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.

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