



Open Anthropology

A PUBLIC JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Volume 3, Number 3

October 2015

Race, Racism, and Protesting Anthropology

The Editors' Note

Jason Antrosio & Sallie Han

Race has been central to the emergence and development of anthropology in the United States. Anthropologists have used a critique of racialized biological determinism—by either emphasizing cultural explanations or attempting to deconstruct the very notion of a biological basis for racial classifications—as a means to confront the structured racism of American society. In its focus on muting race and racialized explanations, U.S. anthropology has historically paid less attention to racism. Racism was viewed as primarily an illusion about race, overlooking that structured racism itself gives importance to race. While anthropology has therefore often been used to protest structured racism, its institutional position as an anti-race science has often also insulated it from a necessary self-critique of the discipline's own silences, exclusions, and practices around race.

This issue of *Open Anthropology* provides a selection of articles which tackle the themes of race, racism, and protest. We open recent work by scholars applying anthropology to contemporary protests, examine the foundational but often muted contributions from anthropologists of color, and feature pieces that ask anthropology to be more self-critical. The articles reveal that although anthropology's reflections on race and racism may yet be too modest, a potent public anthropology is still possible.

The issue begins with two articles focused on contemporary events and protest. “#Ferguson: Digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States” by [Yarimar Bonilla](#) and [Jonathan Rosa](#) is a penetrating social analysis of the aftermath of the fatal police shooting of unarmed African American Michael Brown. Navigating between too-simplistic celebrations or denunciations of social media, Bonilla and Rosa contend that

Twitter affords a unique platform for collectively identifying, articulating, and contesting racial injustices from the in-group perspectives of racialized populations. Whereas in most mainstream media contexts the experiences of racialized populations are overdetermined, stereotyped, or tokenized, social media platforms such as Twitter offer sites for collectively constructing counternarratives and reimagining group identities. (6)

For Bonilla and Rosa, it is important to understand social movements and social media through an ethnographic method “that follows users across multiple online and off-line communities to better understand how digital and analog forms of engagement are mutually constitutive” (11). This ethnographic context reveals how “social media participation becomes a key site from which to contest mainstream media silences and the long history of state-sanctioned violence against racialized populations” (12). More information and resources can be found at the [Anthropology & Ferguson](#) website of *American Ethnologist*.

[Christen Smith’s](#) “Blackness, Citizenship, and the Transnational Vertigo of Violence in the Americas,” appears as a Public Anthropology contribution in *American Anthropologist*. Smith traces how the Ferguson protests go beyond the United States and national politics. This new movement “is about an emerging global politics of race, citizenship, violence, and nation that requires us as anthropologists take stock of our approaches to these topics” (384). Drawing on long-term fieldwork in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, this moment of coordinated protest is more than “transnational racial politics” (384). Rather, it is a crucial reflection on states and citizenship: “Race—as a social, historical, and political formation—continues to define not only expressions of citizenship and the kind of citizenship we practice but also the extent to which we are recognized as citizen-subjects at all” (385). Smith simultaneously challenges anthropologists to examine their role in the legacy and contemporary ramifications of “the cognitive dissociation between blackness and humanity” (385).

“Anthropology Matters,” the 2013 Presidential Address by [Leith Mullings](#) and posted in full to [YouTube](#) similarly confronts the legacy of anthropology and its possible contributions. This wide-ranging address pays particular attention to “the development of anthropological theory in some of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s” (4). Mullings discusses “why anthropology mattered to me” and highlights the contribution of “organic intellectuals” (5) who have at times been overlooked in the history of anthropological thought. Drawing on her own *Annual Review* article [Interrogating Racism: Toward an Antiracist Anthropology](#), Mullings urges anthropology to “advance a more dynamic culture concept grounded in economy and power” (8). Like Christen Smith, Mullings is a call to examine “Comparative Racisms” across the Americas (10-11), as well as highlight an anthropological project with the New York African Burial Ground (11-12): “Despite anthropology’s checkered history on a range of topics, at its best it can provide the theoretical perspectives and methodological tools to analyze the complex challenges of a rapidly changing world” (12).

One of the prominent organic intellectuals Mullings cites is [St. Clair Drake](#) and we include Drake’s “Reflections on Anthropology and the Black Experience” published in the *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* in 1978. Drake is here discussing what factors limited the number of Black anthropologists. Like Mullings, this is a personal and historical reflection, and like others in this issue, Drake ponders the value of ethnography and doing fieldwork in Mississippi during the 1930s, using an approach pioneered by Allison Davis and his associates:

Using Lowie’s minimal definition of “caste,” they proposed to lay bare the dynamics of oppression in the American South, the mechanisms of exploitation. To them, this was only, in part, a question of values. It was primarily a problem of defining the kind of structure that conditioned the values and reinforced those attitudes scholars usually referred to as “prejudice.” It opened up the question of what specific structural changes could have some chance of setting off favorable changes in “race relations.” For this kind of problem a structural approach was necessary to supplement cultural studies done by others. (93)

As an extension of these reflections, we include [George Clement Bond's](#) “social portrait of John Gibbs St. Clair Drake: an American anthropologist.” Bond provides a brief social context, biography, and bibliography for Drake’s work, before delving into a longer interview. For Bond, “Drake was one of that small number of social anthropologists of the 1950s whose work dealt with problems of political economy, textual analysis and social action” (762). Through this sample of St. Clair Drake’s work, we hope to provide greater access to some of the materials mentioned in Alex Golub’s post on *Savage Minds*, [Sources on St. Clair Drake](#).

At times even reflexively aware accounts of pioneers in anthropology can still overlook Black feminist intellectual thought. [Lynn Bolles](#) aims at “Telling the Story Straight: Black Feminist Intellectual Thought in Anthropology” in this 2013 article from [Transforming Anthropology](#). In this piece, Bolles concentrates on European American feminist anthropologists: “Despite employing analytical tools that dissect the structural and cultural implications of race, gender, ethnic, economic, and other forms of social inequality found across the globe, these same feminist anthropologists have basically rendered Black feminist anthropology almost invisible” (57). Bolles tells the story straight by providing an account of Black feminist anthropological contributions as well as their erasure, and in the Supplemental Information includes a downloadable pdf, “List of Ph.D Black Women Anthropologists in the Academy 12/12.” Bolles urges greater recognition of these contributions through citation and other practices: “Consider this a challenge to young scholars. Expand your list of whom you cite on a particular topic and the politics of that decision” (69).

One Black feminist intellectual who has been telling the story straight is [Gina Athena Ulysse](#). In this 2002 selection from [Anthropology and Humanism](#), “Conquering Duppies in Kingston: Miss Tiny and Me, Fieldwork Conflicts, and Being Loved and Rescued,” Ulysse discusses her relationship with Miss Tiny during her dissertation research project in Jamaica. Like other pieces in this issue, Ulysse is exploring the power of ethnographic fieldwork, but Ulysse uses this humanistic engagement in “a reflexive approach to revisit several moments of conflict throughout my fieldwork to reveal the extent to which we too often deny agency to both our subjects and ourselves” (11). Through her interactions with Miss Tiny, Ulysse comes to realize how “it was these beauty practices and manicure sessions that made me increasingly conscious of the subtle expressions and sentiments that are rooted in the political economy of self-fashioning among females in Jamaica” (17). In conclusion, Ulysse notes that the fieldwork process “reflects the limits of graduate training that did not consider the intersections of race, class, and gender” (23). Indeed:

Fieldwork was rather painful. The extreme colorism and classism that pervades this "one love" nation was a persistent reminder that "all o' we" are not one and never will be. I was in constant conflict, and often was harshly treated by Miss Tiny, who sought to toughen me up to better prepare me to deal with the realities of being an upwardly mobile female who chose not to pass, by refusing to silence her past. (24)

As Gina Athena Ulysse asks, “Can I write an anthropology that makes me belong and won’t be erased? Can this anthropology serve both Miss Tiny and myself?” (24). Returning to St. Clair Drake, one striking feature of his 1978 account of Black “pioneers” in anthropology is his optimism for anthropology’s future, seeing a growth in Black anthropologists who would diversify the discipline and their interests. “Anthropology as White Public Space?” by [Karen Brodtkin](#), [Sandra Morgen](#), and [Janis Hutchinson](#) more than questions such optimistic narratives. Based on the [AAA Commission on Race and Racism in Anthropology](#), this article begins by asking “How far has anthropology come in becoming racially

inclusive?” The answer—far from Drake’s optimistic projections—is not very far at all: “Our argument is that anthropology departments have not done well when it comes to decolonizing their own practices around race. This is neither true of all departments nor true all of the time—but is still true all too often” (545). The article is a must-read, especially for anyone involved in training graduate students or considering graduate studies in anthropology. It concludes that anthropology needs to do far more to realize its promise:

Finally, the heart of our conclusion is embarrassingly obvious. It is this: the defamiliarizing insights and analyses generated from vantage points developed by anthropologists of color are better tools for diversifying departmental organization and culture (among other things) than hegemonic ones, and anthropology departments should embrace them instead of marginalizing them. Alternatively put, anthropology has made its mark on understanding cultures by taking seriously the points of view of those it studies. We suggest it needs to take seriously the points of view of those who are internal others to better understand and diversify itself as well as enhance its theoretical robustness. (555)

“White Public Space and the Construction of White Privilege in U.S. Health Care: Fresh Concepts and a New Model of Analysis” by [Helán Page](#) and [R. Brooke Thomas](#) is from a 1994 issue of [Medical Anthropology Quarterly](#). Page and Thomas are here summarizing several articles on racism and gender in U.S. health care, revealing a long engagement with these concepts and ideas in medical anthropology. In this selection, they turn special attention to nursing: “Because of their central role in health care delivery, nurses find themselves at the core of this dilemma. . . . If health care to the underprivileged is to be more effective and meaningful, the profession will have to look within itself: at how it recruits, educates, empowers, and socially reproduces its own institutional structures and behavior” (110). Page and Thomas use the studies to develop a model which “illustrates the dynamic discursive field in which racism becomes a strategy of those who seek to maintain white privilege by constructing white public space” (115). But Page and Thomas do not stop there, presciently writing that these studies “have wide implications for critiques of professionalism in other U.S. institutional sites, like business, entertainment, or anthropology, for example” (116).

As mentioned, the Page and Thomas article points to a long engagement of medical anthropology with issues of race and racism, and when we contacted current [Medical Anthropology Quarterly](#) editor [Clarence Gravlee](#) for comment, he suggested several articles, including [Anna Pagano’s](#) recent [Everyday Narratives on Race and Health in Brazil](#), which complements articles in this issue. We have also been inspired by Gravlee’s breakthrough 2009 article [How Race Becomes Biology: Embodiment of Social Inequality](#) which we use in our teaching.

The fact that many anthropology programs are a form of “white public space” leads directly to the situation described in “Whites Teaching Whites About Race: Racial Identity Theory and White Defensiveness in the Classroom” by [Cynthia Ninivaggi](#). Ninivaggi asks common questions for those attempting to teach on such issues:

Did they simply learn to agree with me that racism was bad? Or did they truly meet the goals I set for the course—making connections between different kinds of exercises of power and privilege, between racism, sexism and homophobia? Were they cowed into a posture of political correctness, or were they empowered with a new vocabulary? Were they more comfortable in multicultural settings, or was the whole course simply a painful reminder of differences and social distance? (14)

Ninivaggi finds it useful to use racial identity theory “originally developed as a psychological tool for clinical settings” (14). She explains through practical exercises how to work through these tools in the classroom. “If our students are to become effective leaders in integration and equal opportunity in their communities, they must do more than learn about the sad history of inequality and stratification and develop empathy with its victims” (31).

[Charles E. Orser Jr.’s](#) work has long been useful in teaching about historical archaeology, race, and racism, and here we include a review of Orser’s 2004 [Race and Practice in Archaeological Interpretation](#) by [Anna S. Agbe-Davies](#). Davies explains how Orser “situates archaeology’s long-standing affinity for *ethnicity* and aversion to any critical treatment of *race*” (159). As Davies notes, *Race and Practice* “forces us to think critically about what we can learn about the historical construction of race using the documentary and material records. Anthropologists in other subfields and other social scientists might be pleasantly surprised by what archaeologists have been up to” (160).

A sense of surprise might also be found in [John Hartigan’s](#) article “Translating ‘Race’ and ‘Raza’ between the United States and Mexico.” Hartigan has long taken interesting approaches toward research and public discussion about race, including collaboration with biological anthropologists on his 2013 edited volume [Anthropology of Race: Genes, Biology, and Culture](#). In this article, Hartigan portrays his own evolution and changing views, offering “a current assessment of the challenges posed by translating ‘race’ across this highly fraught border” (29). While Hartigan finds that “in both the United States and Mexico we find examples of dominant discourses—*mestizaje* and color-blind racism—that purposefully obscure and deny the relevance of race,” nevertheless *the analytical challenge is to see through such denials without entirely discounting the distinctive cultural dynamics that lets race slide in and out of view for situated subjects in any setting. Assuming that we can just refer to “race” commonly in both national contexts distorts the lived, everyday register by which people come to regard bodies, words, and the material world as meaningful.* (33)

Hartigan’s ambitious project shifts from vignettes, to considerations of immigration, to his current work on races of corn in Mexico. Like other selections, Hartigan’s article underscores the importance of careful ethnography and situating race across the Americas, as well as echoing themes discussed in a previous issue of *Open Anthropology*, *World on the Move: Migration Stories* edited by Alisse Waterston. We also note that this article appears in [North American Dialogue](#), where incoming editors [Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz](#) and [Lindsay A. Bell](#) published [an issue on race and police brutality](#) in 2015.

[Robin Sheriff’s](#) “Embracing Race: Deconstructing *Mestiçagem* in Rio de Janeiro” returns to ethnography in Brazil. Sheriff is here investigating the common view that Brazilians of color tend not to identify as *negros*. “*Racial mixture,*” “*mestiçagem,*” “*cultural hybridity,*” and the plethora of race-color terms that describe, inscribe, and invoke such notions are assumed to decenter racialized opposition such that black consciousness and politicized forms of *negritude* are nonsensical in Brazil. (88)

Sheriff’s 2003 article uses ethnographic evidence to contest these notions and the idea of a Brazilian “Racial Democracy.” Extended conversations with Brazilians, coupled to anthropological linguistic analysis, reveal a quite different scenario than has oft been described in textbook accounts. Sheriff seems to have finally solved the classic “puzzle” that Marvin Harris in 1970 identified as [Referential Ambiguity in the Calculus of Brazilian Racial Identity](#). Brazilians do indeed discuss and debate the continuum of skin color, but “*Racial classification,*” “*raciological taxonomies,*” “*racial identity,*” and so on are, as my informants in *Morro do Sangue Bom* assert, a different matter. The expression “If you do not pass for

white, you are black” reveals that despite perceived differences in color, raça is conceptualized as both a different and “deeper” quality, as well as a simple, bipolar category. (102)

In addition to the possible dialogue here between Hartigan and Sheriff, there is more material on Brazil available from the In Focus section of the 2014 issue of *American Anthropologist*, [Culture, Politics, and Imagined Genetic Communities in Brazil](#).

The final two articles for this issue of Open Anthropology return to the United States and both discuss race, racism, and protest in particular places. “Valued Lives in Violent Places: Black Urban Placemaking at a Civil Rights Memorial in New Orleans” by [Rebecca Louise Carter](#) appears in the 2014 *City & Society*. Carter is exploring the history and significance of a civil rights memorial to Martin Luther King Jr. in central New Orleans. As Carter notes, it is important “to examine the process of social exclusion in post-Katrina New Orleans, particularly given how blacks and other historically marginalized groups must navigate a complex and contested urban landscape, while still contending with disproportionately high levels of social and environmental vulnerability and violence” (240). Carter’s discussion of “black urban placemaking” (256), draws on an ethnography of how residents and leaders are able to strategically position their social movement around the memorial and in the media. The analysis of how participants “counter social exclusion, rejecting the negative characterizations associated with their communities, and asserting the social and spiritual value and relatedness of ‘all God’s children’” (257-58) hearkens back to Bonilla and Rosa’s perspective on how a supposedly place-less Twitter hashtag can become a vehicle for in-group reimagining and counter-narratives.

[Heath Pearson’s](#) “The Prickly Skin of White Supremacy: Race in the ‘Real America’” takes us to Huntington, Indiana, U.S.A., to understand “how race happens at the local level” (44) and making the point that “race matters in a place. Race happens in a place. Minds do not exist outside of bodies, which do not exist outside of places” (45). Pearson’s study “is my attempt to explore how race happens—by way of (often) subtle, lingering White supremacy—in everyday life” (56). But it is also a study that reminds Pearson “of John Jackson’s claim that hope is one of anthropology’s most insightful and powerful rubrics ‘for reimagining possibility’ (2010:280). Not blind hope. Hope as that which binds together ‘social change, progress, and even revolution’ (280)” (56; see [On Ethnographic Sincerity](#)).

George Clement Bond’s interview with St. Clair Drake concludes with Drake’s own assessment of his contribution to anthropology: “My main contribution has been made through teaching at the undergraduate level, awakening an interest in the discipline” (781). For reflections from 2020 and a longer bibliography, see the *Living Anthropologically* blog-post "[Race, Racism and Protesting Anthropology](#)"

Acknowledgements. Special thanks for this issue to journal editors Michael Chibnik, Clarence Gravlee, and Suzanne Scheld for article suggestions and ideas on short notice. Natalie Newton is the current [SUNY Oneonta](#) undergraduate research assistant and provided help tracking author websites. At AAA, thank you to Chelsea Horton for a smooth transition and for the ongoing support from Oona Schmid. This issue benefitted from the insights and questions raised by the pseudonymous “[Discuss White Privilege](#)”, as well as the impetus from Ryan Anderson and Dick Powis to continue a conversation about graduate training in anthropology. A preliminary bibliography and preview of this issue appeared on [Anthropology Report](#).

Volume 3, Number 3
October 2015

[#Ferguson: Digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States](#)

Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa – *American Ethnologist*. Vol 42, Issue 1: 4-17 (2015)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[Blackness, Citizenship, and the Transnational Vertigo of Violence in the Americas](#)

Christen A. Smith – *American Anthropologist*. Vol 117, Issue 2: 384-387 (2015)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[Anthropology Matters](#)

Leith Mullings – *American Anthropologist*. Vol 117, Issue 1: 4-16 (2015)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[Reflections on Anthropology and the Black Experience](#)

St. Clair Drake – *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*. Vol 9, Issue 2: 85-109 (1978)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[a social portrait of John Gibbs St. Clair Drake: an American anthropologist](#)

George Clement Bond – *American Ethnologist*. Vol 15 Issue 4: 762-781 (1988)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[Telling the Story Straight: Black Feminist Intellectual Thought in Anthropology](#)

Lynn Bolles – *Transforming Anthropology*. Vol 21, Issue 1: 57-71 (2013)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[Conquering Duppies in Kingston: Miss Tiny and Me, Fieldwork Conflicts, and Being Loved and Rescued](#)

Gina Ulysse – *Anthropology and Humanism*. Vol 27, Issue 1: 10-26 (2002)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[Anthropology as White Public Space?](#)

Karen Brodtkin, Sandra Morgen, and Janis Hutchinson – *American Anthropologist*. Vol 113, Issue 4: 545-556 (2011)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[White Public Space and the Construction of White Privilege in U.S. Health Care: Fresh Concepts and a New Model of Analysis](#)

Helán Page and R. Brooke Thomas – *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*. Vol 8, Issue 1: 109-116 (1994)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[Whites Teaching Whites About Race: Racial Identity Theory and White Defensiveness in the Classroom](#)

Cynthia Ninivaggi – *Teaching Anthropology: Society for Anthropology in Community Colleges Notes*. Vol 8, Issue 1: 14-32 (2001)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[Book Review: Race and Practice in Archaeological Interpretation. Charles E. Orser, Jr](#)

Anna S. Agbe-Davies – *Transforming Anthropology*. Vol 17, Issue 2: 159-160 (2009)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[Translating “Race” and “Raza” between the United States and Mexico](#)

John Hartigan – *North American Dialogue*. Vol 16 Issue 1: 29-41 (2013)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[Embracing Race: Deconstructing Mestiçagem in Rio de Janeiro](#)

Robin E. Sheriff – *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*. Vol 8, Issue 1: 86-115 (2003)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[Valued Lives in Violent Places: Black Urban Placemaking at a Civil Rights Memorial in New Orleans](#)

Rebecca Louise Carter – *City & Society*. Vol 26, Issue 2: 239-261 (2014)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[The Prickly Skin of White Supremacy: Race in the "Real America"](#)

Heath Pearson – *Transforming Anthropology*. Vol 23, Issue 1: 43-58 (2015)

[Read more about this article >](#)