

Race and the Epigenetics of Memory

Gabriela Soto Laveaga

In my brief response to Terence Keel's essay "Race on Both Sides of the Razor," I wish to focus on something as pertinent as alleles and social construction: *how* we write history and *how* we memorialize the past. Current DNA analysis promises to remap our past and interrogate certainties that we have taken for granted. For the purposes of this commentary I call this displacing of known histories the *epigenetics of memory*. Just as environmental stimuli rouse epigenetic mechanisms to produce lasting change in behavior and neural function, the unearthing of forgotten bodies, forgotten lives, has a measurable effect on how we act and think and what we believe. The act of writing history, memorializing the lives of others, is a stimulus that reshapes who and what we are. We cannot disentangle the discussion about the social construction of race and biological determinism from the ways in which we have written—and must write going forward—about race.

To the debate about social construction and biological variation we must add the heft of historical context, which allows us to place these two ideas in dialogue with each other. Consequently, before addressing the themes in Keel's provocative opening essay and John Hartigan's response, I wish to speak about dead bodies. Specifically, cemeteries for Black bodies. Three examples—one each from Atlanta, Georgia; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; and Mexico—illustrate how dead bodies must enter our current debates about race, science, and social constructions.

The first example is *Dislocaregraph*, an art piece designed by architect Christina Shivers to measure the vibrations of the dead off Interstate 75 in Atlanta.¹ Let me explain. Initially created in the 1860s as a cemetery for slaves, the Gil-

Gabriela Soto Laveaga is Professor of the History of Science at Harvard University. Her first book, *Jungle Laboratories: Mexican Peasants, National Projects, and the Making of the Pill* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), won the Robert K. Merton Best Book prize in Science, Knowledge, and Technology Studies from the American Sociological Association. Her second monograph, *Sanitizing Rebellion: Physician Strikes, Public Health and Repression in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (forthcoming), examines the role of health-care providers both as critical actors in the formation of modern states and as social agitators. Her latest book project seeks to re-narrate histories of twentieth-century agriculture development aid from the point of view of India and Mexico.

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bert Cemetery in Atlanta was the resting ground for members of various Black churches until it was destroyed in the late 1950s.² Overgrown with weeds and teeming with trash, the cemetery site was then forgotten until the early 1980s, when developers for the new I-75 uncovered some of its headstones. A memorial consisting of headstones (built from the same asphalt material as the road that paved over the original cemetery) and a plaque on the former site came about through discussions with concerned citizens and relatives of those initially buried there. However, the memorial is difficult to approach: it is bordered by one of the state's busiest highways and can only be accessed by the I-75 onramp. Moreover, the surrounding area has become a dumping ground and a camp for the itinerant homeless of Atlanta.³

Shivers's art installations are designed to measure silences created by forgotten pasts. *Dislocaregraph* metaphorically records the vibrations of passing I-75 cars by using movable weights balanced by a plow, a symbol of an African American slave past. As Shivers explains, the history and significance of this cemetery are erased by each passing car.⁴ What is recorded instead is the noise of the present, the cars whose vehicular vibrations continue to unsettle the bodies of the forgotten dead.

The second example takes us to Rio de Janeiro, where the Cemitério dos Pretos Novos (New Blacks Cemetery) is located. *New Blacks* was the name given to recently arrived Africans who, weakened from the atrocious conditions of travel, died shortly after arriving and before they could legally be counted as slaves. In 1760 the Marquês do Lavradio opened the cemetery, and it remained in active use for seventy years, until overflowing conditions forced authorities to open another.⁵ It is uncertain when a neighborhood was built over the cemetery, but by the late twentieth century there was little memory of these buried Africans, the so-named *New Blacks*. In 1996, when some homeowners decided to remodel their home, they—and the construction crew—were shocked to discover human remains. Suspecting foul play, the police investigated, but the deeper they dug the more bones they found. When porcelain shards and other debris from the eighteenth century appeared, archaeologists were brought in. It is estimated that between twenty thousand and thirty thousand humans were dumped in this area, making it the largest slave cemetery in the Americas.⁶ When the owner of the home saw the remains among centuries-old trash, she decided to open a nonprofit educational center and small museum to honor the memory of those forgotten *New Blacks* and “pay respect in death to human beings who did not have respect in life.”⁷ Currently strontium isotope testing is being used in attempts to map the multiple place origins of those found on this spot.

The final example shows burial by exclusion. In 2015, for the first time in Mexico's history, the government formally acknowledged the existence of nearly 1.4 million Afro-Mexicans as a sector of the nation's population.⁸ In a country driven by the national myth of a mestizo (European-Indian) majority, Blacks are

not the only disregarded racial group, but they are by several measurable degrees the most socially invisible. In 2020, for the first time in the country's history, "Black" will be a census category. What does this mean? It means that while dead Black bodies were paved over or built over and forgotten in the Atlanta and Rio examples, in Mexico actual living Black bodies had not, in fact, been counted among the living. These Afro-descendent bodies performed a meta-physical feat by occupying a space but not having a history, a past, or even a present (a presence) in today's Mexico.

How, then, do we write the histories of historical zombies? I use that pop culture term deliberately, for the origin of that word lies in the brutality of slavery on French-controlled Saint-Domingue (today Haiti) and the fate of undead slaves.⁹ Can there be a worse fate than being a slave? Yes: for those enslaved in Caribbean plantations a destiny worse than their daily existence was the inability to shake off the shackles even after death. Zombies, the ultimate New World creation, take us back to the importance of examining what happens to Black bodies after they die. While the imperial fear was that Black bodies would rebel and attack, a slave's terrifying nightmare was that work and abuse would continue well after life had ended. Even in death, Caribbean Black bodies would have no agency, no will. Yet the elimination of Black lives from living memory was even more destructive than the purported living dead. In the Mexican case the erasure of Black bodies was the ultimate move of social deletion—a constitutional erasure that denied their existence until the twenty-first century.

There is no clearer case for how legal categories affect individuals and entire groups than the case of Afro-Mexicans, who had not been included in an official census since 1810. What provisions or care can be given to a community that simply does not exist? That is, quite literally, legally invisible? In April 2016 *BBC News* reported that two Afro-Mexicans had been deported—one to Honduras, the other to Haiti—because Mexican immigration officials insisted that "there are no black people" in Mexico.¹⁰ In light of this intransigence and racial amnesia, how can genetic testing alter generations of ingrained historical beliefs? Without designation as a minority group, Afro-Mexicans do not receive dedicated support for the preservation of their culture or, crucially, for example, for public health spending. Quite simply, if a person or group does not exist then there cannot be appropriate public health measures in place. In the absence of census data, unsurprisingly, there have been few federal attempts to learn the history of those who do not exist.

Historian Stephan Palmié reminds us that "every form of historical knowledge involves propositions about the role of the dead in the world of the living."¹¹ How the bodies of former slaves are remembered in the Western hemisphere reveals much about the construction of history and the social inconvenience of including those who were excluded in life. If we examine the many historical absences of African Americans in various (Latin and otherwise) American

landscapes, we are forced to contend that debates about the biological or social construction of race cannot—yet—take place.

This discussion should encourage us to ponder the implications of scientific findings in societies that have effectively removed traces of physical bodies. How can one debate the epigenetic transformations of groups that legally did not exist? Is genetic testing adequate proof if we do not discover and record their histories? Put differently, if a society has no label for a social group, do they become history's Neanderthals, who were there all along despite historical tellings that had largely (and conveniently) forgotten their sexual coexistence with *Homo sapiens*?¹² What difference does DNA analysis make in societies deft at denying the presence of bodies? If entire bodies can be erased and forgotten from historical memory, what might be the fate of problematic genetic knowledge that is not universally understood and so much easier to hide (or manipulate) in plain sight?

To speak of social or biological variation a *being* must, first, exist. While this seems an obvious truism, the examples above describe individuals who even in death have been erased. How, then, do conversations about social or biological origins of race translate in spaces where such bodies have been uncovered? How do undead notions of our imperial, capitalist, racist pasts align with scientific discoveries?

In his essay Keel reminds us that new genetic analysis has created new challenges for those who embrace the social constructionist position about the relationship between race and healthy or sick bodies. One of his concerns is whether the concept of race *in science* should be used to address and redress discrimination. Keel adds that part of this debate is “whether scientists can use the race concept, while also remaining committed to measuring and quantifying the social factors that shape human biology, in socially responsible ways.”¹³ Yet how is the power of a geneticist different from that of erstwhile social advocates who have fought in, say, Latin America for the recognition of certain identities? This question of identity is central, taking us back to the idea of the epigenetics of memory.

Epigenetics refers to how genes are read by cells, causing genes to be turned on or off (that is, to be active or dormant)—or, in the metaphor driving this essay, to be silenced. In the epigenetics of memory, certain events like the writing of national constitutions, the content of textbooks, or the rise of ethnonationalisms might determine which pasts will be silenced. Can genetic science highlight the systemic erasure of these pasts, or does it unintentionally add to their complete deletion? In an era dominated by home kits that promise to reveal our true origins, there is a flattening out of history that lumps humans into a series of formulaic and problematic national categories that can reinforce historical amnesias, especially when race is conflated with national origin. If, for example, one goes

to Google and types “Genetic testing results,” it does not take long to find sites that promise to unravel “who your ancestors were and where they came from” or pinpoint who you really are: “Nigerian? Sicilian? What are you?”¹⁴ One YouTube video created by the popular website *Ancestry* shows individuals with the results of their DNA tests: “I am 56 percent Irish” or “I am 45 percent French.” These identities have little to do with genetics; they are troubling eighteenth- and nineteenth-century inventions that reinforce the validity of a past defined by nation-states. A scientist (perhaps played by an actor?) in the same video states, “The story of you is in that tube. What is it going to tell me?” A series of people are then shown saying, “I’m French,” “I’m 100 percent Bengali,” and “Are you not going to tell me that I’m English?”¹⁵ These labels are all problematic because, as even the most rudimentary understanding of history makes clear, nations are invented categories.

The power of the nation, as Benedict Anderson so famously told us, is manifested in the construction of such enduring myths about its creation and longevity.¹⁶ A proudly self-identified French woman exclaims in surprise, “I’m 33 percent British!” while another, who had earlier revealed that she hated “Turkish people,” not surprisingly finds out that she is predominantly from “the Caucasus” and asks incredulously, “Is that Turkey?” With soft music in the background, the French woman again returns to suggest that genetic testing should be compulsory because there would be no such thing as “extremism if people knew their heritage like that. Who would be stupid enough to think of such [a] thing like a pure race?” she asks.¹⁷ Invariably, individuals from differing nations embrace in the video: genetic testing, it seems, brings the world together. Historical contingency, however, is more problematic—and potentially divisive.

Let us turn back to the Americas. In the nineteenth century, in addition to the economic and political challenges of independence, Latin American nations faced a seemingly insurmountable challenge: how to socially consolidate a region after three hundred years of racial divisions? The conflict over Latin American identity not only mired the region’s politics but also placed the issue of race as the vital question to be resolved: not in the act of obtaining independence but in the laws that followed. Hence, racial divisions that had originated in conquest and were consolidated during colonial administration became legal terms inscribed in the constitutions of independent nations. Latin American scholars describe this as the region’s “imaginary demography,” in part because a host of racial identities were left out of the discussions on citizenship and national patrimony.¹⁸

Historian Andrés Guerrero writes, “With few exceptions the first censuses adopt[ed] the same racial and social categories of the colonial period.”¹⁹ In other words, modern Latin American states surveyed their post-independence citizens using Eurocentric descriptors of foreign, colonized bodies. The results have been

lasting social exclusion, pervasive racism, and the invisibility of certain groups based on race. Reliance on colonial language and categories tended over time to erase entire groups well into the twenty-first century—groups such as Afro-Mexicans, whose ancestors fled Caribbean plantations and headed to Mexico in an attempt to control the fate of their bodies.

I do not agree that we should “phas[e] out racial terminology in biological sciences,” as Michael Yudell, Dorothy Roberts, and others have proposed, but I believe that we need to contend head-on with the historical phasing out of individuals.²⁰ An effort to do so will also bring Latin America more prominently into discussions of race science. If we leave out this region of the world, our understanding of race science is incomplete. Discussions of race science tend to trace the origins of biological determinism to nineteenth-century Europe, but Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and others instead argue that the seventeenth-century Americas were where these ideas were hatched and carried out.²¹ Beyond the *castas* (the system of classification used to describe mixed-race individuals in Spanish America) was a religious conception of the origins of difference that would carry over into stipulations and decrees that altered everyday life throughout and beyond the colonial period.

To tie these disparate ideas together, I wish to take us to a final destination, a three-story map frozen in time. Located in the heart of Boston, the Mapparium is a stained-glass globe that visitors can walk into via a glass bridge, where they will be transported to a world where Siam, Indochina, and Bechuanaland are still represented. In this historic snapshot of the world as it existed in 1935, there is no Pakistan or Bangladesh, and most of the African continent is decades away from wars of liberation. Even several European countries—such as Germany—have unfamiliar boundaries. This snapshot of our past is a fascinating and jarring reminder that ethnic constructions are tightly linked to ephemeral national boundaries. What then is historical memory, and what is its role in helping to explain race—or ancestry kits? How accurate is it to link ancestry kits with national identities? Can we speak about a social constructionist position regarding race in science if the writing and remembering of history is still demarcated by imperial lines, within imperial networks?

We must hold these questions front and center because simply pondering the impact of science in defining race does not help to solve the issue of place and historical context. Genetic science is a form of historical writing, a type of memorialization. Thus we must ask whether or not race concepts within the life sciences can conjure the bodies and experiences of those erased through the logic of colonization, nationalism, and Eurocentric accounts of human development. If science is a tool of social life and an expression of culture, then surely genetic research can be put to the task of telling better stories about how the past is embodied in the present.

NOTES

1. Christina Shivers, *Gentrified Archives: Representation Machines for Atlanta and Boston*, on exhibit at fortyK (Kirkland Gallery), Harvard Graduate School of Design, March–April 2017.
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3. Perkerson Civic Association, “African American History: The Gilbert Memorial Cemetery,” *Neighborhood Link*, <http://www.neighborhoodlink.com/Perkerson/pages/393631>, accessed March 28, 2017.
4. Conversation with Christina Shivers, Harvard University, March 23, 2017.
5. Ana Lucia Azevedo, “Um drama sob o chão da cidade,” *O Globo*, November 19, 2011, <http://oglobo.globo.com/sociedade/ciencia/um-drama-sob-chao-da-cidade-3273683>.
6. Empresa de Turismo do Município do Rio de Janeiro S.A., “Instituto dos Pretos Novos,” *RioTur*, n.d., http://visit.rio/que_fazer/memorial-dos-pretos-novos/.
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8. Krithika Varagur, “Mexico Finally Recognized Its Black Citizens, but That’s Just the Beginning,” *Huffington Post*, January 27, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/mexico-finally-recognized-its-black-citizens-but-thats-just-the-beginning_us_568d2d9ce4b0c8beacf50f6b.
9. In addition to scholarly work on this topic, most notably Amy Wilentz’s, a recent piece in *The Atlantic* highlighted how the soulless undead are reminders of how the colonial periphery prowls within the imperial center. See Mike Mariani, “The Tragic, Forgotten History of Zombies,” *The Atlantic*, October 28, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/10/how-america-erased-the-tragic-history-of-the-zombie/412264/>.
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12. Elizabeth Kolbert, “Sleeping with the Enemy,” *New Yorker*, August 15, 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/08/15/sleeping-with-the-enemy>.
13. Terence D. Keel, “Race on Both Sides of the Razor,” *Kalfou: A Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies* 5, no. 1 (2018): 10.
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17. *Ancestry*, “Momondo.”
18. Andrés Guerrero, “El proceso de identificación: Sentido común ciudadano, ventriloquia, y transescritura,” in *Etnicidades*, ed. Andrés Guerrero (Quito: FLACSO, 2000), 31, translation mine.
19. *Ibid.*, translation mine.
20. Michael Yudell et al., “Taking Race Out of Human Genetics,” *Science* 351, no. 6273 (2016): 564–565.
21. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, “New World, New Stars: Patriotic Astrology and the Invention of Indian and Creole Bodies in Colonial Spanish Americas, 1600–1650,” *American Historical Review* 104 (February 1999): 33–68; Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, “Racial, Religious, and Civic Creole Identity in Colonial Spanish America,” *American Literary History* 17, no. 3 (2005): 420–437. See also Joyce E. Chaplin, *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500–1676* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Londa Schiebinger, “Medical Experimentation and Race in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World,” *Social History of Medicine* 26, no. 3 (2013): 364–382.