

Race and the Mobility of Humans as Things

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Abstract

This article reflects on a significant dimension of the modern history of race in Europe and the world: the processes of mobility of humans as things that accompanied the scientific pursuit of the immutable racial condition of humans. It asks what it might mean to approach racial conceptions as historically embedded in, and shaped by, racial regimes of mobility, that is, the regimes encompassing the practices and apparatuses for the displacement of human bodies (or parts of bodies) as “scientific things” of racial significance for museum and laboratory networks. The article articulates race in Europe as entailed in a history of national, colonial, and postcolonial regimes of mobility. First, it is suggested that the history of race in science can be understood as the history of regimes of mobility of humans as things. It is then discussed how this history of mobility regimes connects with the making of collectives within and beyond Europe—national, imperial, indigenous, and postcolonial. Finally, the article investigates the contemporary expressions of racial regimes of mobility.

Keywords

archiving and collecting practices, cultures and ethnicities, politics, power, governance

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This article reflects on a significant dimension of the modern history of race in Europe and the world: the processes of *mobility* of humans as scientific things that accompanied the sciences' pursuit of the *immutable* racial condition of humans. It highlights how mobility defines the material life of race sciences in Europe and its colonial spaces, and it asks what it might mean to approach race as historically embedded in, and shaped by, *racial regimes of mobility*. That is, the regimes encompassing the practices and apparatuses that make human bodies (or parts of bodies) into “scientific things” of racial significance for museum and laboratory networks. The article seeks to understand race in Europe as part of a history of national, colonial, and postcolonial regimes of mobility. It first suggests that the history of race in science can be understood as the history of regimes of mobility of humans as things. It then discusses how this history of mobility regimes may form *collectives* within and beyond Europe—national, imperial, indigenous, postcolonial. Borrowing from Michel Serres, it views humans as things as wandering agents that, through circulation, can generate novel collectives and modes of association. Finally, it investigates the contemporary expressions of racial regimes of mobility as *ruins* and as *practices*. The material life of these regimes continues to act upon the present in the manner of more or less productive and more or less disturbing ruins of colonialism, nationalism, and racialism. Yet, the “postcolonial” and “postracial” present continues to be saturated with practices of removal, circulation, storage, and scientific use of biological materials.

History of Race, History of Mobility

Preoccupation with biological essence and fixity has traversed the sciences of race since their inception in the enlightenment. Race as a scientific concept has reflected universalizing ambitions to order human variety into perfectly distinct natural categories, or as nineteenth- and twentieth-century race scholars preferred, into quintessential and overarching “racial types.” In important ways, the quest for races in the world of humans has paralleled a quest for immutable signs in bodily, cultural, and mental forms; a ruthless search for those human characteristics—from skull shape to genetic codes—that could best endure the test of biological variation and historical contingency and, therefore, stand for the measure of human difference. Thus, the idea of race in scientific reasoning is the apogee of classificatory essentialism, the very opposite of movement and change. Important literature on the intellectual history of race as an *idea* has accordingly emphasized this focus on fixity as paramount to the European imagination of race in science (Stepan 1982;

Hannaford 1996). Yet, this is but one side of the story. The history of race takes on a different guise when approached not from the perspective of its life as an incorporeal idea but from the viewpoint of its material life. In this vein, racial categories have come into emergence in scientific practice embedded in a variety of arrangements of people and anthropometric instrumentation, laboratory spaces, skull collections, plaster casts, blood samples, and so forth (cf. Roque 2010; Stocking 1988; Zimmerman 2001). Racial categories embedded in histories of circulation of people and objects have also come into existence.¹ “The history of science,” Bruno Latour observed, “is in large part the history of the mobilization of anything that can be made to move and shipped back home for the universal census” (Latour 1987, 225). The history of race sciences is no exception. In the late colonial period, to name but one significant historical example, classifying human races was virtually inseparable from collecting and accumulating human skulls; throughout the skulls’ trajectories from the field to the museum, race constructs were performed, destroyed, silenced, or again brought into being through a variety of knowledge practices (Roque 2010).

Thus, rather than looking at racial sciences as concerned merely with rigid forms of thinking about human difference, here I would like to shift focus to racial sciences as critically concerned with the displacement of human materiality. The race-fixing endeavor of the (old and new) sciences of race in Europe could not do without the mobility of humans as things on a global scale. Racial categories in Europe have been centrally associated with a history of displacements, a history of mobility that bears material, epistemic, economic, religious, and ethical significance. Accordingly, the history of the material life of sciences of race in Europe in the last 250 years needs to be read as a history of *racial regimes of mobility* concerned with the displacement of human bodies or parts of bodies as racially significant things for scientific networks.

The modern racial paradigm has implied massive migratory flows of biological materials to museums and laboratories around the world and thus cannot be detached from a history of colonial and state-driven mobilizations of people as things. The mobility of people and things has been a conventional topic for historians concerned with the economic and social dimensions of European expansion and nationalism. Since the early modern period, the traffic of artifacts, food, plants, spices, luxury goods, or even human slaves between Europe and the New Worlds achieved global scale, with a dramatic and wide-ranging impact on the reconfiguration of world economies, metropolitan societies, and indigenous communities. This material life of Western modern empires and nation-states did not concern only conventional commodities. Things deemed epistemically valuable

were also commoditized and circulated; their movement, from either close or afar into cabinets, laboratories, and museums, is fundamental to the knowledge economy of modern natural sciences. The discipline of natural history, for instance, would not have been possible without the assemblage of vast collections of plants and animals from across the planet. The study of humans has undergone a similar process. By the late eighteenth century, human body parts were a growing presence in the existing circuits of trade and mobility. This may be read as a combined consequence of the rise of modern physiology, comparative anatomy, and craniology (Foucault 1963), along with the overseas colonial expansion and the building of modern territorial states in Europe. The expansion of empires and national states, on one hand, and the expansive displacement of “humans as things” to the scientific networks of European nations, on the other, became integral to the rise of anthropological sciences, both in their “nation-building” and “empire-building” variants (Stocking 1982). In this context, people and skeletal material were specially valued as an embodiment of *race* and became eagerly procured for museums and laboratories mushrooming in “civilized” Europe. This was a global phenomenon involving the displacement of concrete human body parts and *real* living people.² Moreover, these flows of displacement represented an economy of production and circulation of mimetic representations of humans and their body parts. In the absence of the physicality of human bodies, substitutes could be prepared and mobilized for scientific elaborations about race: paintings, drawings, photographs, plaster casts, and handprints, for example (cf. Edwards 2001).

The intellectual history of race, then, is entangled with the circulation of humans as things in the context of what I designate as racial regimes of mobility. This was a substantial and global historical event that achieved full expression during the period of modern European colonialism, from the late 1700s to the end of the Second World War, the rejection of scientific racism in the 1950s (cf. Barkan 1992), and the decolonization boost in the 1960s–1970s. In the following, I refer briefly to the political economy of extraction implied in these regimes and to some of their manifold current *presences*. What collectives have been born of these circulations? In which ways are racial regimes of mobility and their enduring materialities alive in the present day?

Presences

The rise of the racial paradigm in human sciences co-occurred with the rise of racial regimes of mobility. Both came into emergence in connection with

a world economy of body snatching entailed in a multitude of relations of power and exchange. A variety of more or less equitable transactions and more or less violent extractions of human bodily materials were part of this economy. Up to the first quarter of the twentieth century, human skulls ranked as the most significant material embodiments of race and accordingly millions were secured for museum collections. Other materials were to take their place: blood, in particular, came to prominence for racial grouping and genetic analysis by the mid-twentieth century. Displacement thus affected physical bodies differently; its impact was socially unequal and in some instances strongly gendered (Schiebinger 1990). The economy of racial regimes has especially affected what Roy Porter (2003) termed as classificatory “vile bodies”—low-class, pauper, and destitute Europeans; prisoners, criminals, death convicts, war enemies of every extraction; fishermen, mountaineers, and villagers at the margins of national states; freaks and pathological bodies; and, obviously, indigenous “savages” from outside Europe. These were the types of bodies most propitious to enter the circuits of the science of race and through which race concepts were materialized in science. Displacement also meant replacement. It went together with the rising force of new institutional *places* dedicated to storing, caring, and learning about human biological materials: a network of museum institutions, laboratory spaces, and archival zones where bodily remains followed novel physical and epistemic existence under the wing of science. This replacement disruptively interfered with former meanings and locations of human remains in many cultures. In moving bones away from Christian cemeteries and other religious cult places to museums and laboratories, for example, racial regimes dramatically challenged traditional ways of treating the dead, both in Europe and beyond.

Therefore, the passing around of humans as things has been a historical event of potentially transformative effects—some disruptive, some subtle. To borrow freely from Michel Serres (1997, 407; 346, my translation), we may speak of humans as things in circulation as a kind of “quasi-objects” through which collectives are fabricated; and as a sort of “dangerous wanderers” capable of “modifying the state of the collective that receives them,” not just by “transforming the collective system as such, but by introducing variations in its condition.” Human remains in racial regimes of mobility—while moving as well as while immovable in museum storerooms—constitute such a type of dangerous wanderers, generating daring connections between racial science, Europe, and the wider world. In this regard, one important variation introduced by humans as things in circulation to secluded scientific spaces has been the formation of European

collectives that incorporate body parts from excluded others. The displacement of racialized remains has brought new forms of European collectives into existence, inside which human bodily remains from multiple provenances were an active presence. European nations and empires have been composed of the displacement and reloading of human skeletons, skulls, hair, blood, from place to place, hand to hand, culture to culture, across land and sea, across national borders. In taking on such a transnational reach, the traffic of human remains stretched Europe to *include* regions and peoples that stood beyond, or apart from, its conventional social, cultural, and geographical borders; it led to the inclusion of *other* spaces and peoples that were perceived to be *excluded* from group self-definitions of civilization, normality, nationality: the savages, the uneducated, the abnormal, and the enemy. As such, they forged unexpectedly interconnected worlds. The displacement of wild bones and skulls meant, for example, that some European urban spaces thereby became inhabited by bodily fragments from secluded mountaineers and fishermen living at the margins of the state, or from native populations from faraway villages in Africa, Asia, America, or Oceania. Racial regimes of mobility have thus, quite literally, changed the landscape of Europe. They did so in at least one paradoxical way. In displacing, appropriating, and containing in museums the bodies of people who stood for alterity and *difference*, scientists and collectors have created a lasting and intimate tensional entanglement with their perceived others. Together they became one complex collective. Colonial collections of human remains in current museums perhaps embody this tensional interconnectedness, configuring intricate, and sometimes terrifying, contact zones. For they seem to recurrently enact, challenge, refuse, and revive Europe's history of relations to vile bodies. In effect, racial regimes of mobility continue to lead a meaningful existence today. They are a presence and not inconsequential by any means.

Notwithstanding the formal rejection of racism and colonialism since the mid-twentieth century, racial mobility remains a powerful presence in our contemporary world, within and beyond European geographies. History, the history of race in science particularly, does not come in linear form and direction. On the contrary, racial science and its colonial history *are* present in many guises—in the form of archival materialities, narratives, and documentation attached to object collections (Roque 2011), or, also, as M'charek (In press) argues, as temporally “folded objects” that can take on full significance in current forensics and genetics. To conclude, therefore, I would briefly like to point out two ways in which this folded historical presence of racial regimes of mobility may be felt: the first, as a *ruin*; the second, as a *practice*.

Racial regimes seem to exert an impact on contemporary life through the agency of thousands of European and non-European human remains stored since the colonial era in scientific institutions across the world. They acquire the dynamic force of ruins of a world of colonial violence and racist prejudice, of a scientific and political past that many wish to see forever behind. In a study on the Turkish Cypriots left to live with the objects and properties of their declared Greek enemies in Cyprus, the social anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin (2009) proposed the notion of *ruination* to refer to how material remains or artifacts of past destruction and violation—in her case, the Turkish invasion and occupation of Cyprus in the 1970s—continue to shape people’s visions, subjectivities, and affects in the present, and as such retain a form of historical agency (on imperial ruins see also Stoler 2008; on racism see Amin 2010). “Knowledge production,” Navaro-Yashin (2009, 7) writes, inspired in Walter Benjamin, “is subject to ruination, to the piling of debris behind us.” Knowledge production about human races has been subject similarly to processes of ruination. We live today with material remains from former colonial and racialist knowledge forms, ruins of the sciences of race that constitute a troubling and effective company.

The problematic of repatriation offers a paradigmatic example of this point. The biomaterials collected by race scientists and colonial agents may constitute “skeletons of colonialism” and ruins of former racial sciences. Yet they remain a lively force that shapes postcolonial identities and postcolonial science. Since the 1970s, heated debates about the ownership and repatriation of indigenous human remains from museum collections have been involving indigenous people, biological anthropologists, and the governments of former colonizing and colonized nations in North America, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, and Europe (see Fforde, Hubert, and Turnbull 2001; Pickering and Turnbull 2010). Historical human remains articulate identity narratives that stand in opposition to a history of racism, colonialism, and absence of proper ethics of collecting in scientific practice (cf., Johnson 2005). They stand for the evils of race science. Nevertheless, regardless of their controversial origins, a number of biological anthropologists continue to claim their epistemic significance. “Human bones have played their part [in science],” a reputed evolutionary anthropologist stated in 2003, “and will continue to play” (Foley 2003).

Racial regimes of mobility, however, do not live on simply as ruination. They exist in the form of meaningful contemporary *practices*, in which, once again, science, medicine, the state, capitalism, bioethics, and the cultures and bodies of indigenous and/or citizens come into contact and collision. Repatriation practices represent one variety of contemporary mobility

in the manner of *counterflows* of former regimes, which attempts to undo the colonial circuits of extraction and circulation of biomaterial. Nevertheless, new forms of mobility appear. The emergence of the so-called new sciences of race in genetics, forensics, or medicine in the last decades has implied the creation of new and the reconfiguration of old regimes of mobility of humans as things. Regimes of mobility that resonate with the unethical terms of colonialism seem to resume in the global traffic of organs and in some areas of postcolonial genomics (Benjamin 2009). Genetic research continues to be significantly fed by regimes of mobility in which race is either a hidden category or an explicit asset, particularly when the genetic testing of indigenous populations is concerned (cf. Mgbeoji 2007). The knowledge programs and blood collecting activities of modern genetic scientists—the Human Genome Diversity Project and the International Haplotype Mapping Project, to name two important examples—have been followed by critiques of how these projects presumably “resuscitate” not only racial categories but also intrusive collecting and mobility methods that resonate the colonial era (e.g., El-Haj 2007; Reddy 2007).

People’s bodies and body parts continue to lead itinerant lives that take the direction of scientific laboratories. This turns the reality of racial regimes of mobility into more than a spectral past. Racialized humans as things remain a concrete, active, inescapable, and sometimes tricky presence in the contemporary world. They may problematically bind contemporary Europe to abject pasts, to supposedly bygone colonialist and racist times. They may problematically bind Europe to peoples perceived as culturally other, spatially remote, or even evolutionarily distant, such as indigenous tribes from an Amazonian wilderness, for example. Dangerous wanderers, in Serres’s terms, indeed they seem to be.

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Notes

1. Circulation has come to recurrent usage in science studies to express concern with the fluid, movable, heterogeneous, and contingent condition of science and technology. My focus on mobility also expresses this concern and follows in the wake of seminal works about objects and things that circulate across networks between the field, “society,” and the museum or the lab (cf., e.g., Star and Griesemer 1989; Latour 1999a, 1999b).
2. The travel (either forced or voluntary) of living humans—especially of indigenous people from extra-European countries to museums, exhibitions, panopticons, zoos . . . —has been also an important dimension of these regimes (see Blanchard, Bancel, and Lemaire 2002; Qureshi 2011; Zimmerman 2001).

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