

Positioning the Field: STS Futures

STEVEN EPSTEIN¹

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

The essays that appear in this thematic collection of *ESTS*—by Ruha Benjamin, Adele Clarke, Janet Vertesi, Amit Prasad, Monica Casper, Michael Rodríguez-Muñiz, and Sheila Jasanoff—took their original form as plenary presentations at a [conference](#) organized by the [Science, Knowledge, and Technology \(SKAT\) Section](#) of the American Sociological Association. Dating back to the late 1980s, the SKAT Section promotes the sociology of science, knowledge, and technology, especially by organizing sessions at the ASA annual meeting, selecting and presenting awards for books and articles in our field, and publishing regular [newsletters](#). On August 21, 2015, more than 150 sociologists and STS scholars gathered in Chicago for the full-day conference. At least for those of us in the room, it was a historic occasion—the first such event in the more than quarter-century history of the section—and therefore a welcome opportunity to take stock of our past and look forward to consider a range of potential agendas for future scholarship and engagement. Our attention in part was trained on our own discipline as we envisioned how to deepen what I like the call the “SKATification” of sociology. Yet our imagined interlocutors likewise comprised the broader interdisciplinary field of STS, which most of us also call home.

Eight former SKAT section chairs—Susan Cozzens, Karin Knorr Cetina, Tom Gieryn, Michael Lynch, Jennifer Croissant, Kelly Moore, Daniel Kleinman, and Monica Casper—were in attendance, and as the current chair I had the honor of calling them to the stage for recognition alongside other section founders and pioneers such as Adele Clarke and Mary Frank Fox.

This isn't the place for a full telling of the history of the SKAT Section (see [Elizabeth Sweeney's account on the SKAT website](#)), which had grown from about 60 members as a “section-in-formation” in 1987 to just over 600 members by the time of the conference. But many

¹ Guest Editor of this *ESTS* Thematic Collection, and past chair of the Science, Knowledge, and Technology (SKAT) Section of the American Sociological Association. Email: s-epstein@northwestern.edu

readers of *ESTS* will enjoy the witty reflections offered by past chairs of the section in this [short video \(edited by Janet Vertesi\)](#), the screening of which kicked off an invigorating day of intellectual engagement and community-building. (If you're wondering about our curious acronym, you'll find much discussion in the video!)

As part of the day's activities, the organizing committee invited a total of eight speakers at different career stages to appear on two plenary panels. For the first, "Looking Backward and Forward," we asked senior scholars to reflect on the birth of the section and the trajectory of the field and discuss what excites them most now. Less senior scholars were asked to reflect on work that has inspired them and where they would like to see the field head. In the second panel, "Looking Outward and Inward," we asked the panelists to consider two sets of relationships: that between the sociology of science, knowledge, and technology and the interdisciplinary worlds of STS; and that between the sociology of science, knowledge, and technology and the rest of sociology. (We invited one person who is not a SKAT member or a card-carrying sociologist—Sheila Jasanoff—to appear on the second panel, specifically to include the perspective of a knowledgeable and sympathetic outsider-of-sorts whose work has been broadly influential.)`

In the current thematic collection of *ESTS*, which includes the revised versions of seven of those plenary talks, we have not preserved the two-panel structure, which no longer seemed as relevant. But readers should know that these articles do retain the more personal feel of the original talks, which by design stirred together autobiography, history, STS analysis, and a pinch of polemics to put forward brief, unique visions—manifestos, if you like—for future directions in STS, especially in its sociological variants. I am grateful to the authors for taking the time to further develop and clarify their remarks; to Daniel Kleinman for proposing *ESTS* as a home for these papers and as a venue for any conversations that they prompt; and to Katie Vann for her kind and efficient work in shepherding the papers through the production process. The result, I think, is a fascinating juxtaposition of histories, visions, critiques, and positionings:

- **Ruha Benjamin** calls on sociologists of science, knowledge, and technology and STS scholars to bring their critical tools to bear on urgent contemporary racial politics. Moving beyond the emphasis on the "molecularization" of race that has been so productive in recent scholarship, Benjamin proposes close attention to the entanglement of racial politics with technologies of surveillance and carceral administration in countries like the United States today.



Ruha Benjamin at the podium, August 21, 2015. Photo by Kenneth Rhem.

- **Adele Clarke** provides a sweeping and very personal overview of the development of the field, emphasizing the political currents and social movements that have animated it over the years. She then uses that history to inform a call for increased consideration of pedagogy in STS; clearer articulation of theory-methods packages in our scholarship; and expanded work at the intersections among technoscience, gender, race, and (post)coloniality.
- **Janet Vertesi** argues for a thoroughgoing engagement with the realm of the digital. As she explores digital field sites, examines digital methods, and proposes new digital interventions, Vertesi exhorts STS scholars and sociologists to “seize ‘the digital’ as an essential site of empirical and methodological exploration.”
- **Amit Prasad** blends autobiography with findings from an empirical study of embryonic stem cell therapy in India to inform a postcolonial critique of STS in an era of transnational technoscience. He calls for careful consideration and deconstruction of the “discursive contextures” that reproduce the Western/non-Western divide in analyses of science, the social, and the self.
- **Monica Casper** examines her own trajectory as an engaged scholar at the interstices of feminism, biomedicine studies, and sociology. She interweaves her biography with an analysis of how transdisciplinary scholarship provides a vantage point for “resculpting the edges” of the traditional disciplines, and she

closes with reflections on the meaning of scholarly participation in the public sphere.

- **Michael Rodríguez-Muñiz** considers the history of “bridgework” connecting critical studies of race and STS. Drawing on his own research on the production and circulation of racial demographic knowledge, Rodríguez-Muñiz urges STS scholars to engage in a more sustained way with the materials that undergird practices of racial domination.
- Finally, **Sheila Jasanoff** stitches together personal memoir and institutional histories of STS (in its multiple instantiations) to consider key turning points, and to call attention to those accomplishments that “an STS enterprise standing resolutely outside of disciplinary power structures can achieve.” Jasanoff considers the pathways to securing the place of STS in the academy while also endorsing the “parallel strategy” of critical work that reconnects STS to social and political activities outside the orbit of the modern university.



Sheila Jasanoff at the podium, August 22, 2015. Photo by Kenneth Rhem.

I believe these seven commentaries are both provocative and timely. The successes of STS have prompted the need for careful consideration of where the field is heading or should move—not to mention just what we think we mean when we refer to “the field.” These essays, while not exhausting the possibilities of such positioning and self-positioning, offer a

range of potential answers—or at least point to new questions. While the resonances across them are noteworthy, I also find their divergences both instructive and appropriate: I see no virtue in hammering out a party line. Yet only through conversation can our different imaginings articulate in generative ways. I and the editors of *ESTS* look forward to continuing that conversation through readers' responses to this set of reflections.