

<http://somatosphere.net/2017/09/critical-histories-activist-futures-science-medicine-and-racial-violence.html>

Critical Histories, Activist Futures: Science, Medicine and Racial Violence

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By Sarah Pickman

A Reframed (and Reflexive) Conference Report

Organized and Edited by Tess Lanzarotta and Sarah M. Pickman

After a conference ends – after the last paper coffee cup has been tossed into the trash, after the adaptor cable has been disconnected from the podium laptop, after the speakers have rushed out to catch trains and flights homeward – what then? What tangible reminders survive from the days of presentations? An individual participant may have e-mails from new professional contacts and several notebook pages filled with notes hastily jotted during the talks. Fortunate conference organizers may find some funding and support to produce an edited volume of the papers. These texts will go some way to preserving the content of the conference talks. But they will not capture *all* of the ideas and responses generated over the course of those few days. What about the insights that arose from conversations around the coffee table, over lunch, or the bar afterwards? Or the experiences gained planning the conference or reviewing it weeks later? Where will they all go?

This series is our attempt to capture some of the insights, suggestions, critiques and experiences from a conference entitled “Critical Histories, Activist Futures: Science, Medicine and Racial Violence,” which was held at Yale University on February 24 and 25, 2017. The conference was conceived of by the History, Science, and Justice Collective (HSJC), a group of graduate students in Yale’s Program in History of Science and Medicine working towards a more just history of science. With the [CFP](#) these students asked for submissions that not only discussed historical cases of past injustices, but would also create starting points for historically informed debates about current forms of injustice and violence, including the inequities we see in the academic field of history of science and medicine. Part of the aim of the conference was to be reflexive about our own position as graduate students, especially graduate students at an elite private university in a majority-white field, in taking on this kind of

work. The panels that ultimately comprised [the final program](#) reflected a variety of engagements with these themes, presented by graduate students, faculty, health practitioners and community organizers. Topics ranged from the labor politics of the academy, to community research partnerships, to science pedagogy, to conceptual issues such as which audiences scholarship reaches and what counts as violence in historical inquiry. A lunchtime session on “Deploying Scholarship as Activism” drew the speakers and the audience – which included a wide swath of undergraduate, graduate and professional students from inside and outside of Yale – together to discuss concrete ideas for what activist-minded scholarship could look like.

After the conference ended, my colleague Tess Lanzarotta and I, as two of the core organizers of “Critical Histories, Activist Futures,” invited some of the scholars who participated to contribute to this “reframed conference report” for *Somatosphere*. We wanted to give them a chance to put down in writing the conversations we had with them and the ideas they expressed during those in-between times at the conference outside of the formal paper presentations. Specifically, we asked them to write about the issues from their presentations that they find to be most pressing, as well as to reflect on the personal stakes they have in their work and how they see their own research and role in the academy in relation to the conference’s themes of the history of science and medicine, race, violence, equity and justice. In short, we imagined this series for *Somatosphere* as a way to record the self-reflexive thoughts raised during the conference that could not be captured by the typical academic paper presentation – or by most other forms of academic writing. We hope that these contributions from the “Critical Histories” participants, as well as several of the organizers, can be things for you to think with during your own in-between times.

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[“Critical Histories, Activist Futures”](#) is a series edited by Tess Lanzarotta and Sarah M. Pickman.

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