

Editors' Introduction to Special Issue of Occasion, "Biologism"

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THIS ISSUE OF *Occasion* addresses the ways that biology has been put to use in various aesthetic and ideological formations as a determinant of identity. Our choice of Biologism as the focus of study—a term used to address the ways that practitioners of identity studies attempt to reckon with biological aspects of subjectivity—is motivated by our desire to confront head-on the complexities of the topic as it is seen in many domains. It is a topic that has attracted the attention of many humanities scholars and social scientists, from disciplines as diverse as literary studies, cultural anthropology, law, and history.

The essays collected here speak to a growing interest in interdisciplinary scholarship to converse with the ways that genetics, blood, and other biological markers impact the ways we think about identity and community. That is not to say that these authors uncritically either celebrate or diminish biologicistic approaches to imagining identity; instead they encourage us to think with nuance about the ongoing (and arguably increasingly) important role biology plays in our understandings of selves—whether we are willing to admit it or not. Some of these essays explore, with care, how we might discuss the connection between race and biology without compromising the important strides made against scientific racism, while others ask us to return to discussions about nationality, kinship, and origins, keeping in mind our contemporary context and the future potentials, positive and negative, for biologicistic thinking. In all, these works offer insight into how representations of biologism enrich conversations about identity, and, importantly, on the ways people's destinies can be plotted, purposed, and anchored.

From our perspectives as Critical Race scholars, this conversation around biology and identity has only increased as the commercialization of genetic analysis, say through direct-to-consumer DNA screening and databasing kits like *23andMe*, has opened venues for individuals to access ancestry and origins that normalize scientific authority over identity issues. And as the editors of the collection, *Genetics and the Unsettled Past* point out, “scientific portals to the past” have become increasingly meaningful tools used to “investigate and adjudicate issues of social membership and kinship; rewrite history and collective memory; arbitrate legal claims and human rights controversies; and open new thinking about health and wellbeing” (Wailoo, Nelson and Lee, 1).

In other words, given the increasing accessibility to resources that enable us to create narratives in relation to our genetic material, we are at a moment when, as Alondra Nelson argues, the “social power of DNA” is undeniable (3). Nelson’s argument hinges on anecdotes that reveal how genetic informations are prioritized over narrative ones; biologic knowledge, and more specifically, genetic knowledge of a subject’s individual experience and history is privileged over other forms of knowing. Nelson’s important work focuses on the ways that genetic knowledge can contribute to reconciliation projects, but she is not without concerns about how this information can and is being used as well as the limits to those reparations. These concerns echo those made by Dorothy Roberts, who notes that while “[r]ace is becoming more significant at the molecular level,” post-racial ideality means that “race *appears* less significant in society” (287). Put another way, one might see a troubling link between the ways race and biologism are imagined at a genetic level as it serves as distraction or even misdirection from ongoing race-based violence and oppression. Kim Tallbear, in *Native American DNA* likewise critiques genetics-based biologism, rightly identifying screening and databasing programs as colonial technologies that both deliberately and inadvertently perpetuate settler violence on Indigenous peoples.

Indeed, several historical currents work to suppress and even make anathema the idea that biology is destiny. This takes both negative and positive forms--the former being apparent to us rather readily. For instance, the colonial project is undergirded by the logic of the essentially subhuman nature of the colonized, as anchored in their race; of course slavery too worked by that logic. The eugenics movement likewise targeted whole populations for “improvement” or sterilization based on the degree to which science could re-engineer the biology of its subjects. Who would want these days to sign on to the idea that biology is destiny, if the destiny of so many peoples were to be dispossession, enslavement or extermination?

In today’s world, supposedly enlightened by a long period of liberal values, “destiny” falls out and is replaced by a self-fashioning project sometimes aided and abetted by liberal policy-making, taking the shape of the argument for meritocracy combined with some form of affirmative action—this is the positive case for seeing past biology. For example, those growing up in the shadow of historical racism are to benefit by the adjustments of the liberal state, but once that adjustment is made, it is up to the individual to succeed. In the realm of science, instead of eugenics we have biotechnologies that are getting closer and closer to being able to commandeer cells and systems to work at their will. Indeed, one of biomedicine’s core ethical problems has to do with what kind of “life” is valuable, and what intrusions into the DNA of an individual are permissible, and under what conditions. But the idea of the malleability of biology is well-established and generally, if not universally, lauded—it is as if science will save us from what was formerly declared our permanent selves, fixed by biology destiny.

And yet it is not advisable to attempt to see past biology so easily, for either political or practical reasons. There are good, and urgent reasons to rethink our too easy and too expedient dismissal of biology, and that brings us to consider some of its positive aspects. For if we devalue biologism in the name of progress and anti-racism, do we not at the same time write off the positive claims of subjected and subaltern peoples that are based on biology—claims that take the form of the negation of the negation? That is, how can we dismiss the historical legacies of racism based on race without recognizing that remedies must likewise serve the interests of those who were persecuted based on biology? That is to say, the rebuttal "All Lives Matter" simply shows the bankruptcy of liberalism in this regard. In these and other cases, biology as part of one's identity matters in meaningful and urgent ways. This often takes the form of real claims to property, land, resources and rights as made by indigenous peoples who argue that those things taken from them on the basis of biology should be similarly restored to them. It is therefore always critical to understand who is able and willing to say that biology does not matter, and for what reasons, as much as it is in the reverse—whose claims to biologically-secured identity and privilege can and should be recognized?

The answers to these and other questions can only be arrived at by placing them into particular contexts, histories, political projects, and this is what this issue of *Occasion* does.

The papers collected here come from different areas and have different critical and theoretical perspectives. Yet each serves as an excellent example of the kinds of thinking we need to engage in if we wish to understand better the many ways biology works in the world in conjunction with many different sorts of ideological formations. Again, some may be positive, others negative, and perhaps most a mixture of both. We wish to begin a set of discussions that we hope others will join. We start with four exemplary essays, and invite anyone who is interested in joining this conversation to send us an abstract. One of the great advantages of electronic publishing is that it allows for an evolving conversation to unfold on its pages.

Christine Yao's essay starts with an unlikely proposition—that biology might be a site for grounding blackness in ways that also creates ties to other peoples of color. Yet she justifies this claim with an empirical case from the 19th century—David Walker's abolitionist tract *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*. Yao argues that both Walker and Martin R. Delany engaged with contemporary debates in biological race science—that is, the site of a scientific rationalization of race whose legacy we find still all around us. She borrows Britt Rusert's term "fugitive science" to describe this powerful counter-movement, which appropriated biology itself to make a radically different case for race, and most importantly, for the possibility of trans-racial political activism.

Richard Snyder's essay likewise addresses the issue of biologism at the level at the level of the collective, but as represented in a text that is both deeply individual and eminently collective at the same time—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*, which in Snyder's words "represents nuances of longing and belonging across continents, cultures, and conceptions of the nation." These nuances are articulated by and through the image and trope of "blood" in the text, as it specifically links up to notions of national belonging and displacement, exile, and colonization. "Blood" therefore maps a biological constant that is constantly re-inflected by national and diasporic regimes of power and the vestiges of power. This all becomes apparent through the essay's reading of the complex poetics of *Dictée*.

Through a compelling reading of Lee Kyun-Young's *The Other Side of Dark Remembrance*, and more recent incest dramas in South Korean culture, Sandra So Hee Chi Kim demonstrates

how the incest taboo works powerfully as an index to a national crisis of “interrupted kinship” in South Korea. Reading the production and reception of these narratives in the historical context of the Korea civil war, Kim sees the incest taboo within the “forbidden relations” trope found in many of these narratives. Sexual desire, national longing, and illicit relations and reproduction are all tied together, as biology becomes also the trace of a lost national unity.

In the fourth essay in this collection Lee Brewster Norton gives a brilliant reading of Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy or, The Revised Curriculum*. Pointing out that Giles is an acronym for “Grand-tutorial Ideal, Laboratory Eugenic Specimen,” Norton places the novel in the context of the mid-1950s, when “the organism was displaced from a position of privilege” by first-order cybernetics and molecular biology. At the moment the characteristics that had previously defined the organism came to be relegated to the second-level, placed beneath the over-arching operations that governed computers as well. The discovery of the DNA double-helix, and the “genetic code” likewise seemed to subordinate the organism to a higher calling. For Norton, “Giles cuts the tragicomic figure of a genetic aggregate struggling to understand itself as an individual.”

In our final essay, we have another study of a pivotal moment in biological science. Rebecca Wilbanks’ “A Human Genome Synthesis Project: The Crazy Constructive Science of BBC America’s *Orphan Black*” analyzes this British television series as a way to understand the historical transition from the Human Genome Project, the international scientific collaboration that produced a survey of the human genome, recording the sequences of much of human genetic material, and the spirit behind “HGP2-write,” a project that sought to do more than simply “read” code—it sought to focus on “writing” new codes, inventing new syntheses of genetic material. We see a shift from biology as ontologically determinant to biology as simply furnishing the raw materials for new ontological possibilities. Wilbanks shows how *Orphan Black* explores the widening gap between biology and identity even as it remains loosely tethered to the original genetic material. According to her analysis, the show holds in tension traditional social beliefs about biological determinism and the “realities” of viable new human beings who are both partly determined by biology and by new processes of synthesis.

These essays, each coming from a different aesthetic and disciplinary angle, help us start thinking about how pervasive biologism is—its multi-faceted ideological functions, the different spaces of psychic and social life it occupies, the collective and personal agendas it underwrites. To identify the phenomenon outside and beyond its usual applications alerts us to how our bodies and our selves are marked by, and enact, specific ways of biological being. A

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