

Our Shared Future, Reckoning with Our Racial Past Forum:

Panel: What's Real About Race?

Interviewer: Sabrina Lynn Motley

Interviewees: Pilar Ossorio, PH.D./J.D.; Lonnie G. Bunch III, Smithsonian Secretary;
Damion Thomas, PH.D., Smithsonian Museum Curator of Sports

Forum Date: August 26, 2021

Video Length: 16 minutes, 53 seconds

Graphics on screen

Our Shared Future

Reckoning with Our Racial Past

Smithsonian Forum

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Reckoning with Race, Wealth and Wellness

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Sabrina Lynn Motley

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What's Real About Race?

Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch III

Pilar Ossorio

Damion Thomas

Visual

Sabrina interviewing Pilar

Narrator

Our Shared Future, Reckoning With Our Racial Past Forum. Reckoning with Race, Wealth and Wellness. Hosted by Sabrina Lynn Motley. Discussing what's real about race. Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch III, Pilar Ossorio, and Damion Thomas.

Sabrina

Here to guide us is Dr. Pilar Ossorio, professor of law and bioethics at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and the Ethics Scholar-in-Residence and ethics program lead for the Morgridge Institute for Research. Welcome, Pilar.

Pilar

Hi.

Sabrina

So I'd like to start by looking at the origins of race as a social construct. What exactly is race science and why do we all experience it or think of it differently?

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Pilar Ossorio, PH.D./J.D.

Pilar

Right. So when you ask what is race science, I would define it as a kind of science that assumes that human beings can be...divided into discrete, immutable categories that are defined by racial essences, biological racial essences, if you will. This is a kind of science that...I guess originated maybe in the 1700s. So, the first...taxonomy of race, or at least the most influential taxonomy of race was developed by Carl Linnaeus, or Carolus Linnaeus and published in about 1758. And he thought there were four human races, so Native American, European, African, and Asian. And he not only attributed different physical traits to those races, but in addition to physical traits, he also, right from the beginning, built in notions of racial superiority and inferiority into this taxonomy. So this sort of taxonomy justified European colonization. Obviously, if you think that Europeans have the character traits that makes them--make them good at governing, then that was a way of justifying colonization and justifying various kinds of racial inequalities.

Sabrina

Okay, so if I hear you correctly, race science isn't very scientific, is that correct?

Pilar

Well, by the early 20th century, it had become clear that that sort of simple idea of fixed discrete categories of humans didn't hold up. Right? So, anthropologists had been going around and other scientists going around the world measuring all kinds of traits in people, and they couldn't find discrete categories. Right? So that, you know, on a scientific basis, it was beginning to fall apart. And then also, you know, World War II, the Nazis basically used this to justify mass murder and genocide. So, um...the rest of the world reconsidered, both societies at large and scientific communities reconsidered race science. And I think mainstream science really moved away from that notion of race as being, like, fixed biological categories. Right? So there--Even though we're not explicitly trying with our science to justify racial inequality anymore, I think there are times when that still happens. It might still be implicit. And you ask why people experience this differently. And I do think it's because what we now understand about race is that it is something that societies impose. Right, that there's all kinds of variation among human beings, our variation is very complex and geographically patterned. And we have biological variation and social and political variation. And societies impose categories on that variation, right? But those categories are not fixed and immutable and intrinsic to people. But that doesn't mean that they're not real, right? Those categories shape our lives in many ways.

Sabrina

So, thank you. I'm going to leave it there.

Visual

Sabrina interviewing Lonnie

Sabrina

And I want to turn to Secretary Bunch, and I'm going to ask you to talk about the role of museums in popularizing race science. I mean, what has your experience been? How do you see this, particularly at the Smithsonian and at other museums?

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Lonnie G. Bunch III

Smithsonian Secretary

Lonnie

Well, in many ways...museums have really reflected the identity of the community that they grew up in, which meant that notions of eugenics, the fact that they believed that certain races were more superior to others, really were at the heart of the creation of many museums being in the United States or in Europe. So what you see is, especially in the area of anthropology, you see these amazing collections where people are categorized based on race. You see museums based on racist ideas, collect human remains, collect sacred property. So in essence, what you really have are museums that are not places of all truth, but rather they are places that reflect the truths of that particular time. And the challenge is that places like the Smithsonian had collected many human remains. The Smithsonian had also made sure that the way they did exhibitions, that people of color were-- when they were in the exhibitions were really second class. So in essence, what museums traditionally have done is that they have supported notions of eugenics. And in essence, the challenge for museums is to recognize that those notions have been countered and that museums need to take the other stance. How to help people who come to the museums better understand the realities of race, not the pseudoscience of race.

Sabrina

So you've raised the issue of ethics in what you're saying. And can you talk a little bit about the ways that museum ethics have changed over time? And I think this is particularly true for people like ourselves who work in museums, who love cultural institutions, but who really grapple with some of these issues still today.

Lonnie

I think the challenge for museums today is to shine the light on their own work and that the fact that now it is no longer acceptable to keep human remains. So because of a variety of federal acts, we now have repatriated remains of, you know, thousands of people. We've returned funereal objects and sacred objects. So in essence, that is really a first step in museums rectifying and remedying prior acts. But the challenge really is how to go beyond that, how to make sure that museums create an environment where the visitors who come to the museums understand the history, understand the culture. In essence, that what museums need to do is to define reality and give hope. And part of the challenge of that is for museums to look at themselves. You can't say that you have changed the way museums done their work by simply repatriating remains. It also

means you have to think differently about the people that work in museums. You have to think differently about the way they interact with different communities. And in essence, what you really want to make sure is that museums find the right tension between scholarship and the communities they serve.

Sabrina

Thank you, Secretary Bunch, for your leadership and for being with us today. Not only has race science been ingrained in society through museums and media, it's also been enforced through sports and stereotypes of the Black body, depicted for its unbridled strength. So while moments of racial progress have been framed by athletes who defy discrimination, racial mythology continually limited those barrier-breaking athletes. To guide us further into this conversation, Pilar and I are joined by Damion Thomas, curator of sports for the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. There, he also leads the museum's sports and race initiative. Let's start with the example of the first African American heavyweight boxing champion, Jack Johnson, who also sought to compete with his peers without being restricted by segregation. His quest for a bout in the ring to prove personal mastery ultimately dissolved into a national threat to white supremacy.

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Sabrina interviewing Damion

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Damion Thomas, PH.D.

Smithsonian Museum Curator of Sports

Sabrina

So, Damion, help us understand why that particular fight was a key moment for race science in sports.

Damion

Well, Jack Johnson had actually won the heavyweight championship a couple of years before in 1908. And there was a call put out to Jim Jeffries, who had retired as the heavyweight champion to come out of retirement. So now you have these two formidable fighters meeting on July 4th, 1910. And it really is considered to be a battle

of the races. And earlier in the 20th century and the latter part of the 19th century, you get these ideas of social Darwinism. This idea that we're creating a hierarchy of race and the idea that African Americans are inferior in all ways, including on the playing field. And so you get these two men symbolizing and representing their races in this boxing match, and all of the racial stereotypes and racial science are put to the test. Jack Johnson is expected to lose this fight because the perception is that African Americans are emotional and they'll be guided by their emotions, whereas Jim Jeffries was the epitome of white masculinity, is a thinking man and it's believed that he's gonna win because he's white. And ultimately, Jack Johnson won this boxing match. He knocked Jim Jeffries out. And this was a key moment in history because even after the fight, there were race riots all over the country, white mobs going into Black neighborhoods, saying actually that fight doesn't mean anything and it doesn't challenge these notions of inferiority.

Sabrina

So it's interesting. And I'm thinking about what Pilar said and this idea that race science is absolutely not real, and still, this notion of biologically different--differences between races exist. And so, Damion, can you tell us a little bit about this brain versus brawn? Is it still something that we're living with? How does it affect athletes that we encounter today?

Damion

One of the things that's interesting about the intersection between sports and race science is that sometimes it challenges notions of race. But other times it reinforces these ideals. And so it is a space where race is always being negotiated, sometimes to the detriment of the groups who are impacted. And sometimes it also benefits them. And so it is a-- it is an issue that's continually being re-contextualized as different issues come to the forefront in society.

Sabrina

So to that point, there's a term, "race-norming," that has come to the forefront because of what's happening in the NFL. I had never heard of this, but can you tell us what race-norming is and how does it appear in sports today? What's the impact of this phenomenon today?

Damion

Sure. Race norming started in the 1980s. It at least became a big public issue, because what leaders were trying to do was to account for the racial bias in aptitude tests. And so what they were trying to do was to pit-- or not pit, but to measure candidates within their-- their racial categories. And then only thinking about how people scored in relationship to people who were classified as the same race. So it started as a way to try to mitigate racism and the impact of-- of these racially-biased tests. The way it was used by the NFL and the people that they hired was, they decided that African Americans experience higher levels of cognitive decline. Just naturally by-- as a-- as a race, and so African Americans are more likely to suffer from things like dementia. And so what the NFL decided to do is to say that because African Americans suffer more from these-- these issues related to cognitive decline, that African American players would have to show greater harm than other races because of their participation in the NFL. And so this became a major story because two African American players who would have classified for a payout under the NFL's system if they were white, were not allowed to get a payout. And so they sued the NFL, because rather than using race-norming as a way to try to account for-- for racial differences, they were actually using it to punish African American players.

Sabrina

Okay, so that's a lot. And, you know, it begs the question--I'm going to ask you, Pilar, how is this allowed to continue?

Visual

Sabrina interviews Pilar

Pilar

So actually, this kind of thing goes on in medicine a lot. So all kinds of organ function, lung function, kidney function, for instance, there is race-norming in medicine. So it's a much broader thing than just in sports, because-- and this is where I was talking earlier about some "race science" kind of continuing to impact contemporary practices even when we think we've moved away, right? There is this idea that different races have naturally differing levels of functioning in various aspects of our bodies. And so--and a lot of that was never really well-substantiated scientifically. Right? It just became the practice. And it actually gets "built into" medical machines, for instance, machines that measure lung function, spirometers, they have different settings for Black and white. Right? And that's part of--it's a kind of race-norming for lung function, right? So this continues, and only very recently with the Me Too movement have people in medicine been really speaking out against this and asking for reconsideration of race-norming in all kinds of ways. This probably affects, for instance-- So, when people get transplants,

because there's race-norming for kidney function, African Americans have to be sicker before they are eligible for a transplant, right? And then this-- this has consequences down the line.

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Sabrina, Pilar and Damion on screen

Sabrina

You're right. Exactly. The implications are real. I mean, to the body, to the wallet. This is a fascinating conversation, and I wish we could spend more time. But I want to thank you for being here with us, for starting us off with such a strong conversation. You've told us how race-norming, race science or the lack of race science has an impact on not only our bodies and wallets, but on society as a whole. Thank you again so much for being with us.

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Watch the entire forum and view additional resources at oursharedfuture.si.edu/race.