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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 Jeremy L. Caradonna, University of Alberta.

In the late eighteenth century, the German naturalist and proto-anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840), borrowing terminology from a colleague, Christoph Meiners, drew on anatomy, studies of skin pigmentation, and the incipient science of measuring skulls to argue for the existence of five discrete, color-coded races: the Caucasian (or white) race, the Mongolian (or yellow) race (which, according to Meiners, included the Jews), the Malayan (or brown) race, the Ethiopian (or black) race, and the American (or red) race. Blumenbach argued that skulls from the Southern Caucasus region best exemplified the white race—the original, archetypal race from which all other races had “degenerated.” Although Blumenbach rejected slavery and the notion that his categories implied a socio-racial hierarchy, it was clear that the “Caucasians” (beginning with Adam and Eve) were the true measuring stick of humanity.

Sound familiar?

Blumenbach’s racial categories would go on to have a massive impact on the scientific racism of the nineteenth century, and indeed his color-coded categories, along with the long-antiquated term “Caucasian,” still play a prominent role in our increasingly hazy conceptions of “race.” Even if anthropologists have more or less abandoned the term in favor of the more fluid and cultural category of “ethnicity,” we still inhabit a world profoundly affected by racism, racial inequality, and racial stereotypes. The notion of a “yellow” or a “red” race is heavy baggage that we carry with us from early modernity.

In his beautifully crafted and intricately argued book, Andrew S. Curran provides the historical background to understanding modern racism and racial categories. In short, he shows that racialists such as Meiners and Blumenbach drew on well over a century’s worth of research and debates on equally dubious racial science. *The Anatomy of Blackness* is, as the title suggests, concerned primarily with the discursive “creation” of black bodies in the Enlightenment era (and especially in France). But as the author acknowledges early on, discussions of “blackness” always related to “the definition of whiteness” (p. 6), since Europeans virtually always defined themselves relative to other—in their eyes, lesser—races. Curran also helps us understand the way in which anatomists, men of letters, slavers, and planters drew on natural history, travel literature, and proto-ethnography to justify and rationalize chattel slavery in the colonial New World. Curran is very clear and successful in his argument that the discursive construction of the *nègre* always contained an element of power—that is, scientific discussions of race, crania, and skin pigmentation were never neutral and were invariably infused with conceptions of European superiority: “Put bluntly, this book seeks to underscore the relationship between representations and the brutal lives to which Africans were consigned in European colonies” (p. 28).

One of the great strengths of this book is that Curran is careful to show the range of viewpoints that existed on the race question in the eighteenth century. The thinkers of the Enlightenment never adhered to a consensus on the ontological status of the black body, although the same assumptions, categories, and preoccupations appeared in different schools of thought. Curran argues that at least

three views on the origin of blackness co-existed for much of the eighteenth century: 1) an older monogenesis, rooted in the Bible, that assumed that all human groupings (including black Africans) derived from common origins; 2) a newer, science-based monogenesis, shaped by Pierre Barrère and the Comte de Buffon, that used proto-biology, climate, environment, and a dash of humoral theory to argue that black bodies had “degenerated” over time and that beneath the pathological black body was an inner (archetypal, true, non-degenerate) whiteness; 3) polygenesis, backed most famously by Voltaire, that departed radically from the Biblical tradition and argued that black Africans were an entirely different *species*. All of these views appeared in a prize contest (1739-1741) at the Academy of Bordeaux on the “physical causes of blackness and African hair” and the “cause of their degeneration,” although the updated theory of monogenesis appears to have had the widest currency amongst scholars.[1] The upshot of all this debate on the *nègre* was that, over time, the apparent differences between the races became hardened, the black body was essentialized (and defined by non-blacks), and Africans were seen as hopelessly pathological, dishonest, unintelligent, child-like, violent, and hypersexed. Although not all anatomists supported slavery, those involved in the slave trade and the colonial economy never hesitated to draw on (and sometimes even produced their own) natural histories that justified the enslavement of black Africans.

In terms of the historiography, *The Anatomy of Blackness* builds off of Christopher L. Miller’s *Blank Darkness* and *The French Atlantic Triangle*, Sue Peabody’s “*There Are No Slaves in France*,” Marcel Dorigny and Bernard Gainot’s *La Société des amis des noirs*, the works of Laurent Dubois, and a host of other historians and literary scholars who have studied slavery and representations of black Africans—all of whom are cited by Curran.[2] However, the true insight and innovation of Curran’s book, vis-à-vis these other books, lies in its focus on the discursive creation of blackness and its effectiveness in justifying slavery. Although their names do not appear in the notes of this book, *The Anatomy of Blackness* also shares certain affinities with Stephen Greenblatt’s *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* and Joyce Chaplain’s *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500-1676*. [3] Both works take up the subject of bodies, the New World, and discourses of power. Likewise, Curran is interested in how the experience of the French colonial empire became a proving ground for evolving conceptions of human anatomy, race, climate, environment, and slavery. The works of Greenblatt, Chaplain, and now Curran tell us relatively little about the mechanics of slavery and colonialism in the New World, but they go a long way in helping us understand the intellectual culture that undergirded, rationalized, and facilitated the conquest of the Americas and the subsequent implementation of a slave-based economy—in short, how the horrors of the New World became “thinkable” by Europeans. Finally, Curran’s book adds to a growing historiography—too voluminous to cite—that takes aim at the idea of an unequivocally progressive Enlightenment. Some of the thinkers that Curran cites were open *nègrophiles* or at least critical of slavery (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Diderot, Rousseau, Helvétius, Mirabeau, Raynal, Montesquieu, Blumenbach, Grégoire, Voltaire, Condorcet), whereas many others were ambivalent about or even in favor of chattel slavery (Mercier, Buffon, Le Cat, Linnaeus, Malouet, Rousselot de Surgy, Labat, Virey; Napoleon, of course, reinstated slavery in the French Caribbean and fought the democratic uprising in Saint-Domingue). Yet even the anti-slavery camp often supported racist ideas and taxonomies that a Whiggish historian of the Enlightenment would have difficulty explaining away. The bottom line here is that even the “progressives” of the Enlightenment would be considered horrible racists in our own day. But who is really surprised by that? Curran and others have had to refute the textbookish interpretation of the Enlightenment for the simple reason that scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries produced a simplistic, cherry-picked, saccharine image of the period.

The only substantive criticism that I would have of the book is that Curran spends surprisingly little time discussing people of mixed-race heritage. He does include a lengthy discussion of albinos in chapter two and the way in which they challenged black and white categories (and altogether beguiled the anatomists of the day), but he says curiously little about *métissage* . What was the ontological status of an individual who was half black-African and half Franco-French? Where did they fit in Linnaeus’ or

Blumenbach's taxonomies? How were they conceptualized and treated? The mixed planter Julien Raimond makes a cameo appearance but Curran does not tell us about his place in the racial hierarchy. I was also surprised to see the absence of the Chevalier de Saint-George (1745-1799) from this analysis. Born to a former Wolof slave and an ethnically French plantation owner, the "black Mozart" settled in France and eventually became one of the most renowned composers and musicians of the late eighteenth century as well as a celebrated fencer. Did the Chevalier de Saint-George—who was well known to intellectuals and social elites throughout France—complicate the racist notion that blacks were incapable of creative genius? Was the Chevalier even considered "black"? Given all of this, it would have been worthwhile to dedicate a bit more space to analyzing the anatomical and cultural debates surrounding biracial French subjects.

But these are minor quibbles. In the end, Curran has produced a powerful argument about how Europeans defined not only Africans but themselves in the early modern period; about how depictions of the "other" furnished slavers and planters with the necessary intellectual justifications for slavery; about how natural science has the (frightening) ability to define both body and soul.

NOTES

[1] I discuss this and related competitions in my book, *The Enlightenment in Practice: Academic Prize Contests and Intellectual Culture in France, 1670-1794* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), chapter five.

[2] Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001); Sue Peabody, *"There are No Slaves in France": The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Marcel Dorigny and Bernard Gainot, *La Société des amis des noirs, 1788-1799: Contribution à l'histoire de l'abolition de l'esclavage* (Paris: UNESCO, 1998).

[3] Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992); and Joyce E. Chaplin, *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500-1676* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

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