

UvA Research Priority Area: Decolonial Futures

***** SYMPOSIUM *****

On the birth and afterlife of racial science: Racial pelvimetry, obstetric racism, and decolonized health futures

Date: Wednesday August 19, 2026

Location: De Brug, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 4e etage.

Organizers: *Dr. Alana Helberg-Proctor (Anthropology, UvA), Dr. Laurens de Rooy (Museum Vrolik/ Amsterdam UMC), Dr. Bahareh Goodarzi (Anthropology, UvA; Midwifery Science, Amsterdam UMC) & Dr. Paul Wolff Mitchell (Leiden University; independent archival researcher for Museum Vrolik)*

On Thursday August 19, 2026 we are organizing a closing symposium to share and discuss the first research results of the Decolonial Futures RPA and AISSR Impulse Grant 2025 projects on the birth and afterlife of racial science from 18th and 19th century racial pelvimetry science to present-day obstetric racism, recognizing that the race science of past centuries haunts contemporary scientific practices, as language, ideas, and objects crafted for and by racial science still circulate in the present.

In this multidisciplinary project we explored how eighteenth and nineteenth century racial pelvimetry - the measurement and classification of pelvises of birthing people following racial typologies - still appears in, and haunts, present-day obstetrics and gynecology. Here, we are animated by Karkazis and Jordan-Young's (2020) notion of "haunting" to conceptualize race as a ghost variable by which to trace "ideas of 'race' in particular niches of science, technology, and medicine where it is submerged and disavowed, yet wields power" (763). Racial pelvimetry is a practice foundational to what Dána-Ain Davis (2018) has called "obstetric racism" - the intersection of obstetric violence and medical racism - which results in higher mortality and poorer health outcomes for Black, Brown, and Indigenous birthing people and their children. While histories of obstetric racism often begin in the context of experiments on enslaved people in the U.S. American South in the nineteenth century (Cooper Owens 2017), in our preliminary collaborative archival research we have found that the anatomical study of racialized pelvises starts among Dutch obstetricians studying and collecting the bodies of racialized people from the colonial Dutch East Indies and Cape Colony the eighteenth century. In some cases, these remains are still in museum collections in the Netherlands. Recognizing the colonial roots of obstetric racism in the Dutch context not only sheds new historical light on the role of race science and colonial networks in the Netherlands. It also draws attention to the persistence of (sometimes submerged) racial categories in obstetric and gynecological practice.

Symposium program

14:00 - 14:05 Welcome and opening (Alana Helberg-Proctor)

14:05 - 14:50 **Keynote Dr. Paul Wolff Mitchell** (Leiden University Medical Center; independent archival researcher for Museum Vrolik)

14:50 - 15:35 **Keynote Dr. Bahareh Goodarzi** (Anthropology, UvA; Midwifery Science, Amsterdam UMC)

15:35 - 15:50 Koffie/thee break

15:50 - 16:25 **Group discussion: the historical roots of obstetric racism**
(Moderator: Dr. Laurens de Rooy (Museum Vrolik/ Amsterdam UMC))

16:25 - 17:00 **Group discussion: (Un)doing race in birth care**
(Moderator: Dr. Alana Helberg-Proctor (Anthropology, UvA))

17:00 Closing remarks (Laurens de Rooy & Alana Helberg-Proctor)

17:05 - 18:00 Drinks and networking

Please email to l.derooy@amsterdamumc.nl or a.e.g.helberg-proctor@uva.nl to let us know if you like to attend this symposium