

What is Speaking of Race

Erik: Hey—it's been a WHILE since we talked about our purpose here, with the podcast.

Jo: I mean, have we ever talked about it more explicitly than Jim's short statement about why he created the race course in our very first episode?

Jim: Well, we did recently talk about the question of why three white folks are doing this podcast in our episode about the George Floyd protests, and we made the point there that it IS important for white people to think and talk and act about race. Otherwise we just reproduce inequalities that make race a problem only for people who aren't white in the first place.

Jo: That's a really good point to lead with, Jim. White people need to be talking about race. But how about why we take the particular approach we do in this podcast-- detailing the whole long history of race and science and racism?

Erik: Well how can anything get better if we don't know what it is that we're getting better from? And to understand scientific racism, you really have to go back to the institutionalization of slavery in the Latin-west.

Jo: And we've already done those episodes.

Jim: Like in our episode on 16th century race in Mexico and 19th century race in Brazil and the one about Slavery and Black Bodies and of course, it's the subtext of almost every episode outside of the miniseries Jo did on race and caste in India.

Erik: Yes. And I think a key takeaway from that period of time is that the last five hundred years of Western history have been built upon a really terrible paradox.

Jo: Ah, you mean the whole "all men are created equal" thing...except slaves?

Erik: Except slaves and aboriginal peoples already inhabiting the world, many of whom had more melanin in their skin than the European colonists. And there's the source of the paradox: the religious foundations of Western Christianity that were the bedrock of the colonizing and enslaving societies insisted that *everyone* was created and valued by God.

Jo: Yep, and even when – in the 1700s -- Europeans began to rebuild those traditions around the newer foundations of Enlightenment they said that, "all men are ... endowed with certain inalienable rights ... life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The Enlightenment didn't challenge the deep and terrible paradox at its core. Slavery and colonization are in conflict with both the older religious and the newer Enlightenment projects.

Erik: How can you say "all men are created equal in the image of God" but then enslave some and kill off others? In order to deal with this cognitive dissonance, slaving societies like the British and French Empires (which eventually became the USA) needed to continually reinforce two things: (1) that black and brown minds were inferior, not-fully developed, not fully human, and (2) that the black and brown bodies were superior to whites in animal-like qualities of labor, resistance to pain, and in supposedly irrational things like music and dance.

Jim: Soooo, both natives in the Americas and the west Africans brought to the US were increasingly described as beast-like—happy go-lucky, resistant to pain and disease, and incapable of higher thought. In places where the labor of non-white bodies became the basis of the economy, the subjugated status of black and brown bodies meant they weren't a real threat to white authority. And when they were, crackdowns were swift and severe.

Erik: Right, this is why when you learn about things like slave rebellions or native uprisings you find death counts like a dozen white slave owners being killed and 300 or 1,000 slaves or natives being tortured and executed. Inferior animals deserve this sort of vengeance, was the thought, lest they get uppity ideas – that's why the word used then and, unfortunately now, is "uppity"—it's literally telling the black and brown laboring beast to stop pretending it's a full-fledged man. It's also why you can have white slave owners talking about how "close" they are to their slaves; how good life is for the enslaved. It's how you would talk about your dog or cat that you saved from having a hard life fending for themselves in the wild.

Jim: Exactly, But in the US, the further north you went, the less you saw of treating blacks like animals—and the more you saw reactions of foreignness and disgust. (Like, the disgust expressed by Louis Agassiz, the Swiss scientist and later Harvard dean, when he first encountered Africans at a hotel in Philadelphia in the mid-19th century, as we discussed way back in our episode on polygeny and monogeny).

Erik: Like three years ago!

Jo: From a contemporary perspective, people are no longer allowed to express the disgust part. White people will go to great lengths to show how they are not disgusted by black culture—sometimes by open appropriation of clothes, music, food, and linguistics. This is what people mean when they say "I'm not racist" -- they mean they're not acting out of disgust. But as a society we've dealt much less with the "inferiorization" side of the problem. You can admire black and brown athletic and musical achievements all you want. But the whole quote "shut up and dribble" is an all-too-common expression of the remaining inferiorization part of racism.

Erik: That's really where we're trying to intervene in this podcast. The stress on the biological unity of all humans is to undercut one major pillar of the inferiorization argument – if we are all the same biologically, then deficiencies in educational achievement, income and wealth gaps, etc., have to be explained as originating in something other than a racial "essence" of one kind or another.

Jo: That's right. In cultural anthropology, we teach that those gaps are constructed, not essential; socio-cultural, political, and economic, not biological. And from a perspective that views race and racism as socially constructed and structurally maintained through institutions like government and public spaces—

Jim: —and don't forget policing and the legal system—

Jo: —yes, it is not surprising that those who dislike the implications of reorganizing society to be less racist continually try to hold up racial essentialism and then highlight disparities between

racism where they can rebrand the inferiorization argument. Without the direct disgust part, though, so it almost looks not racist? It can fly under the radar a bit more easily, I guess.

Jim: And the fight against racial essentialism—that belief that race is an innate biological quality—is the reason that we have focused so much attention on the biological side like in our episodes about race and the Human Genome Project or athletics or DNA Ancestry.

Erik: That's right. It's not enough to say race is socially constructed without telling people why that is.

Jim: This is a point that Adam Rutherford makes in his recent book "How to Argue with a Racist," which goes nicely with our last episode about scientific racism.

Jo: And we've all worked hard to make that case in our classrooms so it's important that it comes through in the podcast, too.

Erik: If people can come away from the series knowing why race is not biological and understanding the historical effects of race on modern people of color, we should be happy campers.

Jim: So, if you're new to our podcast or if you've listened along since the beginning, this why we're putting this out there, and hopefully it helps.

Episodes mentioned:

What you don't see when you don't look <https://youtu.be/1pwQuN4AM7k>

THE PROTESTS ABOUT THE DEATH OF GEORGE FLOYD
<http://speakingofrace.ua.edu/podcast/the-protests-about-the-death-of-george-floyd>

THE BEGINNING OF RACE <http://speakingofrace.ua.edu/podcast/the-beginning-of-race>

RACE IN BRAZIL <http://speakingofrace.ua.edu/podcast/august-26th-2018>

RACISM AND BLACK BODIES <http://speakingofrace.ua.edu/podcast/racism-and-black-bodies>

RACE IN INDIA, PART 1 <http://speakingofrace.ua.edu/podcast/race-in-india-part-1>

RACE IN INDIA, PART 2 <http://speakingofrace.ua.edu/podcast/july-15th-2018>

MONOGENISM AND POLYGENISM <http://speakingofrace.ua.edu/podcast/monogenism-and-polygenism>

RACE AND THE HUMAN GENOME PROJECT
<http://speakingofrace.ua.edu/podcast/race-and-the-human-genome-project>

RACE AND ATHLETICS <http://speakingofrace.ua.edu/podcast/race-and-athletics>

DNA ANCESTRY TESTING AND RACE <http://speakingofrace.ua.edu/podcast/dna-ancestry-testing-and-race>

SCIENTIFIC RACISM <http://speakingofrace.ua.edu/podcast/scientific-racism>

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