



Tulsa Garden Center *at Woodward Park*

Analyzing Carl Linnaeus' Role in Systemic Racism

By Dylan Axsom

Tulsa Garden Center at Woodward Park

March 2020

Over the past several years, the murders of people of color by law enforcement have brought the issue of institutional racism - defined as “the systematic distribution of resources, power and opportunity in our society to the benefit of people who are white and the exclusion of people of color” to the forefront of American society (Solid Ground). Mass protests and demonstrations over injustice have acted as a catalyst for many to take a deeper look into how their actions and assumptions reflect a system which continues to oppress and exclude people of color. Both individuals and institutions have been reexamining what it means to be inclusive, diverse, and equitable in a world where not all racism is plain to see. Problems with promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within an institution can occur in many places, be it the recruiting or hiring processes, methods of operating, and even in the name of the institution itself.

As many other businesses have now done, the Tulsa Garden Center at Woodward Park has taken time to self-reflect and evaluate what more we can do to promote DEI in both our non-profit and the community as a whole. Upon this review, we have learned that despite being a nonprofit with a mission of horticultural education for all, a figure we have long idolized as a champion of the garden world may have also been a major figure in the foundation of systemic racism and exclusivity: Carl Linnaeus.

Carl Linnaeus was a Swedish botanist who published the first volume of his work *Systema Naturae*, or *The System of Nature* in English, in 1735. This publication implemented the standardized scientific classification system called binomial nomenclature that is used today to classify plants and animals. Known as the “father of taxonomy” for the feat, Linnaeus has become an icon in the world of horticulture for this method of identifying plants, which was, and still is, notoriously hard. This naming system makes it so that all living organisms – plants and animals – can be classified based on physical characteristics and are given a genus and species.

In the tenth edition of *Systema Naturae*, published in 1758, Linnaeus began using this binomial nomenclature to identify mammals, starting with primates, and more specifically, humans. Dubbed “homo sapiens,” Linnaeus separated humans into categories where he described each “type” of human by physical characteristics, as well as behavioral and

personality characteristics – something he hadn't done for other species. The four prominent categories Linnaeus identified were Americanus, Asiaticus, Africanus, and Europeus.

Americanus were described as a “copper-coloured” people who had straight black hair, wide nostrils, harsh faces, and scanty beards. Linnaeus wrote that they paint themselves with “fine red lines,” were upright, choleric – meaning irritable, obstinate – meaning refusing to change despite persuasion attempts, and that they were governed by custom – as opposed to being governed by law (Linné, 1806, pp. 9). This group of people are known today as Native Americans in North America.

Asiaticus, who we would call Asians, were described by Linnaeus as “sooty, melancholy, and rigid” with black hair, dark eyes, and wearing “loose garments.” He said that they are “severe, haughty, and covetous” - meaning they are strict or unfriendly, act arrogantly superior and disdainful, and are stingy or greedy. He noted that they are also “governed by opinion” (Linné).

Africanus, or black people, were detailed as black with frizzled black hair, flat noses, silky skin, swollen lips, and being “anointed with grease.” For social characteristics, Linnaeus said Africanus are crafty, lazy, relaxed, phlegmatic – having a calm disposition, negligent, and governed by caprice, or impulse (Linné).

Lastly, Europeus, modernly called white people, were described as fair, sanguine – having a complexion that allows blushing on the skin, and brawny. They were described as having yellow or brown flowing hair, blue eyes, and being clothed investments – official garments such as robes worn during church services. In describing behavior and personality, Linnaeus said that Europeus were gentle, inventive, acute – being able to recognize fine distinctions, and were governed by laws (Linné).

Seeing these descriptions from 1758 can sound very familiar in the modern day as almost all of what was published on Africanus, Asiaticus, and Americanus is now widely recognized as racist stereotypes for each respective group. While some argue that it is unfair to judge the standards of the 1700s to those of today, Linnaeus' work was flawed, even for his time, as he had not physically observed any of these groups himself apart from Europeus (Revolution and Ideology, 4:58-5:07; Müller-Wille, 2014, pp. 4). Nor were his findings backed up

by any of his own empirical data to prove the observations. Linnaeus' descriptions came from what he heard or read from other's observations, exemplified in his writings of *Americanus* – not all Native Americans painted themselves with “fine red paint.”

Additionally, the context in which the tenth edition of *Systema Naturae* was published is important to note. In 1758, when the tenth edition was published, the trans-Atlantic slave trade that sent over 12 million Africans from Africa to North America, South America, and western Europe was at its peak (Library of Congress). By being published as science, Linnaeus' descriptions of these different groups would act a way for society to justify slavery, ethnic cleansing, and colonization – all taking place during this time – through scientific racism, a “scientific tradition in [which] biology is used not only to prove the existence of race, but also, to maintain existing social hierarchies.” His work would act as the foundation for this tradition. (Revolution and Ideology, 6:02-6:27; Garrod, 2006).

A prominent example of the use of scientific racism can be found in Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, when discussing the “Indian problem” and giving slaves the same rights as whites (Herbes-Sommers, Strain, Smith, 2003). Jefferson references Carl Linnaeus' human classification when writing about assimilating Native Americans, saying they are “on the same module with homo sapiens Europeus,” and are therefore able to adopt the culture of settlers. He did not support assimilation for slaves, however, stating that they are “inferior to the whites in the endowments of both body and mind” and that the reason would be unknown until science explained it (Herbes-Sommers et al, 2003).

Linnaeus' writings implied Europeus' superiority, which can be seen when comparing his descriptions of Europeus to the other groups and influenced the United States' founding fathers who looked to Enlightenment Era figures such as Linnaeus. His descriptions for the other three groups all include negative descriptions in regard to personality: lazy for *Africanus*, stingy for *Asiaticus*, or stubborn for *Americanus*, but his description for Europeus includes no negative descriptions. And though maybe an overlooked detail, Linnaeus' descriptions of how each group are governed is of importance as well.

Not only was the trans-Atlantic slave trade at its peak in the 1700s, but so too was the Enlightenment Era (Bristow, 2017). This period celebrated peoples who were governed by law,

as opposed to tradition, due to influence from the social contract theory and the work of philosophers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau and John Locke (Revolution and Ideology, 2019, 5:30-5:46; Friend, n.d.; Bertram, 2017; Tuckness, 2020). By describing the perceived ways that these groups of people were governed, Linnaeus essentially placed people of color below Europeans in terms of sophistication, therefore reinforcing the perceived hierarchy of humans and leading others to use these findings to justify their actions and beliefs – exemplified by the words of Thomas Jefferson.

With an understanding of the context in which Carl Linnaeus was writing, some argue that he himself was not racist, but was rather a product of his time and that what others did with this information is of no fault to him. Though he may not have set out to create the foundations of systemic racism, it is hard to argue that his work didn't influence it. Therefore, in modern society and as a community organization, we must review Carl Linnaeus' work in terms of the legacy it created and the consequences it has had. Though Carl Linnaeus brought a vital piece of scientific organization to the world, he also published unfounded information that became the foundation for discrimination of entire groups of people. By publishing these ideas and biases as scientific fact, his work was etched into history and has influenced global views on people of color.

As the Tulsa Garden Center moves forward to increase diversity, equity and inclusion within our organization, it is important that we take the time to review our choices that remain prominent today, even as simple as the naming of a building. Being a nonprofit that strives to make everyone feel welcome within Woodward Park's 45-acre campus, it is critical that we consider the effects those choices have on people, and that we are prepared to take action in order to rectify decisions that were made before knowing all of the facts.

Bibliography

Bertram, C. (2017, May 26). *Jean Jacques Rousseau*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rousseau/>

Bristow, W. (2017, August 29). *Enlightenment*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/enlightenment/>

Friend, C. (n.d.). *Social Contract Theory*. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

<https://iep.utm.edu/soc-cont/>

Garrod, J. Z. (2006, January 1). *A Brave Old World: An Analysis of Scientific Racism and BiDil®*.

PubMed Central (PMC). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2687899/>

Library of Congress. (n.d.). *The trans-Atlantic slave trade*. Lowcountry Digital History Initiative.

[http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/africanpassageslowcountryadapt/introductio
natlanticworld/trans_atlantic_slave_trade](http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/africanpassageslowcountryadapt/introductio
natlanticworld/trans_atlantic_slave_trade)

Linné, C. (1806). *Systema Naturae - English* (13th ed., Vol. 1). London: Lackington, Allen, and Co.

Müller-Wille, S. (2014, July 1). Race and History: Comments from an Epistemological Point of View. PubMed Central (PMC).

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4326670/>

Revolution and Ideology. (2019, December 23). *Scientific Racism - Carl Linnaeus* [Video].

YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=dD4IQ5p9yIc>

Solid Ground. (2013). *Definition & Analysis of Institutional Racism*. Racial Equity Tools.

<https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/institutionalracism.pdf>

Tuckness, A. (2020, October 6). *Locke's Political Philosophy*. Stanford Encyclopedia of

Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke-political/>

<https://www.tulsagardencenter.org/carl-linnaeus>