Sara Wilson: Congratulations on being the 2019 Michael Kearney Memorial Lecturer—what an honor, and what an impressive recipient you are. Michael Kearney is known for having an abiding interest in three key themes: migration, human rights, and transnationalism. On a broader scale, his work was a commitment to applied anthropology as a tool for understanding and resolving problems in the human condition. As the outstanding scholar chosen to honor his legacy this year, what are your current thoughts on the intersection of these three themes, and what contemporary issues do you find most relevant in relation to Kearney’s work?

Yolanda T. Moses: Well, those are all big buckets, right? *laughter*—but you’re right in that they intersect. And they intersect because those of us who study human evolution know that human beings have always migrated—they have always moved around. They haven’t ever stayed in one place. And this was before there were geopolitical boundaries creating bounded spaces where people are supposed to stay, so that has always been a human problem. Because that means people can’t move. What we’re seeing in the twenty-first century is a more intense manifestation of what happens when people, power, politics, ideology, and geography clash. And it is when people’s goals, of wanting to change, to move around the planet in ways that they want to, are hindered, that we get that intersection. The idea of human rights is also a recent phenomenon that focuses locally, at the state level and internationally on the right of people to live as human beings, decently as human beings, depending on how the state defines that. And Kearney’s notion of transnationalism is one that I found useful as a graduate student when I was trying to understand as a cultural anthropology graduate student the origins of social inequality.

SW: Has Kearney’s work and legacy impacted you and your work personally?

YM: Yes, he was my advisor in graduate school at the University of California Riverside, so he helped me to think about my work that I was doing in the Caribbean in new ways—instead of these bounded spaces I mentioned, it’s about flows, about global flows, about how people ebb and flow and the reasons for that ebbing and flowing. So those three things sort of fit together for me, and transnationalism is one that we continue to grapple with because I think the model of the dominant nation-state is one that kind of butts up against this notion of transnationalism—the nation as being supreme when, in fact, there are other kinds of models that overlap with it and conflict with it, and that’s part of what we’re seeing every day.

SW: You’ve studied, taught, and lectured a lot on race, and I imagine the bounded nature of the world—or the illusion that we live in a geographically bounded world—plays directly into the ways that race is constructed and used for geopolitical ends. Do you think that’s fair?
YN: Partly, yes. I think as far as it goes, I think it’s fair. Because race is such a fluid concept itself that it changes based on the situation and the moment.

SW: I’m interested in how you—I mean you just mapped out how our idea of transnationalism has changed over time and how obviously the idea of boundedness between countries is a relatively new phenomenon. What is the relationship of our contemporary ideas about race to that other timeline that you mapped out? If that question makes sense.

YM: In a historical sense, there have always been some kind of borders and boundaries, separating people and keeping them together, but the question is also political and about power relationships: who has the power to do something about it? So what I’ve seen change over time, just in terms of looking at the history of race in the west, is that you have people who are elite, or whoever we’re talking about, who have the power to create categories, to give those categories meaning, to name people in those categories, and to enforce the reality of those categories. Those elites are the ones that actually created racial structures, and out of those structures, behaviors that reinforce those thoughts about people, whether they’re real or not. And so I think what we’re seeing today is again a reassertion of racial hegemony, this time with the aid of social media and a 24-7 newsfeed. We can see what is happening at warp speed all around the world. But do we understand what’s happening in these places? Some people are resisting in place, other people are trying to move in some cases—getting away from their current geopolitical state, moving to another place whether because of wars, discrimination, genocide, what have you. So there’s more of a mainstream awareness about what’s happening around transnationalism than there was in the recent past. And it’s an awareness that’s with us—and in some ways, it’s so ubiquitous that we don’t stop to take it apart and understand it. And that’s where I see the role of anthropology making a difference, showing us how to understand and critique what it is that we’re actually seeing. And this is where the connection you’re asking me about comes in.

I can use our own country as an example. Our rhetoric and national narratives have been that this is a country that’s open to immigrants; where the reality is that—well, no. *laughter* And it’s never been that way, and by peeling back and looking at what our history tells us, what our social structure tells us, what our laws tell us, then, you know, we’re able to understand why in this particular contemporary political climate in the U.S., staving off the “horrible people” coming across our borders is not new. This is not a new phenomenon. It may be new to certain groups of people, but this is certainly not new in our nation’s history. Though that idea of its newness (that hate groups are recent and are on the fringe of our population) may be the kind of narrative we want to tell ourselves.

So I think it’s important to unpack this. And because, you know I do my work in a university setting and meet with students, talk with students all the time, there are a lot of students who are just ahistorical about all this stuff. They just—haven’t had it. The first time they’ve had any critical conversations about structural racism it is in our classes, and it’s just not happening in our elementary schools, and our junior high schools, and our high schools. And what can change so that our students have a more nuanced and a more critical understanding of what it is they’re seeing when they see a parade of young white males in polo shirts and khaki pants, marching down the street in Charlottesville, Virginia spewing hate? And what’s at stake if they are not
provided with that critical analysis? It is the domain of anthropologists to help us understand how to change this. So that’s how I see the relevance of this notion of intersections, right? Migration, human rights, transnationalism—all of it is tied together and we have to understand that if we are for one thing—for example if we say, “I’m for human rights”—then we have to be very active in terms of understanding what our immigration and migration laws have to do with human rights. Why people are moving from Central America to the U.S. This is where the political stuff comes in—why people are moving in the first place. In Europe for example, people from Francophone Africa and Caribbean islands like Guadeloupe are migrating to France. It’s sort of like, folks are coming to the metropoles that they’ve been raised as colonial subjects to understand that they’re a part of.

**SW:** Right, the metropole being the center of the societal mindset in which they’ve been immersed, so why would it be a problem for them to move there?

**YM:** Exactly. Especially for some of the islands I’m familiar with in the Caribbean, you know, like Guadalupe—they’re French citizens. So why would they not want to go to France? They have French passports…

**SW:** Absolutely, I mean even just as a visitor, but especially moving there shouldn’t be that much of an issue if you’re a citizen there.

**YM:** Exactly, but the reality is that you’re not considered a true citizen. I did my fieldwork on Monserrat, which is a British colony and the people there were British subjects, part of the Commonwealth, but they had different waiting lines and everything when they went to even visit Britain.

**SW:** Wow.

**YM:** So there is a contradiction right there at the foundation of what it means to belong, and young people need to understand that this country has its own contradictions as well. We promoted citizenship for some, but not for others. Remember it was not until the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution that African Americans were made citizens. Never mind they could not exercise those citizenship rights for another century. The point is the conservative political language here in the U.S. more recently, has been about taking away the fourteenth amendment, the citizenship amendment, for people born in this country who are from somewhere else. That should be alarming to everybody. And the anthropological question is, under what social and cultural conditions is this right being questioned? It is being questioned when some of the people in power here in the U.S. feel that they’re being overrun, and outnumbered by the “other” and that immigration isn’t good for the U.S. anymore. Also, when divisive racial rhetoric is used on a regular basis by the most powerful person in the United States. And you know, our tone-deaf President says his racial and bigoted insults and comments from the White House.

**SW:** I want to return back to your point about what anthropology and what anthropologists can do. You mentioned that they can change this. I mean in terms of changing this misunderstanding or maybe even just ignorance—innocent ignorance, perhaps—about why people are moving in
the first place: anthropologists can answer that question a lot better than other disciplines. I mean you just gave me essentially a few examples of motivations for people migrating. And an obvious answer to the question that I’m trying to formulate is: people in power spin the narratives that are needed to maintain that power, right? What are some other ways anthropologists can help us understand, for lack of a better term, “the other side”—the question of why a lot of Americans don’t want immigrants? How can we understand from an anthropological perspective what’s happening with the distaste, the disgust, toward immigration and immigrants themselves?

YM: Well, I think there are a couple of things happening, particularly here in the U.S., and one is that historically from the beginning of this nation, there have been laws on the books that limit the number of people who can be full U.S. citizens. I think that the 1790 Census was the first instance where it was indicated that full citizens could vote if they were white and male and owned property. So this notion of whiteness and hierarchy goes back a very long way, and it’s indelibly stamped in our society in terms of racial and power hierarchies. You’ll remember that in the nineteenth century, people we today consider white from southern Europe, and from Ireland, were not considered people who were able to fit in as citizens in the U.S., because they had been othered not only by their skin color but because of where they were from and the conditions in which they lived. There had been a particular kind of relationship that Protestants, from Britain—who inherited the government here in the U.S.—had had a particular kind of relationship back in Europe with the Irish immigrants. So it wasn’t as if there was a new thing; it was like, oh no this power relationship is longstanding—“we know the Irish people are not like us. They’re just definitely not like us.”

I think it’s really important for us to understand that this country is still an experiment. It’s an experiment in progress. There’s no other place that has been as successful, and I’m not saying we’re completely successful by any means—but as successful in terms of creating documents that say everybody has a right to freedom and what have you. These documents have created a way for people whose voices have not been included initially to include themselves. And that’s what makes this a bit different, and if we continue as a democracy, there will always be some kind of political engagement, awareness and resistance for progress to take place in this country. So the assumption that because we have a certain demographic that is slowly shifting where there will be no majority population does not mean that everybody is going to have access to power, to wealth, healthy lifestyles, and healthy powerful relationships—just look at South Africa.

And so how can we look at other places to understand what we can do to really “walk” our “talk,” to be that place where we can have hope, that country that in fact does try, as hard as it can, to create spaces for new people that we let in—and to set up a process for letting people in, not to shut the gates, not to shut the doors, because that is not how the success of this country has happened. We are not where we are today by doing that. And as you said before, we need to understand the triggers and mechanisms for ordinary folks to understand what’s at stake for them if they’re not engaged and they’re not active in pushing back against what’s happening. Part of this is a fear—that it’s a zero-sum game that we play with the ‘Other’; that if you come here to
the U.S., then you’ve taken something away from me, and I will never be able to regain that. Versus looking at: whose losing and who’s winning here, structurally? And everybody who is losing needs to form coalitions and work together to understand that there are certain groups of people who are winning, i.e., keeping their privileged position, because they’re pitting certain groups of people against everybody else. What almost happened—and this is one of the reasons I like the historian David Roediger, you may know his work, as he writes about race and labor—one of the biggest fears of the white power elite in the U.S. in the 19th century was that African Americans and recent white immigrants and Native Americans would all get together and figure out that they were all being exploited.

**SW:** Didn’t this briefly happen right after the Civil War where sharecroppers realized that they had more in common than they thought and sort of started banding together? And of course this was immediately squashed—

**YM:** Yes, and that was the rise of the KKK and all of the racist and domestic terror that was characteristic of groups like that.

**SW:** There you go.

**YM:** So there were ways that the power elites basically said, “you know, it’s not to our advantage for these people to form coalitions because—they may bring down the systems of privilege that we have put in place. For example, there was a gentlemen’s agreement between the southern states and the North before the Civil War. That, you know, if you guys don’t push slavery any further into the new states, we’ll just let you keep those slaves. And it was Abraham Lincoln that finally said, no new territories will have slaves. And the response was, “well, wait a minute, as we move West, you mean we can’t have Texas, we can’t have California, we can’t have the whole Southwest?”—and they were not happy about that. It’s always been about that battle around who’s going to have power and control in this country. And you know, who gets caught in the crosshairs? A lot of poor, working class, voiceless and powerless people got caught in the crosshairs, and economically, it was very important for that system of exploitation to stay in place as long as it could. So once it came down, the question was, what is it going to be replaced with? And a lot of Euro-Americans who were not plantations owners and property owners, they were not happy either. What’d they have after the Civil War? You know, they were the ones who signed up to get killed and maimed for both the Union and the Confederate armies and came back home and—they had nothing but their whiteness.

So anyway. That’s the part of what you were asking: it’s this zero-sum game, it’s a fear of the other, it’s an economic hierarchy and a racial hierarchy and a class hierarchy that is invisible to everyday folks who don’t see how these structures came to be, how they are maintained. They often don’t see the big picture of who is disadvantaged and who is advantaged. And I think anthropologists have a role to play to help our students, policy makers, and the general public to unpack all that baggage and to make the unseen seen, and to show how these large, complex, intersecting systems of inequality work. We work in both small-scale societies and large-scale societies. We have the ability to do that. For example, a lot of urban anthropologists work in large-scale societies, but maybe in smaller scale communities, but they understand that
communities and groups of people don’t live or function in isolation. Just throwing money at the problem of disparities in health or education, for example, isn’t going to change the problem unless it’s dealt with systemically. And that’s where it gets really, really complicated and scary for change agents. One of the biggest scares for me as a young anthropology graduate student back in the day, and I’m not a conspiracy theorist, is what happened to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. When he started bringing people together around economic issues across racial lines is when he started to be very, very dangerous to the status quo.

SW: Right.

YM: We have the narrative from our current President that he’s a populist and he’s for the regular people, but all his actions indicate otherwise. He’s a very extreme case of what can happen in a democracy when the leadership behaves and acts like a bigoted demagogue. In some ways we are lucky that he is so simple-minded and transparent in how he does things that he doesn’t even have to telegraph that bigotry, right? Whereas, people who are a bit more sophisticated, like conservative presidential contender Mitt Romney, when he ran for president in 2008 was smart enough to say what he had to say about the unwashed masses in private meetings. But little did he know, he was being taped. So when he started talking about the “unwashed majorities” and how he would rein all that stuff in, the majority of the American people were privy to what goes on behind closed doors.

SW: It’s funny, in some ways when you hear a more careful rhetorician crack like that, it’s almost more shocking at this point than hearing Trump say the same thing every night.

YM: Right.

SW: Trump makes it palpably obvious what’s really going on.

YM: Right, and he’s empowered a lot of people who think the way that he does to act on those thoughts. Some people say it’s only a small part of the population who act in extreme ways. I call it domestic terrorism, and it is vastly under-researched. But as the 2018 elections showed, when all Americans get mad and fed up, then you understand what a democracy is. It is messy, it is dirty, and we’re all going to have to own it. Nobody is going to own it for us—we have to own it ourselves. If these are the things we believe in, then we must fight for them, especially right now. So, for me, it’s a question of how to empower people to understand what it is they have to do. That’s really important.

SW: I’m interested in specific fieldwork or research, or maybe even a class you’ve taught recently, or it could be from your work on the Caribbean—but I’m wondering what specific work you’ve done that helps you understand our current moment and those three Kearney topics that we mentioned earlier. Is there anything specific about your fieldwork that has allowed you to sift through what’s currently happening in the world?

YM: Well, yes, and then I’d also like to talk briefly about Australia as well. From my graduate work in the Caribbean, I was beginning to understand how this notion of transnationalism worked. I was looking at the island of Montserrat and the impact of remittances, economic remittances that were sent back home to Montserrat by people who had migrated. And what I
was looking at was the impact these migration patterns had on the status of people, but especially women left back on the island. Montserrat at that time had about 14,000 people on the island. It was a small island, and this was before the volcano erupted in 1987 that reduced the population by almost 50%. The volcano didn’t kill them, but they left because they couldn’t stay and make an economic living. Anyway, when I did my fieldwork in the 1970s, there were as manyMontserratians living in Brooklyn, New York, and Leicester, Britain as there were on the island. So there was this intricate communication network—and this was before the internet; I don’t even know if we had faxes at that time. But there was this communication network that was set up (letters, telephone, telegrams and word of mouth) that helped me understand that even though money and other resources were being sent back to the island, the social structure and social organization on the island were slow to change because there were, I call them “networks of spies,” *laughter*, that pretty much were in contact with people both in Brooklyn and in Leicester. So, if folks on the island got out of line, particularly women who were expected to behave as if their husbands or significant others were still there on the island, in terms of their behavior.

And so that gave me a way to understand that even though these men weren’t there, they were still “there.” And the way that society had worked was still expected to happen. Now, this was one of the first studies I think that was done to refute the economic theories of the time that working-class women were promiscuous and had lots of different partners and didn’t want to get married, etc., etc.; whereas, middle class women were people who followed the rules and the moral of respectable society. Well, what I found was that that was true to a certain extent but had nothing to do with promiscuity and everything to do with economics and agency. And how certain women were leveraging their choices and opportunities for themselves and their families.

**SW:** Seems connected to the Moynihan Report, in a sense.

**YM:** Yeah, it was around the same time in the 1970s here in the U.S. that democratic Senator Daniel P. Moynihan was using social science research to blame black women in single parent families for their own poverty, juvenile delinquency, and other structural problems. This whole notion about single-parent families in the 1970s still has policy implications even today. Well, the reality on Monserrat is that they weren’t single parent families—these were collectives, and these poor working-class women lived in the households, often of their mothers, siblings, or other relatives. In these extended family households, they shared resources and did many things collectively. And, the bottom line is that working-class women informants told me they would choose not to get married because the men of their class level that they were able or encouraged to marry couldn’t provide the economic support for them at all. So they said things like, “yeah, I’m going to live with my mom, and I am going have a kid. I’m working, my mom’s working, my brother’s working, and we can all pool our money and live the way we want to live. And I can also can have a boyfriend.”

So that worked for them, but there was such a moral stigma against this kind of behavior, when I got there, I chose to look at both working class women and middle class women. On the whole, the social agency of middle class women was more limited, “we can’t do this, we can’t do that, we can’t do this, we can’t do that….we can’t be out by ourselves, we can’t be in certain
company,” and I thought, it seems to me, the people who have the most freedom to exercise agency are the working class women here, and not the middle class women. It was a question of, do you feel that trading marriage—a ring on your finger—for respectability, as it was defined on the island, gives you happiness? And for most of them the answer was, no, it didn’t, because they had fewer rights by law as married women, and were not able to be as free and flexible in their movements and who they associated with. They thought they would be able to exercise some freedom of movement and decision-making when their husbands went away to work off-island. But this is where that communication network would kick in and it was like, oh my God! Husbands off-island knew what wives were doing on-island! Economically, the middle-class women may have been getting support for themselves and their families, but they had less social agency outside of that relationship. Whereas, working class women were able to take advantage of a range of opportunities, including working off-island. Because they knew that they had networks of support back home, so they got more economic independence, social independence, and sexual independence. Many of them said they didn’t even want to get married because they didn’t want to limit their options. So for me that was just—wow. Nobody had really looked at the impact of these moral arguments about “promiscuity” from the perspective of the women in question! I was able to make that contribution and was really happy about that.

SW: That’s brilliant.

YM: In terms of Australia, you asked about a class. I just taught a class this last quarter called “The Global Color Line,” and it was based on a book written by two Australians. I thought I knew a lot about British colonial influence in the colonies, but in this book, both historians made clear that Britain and its policies around race, class, ethnicity, and citizenship had a direct influence on what happened and how policies and laws developed in the U.S. As Americans, we sometimes forget we were their early colony that broke away from them, and were not officially a part of the British Commonwealth. But in Australia, where this colonization happened in the nineteenth century, and in South Africa in the 19th, and also in Canada. So I was able to look at all four countries—at their trajectories, in terms of how British ideas about race influenced laws, rules, policies, and practices that are still operative today. All four are countries where a lot of immigration and migration took place, and all four set up themes and laws and policies to direct that traffic, so to speak. And so we looked at how Australia developed its policies that at one point didn’t allow blacks to come, how South Africa developed apartheid, how Canada developed its migration and immigration policies, and how they were raced. And of course, how we in the U.S. developed our laws and policies around race and inclusion because we did them first. All these policymakers and heads of state of these 4 countries were talking to each other in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to keep all four of these countries controlled by elite white people. The policies and practices around race that we think stem from our own experiences here in the U.S. as a democracy didn’t happen in isolation.

SW: That’s fascinating.

YM: Yes, it is. *laughter* So I’m going to do more research about the links among the British, Australian and U.S. historical notions of race and their implications for racial thinking in current policies in all three places.
SW: You also have taught in Salzburg, right?

YM: Yes, I am on the faculty of several projects that are part of the Salzburg Global Seminar. The seminar has an interesting history. It was started by academics from Europe and the U.S. right after WWII to promote peace and solidarity through the sharing of information. Margaret Mead was among the first group of academics to attend the seminar in the late 1940s. I have been invited to attend seminars on and off over the last 20 years. The experience has allowed me as a faculty member in that program to understand what’s happening with migrations and immigration of different kinds of refugees into Europe. I hadn’t looked at, for example, France and Belgium and non-English-speaking countries; right now, that’s what I’m looking at. But, you know, Germany has reached a point where they’ve said, no more immigrants; Italy is a place where people are being off-loaded to Greece, and the list goes on. And you’re starting to see the racialized other stereotype developing, just like here in the U.S. How much of that rhetoric is about racism, and how much is about economic fear, or even some combination of both?

SW: Totally, I mean it echoes of the twentieth century a little bit, I’m sure.

YM: Oh, yes. And Austria is a very historically racial place because first, they were occupied by Germany during WWII, and they currently have a third party that is, supposed to be, a populist, socially conservative party that is anti-immigration. And you’re seeing the rise of these conservative political parties that also vilify immigrants and migration policies and practices all across Europe. And part of what happens to give these parties more mainstream appeal is, either there is a despotic leader or there is a political party that specifically focuses on anti-immigrant rhetoric and is able to fan the flames of fear and hate that are already there. One of the issues that I think us as students of anthropology should be mindful of is the rise of anti-Semitism again in Europe, and also here in the United States. And because of social media and the ease of travel by jet planes that go from the U.S. to other places, Steve Bannon has become a big draw for these political parties over in Europe.

SW: You’re kidding. Oh gosh.

YM: So, Trump’s’ former chief campaign strategist that helped to start the Alt Right here in the U.S. is over there in Europe talking to nationalist right-wing political groups about how they can do what the U.S. did.

SW: Oh god.

YM: I’m telling you! Here in the U.S., some political and social justice groups ask the question, whose America is this going to be? I think we could also ask the larger anthropological question; whose world is it going to be? Is it going to be a world where a few powerful people are ruling their countries out of fear and xenophobia? And where is the global political will to help us as humans deal with the question of our relationship, not only to each other, but to our climate and our planet? I think that’s a critical question because if we’re not working together, and if we’re not bringing along the least empowered of us in this journey, it’s not going to work. It is not going to work for all of us. We can do o.k. with climate change initiatives in the U.S., or in other individual places, but unless everybody is engaged to some degree in helping the environment
for all people on the planet, then we’re headed for THE END. We already have a big problem with the global footprint of the haves versus have-nots, but we’re headed for an even bigger problem.

SW: It strikes me that that’s reflected in so many different areas of discourse. I mean you’re talking about how a world that works for a few is not sustainable. That’s not just in terms of climate change, but in terms of economics as well, which is of course directly connected to climate change…how sustainable is our future if it’s just the world’s richest one percent continuing to get richer and dictating policy for everyone else?

YM: Yes, and here’s something that I haven’t talked about that I’ll put on the table.

SW: Okay.

YM: Michael Kearney in his ideas of transnationalism did directly include talk about global capitalism, we talked about it; he understood it over 40 years ago. And it’s become even more important today to link an understanding of systems of oppression. Today this is all happening in an environment where the rich, as you say, want to get richer because they can. And unless there is a leveling mechanism, which I don’t necessarily see at this point, then it’s only going to be the haves against the unworthy have-nots across the globe. And in every country, you may see similar kinds of behavior like people building fences and walls to keep the “others” out, while the rest of the world just kind of goes to hell in a handbasket. Right now, the Atolls in Micronesia and the Samoan Islands—the islands where the bombs were exploded back in the ‘50s—some are owned by France, some are owned by the U.S., they’re sinking! The islands are sinking! And there are real people who live on these islands. So what we’re seeing in real time is that the most vulnerable people—the animals as well—are being impacted right now and unless that global intervention takes place, it’s only going to get worse in terms of global migration and displacement. So we can add to that geopolitical list of things that cause people to move—conflict, war, famine, the reality of climate change. Environmental disasters are pushing this latest migration and movement of people from one place to another, whether we’re ready for it or not. It’s happening, and we have to understand it to explain it.

SW: Let me—this seems like a good opportunity to talk about the relationship between conceptions of nature and societies. I was poking around looking at your work online and found the “Race: Are We So Different” or “Understanding Race” project (www.understandingrace.org). I was prepared to see some of these topics in this project’s online timeline, particularly more obvious eras like “Slavery and the Invention of Race” and “Indian Wars and Westward Expansion.” But the “Early Classification of Nature” was interesting to me: that this seems like a construct that must run through hundreds of years of history, and how classifications and understandings of nature actually inform power structures. Could you say a little bit more about that? It seems very connected to what’s happening right now, right?

YM: Right. One of the things we do in the race project is to try and simplify for ordinary people an understanding of how we came to talk about race and know race or think we know race, and conceptualize it. This term came from biology in the sense that early scientists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries studied races of animals. And they had this notion of races of animals;
animals could be bred to create different, you know, species. And in the late 1700s/early 1800s, when European exploration obviously had taken place, there were philosophers like John Locke and others who talked about individuals and freedom and freedom of all people, and all that. And that notion of what it means to be human came into direct conflict with the way colonized people were being treated in various places around the world. And this notion called for some way for philosophers, for Christians, for “good people” to think about, “well, how can we say we are for individual freedom and for all human beings when we still have serfdom in Europe and people colonized, enslaved and killed in other places? And that’s when philosophers, economists, Christians—started looking at biology as a way to give answers to this conundrum. In the biology of the 18th century there were races of plants and animals, but not people. But by the middle of the 19th century that had changed. There developed taxonomies of human races, categories of people, who are different not just in terms of how they look, but in terms of how they behave, how they act, and how similar to European colonizers they were or were not. Intellect and technology creation and usage have been two hallmarks of how we as scientists, social scientists and also other scientists have talked about civilization, civilized peoples, and progress. How much technology they have, how they’re exploiting the environment has been important for us to document. So the hierarchy of people encountered who display certain western traits of civilization and the hierarchy of biology start to merge to create racialized typologies. For example, hunters and gatherers have to, you know, roam around looking for food. Pastoralists have to move around, but they have animals and don’t have cities or villages or things like that. Agricultural people are those who are stable and grow crops, that’s another stage of development. And then people who own land, cultivate land, and make something of that land, are people who are civilized. So that notion of progress played into the biology of the nineteenth-century evolutionists, when Darwin started talking about the origin of species and survival of the fittest. He never intended for any of his theories to be used in human society because he and his grandfather were abolitionists. They did not believe in slavery. But as I’m reading more and more about it, he didn’t believe that all people were created equal, either. But he didn’t believe in the institution of slavery. Okay. So he was looking at the Galapagos Islands and the finches. That was his research. Finches. And social Darwinism grew out of that because that explanation helped Christians and people of goodwill explain why they enslaved people, why they colonized people, and why they exploited other people’s resources. The benevolent explanation is that colonized people, and enslaved people had not evolved enough to exploit their own resources themselves. And another narrative in the U.S. was that in taking the land from Native Americans, we were actually fulfilling our manifest destiny to tame this wild and uninhabited continent.

SW: Right.

YM: So there is hooked into this notion of progress a kind of unilinear evolutionary model. And here in the United States, you see it played out by Westward Expansion in the 18th and 19th centuries. Since Native Americans were not using the land the way it should be used—not farming it, but hunting on it.
SW: So they were kind of breaking the laws of science in some sense according to this paradigm. Is that fair?

YM: Well, according to the paradigm, the people who were being exploited weren’t civilized yet. So it is o.k.

SW: So we must “help” them get there.

YM: Exactly. Or not. So the ideal narrative is that we’re holding this land/resources in trust, we’re helping them (Native Americans) become like us, and once they become like us, then, you know, they can become equal citizens. And that didn’t work, for example, with the Cherokee Nation in the 19th century because too many white settlers wanted the land they were on. So they got moved away (to the Oklahoma territory), and all of a sudden the political and racial narrative changed from “they are just like us, but need more time” to “they were not capable of taking care of their land and climbing up this racial and intellectual hierarchy; they don’t have the intellectual capacity”, to “they are different kinds of people who are not able to ever reach that pinnacle of achievement of the white race—therefore, they don’t deserve to keep their land.”

SW: Never mind that the taxonomy of different species is something that we constructed ourselves back in the Enlightenment, right? I mean these categories themselves are—

YM: What we call race biology and race science was superimposed on homo sapiens for social and political reasons. And all kinds of inferences were made about what those differences among people meant. In a nutshell, that’s what we’re trying to say to the public about race, that it’s deeply embedded in what we think we know.

SW: You mentioned it’s the task of the anthropologist to make the invisible visible: how do you see this paradigm playing out today?

YM: I will give you an example. I mean, American Samoa: our government won’t call it a colony. The Philippines, we won’t call it a colony. Puerto Rico, we won’t call it a colony. But we won’t insist that they become full-fledged states like Hawaii did, either. And they won’t become states. They won’t have independence. Well, here within the borders of our country, we won’t even let D.C. become a state.

SW: I’m near D.C., and people are really excited about that prospect, but I’m not sure it’ll fly.

YM: Well, it would have to be a democratic president, a democratic house, and a democratic senate. That’s how it’s going to happen. If it happens; and Puerto Rico, too, that’s the only way it’s going to happen. I think it’s very slow slogging. I mean, a lot of people say, “oh yeah, we know that race is a social construct.” BUT. Deeply imbedded in that social construct are still beliefs that race resides in certain bodies versus others. And the question is, how to get at that intractable belief. My students tell me, “oh yeah, we know that there is no such thing as biological races.” Yes. But in 2019 we hear race talk in reference to the ingrained nature of certain cultural behaviors. Now politicians, like our President and right-leaning news media outlets talk about culture being ingrained. Harking back to the 19th century race science, and if culture is based on learned behavior, how can it be ingrained or hardwired? “Well, because
there’s epigenetics.” Well, epigenetics says there’s certain kinds of things that can change from one generation to another based on the environment, and that can impact genetic expression, which may impact behavior. So we do need to learn more about the environments that people live in under stress, all kind of things that can affect a child being born. But, that is not race. So those are the kinds of things that we need to understand, understanding genetics is very important but not—you know, talking about biological race by a different name. Then there’s the whole genetics movement and the popularization of so-called ancestral DNA testing.

SW: Yeah, a couple of my family members got “23andme” for Christmas.

YM: Yeah, sure, these tests tell you about your recent ancestry, but doesn’t tell you about your race. There is no such thing as separate biological races. These tests do not tell you anything about how you behave or how you act. It has nothing to do with that. It has to do with recent ancestry and geography.

What we try to do with the race project is to show, yes, there are differences; that race is not biology, what you’re seeing is human variation and human variation is just that; that the history of the idea of race is socially constructed to benefit certain groups and not others, but as a result of believing that race is biological and that people are separate races, there developed in this country deeply-imbedded systems that operate as if that’s true—and continue to operate as if that’s true. And so there is systemic racism. And that’s also what we have to understand in order to change it. That and there’s another complication: they have biological consequences.

*laughter* So it’s like, well that’s what I said, “it’s separate races”—no, it’s individually biological consequences like stress, high blood pressure, and stuff like that that are environmental factors and that are endemic. So those are the kinds of things that when we teach medical anthropology or cultural anthropology or biological anthropology, this is where those four fields come into play. If the biological anthropologists aren’t teaching this the same way as the cultural anthropologists are teaching it, then there’s going to be a disconnect between what students learn. And how we talk about it is important because of the language and the relationship between language and culture. Why do we still use this word? The word race. Why do we use “race” if there’s no such thing as separate races? Why do we use it? So we have to interrogate that as well.

SW: What does it really refer to in any given conversation?

YM: Right, what does it reify? Because we say one thing but we’re talking another. So those are reckonings that we all have to have to do in our work.

SW: The Kearney lecture is a major highlight of the SfAA annual meetings and tends to be a moment for social scientists working in a number of fields to reflect on global trends, to sort of zoom out and gain perspective on what’s happening outside of niche fields (while of course being informed by what’s happening in specific communities, like your research in Montserrat and your Australian class “The Global Color Line”). If you had to choose one major thought or question for your fellow social scientists to take away from this lecture, what might that be? Or perhaps: what image(s) do you want us to reflect on in the coming months?
YM: At no time in human history have we had the technology, the science, and the global connectivity to make this planet we live on safe and inhabitable for all of us. But we are on a collision course with ourselves instead. At the global level, we have unchecked and unfettered global capitalism; rising nationalistic populism in countries previously more committed to democratic aspirations; structural racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, islamophobia; and intractable disparities of all kinds. I believe that it is our role as anthropologists wherever we are working to speak truth about these structural problems that are hampering the betterment of the human condition. Our job is to continue to challenge the status quo, in our own field and in society. We must not only continue to ask the critical questions, the awkward questions, but we need to ask the questions behind the questions.