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Andrew S. Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. xiv + 310 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl) ISBN 978-1-4214-0150-8. \$29.95 U.S. (pb) ISBN 978-1-4214-0965-8 forthcoming.

Review essay by Madeleine Dobie, Columbia University

*The Anatomy of Blackness* is a major contribution to the history of racial thought, and in particular to the study of its scientific dimensions. Through wide-ranging readings of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travel narratives and ethnographic and scientific texts, Andrew Curran explores how European discourses on skin color and human diversity took shape in the age of Enlightenment science and colonial slavery. Though it is focused on France, the book also considers Iberian, British, and German sources, charting the transfer of ideas across borders, languages, and literary genres. Taking issue with “rigid genealogies and single legacy histories” (p. xi), it characterizes the definition of blackness as a “shifting mosaic” of diverse and often contradictory ideas (p. 6).

At the center of the study is a challenge to the widely shared assumption that the category of race rests on principles of immutable difference and radical alterity. Curran shows persuasively that eighteenth-century scientists and philosophers predominantly accepted the monogenist vision of human origins articulated by the Christian church, though they understood human unity in secular rather than theological terms. He also affirms that the division of mankind into fixed taxonomic categories proposed by Carl Linnaeus in the 1758 edition of *Systema naturae* was rejected by many of his contemporaries, not least the Comte de Buffon, who argued instead for the fluidity of human “varieties” formed and transformed by climate and environment. The point of this rereading is not, however, to defend Enlightenment science and philosophy against the criticism that it introduced racial and indeed racist thought. Rather, Curran shows that environmentalist arguments were rapidly combined with accounts of deep-seated physiological difference. He also notes that arguments for the unity of the species and the plasticity of human subgroups did not prove to be incompatible with acceptance of the regime of Atlantic slavery.

As the book’s title suggests, Curran’s point of departure is not the question of “race” per se, but rather the establishment of the dark skin of people of African origin as a scientific problem. He considers why seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European thinkers became interested in “blackness” and what claims they made about its causes and implications. The story begins in Paris in 1618 when the celebrated anatomist Jean Riolan conducted the first known experiment using dissection and a microscope to identify the causes of black skin. It follows the progress of this inquiry into the second half of the eighteenth century, when the German anatomist Johann-Friedrich Meckel observed a blackish hue in Africans’ brain tissue and his French counterpart, Claude-Nicolas Le Cat, discovered an elemental black fluid that suffused sperm, glands and membranes. The decision to adopt the skin color debate as a point of departure reflects Curran’s concern with exploring the historical form of arguments rather than treating race as a preconstituted theme. In the book’s introduction he explains that his method will be to recreate the reading practices of an imagined eighteenth-century French reader by starting from sources, such as travelers’ accounts of Africa and the reports of scientists, rather than from concepts or questions (p. 18).

I respect and to some extent agree with this approach and with the scholarly and political principles that undergird it. But I also think that it raises some significant questions. To what extent is it possible to break free of retrospective constructions of race influenced by contemporary social and political preoccupations? If a loose idea of race is not our starting point, how do we know what we are looking for or which representations and discourses fit together? For example, why should we assume a connection between Africanist travel writing and experiments conducted under the auspices of natural science? And finally, is the problem of anachronism as clear cut as it at first seems to be? I will come back to these questions after considering Curran's arguments in greater detail.

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The main narrative thread of *Anatomy of Blackness* retraces the history of two interwoven ideas about African phenotype. Curran shows, on the one hand, that starting in the 1750s a consensus began to build that black skin and the various characteristics associated with it are inherited, though the root cause is environmental and therefore subject to change over time. At the same time, he documents the rise of the view that black skin arises from the degeneration of originary whiteness, i.e. that it is a reaction to unfavorable environmental conditions (23). This idea was first formulated by Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis in *Vénus physique* (1745), a treatise devoted to the science of human reproduction. Defending an "epigenist" theory of reproduction, Maupertuis attacks the "preformationist" arguments circulating in the period, proposing instead that procreation is contingent on the mixing of egg and sperm and requires contributions from both male and female partners. In the second part of the text Maupertuis considered the implications of albinism, or more specifically the condition of the black albino or "nègre blanc" (23), for this theory. He notes that although numerous cases of black albinism had been studied there were no known cases of "blancs nègres." Taking stock of this point he posits that humans were all originally white and that albinism is a reversion to this inaugural state. Maupertuis's hypothesis was to have an enduring influence. Subsequent thinkers followed in his footsteps by arguing that humans were originally white and that other skin tones were signs of degeneration. The history of this idea makes fascinating reading, and Curran's account is both detailed and erudite. But perhaps a more pointed analysis of the symptomatic nature of Maupertuis's text would have brought the stakes of this argument more clearly into focus. Why didn't Maupertuis or his contemporaries notice that albinism also affects white populations? What factors predisposed them to overlook this fact and to enshrine whiteness as the unmarked norm from which other skin tones represent a deviation?

As the book's title suggests, one of Curran's main objectives is to reconstruct the relationship between the establishment of blackness as a topic of research and the establishment of anatomy as an authoritative discourse. He shows that from the early seventeenth century physicians used dissection as means of determining the causes of blackness. In the initial phases of this inquiry, causality was presumed to be skin deep. Blackness was discerned to reside in the "reticulum mucosum" or "Malpighian layer," named for the eminent Italian physician, Marcello Malpighi. The late 1750s, however, ushered in a "deeper, organ based approach" (p. 125). The German anatomist Meckel studied the color of brain tissue, while the French naturalist Le Cat identified a black fluid dubbed "ethiops" that permeated glands, membranes and sperm (p. 126). In reviewing these various approaches, Curran emphasizes that the very period that saw the ascendancy of Buffon's environmentalist, anti-taxonomic views also witnessed the proliferation of attempts to show that human diversity is located at the deepest levels of bodily structure and thus not subject to rapid change. The study of the brain, in particular, called forth claims about the relationship between black skin and intellect or moral character.

The emphasis that the book places on anatomy has the valuable effect of focusing our attention on the central place of the body in race science and anthropology. Curran in effect outlines a circular process whereby African bodies were perceived to be different and assigned a different place in the social order while, at the same time, the causes of social and cultural difference were sought inside the body. One of the book's most compelling sections is a re-reading of Book XV, Chapter V of *De l'esprit des lois*, the

famous passage in which Montesquieu offers an ironic summary of the “true causes” of the Atlantic slave trade. In his reading of this widely interpreted chapter, Curran breaks new ground by emphasizing the extent to which Montesquieu identifies European perceptions of the African body as a leading cause of prejudice and slavery (pp. 132ff). “These slaves are black from head to toe and; and they have such flat noses that it is almost impossible to pity them. It is hardly to be believed that God, who is such a wise Being, should place a soul, especially a good soul, in so black a body,” Montesquieu writes, capturing the phobic character of racism.

Another highlight of the book, from my standpoint, is its reading of Voltaire, whom one might call a leading example of racial phobia. Curran shows that the philosopher’s polygenist position, established early in his career, was a relative anomaly in the largely monogenist environment of the 1750s and 1760s. Voltaire, notably, contested the claim that “*nègre-blancisme*” was a sign of originary whiteness, citing the existence of the *reticulum mucosum* as evidence that there are fixed racial groups. But Curran also suggests that it is wrong to cut Voltaire out of the narrative of Enlightenment life science or to characterize his views as a retrograde exception to the more progressive tendencies of the age (pp. 148-49). Rather, he proposes that Voltaire be seen as one of a cohort of thinkers whose contrasting views contributed to the coalescence of the view that physiological variations are tightly interwoven with social and cultural differences. Voltaire’s views on human diversity seem all the more anomalous when we consider the opposition to slavery that he voices in works such as *Candide*. As Curran suggests, this apparent contradiction reflects both the heterogeneity of racial thinking and the internal tensions of eighteenth-century French abolitionism. He explores these tensions further in the final section of the book, which shows that by the end of the century natural science was being marshaled in defense of both sides of the antislavery debate.

*The Anatomy of Blackness* brings both depth and insight to the study of Enlightenment science and anthropology, but it also raises a number of methodological questions. As I noted earlier, Curran effectively advocates disconnecting the various issues conventionally gathered under the rubric of race with the goal of seeing these questions afresh, through the lens of eighteenth-century discourses. Though at first glance this approach seems eminently reasonable, I am not in the end convinced that we can in fact disaggregate race in this way or that the eighteenth-century context requires or invites us to do so. I also have doubts about the viability of a discourse-based approach, which I have questioned in my own work on the cultural imprint of slavery.

The questions raised in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe about African anatomical and cultural specificity were framed by the context of Atlantic slavery. Anatomists were interested not in skin color per se, but rather in the causes of black skin, stigmatized by its association with the slave trade. The examination of skin color was, in a sense, always already interwoven with issues of identity and difference, anatomy and moral character, heredity and environment. As scholars including Jean-Frédéric Schaub have shown, these various issues were brought together at the very beginning of Atlantic world history, in the age of conquest and reconquest of the late fifteenth century.<sup>[1]</sup> Though theology, philosophy and the natural and social sciences later challenged and/or affirmed these interconnections, the fundamental linkages have remained in play and still reverberate in contemporary conceptions of race. Imperatives to historicize race and avoid projecting modern ideas often obscure both these continuities and the enduring referential messiness of race, which is not a single concept, but rather a protean compound made up of the various elements mentioned above.

Black skin emerged as an anthropological and scientific question in the orbit of Atlantic slavery, but to this point it should be added that this colonial context was not strongly represented in French culture until the final decades of the eighteenth century. I have argued, in fact, that the colonies, with their problematic associations of slavery and metissage, were subject to a diffuse process of cultural repression. This pattern of avoidance makes it difficult to study eighteenth-century ideas about “blackness” solely on the basis of the discourses (natural science, travel narratives) in which it is

examined. We also have to consider how dimensions of social and political history that were not widely represented helped to define ideas about anatomy and human diversity. As the scholars associated with Subaltern studies have advocated, we have to read between the lines of authoritative discourses such as science and travel writing.

My principal criticism of *Anatomy of Blackness* is that it does not really take stock of this framing context and, as a result, falls into a number of problematic assumptions and conflation. By foregrounding discourses, what Curran calls the “textualization” of Africans (p. ix), the book conveys the impression that skin color and the difference embodied by Africans were prominent subjects of discussion in eighteenth-century France. Yet what he describes, for the most part, are fairly isolated works, sometimes the only passage of a much larger work to focus on this question. To say that Pierre Barrère’s 1741 *Dissertation sur la cause physique de la couleur des nègres* “ushered in a new era” of scientific research, for example, seems to me to overstate the public profile of this relatively obscure text (p. 122). In a couple of sections of the book, passages that are not explicitly about Africa or the colonial world are read as if they were. For example, Curran reads Montesquieu’s formulation of his famous account of the deleterious physiological and social effects of hot weather in Books XIV-XVI of *De l’esprit des lois* as a meditation on Africa(ns), though Montesquieu explicitly ties it to a discussion of Asian despotism (pp. 134-37).

A related problem is the tendency to conflate narratives about Africa with representations of the colonial world. Curran approaches the narratives of missionaries such as Jean-Baptiste Labat and Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix (an interesting case since Charlevoix spent only a month in Saint-Domingue and composed his account on the basis of a manuscript penned by a colleague and Navy Department records) as extensions of the longstanding tradition of Africanist travel writing and ethnography. He speaks of “Africanist discourse” and of the representation of “Africans” even when commenting on works about the Antilles. On one level this choice seems justified. Men and women enslaved in European colonies were often born in Africa, and it is important to acknowledge this fact. Moreover, as Curran explains, the concept of “Africanist discourse” has been deployed by Christopher L. Miller to capture the diffusion of stereotyped views of Africans and people of African descent.[2] This said, a greater effort could be made to differentiate the specific context of the colonial Americas, a world whose social and cultural horizons were shaped by the norms of the plantation and by the interplay of European, African, and Amerindian cultures. *Anatomy of Blackness* makes relatively little reference to the substantial body of recent work, for example Srinivas Aravamudan’s *Tropicopolitans*, Doris Garraway’s *The Libertine Colony*, and Megan Vaughan’s *Creating the Creole Island*, that has been devoted to these processes of creolization and to the first examples of what Edouard Glissant named as “Caribbean discourse.”[3]

I suspect that Curran uses the term “Africans” when speaking of the populations of Caribbean colonies because he doesn’t want to translate the term *nègres*, which he defends the use on grounds of historical accuracy, with the English word negroes (p. x). This is certainly understandable, since while the two terms ran roughly parallel in eighteenth-century letters, the English word has a longer history and a supplementary association with U.S. segregation. “Africans,” however, fails to capture the meaning of the word *nègres*, which signals the conjuncture of slavery and the diasporization of Africa. As Simone Delesalle and Lucette Valensi explain in a 1972 article, by the 1650s the word *nègre* had become more prevalent in French dictionary entries than related terms such as “Maures” or “Éthiopiens.”[4] It encompassed terms that carried specific geographic and cultural meanings and replaced them with a general principle of subordination on the basis of skin color and heredity. The definition of “blackness,” as Curran himself argues (p. x), is a question raised primarily in conjunction with the ascendancy of this term.

Until the 1760s, when the social/demographic vocabulary used in relation to the French Caribbean became more complex and more nuanced, French writing on colonial society generally organized the

population into three classes: *nègres/esclaves*, *sauvages* and *blancs/habitants/Français*. Interestingly, most of the ethnographic content of this literature focused on Amerindians or *sauvages*, presumably because they formed a recognizable cultural/geographic group. By contrast, writing on *nègres/esclaves* generally concerned slaves' role in plantation agriculture or matters of management and security. There are, however, some exceptions to this rule, and what is striking about these passages is that when writers such as the Dominican missionary Labat attempted to describe the mores, behavior, religious attitudes, and character traits of slaves they quickly reverted to Africanist rhetoric. That is to say, they commented on the different characteristics of various groups—Congos, Mine, Arada, Mandingues—though they formulated these differences in terms of potential value for the slave trade. *Anatomy of Blackness* discusses this tendency in several places. Curran rightly notes, for example, that French writers often viewed enslaved Africans as members of cultural groups defined by their perceived utility. But more could be said about the various translations that underlie these descriptions, notably the re-conversion of *nègres/esclaves* into Africans and the replacement of Africanist ethnography with its mercantile pastiche. The elision of these translations leads Curran to characterize colonial ethnography in surprising ways. Building on a point made by Catherine Gallagher, he suggests that colonial ethnography is not purely fictitious: it is mode of knowledge of the other that is born of the need to know (p. 65). Though there is no doubt that slave traders, travelers, and missionaries were familiar with African societies and at times used this knowledge to their advantage, I want to question the idea that we should read ethnographic generalizations about (enslaved) Africans' propensity for lying or stealing as betokening "real cultural knowledge" (ibid.).

My final set of comments concerns the relationship between science and colonialism. Over the last fifteen years, scholars working on a range of periods and geographic contexts have documented the colonial roots of fields such as botany, ecology, and tropical agriculture. Race science, on the other hand, seems to have followed a different trajectory and to have been much less directly informed by colonial evidence. With the lone exception of Pierre Barrère, who served as a physician in French Guyana, the figures discussed in *The Anatomy of Blackness*—Maupertuis, Buffon, De Pauw, Le Cat, Meckel—were all "armchair philosophers" who never set foot either in Africa or the Americas and who based their arguments on the testimony of travelers or on recitations of each others' work. Consequently, questions that could have readily been resolved by reference to colonial experience were still being debated by European scientists well into the 1750s. There is indeed some irony in the fact that metropolitan thinkers were busily theorizing originary whiteness while colonial administrators were attempting to control (what they saw as) the darkening effects of metissage.

At one point in the book, Curran states that slavery constituted the main source of scientific evidence in discussions of skin color and related issues (p. ix). I think that this is both true and inaccurate. As I noted earlier, the scientific study of blackness took shape in a context structured by the racial order of the colonial plantation but, at the same time, inflected by the relative invisibility of this universe. The traces of this duality can be read in the perplexing silences and disjunctures of cultural history. As Curran notes on several occasions, naturalists' writing on phenotype, heredity, and environment seems surprisingly apolitical: strangely divorced from the brutal realities of colonial slavery (pp. 87, 227). He is perfectly correct, but I feel that this point could have been developed and placed in its full context, i.e. the disjuncture between slavery and science and the cultural repression of slavery on which this disconnect rested.

The questions that I raise here do not by any means invalidate the undertaking of *The Anatomy of Blackness*, which on the whole succeeds in organizing a substantial body of original research into a perceptive set of arguments. Curran has certainly gone further than anyone else in identifying the main currents of and contributors to French race science in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. His lucid and well-paced account of debates over monogenism and polygenism, environmentalism and heredity, fixed races and fluid varieties will guide scholarly inquiry in this field for decades to come. In a broader sense, the book participates in the important collective project of developing what, until the last

decade or so, was a relatively neglected field. Along with a number of other recent studies it represents an important contribution to the study of how colonization, slavery, and racism coexisted with the age of Enlightenment.

## NOTES

[1] Jean-Frédéric Schaub, *Lois, justice, coutume: Amérique et Europe latines, 16e-19e siècle* (Paris : Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2005); and "Oroonoko, prince et esclave": *roman colonial de l'incertitude* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008).

[2] Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness. Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

[3] Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688-1804* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999); Doris Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005); and Megan Vaughan *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005).

[4] "Le Mot 'Nègre' dans les dictionnaires français d'Ancien régime. Histoire et lexicographie," *Langue française* 15 (1972), pp. 79-104.

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