On Academic Elitism, Implicit Racism, and Social Media

Joshua Earle, Virginia Tech, jearle@vt.edu

At around noon on February 22, 2021, a remarkable thing happened. MC Hammer (yes, that one; no, I’m not kidding) distilled the entire thesis of Science and Technology Studies (STS) in six words on Twitter: “when you measure, include the measurer.”

At around 7 a.m. the next day, the twitter account for the Society for the Social Studies of Science, 4S, the professional organization for STS, found the tweet and immediately stepped on a rake in a way both embarrassing and entirely on-brand. This event, coupled with the lack of panels for and about marginalized people at the upcoming Annual Conference, reveals a serious problem within the STS community: that we imagine ourselves to be experts on the social dimensions of science and technology, and on the communication of said dimensions, and yet we are very bad at realizing our own embroilment in the systematic (and strategic) racism of our own field and academia in general.

We imagine that those who are not a part of our organization can’t themselves be experts of—or well-read in—our field. We protect our boundaries behind hundreds of dollars of conference registration fees, paywalls for journal articles, and jargon that half of us only pretend to understand. All of these barriers fall most heavily onto racialized and otherwise marginalized people (scholars included). Meanwhile, we write for each other and rarely anyone else, our institutional access gets around paywalls that nonacademics couldn’t hope to keep up with, and our travel stipends cover (sometimes) our conference fees and travel.

So, when the @4sWeb Twitter account on February 23 asked what we STSers might suggest for further reading “now that he’s an aspiring STS scholar,” every Black academic and aspiring lover of STS heard the condescension in their bones.
They heard the implicit “Foucault is mainstream, bet you’ve never read [insert edgier, more obscure, more difficult scholar here]” like an indie music nerd trying to out-hipster a seemingly new guy in the record store. It was assumed that a Black entertainer, rapper even, perhaps more famous for his pants than for the music he made, couldn’t possibly know as much as we do about the connections between philosophy and science, and obviously couldn’t have absorbed the lessons from our favorite authors without having been among us, guided by us. He must be an impostor, whom we ought to shuffle toward the airlock.

Hammer, almost immediately, responded in impeccable fashion with a quick “lol, the audacity.”
The 4S account did immediately realize its mistake, and apologized (see the MC Hammer tweet below). Later, higher-ups would issue a more formal apology.

Hammer, to his credit, was incredibly gracious in accepting the 4S apology on twitter, declaring “no harm no foul.” But there was harm. We cannot un-ring that bell, and we have lost a lot of respect and trust, especially from the Black community because of this.
We imagine ourselves inclusive. We laud citizen science projects, making and doing, and science communication outreach. The president of our professional society is a woman of color, our president elect is a woman of color and now the leader of the federal Office of Science and Technology Policy. And yet, if a Black “aspiring scholar” wanted to watch one of the open panels in our annual conference, where would they go to see themselves and their experiences reflected in the scholarship? Where would a trans person go to see themselves in the scholarship? Where would a disabled person go to see themselves reflected in the scholarship? Well, the Black “aspirant” would have a few options. There are two panels which mention Black-ness explicitly in their title or description, and three other panels which explicitly talk about race. Out of two hundred and ten. Disabled people get to see themselves in only one panel. Trans people are left out entirely. How are they included, again?

The short answer is that they’re not. And the culture of STS itself is to blame. Myself included. I was astonished when I read MC Hammer’s tweet. It’s a profound and eminently accessible introduction to just what STS is about. But why would I be astonished that it came from MC Hammer? What, rappers can’t read Foucault? Did I forget his work with Scholastic encouraging kids to read? We had posters of him in my Middle School (that’s usually grades 6-8, ages 11-14 in the US) surrounded by stacks of books.
Was my astonishment the generic kind of “hey, cool, that famous person is interested in the same thing I am” or was it also informed by him being Black, in his 50s, and a rapper? I can’t say for sure, but it’s probably the latter. Had I actually been following him before this tweet, I would have seen a man deeply interested in AI and robotics, who was actively promoting learning, reading, and reflection into one’s own biases. He was also active in the #BlackAFinSTEM movement in the summer of 2020, a hashtag which supported early career Black people in STEM fields. He may not say things in the same academic language that we might, but it’s actually more digestible for that fact. He also has 3.2 million followers, so his outreach on these topics dwarfs our entire field by orders of magnitude.

And while some scholars immediately called out the 4S tweet for its racism, some, in discussions on Facebook decided that Hammer’s appeal to the non-truths of science was just as bad as the naïve scientism that he was speaking against, effectively dismissing him because his argument wasn’t “nuanced” enough. On Twitter. This is all of our problem. And it has been for some time.
In 2015, at our 40th anniversary conference in Denver, Michael Mascarenhas gave an electrifying talk to thunderous applause about just how white the STS field still was, even 40 years after its founding as a field. This talk turned into his 2018 paper *White Space and Dark Matter: Prying Open the Black Box of STS*, in which he examines just how race and racism are expressed within the field of STS. His longitudinal searches of topics covered in 4S panels, demographic charts of faculty in departments, and more, yielded numbers not much different from the ones I found in this years’ call for submissions. We’ve known about our own shortcomings for some time now. But where has that thunderous applause gotten us?

Think about your department. Does it have more faculty of color than it did 5 years ago? 10? How many people of color are on your department’s required reading list? Trans authors? Disabled authors? Do you retain students of color and get jobs for them? What about Disabled students? Trans students? I know my own department has some difficulty with all of these issues. This is my problem, too.

Defense of these events, the Twitter kerfuffle (technical term) and the lack of diversity of open panels for this years’ meeting (The term “data” pops up 58 times, “artificial intelligence” 10 times, and “machine learning” 18 times as a comparison) are obvious, right? The person on the twitter account just made an honest mistake, and worded their tweet badly (they said so themselves in their almost immediate apology, and I believe them). And 4S doesn’t control what panels are proposed, and they can only accept those that are submitted. But this defense fails in exactly the way that STS is built to reveal. The defense pushes the problem onto the actions of individuals, assuming and implying that individual actions are unaffected by the culture of their environment. It ignores how the COVID-19
pandemic exacerbated an already difficult application process for panels, in ways that were entirely foreseeable and counter-able by the 4S committee and STS departments.

4S could have included their own panels on minoritized topics, incentivized submissions from minoritized scholars through waiving fees, inviting minoritized scholars directly, and in other ways lowering the barriers to participation. 4S itself, as an entity, and STS itself, as an entity, are responsible for the culture which produced no transgender topics for its largest annual event. Responsible for the culture which has only one panel about disability, and only five that talk about race in any explicit way. This is the culture that STS has built for itself through design or through negligence. But, as Dr. Debbie Chachra and Damien Patrick Williams are fond of saying, any sufficiently advance neglect is indistinguishable from malice, and it has been more than 4 decades of neglect so far.

Some of this is structural at the academic level, but breaking down structures and networks is what STS is supposed to be good at. This is supposed to be our thing! Yet, we still refuse to break open the Black Box of STS as Mascarenhas wrote. We are still a white (abled, cis, economically privileged) space into which people visible against that background will, inevitably, feel unwelcome. We need to look deep at ourselves and work on this. Lowering barriers is not enough. We must cultivate welcoming spaces for marginalized scholars, for novices and well-read rappers in baggy pants alike. The slow move to open-access journals and scholarly blogs like Backchannels and Nursing Clio is one good trend, but most of our work is still hidden behind journal paywalls or in $100 limited print academic press books. Academia is, by design, not inclusive. There are incredibly high barriers to access. Are we so determined to be academically legitimate that we follow that same trend? If so, we may never get to a place we might call inclusive and welcoming, and will always be racist, ableist, and transmisic.

What that might actually look like—truly welcoming and inclusive STS—I don’t know. I don’t have the right to say what it looks like. After all, Academia was built for people like
me. The only barrier I had to jump was that of cost (and a terrible undergraduate GPA) and that still almost kept me out. I inhabit none of the marginalized positions I discuss here. But Black, disabled, and trans scholars have been saying exactly what I have been, directly to our faces for decades. We haven’t listened. Maybe if it comes from a white cis able-bodied man, we will finally hear it. It is a tricky thing, though. I run the risk of speaking for marginalized people in ways they might not want, but if the privileged don’t speak up, everything will continue on as it was. So, I feel compelled to write this piece, and I welcome any pushback from places where I might be overstepping.

Minoritized positions must be seen by STS, individual departments, and 4S itself as markers of expertise that we desperately need. And those of us who have found ourselves moving through the academic/STS ecology with ease need to fight like hell to get them into our spaces, and excise those who make our spaces uncomfortable. If we are truly dedicated to the idea that different agents change the network, then we must do better by our own networks. Else, what authority do we have to speak on it at all?

Addendum

Some of the defenses I mentioned above were actually used when I attempted to publish this piece on official 4S sites. I was rejected from both Backchannels and Engaging Science, Technology, and Society (ESTS). Backchannels rejected this due mostly to its length (they require 1k or fewer words, this is over twice that long, especially with this addendum), but included in their response to my pitch (they had not seen the full text):

We don’t understand your position regarding the organization of the open panels for this year’s meeting. Open panels are submissions by 4S members and non-members. The organizing team and 4S cannot steer submissions and their topics, even if there’s an annual theme speaking to that topic. Panels reflect the research interests of those submitting. Besides that, the meeting’s theme and the Toronto organizing team (which includes Indigenous and BIPOC scholars working in the areas of women’s studies, Indigenous studies, disability studies, and more) aim to address the issues of systemic racism and exclusion and to ensure the inclusion of marginalized communities.

There have also been several contributions on these issues at the previous meeting—Tony Hatch’s subplenary talk, the plenary talk of the current president Joan Fujimura, and many others if you look at the program. Finally, with Alondra Nelson, the current president-elect and a woman of color who studies issues of race and science, these topics are not neglected.”

The assumptions about this piece, and the immediate defensiveness (including the “but we have Black women in leadership” line) only reinforce the work we need to do as a community.

ESTS did actually see the full piece (excepting this addendum, of course), and also decided not to publish it. It seems that ESTS’s Editorial Collective’s main issue with this piece was that the problem is too large for a single, 2k word piece, to adequately handle. Which… legit.
They write:

…[W]e believe that the discussion your manuscript attempts to initiate is crucial, we also do not think that a brief single authored submission can sufficiently engage this question. To that end, we welcome a proposal for a Thematic Collection that features a greater number of differently positioned and located contributors who would reflect on this issue.

This is a good idea. More people involved means higher visibility means more potential movement on solutions (and probably more viable solution on which to act). My fear about this is that collecting these pieces into a single Thematic Collection, and not publishing them as regular posts, risks walling the subject off in a tokenistic manner that allows people to both ignore the content within, and claim that the problem has been adequately engaged.

This resonates with another issue they had, which was that the piece both “[didn’t] sufficiently acknowledge the work already underway in 4S and the larger STS community to
precisely realize these goals." And that it offers only critiques “made several times before.” I must point to the paragraphs which discuss Michael Macarenhas’s (2018) work (the only piece cited here) as contradicting the first complaint and as evidence that the “critique is not new” complaint was one of the main points of the piece. Just because it’s been said before—many times, even—does not mean it has been heard. I’d argue that the continuing issue I point out here is evidence of quite the opposite.

Now, to be fair, the involvement of Drs. Kim Tallbear and Michelle Murphy have focused the 2021 meeting towards indigenous issues. This is something long overdue in STS, and seems to have increase the number of open panels on Indigenous issues. Five of the panels mention indigeneity in their titles or abstracts, and the “Indigenous STS” section includes 4 others which do not. This is good (though, again, 9 out of 210, when there is such focus on the issue seems … low?). It does not, however, solve the problem of Black, Disabled, and Transgender scholarship being all but left out of the meeting.

And, finally, and perhaps most personally insulting, was the complaint that the piece “assumes an American audience” and as such was enacting the same exclusions that I was critiquing. They write:

Many of the references, including to popular culture, musical genres, “middle school” assume a U.S.-based audience and that the context you write about is self-evident. As such, the manuscript enacts its own exclusions even as it is critical of the 4S community, which is a transnational community.

I find this argument to be both factually incorrect, and disingenuously defensive. Context does not imply audience. The actant involved were, themselves American (MC Hammer is an American musician, his genre is an American genre, 4S is an American association even if it imagines itself as “transnational,” I am American as well). For me to discuss the issue in a “transnational context” would be both impossible (I am not “transnational,” whatever that means), and itself colonialist and implicitly racist. That we might imagine a white American writer, talking about events which happened in America, involving other Americans, from a perspective outside of that context is gross and would enact the kind of racist elitism I discuss far more than any contextual exclusion of non-Americans this piece enacts by talking briefly about “middle school.” (note: I did add the parenthetical about the age ranges of most US middle schools in response to this argument)

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References