



## **Perspectives in Anthropology: Science Communication as a Vehicle for Visibility and Representation** with Carter Clinton, Ph.D.

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In a familiar turn of events, Dr. Carter Clinton found his way to biological anthropology through his desire to change modern medicine. Following the logic of any young biology enthusiast, where a love of science and a desire to help people leads to the pre-med track, Carter found himself confronting the shortcomings of the medical discipline. His questions about health disparities led him to research, specifically in underrepresented populations at Howard University. It was at Howard where Carter met Dr. Fatimah Jackson, and suddenly it seemed as if all the right pieces fell into place. His exploration of burial ground soil samples from the [New York African Burial Ground](#) (NYABG) catapulted him into an anthropological reconstruction of identity, lifestyle and disease of this historic Black population through soil chemistry, bacterial DNA analysis and bioethics. As a [National Geographic Explorer](#), Carter has made several media appearances and invited presentations detailing the promise of population genetics and its potential to innovate in anthropological research and STEM as a whole.

Today Carter serves as a postdoctoral scholar in the Departments of Anthropology and Biology at Pennsylvania State University, where he employs population genetic analyses, specifically, fine ancestral mapping in contemporary African Americans to learn more about their origin and derived disease phenotypes. Connecting his research with the historic NYABG population to living African Americans will provide an opportunity to learn more about the African American identity. More importantly, it will illuminate changes in disease susceptibilities from the past to the present helping medical doctors make better, more informed decisions about personalized treatments and gene therapies (ultimately combating health disparities for this underrepresented population). Speaking briefly over Zoom, Carter shared with me how he came to find his own voice through science communication, and the importance of representation and community in biological anthropology and science in general.

*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

**Isis: The New York African Burial Ground is such a seminal moment in biological anthropology and bioarchaeology. Tell me more about how you got involved with the project.**

Carter: It's so crazy how this is a full circle story for me. I actually visited the New York African Burial Ground on a field trip in elementary school, back when the site had just been identified and before any work had been done. I was so fortunate to have multiple teachers that were really invested in not just general curriculum, but also integrating Black history into everything we did. So as someone from Brooklyn, growing up in the early nineties in Bed Stuy, it was an experience that just really stuck with me. When I got to Howard and saw the work happening with the New York African Burial Ground, it was an immediate yes. Like I'm from New York, so I could possibly have ancestors who were

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buried there. And being involved in that project in any way was worth the risk! Even if it meant trying something that had never been done before, and possibly having a dissertation that didn't work.

**Isis: But it did work! And caught the eye of National Geographic. What was it like to have your first science communication experience on such a major platform?**

Carter: This is a great question because I think people see the videos and tidbits that are out now, and they think "Oh, this is really natural thing for him" and that was absolutely not the case. In reality, I'm an introvert. One of the reasons why I got into biology was because I could go into the lab in the middle of the night when nobody else is there, nobody will bother me, and I could just run my experiments and write up my results. I used to be so afraid of public speaking, even just class presentations. This experience was actually was a turning point where I realized that not only do I have something to say, but also someone values it.

So, when National Geographic originally reached out, I just thought it was related to the grant. Like "Oh your final report is overdue" or something like that. Instead it was a producer telling me that they wanted to showcase my work. And because of that intense fear of public speaking, I almost turned it down.

**Isis: [visible disbelief]**

Carter: I know, but thankfully I talked to Dr. Jackson and she told me I had to do it. And of course, it turned out to be a really great experience. I was allowed to answer their questions honestly and without filter. When you're talking about American slavery, people usually only want to hear a fraction of the truth. But I sincerely appreciate how National Geographic has never censored anything that I've had to say and has allowed me to represent my work and its significance for our historical understandings of Black people in this country in its entirety.

**Isis: What a battery in your back. To be cosigned by National Geographic on your first project! How has this shaped the way that you have intentionally incorporated science communication and public education in your work?**

Carter: National Geographic was such a pivotal moment for me because it made me realize that people actually want to hear what I have to say. Imposter syndrome is real, especially for people of color. It took working with National Geographic for me to realize how important it is to be visible as a black man in anthropology and scientific research. There was this one email I received through my website and it was this young Black college student from Philly. He said "You know I've been looking online, basically all over the internet, for someone who isn't a medical student and isn't running the typical research/scientist rat race. Then I came across your page and it's amazing, and you're a Black man, and I don't want to overwhelm you, but this is literally so amazing for me. Will you mentor me or how can I just learn from you?" And it's messages like that, that mean



the most. When I was growing up, I didn't know anyone who was doing biological anthropology. I'm first generation everything, the second to even have a bachelor's degree, and the first to have a Ph.D. I didn't know anyone with Ph.D., or even how to get one. I just had my mom in my ear telling me "You're going to college". So, to be able to be the person I was looking for is incredible. And that representation and visibility really should start in K-12, like it did for me. Literally next week I've been invited to give the keynote at the National Science Teachers Association, which is honestly still crazy to think about. But teachers have so much potential and responsibility to shape the way we think about science, people, and just everything. Imagine if we didn't have to unlearn things like reducing sexual and gender identity to chromosomes.

At the same time, I can't stress enough the importance of the New York African Burial Ground. It's the oldest, largest burial site of free and enslaved Africans ever discovered in the country. It was groundbreaking in the discipline of anthropology and its methodology as far as a community engagement, and so many people still don't know about it! Understanding the importance of this project is a huge part of what took me from "Maybe I have something to say" to "I have got to get this message out to as many people as possible!"

**Isis: The focus on K-12 education is so needed, and I wish we could sneak anthropology in the curriculum from the beginning! To wrap things up, what advice can you give to aspiring young anthropologists looking to start branching out into science communication?**

Carter: This may just be the scientist in me, but the first thing is always the integrity of your research. If people see you working hard, and your results are sound, that speaks volumes to your credibility and helps you get your foot in the door. Second is networking, don't be afraid to put yourself out there. Make the website, or the Twitter account and start sharing your work because you never know who is looking for someone just like you. Especially as Black people in this discipline, we have to show up for each other and those coming behind us. I can't stress enough the importance of a solid committee and network of mentors who can uplift you and challenge you to ask the right questions. And most importantly, being mindful of what the community you are trying to reach actually needs and wants. Are you even the right person to be doing this research? We have to constantly acknowledge and interrogate our privilege, whether it's in our identities or even just in our roles as a researcher.

*To keep up with Dr. Carter Clinton, and all of his phenomenal work you can find him at [carterclinton.com](http://carterclinton.com) and [@the\\_carter\\_show](https://twitter.com/the_carter_show) on Twitter.*