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Working for the Race: Black Scholars, Invisible Labor, and the Baggage of Creating Space

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Photograph taken by Dr. Chanda Prescod-Weinstein, February 25, 2017

“Critical Histories, Activist Futures: Science, Medicine and Racial Violence,” a conference hosted by Yale University in February 2017, was a welcome departure from the Anglo-centrism dominating the fields of the History of Science and Medicine (HS&M). Focusing on the history of knowledge production, dissemination, and professionalization using objects, practices, and ideas, these historical subfields too often ignore the politics of race and marginalization.

Part of this predicament is historical—who became practitioners of science and medicine throughout history and why? These fields, at least as we understand and define them, required access to resources including financial support, laboratory equipment and spaces, education perhaps through universities, and access to books, to name a few. Given the

history of social inequality, certain groups of people lay at the center, others at the periphery, of the historian's gaze. Though African Americans, in particular, traditionally lie at the periphery of HS&M, they are not altogether absent. They are often on the table, but not at the table. Their accomplishments and contributions have been largely overlooked, leaving an untapped trove for scholarly inquiry. As our panel argued, these silences are inherently violent. As Ezelle defined it, violence (broadly speaking) is any expression or deployment of unbalanced power.

Those scholars who research these underexplored subjects are often caught in a liminal space, exerting unrecognized energy while translating the value of their work to the broader field. These personal reflections from each panelist illustrate the hidden dilemmas in bringing African American scholarship to the forefront of HS&M. This dilemma is multifaceted: academic spaces relegate African American scholars to the margin, general familiarity with canonical African American texts, traditions, and experiences is lacking and not encouraged by the field, the scholarly labor to advance critical race scholarship is disproportionately performed by scholars of color, and finally, HS&M are not diverse fields. Black scholars in HS&M, therefore, are doubly burdened. Though their work *necessitates* critical racial inquiry, along with the added labor of moving racial scholarship from the margins to the center, it is done to a far lesser degree by scholars working with dominant (white) racial groups. Essentially, the normalization of dominant identities in contemporary society is reflected in the divisions of labor among, and the scholarly products of, historians.

While organizing this panel, we discovered that racial violence in HS&M is a multi-layered phenomenon, from the historical subjects we study, to our very presence as young scholars in the field. It is a difficult project, therefore, to focus on African Americans in HS&M. It is doubly difficult to be African American historians working on such history.

Making the "Race Panel"

When Ayah first received Yale's call for papers, she knew the conference was for her. Her adviser agreed. She saw this conference as an opportunity to amplify voices usually marginalized in the field. While attending the 2016 Joint Atlantic Seminar for the History of Medicine (JASMED), Ayah recruited Ezelle, who she met the previous year. At JASMED we were both placed on what was essentially the "race panel," the singular panel or conversation at many academic conferences serving as a catch-all for critical race scholarship. This was a familiar experience. As Black scholars, our work is often relegated to the singular "race panel" in the conference though our work differs in scope and perspective. We

were among the few African American scholars attending. At another conference, Ayah and Shelby bonded over the similarities of their topics. Recognizing that the network of graduate students working on the intersections of race and medicine was extremely small, we worked to align our topics more closely for future panels. With Shelby's unique perspective, Ezelle's critical eye, and Ayah's ability to connect historical themes, as well as young historians themselves, we decided to form a panel focused on black experiences and medical violence in hospitals.

Unlike other conferences, where critical race scholarship is often collected into a heterogenous "race panel," this conference placed race and racial violence *at the center* of the conversation. As such, panelists and conference participants benefitted from a sustained focus on the subject. The resulting panel, "Danger on the Ward: African Americans and Violence in Hospitals" opened this very successful conference. Dr. Corey Williams, an apt addition, provided opening remarks, reflecting on his experiences as a physician to help frame the panel discussion.

"Critical Histories" gave us an opportunity to present our work and make space for ourselves. Shelby's paper was birthed from what she recognized as a lack of understanding of an all-too-familiar African American narrative of discrimination and determination: Malcolm Little's coming-of-age tale in Lansing – and later, Detroit – Michigan. The infamous murder of his radical father and confinement of his activist mother played a major role in Malcolm's radicalization and piqued the interest of every college student who perused *The Autobiography*. Pulling together other primary materials that could substantiate Malcolm's largely incomplete memories, her project quickly came into conflict with previously underexplored questions of race, gender and insanity.

For Ezelle, the panel offered an opportunity to critique oversimplified conclusions of "racism" as the only means to explain African Americans' inferior treatment in medical institutions. Using Homer G. Phillips Hospital, an all-black hospital in St. Louis, as a case study, Ezelle noted how "racism" has become a black box itself occluding more complex forms of violence within and across racial groups. Ayah's paper united her two current research projects on the history of African American engagement with eugenics and the desegregation of the Crownsville State Hospital in Maryland. She examined the ways in which African Americans experienced physical, structural, and symbolic violence in American medical institutions and the ways that they responded, resisted, and in some cases participated in medical violence. African Americans were not passive victims, rather they used science and medicine to challenge racial assumptions of inferiority and strategized to improve access to health care for the collective improvement of the race. Though black eugenics and the desegregation of Crownsville State Hospital illuminate different historical

moments, together they tell us how African Americans actively worked to challenge violence, in all forms, to medically uplift the race.

Invisible Labor in the Field

As scholars of color, participating in critical race scholarship is often seen as both our burden and privilege, one that some scholars have abandoned for fear of seeming “too” focused on race. A privilege in that, we are integral parts of reworking historical narratives that have for too long been skewed and incomplete, but a burden in that we carry the weight of advancing unheard voices and creating more spaces for other scholars of color. We have taken on these roles at our home institutions, scholarly networks, and at prestigious universities, like Yale, to bring attention to historical silences too important to be left dormant.

The networking required to create this panel is just one example of “invisible labor” required of Black scholars. It is the labor that is done behind the scenes, often out of a sense of personal responsibility to the race, to help create space for other African Americans, and to catalyze critical racial discourses. Much of this labor is not valued or recognized by traditional academic metrics. Moreover, our research and our very being as young scholars, requires such labor to become visible to the broader field. When opportunities arise to examine the impact of race, African American scholars feel an additional responsibility to attend and participate for “the cause,” that is, to underscore the centrality of race in HS&M, to highlight the ongoing need to examine how racial biases create inequality, and to create more space for black scholars. This burden and privilege is nothing new in African American intellectual history, though it is certainly time that our colleagues are cognizant of the dilemma.

Corey, for example, recalls the very common practice of spending hours on the telephone reaching out to minority medical school applicants, to encourage them to consider Yale for medical training. Shelby has always found her work in the margins as a dual doctoral candidate in African American and African Studies (AAAS) and History. Very seldom has she had the opportunity to collaborate with scholars interested in unpacking race and inequality in HS&M.

Race has yet to become an essential category for historical analysis. Race scholars, particularly those studying African Americans, face difficulties communicating the importance and relevance of their work, especially when a general familiarity with canonical African American literatures, and a particular knowledge of under-studied African Americans as historical actors is rare in the field. Additionally, some scholars within the field

hesitate to critically engage with such work because of these large gaps in knowledge. This is not to say, however, that “race” as a useful category of historical analysis only applies to racial minorities—historians of science and medicine could, for example, creatively use new sociological scholarship in “whiteness studies” to yield new insights into how racial categories, and the ensuing power and privileges granted by them, influenced the development of science and medicine, especially in the modern era. Historians of science and medicine, after all, have done significant work demonstrating that science and medicine are not immune to socio-political forces and often reflect these broader forces.

We hope that the “Critical Histories” model will diffuse throughout the discipline. Academic societies are beginning to respond to contemporary activism by highlighting racial minorities, the American Historical Association’s upcoming meeting is one such example. If the contemporary political moment has taught us anything, it is that the burden is on all of us, not just Black scholars or any scholar with marginal identities, to witness the injustices (and successes) of the past and present. We must communicate them to our audiences. More importantly, it is our duty to add these to our bodies of knowledge. We are the **#blackpanel**.

[Ayah Nuriddin](#) is a Ph.D. student in the Department of the History of Medicine at Johns Hopkins University. She is interested in the ways in which African Americans use medicine and science to do the work of racial activism in the 20th century. Her dissertation project will examine how African Americans developed and mobilized eugenic discourse within the context of racial uplift ideology.

[Shelby Pumphrey](#) is a dual doctoral student in the African American and African Studies Program and the Department of History at Michigan State University. Her dissertation project explores Central State Asylum for the Colored Insane, the first mental hospital for African Americans in the United States.

[Ezelle Sanford III](#) is a doctoral candidate at Princeton University’s Program in the History of Science. His dissertation project, “A Source of Pride, A Vision of Progress” proposes to uncover the complex inter- and intra-racial social relationships within and surrounding the Homer G. Phillips hospital of St. Louis, MO, while providing new insights for writing institutional history.

[Dr. J. Corey Williams](#) completed his medical training at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. Dr. Williams is currently a resident physician at Yale

University Department of Psychiatry. His interests, research, and writing are focused on racial and gender identity development, disruptive behaviors in children, and academic curriculum design.

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