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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 Carolyn Vellenga Berman, The New School.

Andrew Curran's remarkable book examines European representations of the "nègre" as a distinct type of human in the age of Enlightenment. Although this is not a wholly new subject matter, Curran's approach is distinctive. By taking seriously the scientific methods of the anatomists who contributed many of the supposed facts of blackness in the eighteenth century (and earlier) as well the mixed aspirations of the *philosophes* who interpreted them, Curran uncovers not only the violence but also the "quasi-logic" of discourses that have long puzzled modern readers – or simply struck us as daft (p. 22). This enables him to provide a fresh and wholly persuasive account of the intersection of science and slavery in the Enlightenment.

To reveal the peculiar contributions of anatomical science to representations of the *nègre*, Curran conducts an anatomical study of the corpse (or rather, corpus) of a wide range of written materials. As he explains, "to understand a complex *whole*, one is obliged to extract, dissect, and consider the viscera that compose it" (p. 28). One of the marvels of this book is Curran's success in accounting for the complexity he discovers not only in reference works and compilations but also in the works of individual *philosophes* as well as in the field as a whole.

As Curran reminds us early on, "much is obscured" in dictionary definitions, and his careful exploration of each wayward element displays the disturbing richness of what he finds there (p. 10). The gendered article of *le nègre*, for instance, signals how the term "evoked a subjected male human whose very essence was associated with slavery," even as it masked the discrepancies between depictions of individuals (for example in novels) and generalizations about the group (as in natural history texts) (p. 10). But Curran is not merely content to explore the sedimented logic of grammatical constructions. What he excels at unearthing and exposing is the sedimented history of (quasi-) facts. Take, for example, what Curran describes as the "astonishingly race-based definition of the *nègre* and what might be called body-based *négritude*" offered up authoritatively as scientific knowledge in an 1787 issue of the *Bibliothèque universelle des dames*: "One could say that a *nègre* is [a *nègre*] in all the parts of his body, except for the teeth. All the organs carry the mark of this color to a lesser or greater degree; the medullary substance of the brain is blackish and this color dominates more or less in diverse parts of this organ, the semen, the blood, etc." [1] How did these ideas of body-based human differences come to be accepted as scientific knowledge, and how did they coexist with ideas about the nature--and the natural rights--of *l'homme*? Curran's book sets out to tell this complex story.

In order to do so intelligibly, Curran offers his own authoritative account grounded in a survey of the corpus available to an eighteenth-century (French) reader. As he explains, "to help readers understand the textual representation of the *nègre* in eighteenth-century thought, this book replicates the reading practices of an imagined eighteenth-century reader" (p. 18). This means, first of all, that he must venture far afield from the set of texts produced by eighteenth-century French writers. He does this

from his first chapter, "Paper Trails: Writing the African, 1450-1750," which surveys a wide range of travel accounts and ethnographies available to readers, regardless of date of publication or language of origin. Curran insists that early writings by travelers to Africa "continued to play a critical role in the overall understanding of Africa" in the eighteenth century" (p. 31). A familiarity with these accounts is thus essential to comprehending eighteenth-century developments in anatomy and natural history. After all, only against this backdrop can we see just what is new--and often "nefarious" (p. 223). The survey of early travelogues, for instance, gives us "insight into a time before the presentation of the 'nègre' was dominated by the overwhelmingly powerful modes of interpretation that blossomed along with the Caribbean plantation" (p. 32). With this in mind, Curran begins with early travel accounts published in Portuguese, Italian, Spanish, and Latin, while noting the complex origins and histories of these texts, including, for example, slave trader authors who became African ambassadors, the Arabic-language dictation of a "captured" Moroccan ambassador, and the crucial importance of translations into English as well as French (p. 36).

This wide-angle lens on (French) Enlightenment discourse gives us a fascinating library of pertinent texts. But we do not read from the collection pell-mell, as late eighteenth-century readers might have done. It is, rather, classified by type as well as chronology and organized into a narrative. French Africanist discourse, for example, emerges from a larger European discourse as a result of French involvement in colonial slavery. Just as English and French slave trading expeditions remained "irregular" until the 1670s, so too did English and French "encounters with--and representations of--Africans;" when they established Caribbean colonies dependent upon slave labor, however, they generated a "new type of Africanist discourse derived primarily from the Caribbean context" (p. 51). This new discourse fostered a "breakdown of ethnographic knowledge that evaluated various ethnicities against the needs of white planters" (p. 56). In his 1730-34 *Histoire de l'isle Espagnole*, the Jesuit priest Pierre-François de Charlevoix made this subtext abundantly clear: "Of all the nègres, these Senegalese are built the best, the easiest to discipline, and the most suitable to domestic service. The Bambaras are the biggest, but they are thieves; the Aradas are those who best understand agriculture, but are the most proud; the Gongos, the smallest, and the best fishermen, but they run off easily." [2]

As this example suggests, Curran's book contributes to a growing set of studies tracing the powerful impact of trans-oceanic slave trading and colonial slavery on French (and European) thought, including European views of the "black African." [3] One way to acknowledge this impact would be to accuse the European Enlightenment of sharing the planters' mentality despite its abstract ideals. But Curran requires us to be more nuanced. Slave traders, as he notes, paradoxically offered some of the most "human" European accounts of African practices and peoples, since they engaged face-to-face in trading relationships with local partners (p. 65). Curran describes his own contribution to the distinguished field of writing on "the black African" established by Christopher Miller's *Blank Darkness* as that of recognizing the complexity of Enlightenment-era discourse. Thus he seeks to "challenge what is becoming an increasingly powerful and unquestioned belief in an anxious and monolithic Enlightenment-era consciousness that supposedly acted as both factory and repository for the representation of black Africans" (p. 27). In lieu of this, he offers "an interdisciplinary examination of how Enlightenment-era thinkers living in France (and elsewhere) processed 'ethnography' in the context of their own changing preoccupations" (p. 27).

Slavery meets science, in other words, and the encounter is far more vexed and sustained than we had thought. Curran demonstrates this by examining a series of hybrid discourses extending from what he calls the "birth of the Caribbean African" (the African as a concept invented by colonial planters) to the conflicting accounts of slavery and nègres within the *Encyclopédie* as well as Abbé de Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes* (p. 48). This approach makes sense of the crucial importance of hybrid figures like the nègre

blanc (or albino) in the comte de Buffon's theory of monogenesis. Strikingly, Curran rejects the impulse to clarify apparently muddled thinking by attributing divergent thoughts to different authors at different moments in their writing careers. The individually-authored text written at one moment is not so different from the multiple-authored text, in his view, since it also draws on a complex discursive field. Diderot's "so-called convictions regarding the black African," for instance, were "less real beliefs than they were the reflection of specific intent, conventions of genre, and competing Enlightenment-era epistemologies," ranging from the increasingly "*diagnostic* understanding of blackness" in natural history to the "sentimentalized version of classical liberalism" invoked to defend the downtrodden (p. 14). Curran brings the same nuanced approach to composite texts like the scholarly answers to a 1739 call-for-papers by the Académie royale des sciences de Bordeaux on the physical cause of the "color of *nègres*" as well as its significance (p. 81).^[4]

The rise of scientific thought is hardly celebrated here, as it is inextricable from the pathologization of human difference as the sign of disease or "degeneration." Natural history is not a subplot within the "larger" history of slavery, as Curran argues, but rather a complex plot with larger histories of its own (p. 168). In his account, we experience this history freshly, with no hint of what's to come (in a few years), even as we arrive at each stage with a full saturation in previous discourses as contemporary readers might have done. This exposes the pernicious side of the old as well as the nefarious aspects of the new. Despite his criticism of planter-based ethnography, for example, the comte de Buffon's influential natural history nonetheless "put forward an understanding of blackness that was both derived from and compatible with the context of slavery" (p. 221).

Like any anatomy drawn from a decaying corpse (or, in this case, an ugly corpus), Curran's study can be devastating to read. To illustrate the curious admixture of polygenist views with denunciations of slavery, for example, Curran relays how Voltaire "joked horrifyingly" in *La défense de mon oncle* that "Whoever wants to have a *nègre* dissected (I mean after his death) will find that [his] mucus membrane is black like ink from head to toe" (p. 146).^[5] It is sickening to see how the concept of "blackness" was derived from violence to (mostly dead) bodies, pathologized, enshrined as fact, and used to justify further violence. The painful qualities of this discourse become evident from the first page of Curran's dispassionate history: "in 1618 the influential Parisian anatomist Jean Riolan the Younger became the first person to seek out the precise source of the blackness within African skin." To this end, he "blistered the skin of a black African man with a chemical agent. He then removed the seared specimen and painstakingly examined its various strata" (p. 1).

One is tempted to read such passages alongside the twentieth-century reflections of, say, Frantz Fanon, for whom the (white) French habit of addressing men of African descent in "*petit-nègre*" amounted to a form of imprisonment, perpetuating a "state of conflict in which the white man infests the black with extremely toxic foreign bodies."^[6] But apart from the use of key words like *négritude*, Curran is careful to remain within the body of discourse available to eighteenth-century readers. As he acknowledges, this "clinical treatment of the European representation of black Africans may raise objections among certain scholars" (p. xi). In particular, it might "'ventriloquize or replicate' some of the era's structures of oppression" (p. ix). Although he is careful to document these structures, Curran's refusal to "condemn or exculpate" individual thinkers produces a gripping horror story in which the growing science of human difference, feeding on corpses, tracks and tussles with the rise of Enlightenment ideals. It has all the force of a decisive autopsy.

Accepting the contours of Curran's clinical method, I have only one quibble. Given his emphasis on the "birth of the Caribbean African," it is odd that he ignores the eighteenth-century distinction between what he calls "black Africans" and those *nègres* who were no longer considered African: *créoles* (Creoles)

born and raised in the island colonies. To take only one example, Charlevoix's survey of the varieties of *nègres* available for purchase in the Caribbean, quoted above, concludes this way:

the Nagos [are] the most human; the Mondongos, the most cruel; the Mines, the most determined, the most capricious, and the most likely to despair. Finally, *creole nègres*, whatever their origin, inherit only their color and slavish mentality from their fathers. They have more of a love for freedom, however, though they are born into slavery; they are also more intelligent, more reasonable, more skillful, but more lazy, more arrogant, more dissolute than the Dandas, which is the common name for all those who came from Africa. (p. 54)

By ignoring the presumed “facts” of (generational) differences as well as the perceived similarities between “black Africans” and Creoles of African descent, Curran sidelines an important aspect of eighteenth-century views of human difference. After all, the (re)production of *nègres* in the slave-settler colonies was both a major goal for planters and a puzzle for scientists in this period. Where else could Buffon have learned that the “rudiments of blackness are communicated” to children by their parents, so that, “in whatever part of the world a *nègre* is brought forth, he will be equally black as if he had been born in his own country”? [7] The Creoles offered a perfect laboratory for testing Buffon's theory that the influence of climate produced changes “transmitted from generation to generation, as deformities or diseases pass from parents to children,” yet liable to disappear when the “causes which produced them should cease” (Buffon, p. 27-28). Indeed, he cites a story about the early deaths of *enfants nègres* in “our islands” as evidence that “heat is . . . necessary, not only to the production, but even to the preservation of *nègres*” (Buffon, p. 23). By glossing over the discrepancy between the “*nègre*” and the “black African” as social classifications, Curran underestimates the role played by the *nègre créole* in the development of what he terms a “zoological” view of the human species (p. 168).

Nonetheless, the tight focus on descriptions of the “*nègre*” and the growing role of anatomical findings within this discourse enables Curran to dissect something broad and crucial in *The Anatomy of Blackness*. His book makes a persuasive case for considering the wide range of thoughts about “human difference” rather than the conceptualization of “race” *per se*. It also shows how the “ellipsis of politics” constitutes a political danger, and how a surprisingly broad set of scientific “facts” were shared by anti-slavery and pro-slavery advocates (pp. 23, 87). Finally, it exposes a profound tension between central strands of Enlightenment thought, as zoological views of the “human species” emerged in awkward tandem with universalizing concepts of “human nature.” In so doing, this study reveals with striking clarity the complex interaction of the science of human difference in this period with other strands of Enlightenment thought as well as the practices of (French) slave trading and colonial slavery.

Notes

[1] *Bibliothèque universelle des dames*, 1 [1787]: 210, quoted on p. 9.

[2] *Histoire de l'isle Espagnole ou de Saint-Domingue, écrite particulièrement sur des manuscrits du P. Jean-Baptiste le Pers, Jésuite, missionnaire à Saint-Domingue, et sur les pièces originales qui se conservent du Dépôt de la Marine, par le P. Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix* (Paris: H.-L. Guérin, 1730-31), 2: 498, quoted on p. 54.

[3] See, for example, Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) and *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave*

Trade (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008); Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1680-1804* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999); and Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009). Curran's study will become an indispensable companion to the primary texts collected by Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze in *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997).

[4] "Quelle est la cause physique de la couleur des nègres, de la qualité de leurs cheveux, et de la dégénération de l'un et de l'autre?" (quoted on p. 239, note 25).

[5] François Marie Arouet de Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Jean Michel Moreau et al., 52 vols. (Paris: Garnier frères, 1877-85), 5: 403.

[6] "Parler petit-nègre, c'est enfermer le Noir, c'est perpétuer une situation conflictuelle où le Blanc infeste le Noir de corps étrangers extrêmement toxiques." *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1995), p. 28; *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 36, translation modified.

[7] George-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, *A Natural History, General and Particular*, trans. W. Smellie (1860): selection from vol. 1 in Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*, p. 24. See my discussion of "Creoles and Creolified" in *Creole Crossings: Domestic Fiction and the Reform of Colonial Slavery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), chapter one; and Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

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