

- Arjun Shankar: [00:20](#) Welcome to the first episode of the first season of Anthropological Airwaves, American Anthropologist's flagship podcast. My name is Arjun Shankar, postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania, and the executive producer of this podcast -- I am extremely excited to announce our new initiative. We felt for quite some time that the podcast form had much untapped potential for all four fields of anthropology and we want Anthropological Airwaves to make a strong contribution towards that exploration, but what new possibilities for anthropological scholarship might emerge through such an endeavor. Each episode will be a journey into this question, merging research insight, reflections on methodological innovations, and recommendations for public engagement for some of the most passionate, creative, and rigorous scholars in our field. Now, we've set ourselves an ambitious agenda, but we believe that this moment calls for serious and determined explorations about the direction that anthropology can take in the 21st century.
- Arjun Shankar: [01:23](#) This is partly why we pay special attention to the issues that haunt our present world and the anthropologists whose work directly deals with issues of social justice and social inequity, in that context. And perhaps that's the best transition to our first episode on science and race, in which scholars explore the questions of racialization and the role that science has played in producing what we now understand as "racism": how have anthropologists been implicated in the legacy of scientific racism? What are the lasting impacts of this legacy, and how do we excavate the many layers of racialization, as an ongoing and ever-forming social process? Keep these questions in mind as you first hear from Professor Deborah Thomas, who speaks about her vision for the relaunch of American Anthropologist as well as Penn's year-long colloquium on Race. You'll then hear from Dorothy Roberts, Michael Yudell, and Sarah Tishkoff during one of these colloquiums as they interrogate the history of scientific racism. Finally, we'll end with a deep dive into Dorothy Roberts' thoughts on the way her public engagement impacts her scholarship. And with that, I welcome you to listen to our first episode of Anthropological Airwaves, please enjoy.
- Arjun Shankar: [02:42](#) I'm here with professor Deborah Thomas, the current editor of American anthropologist, and so to kind of launch this new endeavor, we want to ask Professor Thomas about her vision for American Anthropologist.
- Deborah Thomas: [02:54](#) Great. Well, I'm honored to be part of the first podcast. It's a great way to create an anthropological field that's more public and more dialogic, and so I'm happy to be able to host it on the

website. American Anthropologist, as you probably know, is one of two four-field journals. It's the flagship journal for the American Anthropological Society. It's been published consistently since 1881, so it has a long and distinguished history and has always, I think, been the best representation of what the big-tent of anthropology can really be. So my vision for the journal is to make sure it's maintaining its role as a big tent and to make sure we're publishing the best of anthropological research that's happening today across the sub-fields -- traditionally, the four subfields, but of course, there have been a number of additional fields that have emerged in recent years that we seek to cover -- and also to extend the reach of the journal in a number of ways.

Deborah Thomas: [04:13](#)

One of those ways is, of course, by developing the website. American Anthropologist has not, prior to now, had a very well-developed Internet presence and we would like to create a space that makes the work of the journal, the research articles, more visible, but that also is sort of intentionally broader, and might pick up on some of the discussions that are happening in the research articles. Certainly within the website format, we can have a more regular dialogue, we don't have to wait for the quarterly issues of the journal to come out. We can respond to things that are going on more immediately, therefore having a more public and political voice. Not that that voice would be unitary, but the debates that anthropologists are having about issues and challenges that we confront in the world are debates that people should hear about and know about.

Deborah Thomas: [05:17](#)

Other changes that are afoot, we have changed the names of our forum discussions that have been, I think by now pretty well established. So we're just tweaking them a little bit. We've changed the name of World Anthropology to World Anthropologies, which was Virginia Dominguez's original vision of what that section should be. We've changed Public Anthropology to Public Anthropologies, in order also to accommodate the vision of those editors who are Yarimar Bonilla and Adia Benton. And we've changed Visual Anthropology to Multimodal Anthropologies, and I think that might be the most controversial shift. Uh, in a way. I'm certainly, there's a long history of visual work within anthropology and uh, there have been certain kinds of discussions around what that work should be and debates about how visual work should compliment or challenge a text-based work. But I think there's so many ways now in which anthropologists are exploring their topics, some of them are not visual, some of them are sonic, some of them are performative, and we wanted to be able to open up to that other kind of

material, while also signaling something about what we see as a potentially more collaborative or participatory ethos that seems to accompany the label multimodality and I think this podcast is part of that, and I know that the three new editors of the multimodal anthropology's section Harjant Gill, Sam Collins and Matt Durrington of Towson University certainly are working together with SVA to try to build a collaborative space in non-text-based work.

Arjun Shankar:

[07:17](#)

So two things we want to feature in this particular podcast. One is we want to think about the diversity of ways that anthropology is being taught in different departments, different universities. In this case, we're at the University of Pennsylvania, and I'm thinking about this year's colloquium series, which is on race, an anthropological perspective. I'm wondering how that approach to anthropology, what new questions emerge there, what new questions have students been asked to think about because of that colloquium and how might that fit with American Anthropologists broader vision?

Deborah Thomas:

[07:49](#)

Well, actually the colloquium series is called "Race, an Anthropological Interrogation," which I think signals something just slightly different from perspective, right? It's a more active process of really demanding something of the field, you know, vis a vis our long engagement with racial processes, both a positive and in some cases negative. And to do that at Penn I think, which, you know, was the helm of some of the architects of scientific racism, earlier in the 20th century also has some significance for us as a four field department in an era in which that organization is being debated. It's been very useful, I think, to plan these colloquium series across sub-fields and collaboratively with faculty working in different sub-fields. And I think the question of race must be dealt with across the sub-fields in that way. And we've had a number of really amazing speakers in, and our sort of overarching arc has been to really encourage students to understand raciality not as an embodied trait, but as a historical process and to think of it also as a geopolitical process that is tied to everything we understand as modern capitalism -- imperialism, the developmental plantation agriculture, the transatlantic slave trade, right? So we're, we're attempting to dislodge this idea that's also a very dominant and strong popular idea that raises something that certain people have, and instead emphasize a truth instead, that race is a context in which we all live and it's a historical relation. And so to try to bring together an analysis of that from the various areas in which we do our work, you know, deep history of material culture and an understanding of biology, human biology and genetics and the ways that's twisted and turned to

satisfy different kinds of political objectives and agendas, and even public health campaigns, right? To think through language, and how language socializes us into particular understandings of race, right? And our own sort of racial relations with the world. And then, clearly, within sociocultural and medical anthropological approaches, how people live this today, clearly, um, there's a lot of contemporary political purchase to a project like this, certainly with what we've seen in the last several years, in terms of state violence and certainly today with Trump's executive order banning migration from the seven countries that have been racialized now, as being Muslim, and therefore unwanted within the United States.

- Deborah Thomas: [11:19](#) So I think these are debates that have much longer pasts and it's some of that that we're trying to really get out of this colloquium series.
- Kyle Olson: [11:36](#) In this segment, we'll be listening to a montage of clips from the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania's colloquium on Race. We recorded a round table discussion between Michael Yudell, associate professor at the School of Public Health at Drexel University, Dorothy Roberts, Professor at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, and Sarah Tishkoff, Professor in Genetics and Biology at the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman School of Medicine. In their comments, they each focus on the highlights of their recent article in the journal *Science* coauthored with Rob DeSalle, of the American Museum of Natural History, entitled "Taking Race out of Human Genetics".
- M. Yudell: [12:17](#) Are we heading for a different time in our nation's history? Yes. We don't know what that means yet. I think that the uncertainty of it, compounded by things that have happened since the election are making people think about these issues and think about social justice, who think about American pluralism, very nervous.
- D. Roberts: [12:44](#) This notion that racism doesn't affect US society anymore, look at the impact of that -- gutting the Voting Rights Act, which then allowed states to pass laws to restrict voting and had an impact on this election. No doubt, if without those restrictions. We went to see him in a different result in the election. And now, Justice Roberts will have a compatriot on the US Supreme Court who believes just like he does, that racism doesn't affect US Society.
- Kyle Olson: [13:25](#) But as we'll see, this notion that racism doesn't affect US society anymore is a fiction. Unfortunately, as Dorothy Roberts points

out, it's a particularly stubborn one, in part due to the fact that it has been propagated by political initiatives for scientific research programs.

- D. Roberts: [13:41](#) When the map of the Human Genome was unveiled at a White House ceremony in 2000 by President Clinton...
- Bill Clinton: [13:50](#) "All of us are created equal entitled to equal treatment under the law. After all, I believe one of the great truths to emerge from this triumphant expedition inside the human genome is that in genetic terms, all human beings, regardless of race, are more than 99 point nine percent the same"
- D. Roberts: [14:10](#) It showed that race does not exist at the genetic level and even Francis Collins who's now head of the NIH, said I'm happy that today we're not talking about race, we're just talking about the human race. And Bill Clinton said in genetic terms, regardless of race, human beings are ninety nine point nine percent the same, as a way of saying that we're -- this project is going to move us forward toward another way of thinking about human genetic variation that doesn't rely on race anymore,
- Kyle Olson: [14:44](#) But did the human genome project move us forward in this way? What did we learn from it about human diversity?
- D. Roberts: [14:51](#) There is a lot of genetic diversity in the human species that 0.01% or whatever percent is also lots of genetic variation that is significant in some way, but it doesn't divide into genetically distinct races.
- Kyle Olson: [15:11](#) So then why is this the case and what does it imply? Sarah Tishkoff provides some answers.
- S. Tishkoff: [15:18](#) Race classified based on both socio-cultural and biological characteristics. It does not correlate with patterns of population structure inferred from genetic data.
- Kyle Olson: [15:28](#) So if the existence of genetically distinct races isn't supported by the evidence, what does the evidence show?
- S. Tishkoff: [15:34](#) So what are the evolutionary forces that impact the variation we see today? Mutation, Genetic Drift -- that just means the random changes in frequencies of these genetic variants, Migration, right, so genetic variants can be introduced when populations migrating to different regions, and natural selection. So if a genetic variant increases the fitness of the person who has it, which means that they're more likely to have

children or more children and their children are more likely to have children. [That gene is] going to increase in frequency in the population. Genetic study that has gone for over 50 years has shown that the majority of genetic diversity is within populations, and about 15 percent amongst populations.

- Kyle Olson: [16:19](#) It bears repeating that genetic research has shown us that there is more diversity within the traditionally defined racial categories than there is between them. So where do these traditionally defined racial categories come from and what impact does this have on scientific and public discourse today?
- S. Tishkoff: [16:35](#) One of things that people often use to classify race is skin color. What a terrible, terrible classifier actually, because we can see that skin color varies quite a bit around world and is strongly correlated with UV exposure, right? So we see people who are just equally as dark skinned who live close to the equator. They can be in many different regions, Papua New Guinea, Africa and so-on. And it turns out, well, many of us already know, that there's a huge amount of diversity even in Africa for skin color.
- Kyle Olson: [17:05](#) As we can see, the biological basis for the division of human populations into racial categories rests on shaky empirical ground. So what accounts for the longevity of the use of the term in science?
- D. Roberts: [17:17](#) The scientific invention of race, a combination of political and scientific endeavors that created the concept of biological race in order to serve political purposes.
- Kyle Olson: [17:34](#) What we learned from the panel's historian was that this critique of racial science has deep roots going back to among others WEB Du Bois.
- M. Yudell: [17:42](#) Du Bois brought a mindset that the racial inequalities that we were seeing in the country and globally were not caused by biological differences, as science had rallied to during the 19th and genetics had begun to embrace at the beginning of the 20th century, but for Du Bois, disparities were caused by social inequalities and poverty.
- WEB Du Bois: [18:11](#) They do not stop for a moment to question how far the organization of work and distribution of wealth in America is perfect, nor do they for a moment concede that the economic organization of America may have fundamental injustices and shortcomings, which seriously affect not the only negros, but the whole world.

- Kyle Olson: [18:32](#) So as we can see, Du Bois was already articulating both a scientific and political critique of the race concept, but unfortunately, too few have heard the message, even today.
- D. Roberts: [18:44](#) So there are lots of social consequences. It's bad science, but it is also bad science with horrible social consequences, because it has an impact on policy. How can address health inequities -- it's a big difference if you think they're caused by innate genetic differences as opposed to being caused by structural inequities in our society. So, how do you resolve that contradiction, between slavery and democracy, has always been resolved by saying that the reason why non-white people are in their subordinate status is because of their own innate defects and inferiority. And, I think that this resurgence of a biological concept or race supports that kind of excuse adjusted occasion for state violence and continued structural inequities.
- Kyle Olson: [19:48](#) And for our final segment, we followed up with Dorothy Roberts to talk more in-depth about her work on race and science, and her scholarly engagement with the public.
- Amber Henry: [20:05](#) My name is Amber Henry, I'm a fourth year PhD student in Anthropology and Africana Studies, and I work with tourism and nation-branding in Colombia. So I have just a few questions today. So perhaps a good first question would be to understand what it means to be invested in these types of conversations and also be a member of the general public. We understand that perhaps these conversations fall on fertile ground in departments of Anthropology and Law and Sociology. So what does it mean for you to be so invested in these anti-racist narratives, deconstructing genetics and race, but then also be in the everyday world.
- D. Roberts: [20:52](#) Well, I've always tried to connect my scholarship to my life outside of academia, which involves, you know, my family, my friends, my community, but also activist organizations that are putting into place some of the ideas that I have along with lots of other people's ideas as well, but contributing to what organizations are doing on the ground.
- D. Roberts: [21:27](#) So I don't know if you meant that as part of my everyday life, but I think of that as my everyday life as well. So I find that it's very, very important to think deliberately about how our everyday lives -- and all that that entails, again, family, community, but also organizations that we might be affiliated with -- and how that relates to scholarship, and scholarship can contribute to that. I don't think that scholarship by itself can promote the kinds of change that I'm interested in. So, and I

also think that scholars can't understand on their own what would be important to accomplish change. And then I find that people, everyday people, who are again interested in social change and social equality, in a more humane way of treating each other, that they appreciate the scholarly work that we do, if we use it to contribute to what they're doing.

D. Roberts: [22:36](#)

So I find it really important. It's also inspiring. I think that it can be very depressing if you're working on topics like racism and white supremacy and sexism and other kinds of structural inequalities, and your work tends to focus on how it's perpetuated and even intensifying. It can be very depressing and disillusioning if you don't, aren't connected to people who are actively trying to change that.

D. Roberts: [23:11](#)

I have always benefited by working with activists, with people in communities who are experiencing the problems that I'm writing about. I don't know how I would understand those problems otherwise.

Amber Henry: [23:26](#)

That's great, thank you. So you mentioned reciprocal relationships and I'd like to turn now to the reciprocal relationship between anthropology, cultural studies and science, and one of the meeting grounds of those relationships is in epigenetics. So I'd like to hear you talk a little bit about what role you think epigenetics plays into understanding the relationship between race and genetics.

D. Roberts: [23:52](#)

Okay. Well, I think that epigenetics and other types of what I've been calling new biosocial science, and by that I mean science that looks at the way that social inequality produces biological disparities as opposed to what I call the old biosocial science, eugenics is an example of it -- the biological concept of race -- that innate differences, biological differences produced social inequalities. So the idea that the reason why people of different races have different health outcomes is because of some genetic difference between them. That would be an old way of thinking about it, and epigenetics is a new way of thinking about it, because it asserts that in many cases, the what we see as racial disparities in health could be caused by social inequalities that have an effect on the expression of genes and in through that mechanism produce different health outcomes and so social adversity that let's say African Americans might experience, can have an impact on the expression of their genes and produce differences in, for example, cardiovascular disease.

Amber Henry: [25:19](#)

Right, now how is allowing space for that analysis to hold true different from biological assertions of genetic race?

- D. Roberts: [25:27](#) Because that analysis shows that the social inequality of racism and white supremacy -- I'll focus on black people, again, as a subordinated group -- has an impact on biological mechanisms within black people's bodies that affect the expression of genes in a way that produces unequal health. So instead of theorizing that innate genetic differences in black people produce inferior health, an epigenetic model would say that no, it's because of structural racism. Those create biological mechanisms or are caused by logical mechanisms called epigenetic mechanisms that affect the expression of genes that then produce the unequal outcomes. So it's a difference between seeing these unequal health outcomes stemming from social difference versus genetic difference.
- D. Roberts: [26:36](#) Now, having said that though, it is still possible for an epigenetic model to still be a biologically deterministic one, if the focus stays on the biological mechanisms as opposed to the societal inequities. And I've been concerned about some epigenetic research that suggests that the solution to health inequities produced by epigenetic mechanisms is to intervene in the bodies of people who are experiencing these epigenetic mechanisms instead of intervening in the structural inequalities that caused them.
- D. Roberts: [27:21](#) And so it's important whether the model is genes of the model is epigenetics to understand the way in which structural inequities produce unequal health outcomes.
- Amber Henry: [27:37](#) We're almost at of time. So I wanted you to comment on what you see your work as being part of you speak about, antiracist, really speaking against white supremacy. So we were to flip that negative language to the positive. What kind of view are you advocating is that humanism, is it universalism, what are you advocating in the pro term?
- D. Roberts: [27:59](#) Yeah, I would say, I'm advocating a view of our common and equal humanity. So, I see racism, sexism, homophobia, other kinds of forces based on unjust social hierarchies as denying our common humanity, dividing people in ways that make some more valuable than others.
- D. Roberts: [28:33](#) In a lot of my work, I'm looking at how laws and policies devalue, especially for me, my interest is in black women and black women's childbearing in particular, and relationships with their children. I've focused a lot on in my work and pointing out how laws and policies in the United States have historically devalued Black Womens's childbearing, as a way of propping up these regimes of inequality and, and also my work on the

biological definitions of race. They do the same thing... there's a hierarchy of who's more valuable than others. And I think even though I might write it in more sociological and legal terms, with a more complicated analysis.

- D. Roberts: [29:23](#) To me, in the end, it's about do we treat human beings in our society and globally as if they were equally valuable? That's what it comes down to, so the positive for me is affirming our common humanity, our common, an equally valuable humanity.
- Amber Henry: [29:43](#) Dr Roberts, thank you so much for being a champion, for helping usher us into the new reality.
- Kyle Olson: [29:57](#) Thank you for listening to the first episode of Anthropological Airwaves. We hope you'll join us again next time.