

## Social Problems, Structural Issues, and Unsettling Science

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A descendant of displaced and dispossessed Africans, I was born in Tetiohoseró:ken (Buffalo, New York), occupied Tsonontowane'á:ka (Seneca) territory. I grew up in a low-income Black neighborhood in one of the poorest and most racially segregated cities in America. We never had much, but I had my library card. I spent my time reading, learning, experimenting, and asking too many questions. My good grades were not enough to keep me out of trouble. I was a multiply neuro-divergent child, misgendered at birth, in a low-income religious family racialized as Black. To avoid the consequences of rejecting patriarchal norms, I folded inward and was forced to perform colonial femininity. I am not, nor have I ever been, a Black woman. Being misgendered and treated like a Black woman is not akin to what my gender is, nor my sexuality. Identities and culture change; that is why I spoke about my experiences and sociopolitical positions without referring to them. These are issues of power, not identity. Performing race and projected racial nostalgias about identity have nothing to do with the value of my contributions to science. Bragging about progress and making me the face of their diversity initiatives is fine, as long as I don't actually say anything. To put it simply, counting racial identities will not upend a more than five-hundred-year-old settler-colonial system.

As I grew into a scholar, I started asking questions about the co-constructive relationships between historically contingent political processes and the biology of humans, among other organisms. The denial of my self-determination by re-fashioned colonial domination coupled with a lifelong interest in biology have made me distinctly aware of the dangers of the dichotomy of ideal and problematic bodies in human biology. My first master's thesis sought to investigate the ways that racial residential segregation, food swamps, and poverty influenced dental health.

Racism. Inequality. History. Biology of the human condition. My work was all of the things anthropology advertises on their glossy fliers featuring the smiling faces of many racialized peoples. My committee members, however, claimed that the connections I drew between racism, inequality, and health outcomes were baseless and insulting to the field of anthropology. Incoherently, I was then told that my proposal was not up to par because it did not account for the biological differences between Blacks and Whites. Citing

standard scientific critiques of race often used against racists was no defense against the mainline anthropologists advising me. They were not convinced by social constructionism, clines, power relations, isolation by distance, intersectionality, or  $F_{ST}$  values. All that mattered was that I challenged a well-groomed public image of anthropology's embrace of diversity for optics. Unable to complete my work in that anthropology department, I applied to other PhD programs. The following academic year I transferred to a sociology PhD program, studying how geneticists and other scientists conceptualize race.

My work was met with skepticism in the sociology department. My Du Boisian approaches were met with dismissals because some sociologists felt that racial identity takes precedence over all else. My experiences led me to seek intellectual community among evolutionary geneticists. My attempts to get a better understanding of the biological point of view landed me in an Evolutionary Theory class. In class, I learned that to describe a product of history adequately, I had to know the historical conditions and modes of interaction within and among populations of organisms and their environments. This resonated with my understanding of Du Bois's (1898) notion of a social problem as "ever a relation of conditions and actions." Despite the continuing definitional dilemma of race, not much attention was brought to bridging the sociological and historical contexts to the larger social problem of health inequalities. Social science definitions argue that race is based on physical characteristics, not much different from Boasian race concepts that see race as primary and racism as the result of racial conflict. Scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2015) refer to race as *corporeal*, and in particular *phenomic* and *ocular*. Race, then, has everything to do with bodies but nothing to do with biology. Canonical racial formation theory (RFT) fails to demonstrate the social constructions of race. Though the scientific critique of race has succeeded in shifting to self-identified racial identity and ethnicity (SIRE) focused analyses, it remains unclear where their notion of bodies comes from if race is not biological.

While contemporary social constructionist race concepts (SCRCs) are sufficient for exposing essentialist ideologies, they have yet to bridge the gaps in our understandings of how racism becomes embodied. As a result, contemporary scientific critiques of biological race concepts remain deadlocked between antiracist and antiracist perspectives. Antiracists argue that the use of race should be phased out of human genetics, while antiracist racialists contend that while not hierarchically ranked,

racism reflects conflicts between these distinct groups.

A central feature of both perspectives is what they agree upon. Both antiracialists and antiracist racialists perspectives refer to what human genetic variation looked like five hundred to six hundred years ago to make statements about what human genetic variation is like now. The mid-fifteenth century functions as a set of pinpoints of biogeographical originality (TallBear 2013). Describing what human genetic variation was like five hundred to six hundred years ago as the anthropological genetic present is what evolutionary biologist Charles C. Roseman (2014) refers to as the genetic now. When speaking of five hundred to six hundred years ago in the present tense, ancient races are assumed to have at least been very real, leaving us with blurred boundaries of the races to negotiate. Referring to what human genetic variation was like in the past is not a reflection of current distributions of human genetic variation in geographical and sociopolitical space. Contemporary SCRCs rely on racialized distinctions that inform interpretations of clustered distributions of genotypic and phenotypic diversity instead of understanding what we know about human genetic variation today in an evolutionary, and thus historical, perspective to understand what processes and dynamics made the present the way it is. References to pinpoints of biogeographical originality are the central tenets of racial thinking, not the theory of evolution (change in allele frequencies over time).

Mainstream SCRCs focus on the changing meanings of the marks of race, while appeals to isolation by distance claim that phenotypic and genetic differences are a function of geographic distance and/or cultural isolation. Contemporary scientific critiques of race allow people to *talk about race and genetics without talking about racism and evolutionary theory*. As a result, race is conceptualized as an issue of attitude and identity, colonialism is treated as an epoch at best, and racism is seen as the result of conflict among racial groups. The phenotypic and genetic variation we see in contemporary populations is not a function of geographic distance but rather a culmination of events, conditions, and actions given all previous states. This means that speaking of patterns of isolation by distance undermines the processes that caused the patterns. Such contingent dynamics are ignored by typological race models and would ultimately be erased

by an equilibrium in isolation by distance models. Power, inequality, identity, economy, law, and any kind of complex demography is excluded. Racism contains the explanatory power of race not racial identity. Thus, politics of recognition are antithetical to doing scientific work that *unsettles* in the study of the effects of political processes of marking and categorizing individuals through racist distinctions.

I am precariously interdisciplinary because the material and social conditions of life demand it. As a result, the social problems at hand are what drive my questions instead of disciplinary guidelines. My concern is with the social problems at hand and the defense of human and nonhuman life. I am interested in improving our present circumstances and accounting for how the present has come to be. The defense of disciplinary boundaries, theorists, and ideals is a practice in which I have no interest. In my pursuit of the study of social problems, I was met with hesitancy from both anthropology and sociology. It's as if disciplines are structured in such a way that we cannot ask the right questions about race. As organizations derived from colonial efforts, disciplinary boundaries resist unsettling claims that place their cherished histories and the fragile self-images of their practitioners at the risk of having their origin stories brought into the full light of day. As noted by scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012, 7), "settler colonialism and its decolonization implicates and unsettles everyone." The work of pursuing futures that do not function off the denial of self-determination and autonomy of others requires that we actively make the world over. I invite everyone to join me: "Let us form groups of two or five hundred and let each group deal with a colonist" (Fanon 2004, 43).

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