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Overview of Anthropology's Importance

"Anthropological scholarship" is a term that generally goes unrecognized by most Americans. As an anthropology student, I am constantly asked, "what even is anthropology?" or "what is an anthropologist?". When people think about academia, the qualitative study of humans is usually not the first discipline that comes to mind. Popular thought is instead directed by the authoritative power of medical sciences and large enterprises, both of which descend from the United States' intense projection of capitalistic values. The prominent focus on these fields tends to overlook the importance of anthropological work on contemporary issues.

Right now, anthropology has the potential to make integral contributions to the nation's conversations, advocacies, and political understandings pertaining to race and racism. The Black Lives Matter Movement and consequential push for police reform have recently gained both immense power and scrutiny. National tensions remain high, yet true anthropological interpretations of race as a social construction remain low. Anthropology has the potential to bridge gaps between politically-driven racial divides by facilitating in-depth reviews of systemic racism. The need for ethnographic research on BLM supporters and opposers enhances the vitality of anthropological voices. I argue that increased addressal of anthropological scholarship is integral to properly navigate 2020 and 2021's current racial climate. This essay explores how anthropology as a public intellectual service can contribute to the evolving perceptions of race in America.

Anthropological Insight Through Ethnographic Work

2020 was fraught with unexpected occurrences and consequential social tensions. The most glaring has been the COVID19 pandemic which has cast light upon racial divides in our contemporary healthcare system. As Black people are dying at disproportionally higher rates than White people, concerns about racial inequality are alluded to in the media. However, these concerns are not new. Biocitizenship—the idea that people become political actors in relation to biomedical processes to maintain their health (i.e., testing access, diagnoses, etc.)—has been rooted in historical inequality (Davis 170). Therefore, scholars acknowledge the anthropological idea that medical citizenship is an extension of political and justice work, despite its exterior image that focuses purely on biological health.

For example, in Chapter 6 of *Reproductive Injustice,* Dána-Ain Davis explores the work of Radical Black Birth Workers—the term "radical" stemming simply from the fact that these birth workers fight against a system designed to disempower Black females. The medicalization of the birthing process has allowed systemic healthcare inequality to infiltrate into the well-being of Black mothers and children. Davis reveals the disturbing prevalence of medical racism through her ethnographic work detailing the lives of birth workers, doulas, and Black pregnant women. As a general statistic, the Black community suffers from abnormally high rates of infant and maternal mortality in the United States (Davis 172).

What this statistic does not reveal, however, are the lived experiences and reasons behind the number. Davis conveys this inordinate occurrence through an ethnographic lens, and subsequently exposes the racism and sexism of American medical facilities. She details stories in

which Black females are noted as 'noncompliant' or 'resistant' in their medical charts, simply because they requested medications (Davis 190). To accompany these stories Davis references research that has studied racial differences in pain management by medical professionals, finding that Black patients are significantly less likely to obtain pain management (Davis 190).

These findings are horrific for reasons beyond the obvious inequality; they indicate that contemporary understandings of race have not significantly changed from the past. Historical *and* contemporary records reveal the entrenched idea that Black people feel pain differently (Manke; Hoffman). As society has progressed, one would think contemporary medical knowledge would have led to the dissipation of this outrageous theory. Yet, the ingrained biases of western society are clearly still prevalent and relevant. Medicine has failed and continues to fail Black females, hence the unremitting need for anthropological work to unveil these unjust inequalities. Without the work of anthropologists like Davis, I fear that statistics like these will continue to be misinterpreted and thus go unrecognized by the general American public.

Doulas and Black birth workers were a part of the BLM Movement when it originated in 2012 (Davis 184). Davis asserts that BLM promotes the values of Black women and families, growing "out of the need for self-determination and liberation of Black people" and doing "so under the leadership of Black women" (Davis 184). Unfortunately, eight years of activism has done little to enact broad-sweeping change to address racism in America, resulting in the current racial climate that is fueled by heated political tensions, unnecessary loss of life, and misinterpretations about the movement's cause. The following section will explore how anthropologists can further contribute to the contemporary conversation about race; it will extend the scope from simply writing ethnographies like Davis' to interpretating humanity and its functions on a theoretical scale, providing insight into why the anthropological voice has an immanent necessity to be heard.

Public Reception of Anthropological Scholarship

Contemporary cognizance of race in America is not black and white—though this play on words might illuminate the issue itself. Anthropological agreement asserts that race is a social construction, and that the distinction between Black and White is created by the human mind and not by human biology. Before becoming immersed in the world of anthropological theory, I myself was unaware of this classification. It does not take many conversations or much media exposure to realize that the general public is unaware of this distinction as well. Therefore, public distribution of anthropological scholarship today is imperative.

Anthropologists wield valuable tools taught through the discipline that are crucial to interpreting and illuminating social situations such as the contemporary racial climate. Anthropology students and professionals commonly view cultures through a participant-based lens, seeking to understand people through the way they understand themselves. This in-group consciousness allows anthropologists to transform their findings into descriptions that reflect an accurate representation of the studied people. Furthermore, anthropologists have a duty to communicate their findings. Regularly, this communication is done within the academy for an intended audience of other anthropologists. Therefore, anthropological scholarship tends to be less prevalent in day-to-day forms interpretable to a public audience.

Even so, some scholars are exquisite in their ability to convey anthropological work to a public audience. For example, in *Gods of the Upper Air,* Charles King dissects the work of renowned anthropologists as it pertains to the general function of the discipline and the evolving conception of race. At one point, King references Edward Sapir stating that, "understanding the social lives of any of these people wasn't about one grand theory or one summer's fieldwork.

What you needed was repeated and respectful conversations with the real human beings whose worlds you were straining, as best you could, to comprehend" (King 228). In the 21st century, some non-marginalized White people are attempting to "strain," as Sapir would put it, to comprehend what it is like to be a Black person. Some people attend marches, while others listen intently to educational podcasts. Though this attempt is promising as a plausible start to understanding the lives of "others," the public remains limited in the interpretation abilities keen to anthropologists.

Therefore, anthropologists should use their voices to promote their approaches toward navigating the current racial climate. For one, we can turn to the history of anthropological thought. King illustrates a racial climate in 1920s Florida upon which connections to today can be drawn. He discusses how a White community felt threatened by the establishment of certain equality rights in the South, tending to "see its own position as somehow under threat, the politically and socially dominant now recasting themselves as victims" (King 199). One hundred years later and I have witnessed this "concern" at play in my own life. I know a few people—all of whom are White upper middle class folk—who feel that the BLM Movement is an act of reverse racism. They blindly accept statistics that associate Black people with higher rates of crime; they feel that "all lives matter," without realizing that all lives will not matter until Black lives matter; and they attribute the successes of marginalized people to be taking away from their own. All the while, these people state, "I'm not racist, but…" As an anthropology student, I am frustrated, concerned, and uneasy that imbedded, subconscious, racist perceptions like these still exist today.

Fortunately, this concern is accompanied by a newfound sense of hope—hope that anthropological scholarship can shed light upon this disastrous way of thinking. Public education about how to think anthropologically may be a start. At the same time, education is not the answer to everything. Anthropologists' voices need to be heard in the news, the newspapers, the media, the television, and any other medium that directs people's political attention. In my opinion, the best way to learn from the past is to assess it through an anthropological lens. This means interpreting how the anthropological understanding of race has evolved throughout time and continues to evolve; this means taking the time to understand people from their own perspective. The current racial climate needs so much more attention than a brief glance at a biased news channel and consequential assumption that one is well-versed on a topic.

In addition to assessing race through an anthropological lens, King captures Margaret Mead's thoughts on anthropology as a discipline quite skillfully. The following declaration has stood the test of time, and remains crucially relevant in today's discussions about race. King states, "like Boas in his work on sound-blindness decades earlier, Mead was discovering that we necessarily interpret foreign ways with intellectual tools we have closest at hand: the mental boxes that are meaningful in our own time and place" (King 184). Contemporary applications of this theory might be the heavy reliance on one biased news source and/or the learned idea that the ghetto is full of bad, dangerous people. King then says:

> all cultures are "experiments in what could be done with human nature," she later wrote. The way to understand these experiments was not to imagine yourself as a white-coated scientist…It was instead to launch your canoe into the world, throw yourself into an unfamiliar setting, and try to understand how local customs make sense to the people who engage in them—even those who might appear neurotic or dime, with dog's teeth for currency and the bones of their father hanging from their arm (King 184).

Mead's theory is abundant with possible comparisons to this country's contemporary racial climate, illustrating the dire importance of an anthropological voice. For example, a modern connection might be drawn between a "white-coated scientist" and a non-marginalized, privileged white man who sits on a comfortable couch in the safety of his own house watching race-related "riots" on his flat screen. (Note that I am heavily stereotyping here for the sake of emphasis.) Then, the next image regarding taking a canoe into unfamiliar territory is the way in which King describes the field of anthropology; it is a discipline that stresses true cultural immersion for accurate understanding. Today, anthropologists can be an integral component in shifting public rhetoric on racial inequality. Mead and King would argue that the stereotype of Black people as 'others' enhances the need for their voices to be heard by anthropologically-centered ears.

Turning to the Academy

Shifting from the general public to the constringent realm of academia, we still witness inequalities pertaining to race. As a result, racism still persists within the anthropological institutions that currently work to combat its existence. First, we must recognize the clearly unbalanced racial population of anthropologists. In an article written to address the academic community, Lynn Bolles' *Telling the Story Straight: Black Feminist Intellectual Thought in Anthropology*, dissects the evolution of power differentials within the discipline as they concern gender and racial divides. She asserts that despite gaining headway in feminist theory and the hiring of women, the majority of anthropologists are White (Bolles 60). In fact, according to the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, less Black faculty held tenure in 2007 compared to White faculty (Bolles 62).

Therefore, despite the push toward a more inclusive feminist discipline, Black female anthropologists tend to lack tenure and uphold responsibilities nonexistent to their White counterparts. One *Journal of Black in Higher Education* report notes that "in a period of economic crisis, nontenured Black faculties are disproportionately vulnerable to tenure denial" (Bolles 62). This unbalanced system thus perpetuates the "exclusionary practices within the discipline" that Black female anthropologists face (Bolles 62). Moreover, Black scholars tend to oversee entire departments, and mentor and represent all students of color on their campuses (Bolles 63). A quick google search reveals that Bolles fits this stereotype, as the head of multiple departments and a common resource for marginalized students.

However, we learn from Bolles that "one does not receive tenure for the number of committees one serves, or for the number of students one mentors" (Bolles 63) Therefore, Black scholars, who tend to serve on many committees and mentor more students than their White counterparts, are already disadvantaged in the pursuit of a tenure track. In fact, "sometimes Black woman intellectual's work is more oriented toward activism rather than toward the academy…" and the academy favors publications as opposed to works of activism in the "scheme of what 'counts' as scholarly production" (Bolles 64). It is quite clear that systemic racism is still embedded in academia, creating marginalization that causes the average Black academic to function differently than the average White academic. This difference serves to reduce the standing of Black anthropologists, particularly if they are female.

Concluding Statements

How do we address issues of long withstanding racial inequalities in the public, if they still persist in academia? Bolles asserts the importance of citing Black female anthropologists, which I have attempted to do here. King promotes the value of anthropological voices throughout time. And Davis provides an ethnographic lens through which public audiences can

understand one aspect of Black females' lives. Throughout my studies I have discovered that discussions about race need not be political or heated with tension. Instead, conversations about race must now start occurring in the anthropological voice. Such a shift entails seeking to understand others while simultaneously evaluating ourselves, for "when we think we are studying people out there, we are really making claims about people right here—about us and our neighbors, about our sense of the normal, the evident, and the standard" (King 177). Anthropological scholarship provides the means through which this kind of information can be understood and spread to the public. But first, institutional changes and systemic evaluations must be enacted. Enhancing programs that promote Black anthropological scholarship, as well as anthropological thought in general, will be a start. Because as Franz Boas said, "almost every anthropological problem touches our most intimate life" (King 177).

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