation for why Indians called themselves red people is that some Native groups might have so identified before the arrival of Europeans and, like "Indian," the term spread throughout eastern North America. The French planter Antoine Simon Le Page du Pratz sometimes called the Natchez "Hommes rouges" but also wrote that "when the Natchez retired to this part of America, where I saw them, they there found several nations, or rather the remains of several nations, some on the east, others on the west of the Mississippi. These are the people who are distinguished among the natives by the name of Red Men; and their origin is so much the more obscure, as they have not so distinct a tradition, as the Natchez."

Undoubtedly, one such tribe was the Houmas, a Muskogean-speaking people in the Lower Mississippi Valley whose name translates into English as red. The Houmas' origin story may have been the source of inspiration for their red identity. According to anthropologist John Swanton, the Houmas and the neighboring Chactiuchas owed their tribal names to the red crawfish who created the earth. Another "red" tribe whom the French encountered in explorations further to the north were the Mesquakies, or "red earths," whose origin story tells of how "the first men and the first women [were made] out of clay that was as red as the reddest blood." Origin stories such as these could also be adapted to account for differences among people. A twentieth-century folklorist recorded that "the Sankies (Saukieseck, to speak the plural as they do) say jokingly that Geechee Manito-ah made the Saukie out of yellow clay and the Squakie out of red."  

Whatever the reason for why Indians used "red people" and "white people" so frequently beginning in the 1720s, it is still not clear whether these expressions meant that Indians believed themselves racially, or physiologically and innately, different from Europeans. The trader James Adair certainly thought that Indians had their own racial identity. Of the southeastern Indians he knew and lived with, Adair wrote, they were "of a copper or red-clay colour" and "are so strongly attached to, and prejudiced in favour of, their own colour, that they think as meanly of the whites, as we possibly can do of them." Indians also made judgments about identity based on empirical observation of the body.

A Chickasaw Indian had heard that James Oglethorpe "was a Red woman's child, but now they had seen him, he believed he was as white a body as any in Charles Town." A trader to the Cherokees told how they had killed an enemy who "was by his Confession an Over the Lake Indian, and by his Whiteness he supposed him to be a whiteman's Son." Another trader described an incident in which Twightwee (Miami) Indians visiting the Shawnees "den[ed] they had brought either Scalps or Prisoners, the Shawnees suspecting them, had the Curiosity to search their Bags, and finding two Scalps in them, that by the Softness of the Hair did not feel like Indian Scalps, they wash'd them clean, and found them to be the Scalps of some Christians." As the science of race emerged in Europe, Indians were also reading meaning into observable bodily differences and putting people into categories accordingly.

Furthermore, Indians ascribed social characteristics to the category "white." In the same year that the Taensas headman told his story about the white, red, and black men emerging from a cave, the trader Alexander Longe interviewed a Cherokee "priest," or conjuror, to apprehend the Cherokees' receptivity to Christian missionaries. Like the Taensas headman, the Cherokee conjuror answered Longe by telling an origin story. In the beginning everything was water. The Great Man Above gave a crawfish some dirt to spread and then made the sun and moon. After he had made all living things, "he take some white Clay and made the white man and one white woman . . . and then he mead tow and Two of Evrynashun under the sone[.] woman and man[.] They have increasd Ever since but I think that The english are the first that he mead because he has Indued them with knowledge of mesaking all things." The conjuror told another story that drew on Cherokee traditions of the four gods of the four directions. The god in the north was a black god colored like the negro and he is verrie cross . . . that in the Est is the couler of us Indians and thee is somthing better than the other [other sources call this god in the east red]. . . . he that is in the south is a verrie good one and white as yow Inglish are, and soo mild that we love him out of mesher . . . yow are whiter Then all other nashons or people under the sun the grate king of heaven has given yow the knowledge of all things Shurely he has a grater love for yow then us and for us then The negrows.

When Longe pressed for more information on the fourth god, the conjuror found a color for him. He was "the Colour of the spanards." In other accounts describing the gods of the four directions, his color would have been
“blue,” but blue men had no parallel in the nascent racial categories of the Southeast.

The conjuror’s reluctance to take the story to its implausible conclusion, blue Spaniards, reveals the reason for his storytelling. Longe thought he was gathering information on Cherokee religious beliefs, but the conjuror was tailoring his story for his audience. The origin story was probably a fabrication, too, a familiar plot with additional expository details, most notably the idea that whites were created first. In both stories, the conjuror flattered Longe with deference to white superiority, but when asked directly about whether the Cherokees would like missionaries to come among them, he expressed doubts about their efficacy for “these white men that Lives amongst us a training are more deboced and more wicked Then the bestest of our young felows is itt not a shame for Them that has such good prists and such knowledge as they have To be worse then the Indians that are In a maner but like wolves.” The conjuror’s narratives intended to instruct Longe in how white people should behave.

In the two stories told by the Cherokee conjuror, whites were ranked first because they had the “knowledge of meaking all things.” Indians were ranked second. Superior wealth and technology justified European claims to the high-status category of “white.” Presumably, it was blacks’ status as slaves that relegated them to the lowest rank. The Taenasa story about the three races leaving the cave used this same ranking of white, red, and black; gave wealth as the criteria for distinguishing between the three peoples (the white man “took the good road that led him into a fine hunting ground”); and similarly tied the color hierarchy to an age hierarchy (the white man was the first to leave the cave). This deference to white superiority was a diplomatic pose, for among themselves southeastern Indians said very different things about white people, calling them “the white nothings,” “the ugly white people,” and “white dung-hill fowls.”

The Color Divide

At first willing to grant white people a higher rank in exchange for trade goods, Indians later rallied around their own identity as red people to challenge the growing power of Europeans, especially the British after the Seven Years War. By the 1760s, in both the Northeast and Southeast, the contention that skin color obstructed unity had become commonplace in council rhetoric. At the 1763 Treaty of Augusta, the Chickasaw headman Pia Matta modified the familiar breast-suckling metaphor when he said that “he looks on the White People and them as one. That they are as good Friends as if they had sucked one breast Altho his skin is not white his heart is so and as much as any White man.” At a 1769 council at Shamokin on the Pennsylvania frontier, the Conoy King reminded the British of the terms of their peace agreement, grounding their alliance in natural design: “Because We all came at first from one Woman, as you may easily know by this mark, ‘that our little Children when born have all the same Shapes and Limbs as yours, altho’ they be of a different Colour.'” Missiweakiwa, speaking for the Shawnees, had made a similar remark to the British at a 1760 conference: when the Shawnees first saw Europeans’ ships come to their shores, “they soon discovered they were made like themselves—but that God had made them White.” The general shape of the human body expressed commonality, but the potential divisiveness of skin color had to be overcome.

Determining who first introduced this concept in council is tricky. An early instance appears in the transcript of a 1687 council between the Iroquois Confederacy and the governor of New York, at which the Iroquois appealed to the colony for help in protecting their western borders from the French and French-allied Indians. The Iroquois speaker, embracing the British king as his own, was recorded as saying, “wee doe Beleive yt. our king & ye french king know onanother [one another] Verry well for they are both of one Skinn meaning they are both white Skinnd, & not brown as they [the] Indians are.” This speaker may have been making an observation about differences he had himself noticed between European and Iroquois skin colors, or he may have, in previous conversations, heard the British and French describe themselves as being of white skin compared to Indians. Whoever originated the idea, both European and Indian speakers incorporated in their speeches the idea that skin color was the critical divide.

In these speeches, skin color always differentiated Indians from Europeans and Europeans from Indians, never Indians from other Indians, or Europeans from other Europeans: color could ally nations together metaphorically but only if those nations were either all European or all Indian. Thus, in the mid-eighteenth century, Shawnee and Iroquois ambassadors seeking allies among other Indian nations argued for common skin color as a rationale for common interests, suggesting that they “take up the Hatchet against the White People, without distinction, for all their Skin was of one Colour and the Indians of a Nother, and if the Six Nations wou’d strike the French, they wou’d strike the English.” Indian speakers expressed disinterest in European conflicts by saying it had nothing to do with their color. They found credible rumors of British-French alliances because they “were people of your own colour.”
In addition, skin color served as an explanation for why Indians and Europeans differed in custom. As an Iroquois speaker explained to the British in the midst of a land dispute, “The World at the first was made on the other side of the Great water different from what it is on this side, as may be known from the different Colour of Our Skin and of Our Flesh, and that which you call Justice may not be so amongst us. You have your Laws and Customs and so have we.”

As land disputes heated up, Indian speakers came to rely on skin color as a divine sign that the land belonged to them and that white people were intruders on it. King Hagler’s assertion that Catawba rights to land originated “in the Great man above” who had made them “of this Colour and Hue (showing his hands & Breast)” was part of a larger argument about rights to land then circulating among eastern Indians. In A Spirited Resistance, historian Gregory Dowd documented how Indian prophecies telling of separate origins gained currency in the mid-eighteenth century, culminating eventually in large-scale resistance movements such as that led by the Shawnee brothers Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa in the early nineteenth century.

In hindsight, it may not surprise us that speakers cast skin color as an obstacle to Indian-European alliances. However, skin color acquired this rhetorical significance amid much more complex and ambiguous dialogue about the nature of differences. Although Europeans wrote elaborate, ethnographically thick descriptions of Indian tattoos, face paint, hairstyles, and clothing, neither Indians nor Europeans targeted these cultural influences on appearance as hindrances to uniting diverse peoples in common cause. Indeed, councils often led to a ritual exchange of clothing, a symbolic act illustrating how two nations could become “one people.” In adopting war captives, the Iroquois put Indians and Europeans through the same ritual process: stripped them of their clothes and gave them a new pair of moccasins to wear. Here, transfers in clothing accomplished the transformation to a new identity.

Moreover, Indians and Europeans isolated skin as especially significant out of an assortment of differences that could be classified as biological. They noticed that only Europeans or Indians of mixed descent had gray or blue eyes and that Indian men could not grow the luxurious beards sported by European men even if they tried. There were also apparent biological distinctions within the categories of European and Indian. Southeastern Indians called the British “blonds” to distinguish them from the Spanish and French. And European writers recorded rampant variability in European and North American peoples’ complexions: Frenchmen observed that there were some Indian

Racial Hierarchy

After the Revolutionary War, Indians and Euro-Americans could still agree on the same labels for racial categories—red, white, and black—but Indians had to struggle to control their meaning. The Cherokees rejected their earlier hierarchy of white, red, and black and proposed a new hierarchy to counter American assumptions of conquest. As in the early eighteenth century, Cherokee speakers used their origin story to explain social positioning, but they now recast the origin story to assert precedence. At the 1785 treaty council at Hopewell, Cherokee chief Old Tassel said, “I am made of this earth, on which...”
the great man above placed me, to possess it.... You must know the red people are the aborigines of this land, and that it is but a few years since the white people found it out. I am of the first stock, as the commissioners know, and a native of this land; and the white people are now living on it as our friends.96

Old Tassel's reminder to U.S. treaty commissioners that the "red people" were the original occupants of the land constituted a Cherokee challenge to U.S. hegemony, which was further elaborated on by Cherokees in the 1790s and early 1800s. After complaining in 1792 that "We are bound up all round with white people, that we have not room to hunt," the Little Nephew said, "though we are red, you must know one person made us both. The red people were made first. . . . Our great father above made us both, and, if he was to take it into his head that the whites had injured the reds, he would certainly punish them for it."97 In the 1790s, another Cherokee told some missionaries that "The Great Father of all breathing things, in the beginning created all men, the white, the red and the black. . . . The whites are now called the older brothers and the red the younger. I do not object to this and will call them so though really the naming should have been reversed, for the red people dwelt here first."98 In the 1830s, a Cherokee man told of how God had made the first man out of red clay. Because Indians were red, they had obviously been made first: "The red people therefore are the real people, as their name yawiya, indicates."99 Thus, after the Revolution, the Cherokees abandoned the mutually agreed-upon racial hierarchy that had granted whites a higher status in exchange for trade goods. Emphasizing their age and precedence as a people, they defined red differently to neutralize the hierarchy Americans thought they had inherited from Britain.

Cherokee insistence that the red people were made first was partly a response to how whites regarded them. At Hopewell, U.S. treaty commissioners claimed that they only wanted to make the Cherokees happy, "regardless of any distinction of color, or of any difference in our customs, our manners, or particular situation."100 The Cherokees were skeptical. One Cherokee complained to Moravian missionaries in the 1790s, "many people think that we Indians are too evil and bad to become good people, and that we are too unclean and brown."101 The Cherokees saw that skin-color categories had become the preeminent status indicator in the American South, and "black" labor and "red" land the two most marketable commodities. British trade goods justified Cherokee deference in the early eighteenth century, but now they were unlikely to gain anything in a racial hierarchy that was pushing the category "red" closer to the category "black."

By the end of the century, the color-based categories that had grown out of Cherokee color symbolism had become racial categories because the Cherokees described the origins of difference as being innate, the product of separate creations, and they spoke about skin color as if it were a meaningful index of difference. However, they continued to play with racial categories' meanings to fit particular contexts. The wordplay and invention surrounding Cherokee uses of red and white give the illusion of complete plasticity, but it was only the meanings of red and white that changed with the situation. The Cherokees never claimed to be any other color but red, and Europeans, even when being insulted, were always white.

Eighteenth-century Indians and Europeans were engaged in the same mental processes. They experimented with biological difference in an attempt to develop methods for discerning individual allegiances. They adapted origin stories to come up with divine explanations for political, cultural, and social divisions. They dealt with the sudden diversity of people by creating new knowledge out of old knowledge, new color-based categories derived from their traditional color symbolism. (The Cherokee conjuror in Longe's account and Linnaeus were compatriots in the same intellectual enterprise.) Indians and Europeans also spent most of the eighteenth century expressing confusion and disagreement about the origins of human difference, the significance of bodily variation, and how and why God, or the Great Man Above, had created such different people. It would take another century for the science of race to reach its full height and then one more century for the idea of race to become seriously questioned. Perhaps we are now at the brink of the last century, when the idea of race will be abandoned entirely, and another system of categories will emerge to take its place.

In the meantime, the use of red to describe Indians continues to be contested. Indians may have named themselves "red" but could not prevent whites from making it a derogatory term. By the nineteenth century, whites had appropriated "red man" and put it to their own uses. Appearing in James Fenimore Cooper's novels, captivity narratives, and dime novels—and ultimately taken up by tobacco advertisers and national sports teams—the noble "Red Man" and the brutal "Redskin" evolved into demeaning and dehumanizing racial epithets. However, at the same time, Indians could always use red to claim a positive identity and to make a statement about difference, to build pan-Indian alliances, as in the native women's organization Women of All Red Nations, or to articulate American Indian grievances, as in Vine Deloria Jr.'s critique of Euro-American ethnocentrism in God Is Red (1973).

The adaptability of racial categories to fit particular political and social alignments says something important about the idea of race in general. If people frequently manipulate racial categories to suit contextualized objectives, the
illusion that race is biologically determined is unsustainable. Yet, scholars seeking to understand race as a cultural construction should exercise care not to dismiss physical differences among people as pure figments of imagination. Why did Indians begin to see in skin color the potential for categorizing themselves, Europeans, and Africans but not use skin color to distinguish among Indians? Is it because there indeed was greater observable, biological difference between the peoples of Europe, Africa, and America than among them? There are physical differences; our collective imaginations organize these differences to make meaning of them and are constantly at work altering those meanings.