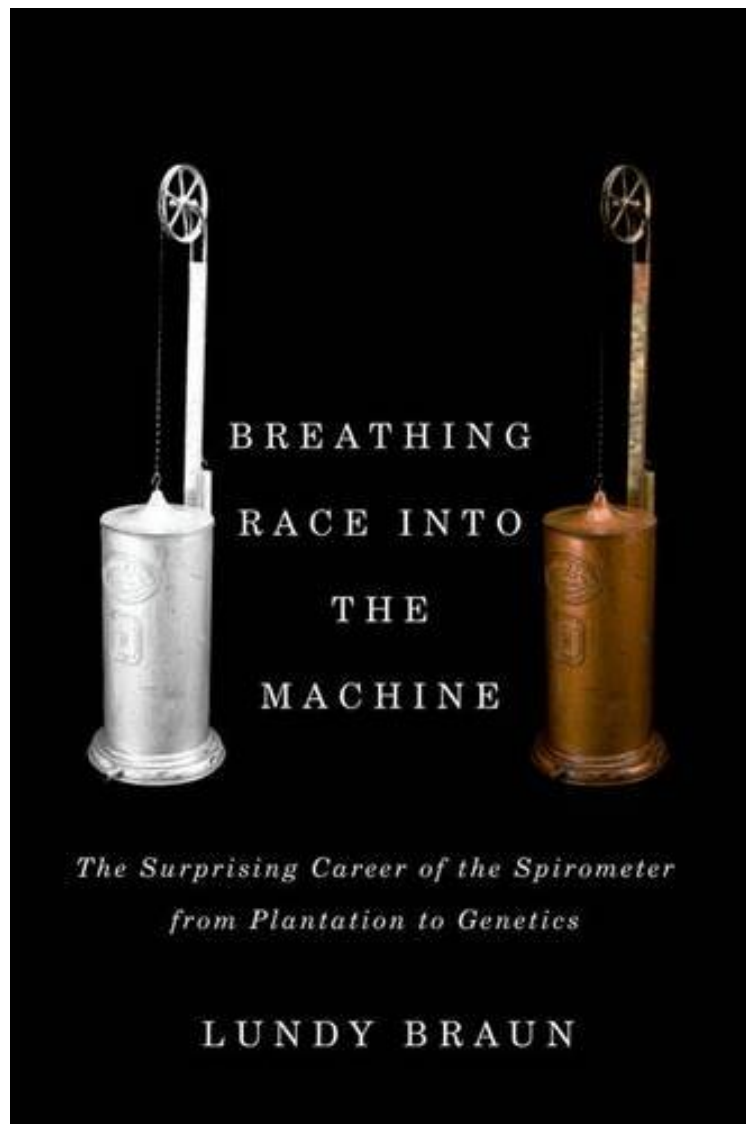


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## Breathing Race into the Machine: The Surprising Career of the Spirometer from Plantation to Genetics

*Lundy Braun*

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**Lundy Braun : Breathing Race into the Machine: The Surprising Career of the Spirometer from Plantation to Genetics** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Breathing Race into the Machine: The Surprising Career of the Spirometer from Plantation to Genetics:

7 of 9 people found the following review helpful. an important contribution to several fieldsBy Troy DusterLundy Brauns manuscript, *Breathing Race into the Machine*, is a significant achievement at once a major contribution to several fields of inquiry, including but not limited to the History of Science, Epidemiology, the Sociology of Knowledge, Medical Sociology / Medical Anthropology, and Race and Ethnic Theory. Moreover, the chapters are written with meticulous care and attention to historical and technical detail, but without sacrificing lucidity. Braun manages to engage the reader with a fluid unfolding story-telling narrative. Any historical account of a scope that covers two centuries must find a balance between situated context and linear progression. The author has admirably accomplished this balance. To wit, by opening the book with a description of how the Industrial Revolution ushered unbridled havoc on workers health (thereby threatening productivity) in the early 19th century, she sets the stage for our understanding of how a new machine that promised precision measurement of workers capacity could dovetail so seamlessly with a need to assess the impact of horrendous working conditions in the coal mines. This provided the larger context for what she would later explain as a justification for the indelible and enduring relationship between difference and hierarchy in measuring lung capacity. More important, Braun documents how the social, economic and political fabric of each period was interwoven into the science of measurement. This theme deftly carries throughout the full manuscript, and will establish *Measuring Life* as a landmark contribution to the social studies of science. Another set of issues will make this attractive to scholars and students of Epidemiology and Public Health, and will ultimately penetrate the curriculum of medical schools. This is because it uncovers and reveals that what has been thought of as neutral measurement of human lung capacity (that has otherwise been characterized as technically unassailable) actually has imbedded in its accounting infrastructure an adjustment bias that - without warrant - assumes racial hierarchy. This in turn contributes to the reification of racial categories in that it has disguised how much those differences were detected not by inquiry, but lodged in the measurement apparatus.0 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy GUSTAVO GOMEZGood

In the antebellum South, plantation physicians used a new medical device the spirometer to show that lung volume and therefore vital capacity were supposedly less in black slaves than in white citizens. At the end of the Civil War, a large study of racial difference employing the spirometer appeared to confirm the finding, which was then applied to argue that slaves were unfit for freedom. What is astonishing is that this example of racial thinking is anything but a historical relic. In *Breathing Race into the Machine*, science studies scholar Lundy Braun traces the little-known history of the spirometer to reveal the social and scientific processes by which medical instruments have worked to naturalize racial and ethnic differences, from Victorian Britain to today. Routinely a factor in clinical diagnoses, preemployment physicals, and disability estimates, spirometers are often race corrected, typically reducing normal values for African Americans by 15 percent. An unsettling account of the pernicious effects of racial thinking that divides people along genetic lines, *Breathing Race into the Machine* helps us understand how race enters into science and shapes medical research and practice.

"*Breathing Race into the Machine* brilliantly tracks the remarkable story lasting to the present of how correcting for race in measures of lung capacity became unremarkable scientific practice. This eye-opening account demonstrates that precision technologies and statistical techniques that supposedly measure biological differences accurately can mask racial myths and wreak devastating consequences for black peoples health and legal rights. Essential reading for everyone concerned about the impact of race on science and technology." Dorothy Roberts, University of Pennsylvania, author of *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-create Race in the Twenty-first Century*" Lundy Braun illuminates how the development of a new machine to measure lung capacity could begin with a benign purpose to assess the impact of working conditions in the coal mines in the early 19th century, but would later morph into a justification for the putative relationship between difference and hierarchy that has remained intact for nearly two centuries. Braun documents how the social, economic and political fabric of each period is interwoven into the science of measurement a theme that deftly carries throughout the book, and will establish *Breathing Race into the Machine* as a landmark contribution to the social studies of science." Troy Duster, author of *Backdoor to Eugenics*" In *Breathing Race into the Machine*, Lundy Braun powerfully reinvigorates our understanding of how racial formation happens. An incisive, considered study of a seemingly conventional physiology instrument, this book reveals science as a foundational feature of the social construction of race. We create our own difference engines, but Brauns astute book reminds us that we do not have to remain captive to them." Alondra Nelson, author of *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination*