Construction of Race in America Through the Eyes of Black Resistors

Teaching the Construction of Race in 19th-Century United States from a Resistance Perspective

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1. What Is This About?

This is a discussion guide for students who have read Frederick Douglass's THE CLAIMS OF THE NEGRO, ETHNOLOGICALLY CONSIDERED (1865), where he countered the pseudo-scientific evidence for racial hierarchies promoted by many of the influential scientists of his time, including Louis Agassiz, George Gliddon, Samuel Morton, and Josiah Nott. Students will learn about the construction of race in the 19th century United States by exploring Frederick Douglass's public resistance to the racist ideas promulgated by these prominent scientists.

2. Why Does It Matter?

Influential publications from the 1800's like Types of Mankind (Nott, 1854) and Crania Americana (Morton 1839) were widely distributed in the US and Europe, and used to support ideas of racial hierarchy that justified colonization, the attempted genocide of indigenous people, and the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans. Instructors wishing to explore this history with their students might be inclined to show images from books like Crania, pictures of Morton's skull collection currently housed at the Penn Museum, or other materials from that era. That's what I did when I first began addressing this topic. Although, as a Black woman, I am an embodied refutation of the racist ideas promoted by these scientists, I felt a heaviness and some hopelessness when presenting the perspective of someone like Louis Agassiz, a pre-eminent white Swiss-American scientist of the 19th century who supported slavery. Even more distressingly, I felt these same feelings emanating from some of my students. I wondered if I was inadvertently reinforcing ideas that were engineered to subjugate and exploit.

After a summer of reflection, I changed my approach to teaching this material by starting with the critique and vigorous pushback from the people targeted by 19th century scientists. Centering the resistors showcased their tenacity, bravery, intelligence and skill at coalition building, undermining notions that they were victims in need of saving. Highlighting resistance also undermined common beliefs that awful things happened in the past because people didn't know any better. Toxic ideas and institutions have always been publicly confronted and challenged by individuals who experience and recognize their harm. The change in my approach has shifted how I feel while teaching about racism in science. The sense of overwhelm and inevitability of oppression that I felt before has been replaced with pride and wonder at the intelligence, tenacity, and bravery of people who face down fierce oppression. I feel energized and inspired, and I can see that reflected back at me from my students.

3. Foregrounding

In this lesson, students learn how Frederick Douglass, a Black 19th century civil rights leader, writer and orator, responded to scientists who claimed they had evidence of racial types and hierarchies. Using a discussion-based format, students explore Frederick Douglass's "Claims of a Negro" speech given in 1865, where he called out these men by name and attacked their support of human chattel slavery in the United States. Among other fallacies, Douglass addressed the premise that Black people are not human, a conclusion drawn from these scientists' work that was used to justify slavery. In his speech, Douglass proposed that this denial of humanity could be addressed in three ways, saying: "One is by ridicule; a second by denunciation; a third is by argument." Clearly, the ridicule and denunciation of ideas of Black non-humanity work as well or better than scientific arguments. Sojourner Truth's, "Ain't I a woman," speech, delivered extemporaneously at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention, was a potently effective rebuke that did not rely on scientific approaches. However, Douglass privileged the scientific argument, presenting himself as a scientifically respectable (see Diaz 2016) individual on equal footing with the white scientists he challenged. This lesson addresses how this specific tactic was used to fight back, while also introducing students to an important era of American history when scientists engaged in the project of race construction.

While parsing Douglass's 19th century prose, which can be challenging, students can also get bogged down in the differences between the scientific ideas of Douglass's time and ours. For this reason, in Race and Biology, an upper-level, discussion-based seminar, that I teach at Mount Holyoke College, this lesson is preceded by a unit on human diversity, where we explore what we currently know about patterns of human phenotypic and genetic differences (none of which map onto biological notions of "race"). As an evolutionary biologist, I work within a framework that proposes that natural selection and sometimes the collision of cultural and biological evolution (e.g., the evolution of lactase persistence in some populations of humans who keep cattle) are important drivers of human evolution.

Many of my students who have learned in their social science and humanities courses that race is socially constructed are rightly confused by how this could be true when they believe they can tell someone's race by looking at them. The external traits that we use to assign race—skin color, facial features, and hair type— aren't those biological? Wouldn't they reflect some biological clustering that we could call race? Biologists can help with this apparent conundrum by explaining how the diversity we see today came to be. The evidence for this story comes from fossils, art, tools, our genome, and the new field of paleogenomics. I recognize that our story is not the only one, but it is essential that we tell this updated version to replace the old one that is still circulating.

The newer story widely accepted by today's scientists goes like this: Around three hundred thousand years ago, we were all together in Africa, where we have spent most of our evolutionary

history. Then, 70-50,000 years ago, some of us left the mother continent via the Middle East, spread into Europe and Asia, and traveled by sea and land to reach the Americas, Australia, and islands in the South Pacific. Because we are a young species that until recently remained together on the continent of Africa, we have low genetic diversity, and 85-95% of that diversity can be found within any population or group. Compare any two groups of humans on the planet, and you will not find enough genetic differences for any population biologist worth their salt to claim that they belong to different races. That said, the existing differences are fascinating, and we spend the first part of the Race and Biology seminar exploring them. We discuss the mutations that have led to skin color variations across the planet, which interestingly corresponds to geographical variation in UV radiation. We also examine the mutations that allow for the digestion of milk by adults that became common several thousand years ago in Europe, parts of Africa, and the Middle East, possibly favored in populations adopting pastoral lifestyles. Mutations like these arise spontaneously and travel independently from each other, moving by different paths across the surface of our planet. The result is a beautiful mosaic of minor differences, most of which, like skin color, vary gradually. The old story of different kinds of people—races with fixed differences— is wrong, it is harmful, and I will add that I think it is boring.

Students with a firm grasp on the extensive evidence pointing to race being social rather than biological will more easily see the flaws in the scientists arguments while reading Douglass's speech and will be able to focus more of their attention on dissecting how ideas of race were constructed and resisted in the 19th century.

4. Class Structure

How I structure this class:

Pre-class preparation. Students are expected to have read Claims of a Negro before class and will have responded to a short writing prompt on our course management system. I read these before class to gauge areas of interest and confusion.

Setting the tone in class. I currently start this class with a short video of Frederick Douglass's descendants reading another speech of his: "What to the Slave is the 4th of July?" In addition to giving students a feel for the written speeches when they are spoken aloud, Douglass's passion, anger, and hope are palpable and still resonate. I follow this with a short powerpoint slide deck on Douglass's life and the circumstances leading to this speech. Finally, I introduce the scientists he countered and their racist ideas. Following this introduction, students are inspired and motivated to put effort into understanding the 19th century prose. They are also aware of but not crushed by the racist ideology promoted by most American scientists in Douglass's time.

For the remainder of class, students discuss Douglass's speech in small groups. Every few minutes, I ask students to share out and respond to each other, generating brief periods of whole class discussion.

I have provided a discussion guide below, with some sample discussion questions. In my classroom, the territory covered by this discussion varies year by year, depending on student interests, previous readings and discussions, and themes and questions that have developed in the preceding class periods.

5. Discussion Guide

Discussion Guide:

Douglass, Frederick. THE CLAIMS OF THE NEGRO, ETHNOLOGICALLY CONSIDERED, 1854.

In 1854, Frederick Douglass addressed literary societies during commencement week at Western Reserve College, which is now Case Western Reserve College. This occasion marked the first time a Black person had given a commencement speech at a major US college. After Douglass was invited by the graduating class, there was enormous pressure from the faculty, trustees, and president to withdraw the invitation. Douglass, who was well aware of the controversy and had considered not coming, spoke for two hours to a crowd of around 3000 people, some of whom had arrived hoping to see an embarrassing display. More people attended Douglass's speech than later came to the commencement, itself. Reporters recounted a transfixed crowd, and following the commencement address, the published speech appeared in newspapers across the country. Read more about his speech at Western Reserve College here.

Douglass begins his speech by defending the humanity of Black people, responding to the claim that Black people can be denied "liberty and the pursuit of happiness" because they are not people. This sentiment was a prominent theme in the Richmond Examiner, a widely-distributed weekly paper published between 1848 and 1863 from the confederate capital in Richmond Virginia. When Douglass refers to "advocates of a diverse origin of the human family," he is speaking of those who adhered to the idea of polygenesis, a belief that races of people originated from multiple creation events. Most enslavers and their defenders, including prominent American scientists, believed that polygenesis justified the kidnapping and enslavement of other humans because they were created as lesser beings. The opposing idea of monogenesis claimed that the creation of humans was a singular event, although most white defenders of this version thought that people dispersing from the center of creation (located somewhere on the Eurasian continent) degenerated over time, especially as they moved into hotter areas of the planet. They found enslavement practices to be abhorrent in part because they acknowledged a common origin for humans, although recognizing this did not necessarily translate into a belief in human equality. Biologists today also believe in a single origin for all humans; however, they point to evidence of human lineages evolving in eastern Africa beginning several million years ago rather than a creation event.

Douglass was clearly a monogenist who also believed in human equality. He tells us that at the heart of the controversy is the issue of power and the division of resources:

In truth, this question is at the bottom of the whole controversy, now going on between the slaveholders on the one hand, and the abolitionists on the other.... It is the question whether the

rights, privileges, and immunities enjoyed by some ought not to be shared and enjoyed by all. p. 13

He exposes the cynicism in the claims of the “Southern pretenders to science,” and calls them out by name, confronting their ideas head on. He also proposes alternative explanations for what these men propose are immutable fixed biological differences between the so called races.

Discussion Questions

1. At the bottom of page 7, Douglass exposes the disingenuousness of crafting definitions and conditions (what constitutes a “man,” in his example) that are designed at the outset to be exclusionary. In what ways do the scientists critiqued by Douglass do this?

2. Douglass critiques the scientific enterprise starting at the bottom of page 9, drawing attention to scientists’ propensity to categorize, divide, and “analyze until all doubt is set at rest.” Why is Douglass suspicious of this approach?

3. On page 14, Douglass discusses the possibility of arguments for and against slavery becoming entwined in self-interest both for himself and those who purport to have evidence for the non-humanity of Black people. Why do you think he addresses this issue?

4. On page 15, Douglass refers to the “Southern pretenders to science.” According to Douglass, why is their approach unscientific?

5. Read through sections of Douglass’s speech where he mentions the leading American scientists of his time (Gliddon, Nott, Agassiz, Morton on pgs. 15-17,20-21, 28). Analyze how he confronts their ideas.

6. What evidence does Douglass use to counter ideas of racial typology? Which of these are still relevant?

7. On page 29, Douglass turns his attention to the effect of social neglect on the mental and physical well-being of Black people. What points does he make?

6. Supporting Resources

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