

Anthropology and Anti-Racism

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What does an anti-racist anthropological approach offer to the discipline and to society at large? Academia has long debated the benefits of objective vs subjective scholarship. I do not intend to repeat that long drawn out feud. Suffice to say that an anti-racist approach is anything but objective, but it is grounded in deep scholarly and vetted research and results. An anti-racist approach is not merely a political or racialized stance but an epistemological grounding that recognizes that the structures, systems and processes of society at every level are established on a belief that non-whites are inferior. Anti-racism work battles the 500-year appropriation of every intellectual strategy, political ideology, artistic expression, spiritual tenet, and philosophical treatise molded to form a reality that often goes unquestioned and violently punishes those that do question it. An anti-racist anthropology epitomizes the lofty goals of our discipline's claim to give insight into the inner workings of any society, any individual or social interaction. Anti-racist anthropology questions the very fabric of knowledge and knowledge production and challenges the very givens of the known world. At its core it offers a radical outcome. Black people are human. The necessity of accomplishing this goal is validated every time a black life is ended unjustly, painfully and unremorsefully.

Anthropology has been synonymous with race and racism since its foundation in the latter 19th and early 20th C. It has worked on both sides of the problem with its early connections to the American and British Eugenics movements, colonialism and American imperialism. But has also been on the cutting edge of knowledge production to counter the voices of the state and the powerful who have long sought to position their status as part of the natural order of rule. Anthropology became both a tool to support and combat racism.

What we see happening over the last few weeks in the United States is neither a new conflict nor a surprising conflict for those of use whose scholarship has been grounded in anti-racism and most specifically on anti-Black violence done throughout the globe. To talk about racism in American we have to talk about whiteness, capitalism, patriarchy and democracy as they were all forged in the same historical context in the birth of this nation. The eradication of most of the indigenous populations to make way for a new form of labor based on African bodies, America created itself the foundation for its eventual position as the first nation state. Through bodies of black Africans and their descendants it created the foundation for capitalism and the industrial revolution.

As anthropologists we are concerned with both the literal and the symbolic. We all know that for any system of power or belief to work it must become engrained in every fabric of society. Music, art, religion, politics, gender, class, hierarchy, status etc. So, it is not surprising that every institution, every belief structure is embedded with racist ideologies. Including our discipline. It also doesn't help when scholars have access to the highest levels of power in the country. For example, Patrick Moynihan, although a sociologist, his research on the Black family in the 1960s served to advise several US presidents (Hilary and Bill Clinton were among his

proteges) and was the defining document used to both establish the welfare system and welfare stigma of the poor urban black family in America.

But there have been anthropologists at every moment who have countered this racism. W.E.B. DuBois and Zora Neal Hurston represent for me some of the earliest scholarly means of battling racism in academia. DuBois with his *Philadelphia Negro* in 1899 documented and described what would later be coined by Paul Farmer and others as structural violence. DuBois demonstrated that the plight of the black community was due to social inequity and oppression not biological inferiority. Zora Neal Hurston in her ethnographies of black communities in the American south and the Caribbean demonstrated the humanity many thought were absent in Black communities. Her depictions of black life of full people not caricatures nor beasts to be feared nor simple minded brutes to be pitied were radical statements about Black humanity. Lives that were filled with love, joy, pain, sorrow, happiness, anger and loss. What better way to counter the racist theater of black face and buffoonery in the American theater than to radically show Black people in love. Following in their footsteps were a number of Black physical anthropologists using the tools of anthropology that attempted to show black inferiority but were easily able to demonstrate the incorrect analysis of their peers who sought to use physical anthropology to support the eugenics movement.

Over the next 100+ years Black anthropologists and anthropologists committed to anti-racist work have continually battled both the intellectual community and the popular community's casual acceptance of Black inferiority and Black genocide. Anthropology has the scholars and the tools to demonstrate the ills of racism and to point out where in society they exist. Once the tools are applied, they are not hard to discover. Rather the difficult task has been to get others to accept what we take as a known reality. The difficulty in convincing others of our truth is both a barrier but also a recognition of how embedded racist ideology is in America and beyond. Think of the disagreements of the last six years since Ferguson, MO. In the Spring of 2014, I taught in my Intro to Anthropology here at Pitt, an ethnography entitled "Catching Hell in the City of Angels". An ethnography done in Los Angeles after the Rodney King riots in the 1990s. Many of my students dismissed me as racist, biased, hater of white people and complainer. It's in my OMETS. Fall 2014 after the riots of Ferguson and the murder of Eric Garner there was significantly less issue taken with that ethnography. If none of this is new and there is an entire canon of work that has carefully and diligently demonstrated all of this over three different centuries, then why are we still here today dealing with this. As anthropologists we know that it takes seemingly insurmountable effort to alter one's reality. I have to undo capitalism, the NCAA, Disney, the Church, the belief in casting a vote, and materialism to even get one close enough to believe the ills of racism. How many chastised Colin Kaepernick when he knelt? How many thought he was unpatriotic? When I was giving a talk in Sweden about Kaepernick and the visceral lynching like response to his kneeling my European counterparts were stunned and confused at the easily achieved references of violence that were inherent in the American response to his kneeling.

As we watch or don't watch the violence happening, we have anthropology as a way to make sense of it. Why do law enforcement or those who believe they can act as enforcers feel the right to kill without impunity? Why do Black Americans seem to resort to violence in an era where peaceful response is society's demand and expectation despite having violence done to them

systemically for generations? Why do people infiltrate these movements for personal gain or to destabilize radical movements seeking change? It starts with an inability of the state and its designees to recognize the humanity in black people. If we treat law enforcement as an institution created by the first modern nation state to control black populations then we should not be surprised that the initiation rites of passage to become an agent of the state would transform a person into a killer and attract those that already want to kill. The state has always demanded that of its law enforcement. The violence we see by Black Americans in response to murder should come as no surprise to anthropologists who study the cultural production of violence. Abufarha in his ethnography of Palestinian violence demonstrates using symbolic tools that the violence done by some Palestinians against the State of Israel was meant to reclaim the nation in terms of the motif of land. Black Americans living in a world where material possession is the symbol of humanity destroy what is most sacred in the American cosmological system. It is why more people respond emotionally to the burning of a Target than to the killing of a Black human being. It is important to keep in mind that a good portion of the violence we see in the streets are not by those protesting but by people with their own agenda. Anti-racist scholarship has long shown how the American government at all levels intentionally infiltrates community organizations to destabilize them from within. COINTELPRO for example. Local law enforcement has systematically demonstrated their strategy of disruption of any entity that threatens the state or the elite. In 1851 a flyer was posted on the streets of Boston warning free Black Americans to stay away from police and watchmen as they were conscripted to capture free Blacks and transport them to the south into the hands of slaveowners. Almost 200yrs later the police have not been given a new order. It is time that we change their orders. It is time that we change their reality and give them a new one. One that doesn't attract violent people who wish to cause harm but instead attracts people who wish to care and protect others from harm.

Anthropology has the tools and the scholars who know how to apply it. It is our responsibility regardless of sub-discipline or research interest to be well versed in these tools to speak out and act out in the spaces where we see racism. These events require more than implicit bias training, cultural competency and diversity initiatives, statements or hires. These only help an institution improve its rankings. What we need is a full commitment of our resources to end genocide and murder. It is imperative that race and racism be at the core of anthropological work. The violence done to Black people throughout the Americas is not casual violence, nor singularly state violence, or even singularly gendered violence or singularly class violence. It is first and foremost a racialized anti-Black violence. The violence we see is not just in response to murder but rather the last straw in lifetimes, generations of dehumanization at every moment of one's own existence and witnessing it in the lives of everyone you know.



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