

Confronting silences

Robert A. Wilson

To cite this article: Robert A. Wilson (2023) Confronting silences, Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society, 6:1, 2264664, DOI: [10.1080/25729861.2023.2264664](https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2023.2264664)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2023.2264664>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 27 Nov 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Confronting silences

About 10 years ago, Adele Clarke and Donna Haraway drew attention to what Haraway later described as a “booming silence” in Science and Technology Studies. This was an interdisciplinary silence over “reducing the human burden on earth while strengthening ecojustice for people and other critters as means and not just ends,” as expressed in the abstract to their session at the 2015 meeting of the Society for the Social Studies of Science (Clarke and Haraway 2018, 4–5). The breaking of such a silence – the first step being the recognition of the silence as a silence – opened the doors for deeper STS-driven engagements with the climate crisis. Such projects of ecological and restorative justice de-centred from exclusively or primarily anthropocentric construals of the site of earthly damage.

The necessarily episodic confronting of silences within, between, and across academic specialties becomes more systematic (and must become so) as an ongoing series of processes. This reflexivity is more self-consciously and positively embraced in some disciplinary contexts than in others. Variability in confronting silences was driven home to me a few years ago via an unexpected and welcome spandrel produced by the COVID pandemic, as those of us whose lives were disrupted (rather than devastated or destroyed) adapted to new-ish ways of working.

This was the opportunity I had to participate-at-a-distance in a year-long seminar series on race and colonialism held by the US-grounded Consortium for History of Science, Technology, and Medicine’s working group on History of Anthropology. Beginning in October 2020, in monthly sessions mostly anthropologically-trained scholars discussed classic and contemporary readings covering the anthropology of White Supremacy; the role of anthropology in creating, reinforcing, and challenging racial categories; slavery and ethnography; colonial identities in the health sciences and in Island Southeast Asia; algorithmic racism; and the visualization of race (History of Anthropology Working Group 2020).

The collective political determination of this working group to critically probe anthropology’s role in racialization and colonialism was as impressive as the visible diversity of the group itself, especially for someone like me coming from the relatively monochromatic, politically-anemic version of the discipline of philosophy predominant in analytic, EuroAmerican circles. The more than 250-year philosophical silence over race and colonialism in the history of modern philosophy was one of philosophy’s booming silences that has only recently been confronted. This has been most notably undertaken via discussions of Kant’s theory of race, his racism, and his ethnocentric conception of philosophy (Eze 1995; Lu-Adler 2023; Mikkelsen 2013; Park 2013) and through the late Charles Mills’ sustained attention in political philosophy to the idea and reality of the racial contract (Mills 2022 [1997]; 2017). Even the recent hive of activity in the philosophy of race literature within the philosophy of science (e.g. Glasgow et al. 2019; Hochman 2018; 2020; Spencer 2014; 2019) reflects only minimal interest in the politics of race and little reflexivity about the relationships between philosophy, history, and race (Jackson 2022).

In contrast to the silences haunting the disciplinary philosophical contexts in which I have worked for 30 years, reflexive grappling with race and colonialism has been embedded within North American cultural anthropology throughout much of its history. Taking new forms in recent years (Allen and Cecil Jobson 2016; Canada 2021; Gupta and Stoolman 2022; Jobson 2020), they are very much continuations of a longer tradition in which epistemic diversity has been central. Methodological commitments to relativism, to participatory action research, to interpretative immersion, and a hypersensitivity to the evils of reductionism and ethnocentrism thread themselves throughout the twentieth-century past of cultural anthropology. Much the same is true of the relatively shorter history of STS, as the context of Clarke and Haraway's intervention suggests. The silence they highlight about environmental catastrophe and ecojustice within STS is all the more booming in light of the field's contrasting attention to inhuman inequities and injustices concerning gender and race.

Latin American-based contributions to STS manifest a stronger commitment to centering discussions of race, colonialism, and the nonhuman world, at least as evidenced by a sample of ongoing research published in *Tapuya* (Arellano-Hernández and Morales-Navarro 2019; Kreimer and Vessuri 2018; Medrado, Rega, and Paulla 2021; Mendoza 2018; Rodriguez Medina 2019). In their overview, Kreimer and Vessuri (2018, table 1) register the generational waxing and waning of "political" features of STS in Latin America but also highlight what we might call a political spine to Latin American STS throughout its history. This spine grew from "the region's technological dependence on more advanced countries in industrial terms" (21) from the late 1950s and supports a lengthier history of the national institutionalization of science and technology influenced by internationally-set programs concerning science policy and "development" (22–23). The implicit integration of political, demographic, historical, and philosophical dimensions to these discussions functions as a preemptive counter to the kinds of silence that analytically-dominated philosophy has intermittently aimed to break (see also Wilson 2023).

Given this brief recounting and contextualization, Indigenous expertise and knowledge, and their relationships to science and technology and their study are positioned very differently across these disciplinary and interdisciplinary frameworks. The refreshing contributions of Alcoff (2022) and Harding (2015) breathe some air into what, in effect, has been a theoretical vacuum for discussion of Indigenous expertise and knowledge in the subfields of epistemology and the philosophy of science within analytically-dominated philosophy in EuroAmerica. The need for this kind of reverse air-pump is evidenced by the novelty of several sessions at the most recent meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association in Pittsburgh in November 2022. These included the symposium, "Global Dimensions of Epistemic Diversity," which sought to provide new perspectives on epistemic diversity, decolonization and science by focusing on aspects of the relationship between science and Indigenous and local knowledge (Ludwig et al. 2023; Parke and Hikuroa 2023), as well as a focus on "philosophy in the field" in Alison Wylie's presidential address (Wylie in press). Preoccupations within the philosophy of science with boundary policing and demarcation and limited sensitivity to the role of lived experience have primed the field as a whole to mistake political epistemology for politicized epistemology. Wylie's longer-term work to connect the philosophy of archaeology with both Indigenous expertise and knowledge and the demographic lack-of-diversity within philosophy is especially noteworthy as a model for how to advance beyond the silences here (University of British Columbia n.d.; Wylie 2017; 2022; Wylie et al. 2021).

Academic interests and orientations, silences and all, rarely float completely free of the societal preoccupations, whether these be EuroAmerican, Latin American, or Australian. Mine are no exception, living and working back in my homeland of Australia since late 2017 after 15 years focused on community-oriented research in my then-home of Alberta,

Canada. During that earlier time, we had constructed video-recorded oral histories in collaboration with some of Alberta's eugenics survivors. These formed a central part of a set of broader online resources for public engagements around eugenics and its ongoing significance that continues to have resonance in a variety of educational settings for lifelong learning (Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada n.d.; Wilson 2018a; 2018b; see also From Small Beginnings n.d.).

Australia, far from both Canada and Latin America, is currently emerging from a recently defeated national referendum. Australians in each of the six states resoundingly rejected the government-sponsored and majority-Indigenous-supported proposal to amend the country's constitution so as to create an Indigenous body, "The Voice," that would provide advice to parliament. The Voice Proposal was, in turn, a key part of the Uluru Statement From the Heart, endorsed at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Approximately 60% of Australians rejected the proposed change. The referendum result concludes a decade that has seen multiple signs of Australia's own brand of anti-Indigenous racism. Two examples of those signs.

First, there was the nation-wide racial vilification of Indigenous Australian Rules footballer and Australian of the Year Adam Goodes following his identification of a young teenage spectator as the source of a racial slur directed at him during a game in 2013. Goodes, who became the face of anti-racism campaigns in sport in Australia, was subsequently consistently booed over a two-year period by large weekly crowds at matches drawing over 50,000 fans. Goodes was also subject to continuing media critique; between the two, they ended his stellar sporting career (Coram and Hallinan 2017; Shark Island Productions 2019).

Second, Bruce Pascoe's best-selling book, *Dark Emu* (Pascoe 2018 [2014]), which challenges the accepted view of Aboriginal Australians as primitive peoples living a hunter-gatherer existence, has faced both reactionary backlash and academic rejection (Blackfella Films Production 2023; Sutton and Walshe 2021). As an outsider to the specializations of anthropology, archaeology, and history that the book's content probes, Pascoe has faced credibility challenges that have expanded to encompass his own Indigenous status (Hardaker 2021).

I feel a particularly poignant form of what Verran (2013) has called *epistemic disconcertment* to be part of a large, non-Indigenous majority effectively having denied the small, Indigenous minority this political right in Australia. No doubt my grandparents' generation found it less disorienting to have been asked to decide in the 1967 Australian referendum, whether to remove two clauses from the Australian constitution that explicitly excluded people of the "aboriginal race" and "aboriginal natives" from (respectively) the reach of special laws "for the peace, order, and good government of the Commonwealth" and the census count. Or to have been witness to the passing of legislation, in 1962, that ensured the right to vote for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults. Maybe this generational shift from a cult of forgetfulness about Indigenous-directed colonialism, what the anthropologist W.H. Stanner famously called the great Australian silence (Clark 2018), counts as its own kind of progress.

ORCID

Robert A. Wilson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8034-0317>

References


Alcoff, Linda Martin. 2022. "Extractivist Epistemologies." *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society* 5 (1): 2127231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2022.2127231>.


- Allen, Jafari Sinclair, and Ryan Cecil Jobson. 2016. "The Decolonizing Generation: (Race and) Theory in Anthropology Since the Eighties." *Current Anthropology* 57 (2): 129–148. <https://doi.org/10.1086/685502>.
- Arellano-Hernández, Antonio, and Laura Maria Morales-Navarro. 2019. "Where Are STS Outside Euroamerica? The Postcoloniality of the Anthropic Dimension and the Anthropologic Scope." *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society* 2 (1): 20–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2019.1591255>.
- Blackfella Films Production. 2023. *The Dark Emu Story*. Directed by Allan Clarke. 95 minutes. Trailer at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1Vq7rrTsY0>.
- Canada, Tracie. 2021. "Special Focus: Engaging 'The Second Generation of African American Pioneers in Anthropology'." *History of Anthropology Review*, April 2021. <https://histanthro.org/tag/engaging-pioneers/>.
- Clark, Anna. 2018. "Friday Essay: The 'Great Australian Silence' 50 Years On." *The Conversation*, 3 August, 2018. <https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-the-great-australian-silence-50-years-on-100737>.
- Clarke, Adele, and Donna Haraway. 2018. *Making Kin, Not Population*. Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Coram, Stella, and Chris Hallinan. 2017. "Critical Race Theory and the Orthodoxy of Race Neutrality: Examining the Denigration of Adam Goodes." *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1 (2017): 99–111.
- Eze, Emmanuel C. 1995. "The Color of Reason: The Idea of 'Race' in Kant's Anthropology." *The Bucknell Review* 38 (2): 200–241.
- From Small Beginnings. n.d. <https://www.fromsmallbeginnings.org/>.
- Glasgow, Joshua, Sally Haslanger, Chike Jeffers, and Quayshawn Spencer. 2019. *What is Race: Four Philosophical Views*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Gupta, Akhil, and Jessie Stoolman. 2022. "Decolonizing US Anthropology." *American Anthropologist* 124: 778–799. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13775>.
- Hardaker, David. 2021. "The Kinship Question: Bruce Pascoe and the Long Search for his Mob", *The Mandarin*. <https://www.themandarin.com.au/163175-the-kinship-question-bruce-pascoe-and-the-long-search-for-his-mob/>.
- Harding, Sandra. 2015. *Objectivity and Diversity: Another Logic of Scientific Research*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- History of Anthropology Working Group. 2020. "Reading Group on Race and Colonialism in the History of Anthropology." <https://www.chstm.org/content/history-anthropology?page=2>.
- Hochman, Adam. 2018. "Racialization: A Defence of the Concept." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42 (8): 1245–1262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2018.1527937>.
- Hochman, Adam. 2020. "Is 'Race' Modern? Disambiguating the Question." *DuBois Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X19000286>.
- Jackson, John P. 2022. "The Perils of Polysemy: Racial Realism in the Real World." *Philosophy, Theory, and Practice in Biology* 14 (13). <https://doi.org/10.3998/ptpbio.2630>.
- Jobson, Ryan Cecil. 2020. "The Case for Letting Anthropology Burn: Sociocultural Anthropology in 2019." *American Anthropologist* 122 (2): 259–271. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13398>.
- Kreimer, Pablo, and Hebe Vessuri. 2018. "Latin American Science, Technology, and Society: A Historical and Reflexive Approach." *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society* 1 (1): 17–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2017.1368622>.
- Living Archives on Eugenics in Western Canada. n.d. "Eugenics Archives." <https://www.eugenicsarchives.ca>.
- Lu-Adler, Huaping. 2023. *Kant, Race, and Racism: Views from Somewhere*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Ludwig, David, Charbel N. El-Hani, Fabio Gatti, Catherine Kendig, Matthias Kramm, Lucia Neco, Abigail Nieves Delgado, et al. 2023. "Transdisciplinary Philosophy of Science: Meeting the Challenge of Indigenous Expertise." *Philosophy of Science*: 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1017/psa.2023.127>.
- Medrado, Andrea, Isabella Rega, and Monique Paulla. 2022. "South-to-South Dialogues Between Brazilian and Kenyan Artists: Decolonial and Intersectional Feminist Perspectives." *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society* 5 (1): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2022.2126245>.
- Mendoza, Breny. 2018. "Can the Subaltern Save Us?", *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society*, 1(1), 109–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2018.1551462>.
- Mikkelsen, Jon M. (ed.) 2013. *Kant and the Concept of Race: Late Eighteenth-Century Writings*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Mills, Charles W. 2017. *Black Rights / White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Mills, Charles W. 2022 [1997]. *The Racial Contract*. 25th Anniversary Edition. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Park, Peter. 2013. *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon 1780–1830*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Parke, Emily & Dan Hikuroa in press. *Against Defending Science: Asking Better Questions About Indigenous Knowledge and Science*, Philosophy of Science.
- Pascoe, Bruce. 2018 [2014]. *Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the Birth of Agriculture*. Magabala Books.

- Rodriguez Medina, Leandro. 2019. "Welcome to South-South Dialogues: An Introduction to a Collaborative Project Between *East Asian Science, Technology and Society*, and *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society*." *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society* 2 (1): 15–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2019.1594659>.
- Shark Island Productions. 2019. *The Final Quarter*. Directed by Ian Darling. 75 minutes. <https://thefinalquarterfilm.com.au/>.
- Spencer, Quayshawn. 2014. "A Radical Solution to the Race Problem." *Philosophy of Science* 81 (5): 1025–1038. <https://doi.org/10.1086/677694>.
- Spencer, Quayshawn. 2019. "A More Radical Solution to the Race Problem." *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 93 (1): 25–48. <https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akz011>.
- Sutton, Peter, and Keryn Walshe. 2021. *Farmers or Hunter-gatherers? The Dark Emu Debate*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Uluru Statement from the Heart. 2017. <https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement/view-the-statement/>.
- University of British Columbia. n.d. *The Philosophy Exception Website*. <https://thephilosophyexception.ca/>.
- Verran, Helen. 2013. "Engagements Between Disparate Knowledge Traditions: Toward Doing Difference Generatively and in Good Faith." In *Contested Ecologies: Dialogues in the South on Nature and Knowledge*, edited by Lesley Green, 141–161. Capetown: HRSC Press.
- Wilson, Robert A. 2018a. *The Eugenic Mind Project*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Wilson, Robert A. 2018b. "Eugenics Never Went Away", *Aeon Magazine*, <https://aeon.co/essays/eugenics-today-where-eugenic-sterilisation-continues-now>.
- Wilson, Robert A. (2023). "Philosophical Silences: Race, Gender, Disability, and Philosophical Practice." *Journal of Philosophy of Education*. To appear in special issue on epistemic injustice.
- Wylie, Alison. 2017. "From the Ground Up: Philosophy and Archaeology." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 91: 117–136.
- Wylie, Alison. 2022. "Humanizing Science and Philosophy of Science: George Sarton, Contextualist Philosophies of Science, and the Indigenous/Science Project." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 52 (3): 256–78. <https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2022.33>.
- Wylie, Alison. 2023. "Philosophy of the Field, In the Field." *Philosophy of Science*: 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1017/psa.2023.90>.
- Wylie, Alison, Matthew Smithdeal, Kristin Conrad Kilgallen, and Jasper Heaton. 2021. "The Philosophy Exception Website Project." *Journal of Social Philosophy*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12443>.

Robert A. Wilson

School of Humanities, University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia

 rwilson.robent@gmail.com

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8034-0317>