

H-France Forum, Volume 7, Issue 4 (Fall 2012), No. 5

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.

Response by Andrew S. Curran, Wesleyan University

I am deeply grateful for the time that Professors Carolyn Vellenga Berman (The New School), Jeremy L. Caradonna (University of Alberta), Madeleine Dobie (Columbia University), and Martin S. Sturm (University of Calgary) took to engage with *The Anatomy of Blackness*. Given the fact that there is a wide range of expertise in this group (two historians, a comparative literature specialist, and a cultural studies/postcolonial specialist), I am very pleased to see that there is a general consensus about what the book accomplishes, namely providing a contextualized history of African and Caribbean travelogues, identifying the antecedents of race science, clarifying problematic notions such as “degeneration” and monogenesis, examining how the *philosophes* of the high Enlightenment treated the question of slavery and Africans, and, finally, rethinking the relationship between natural history and human bondage.

There is a great deal of thoughtful criticism in these reviews. Two of the reviews raise very similar historical questions regarding the status of mixed race peoples and “Creole Africans” within European colonies. I will address these matters at the end of this essay. The more substantive and methodological criticism comes from the postcolonial scholar, Madeleine Dobie. Dobie has, in fact, recently published a book (*Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture*, recently reviewed in *H-France Review*, vol. 11, #168) that treats a corpus that is strikingly similar to mine. Given the fact that Dobie’s and my interests and work intersect, I had fully expected someone to bring our two books (both published in 2011) into dialogue in a review essay somewhere; I did not expect it to be both Professor Dobie and myself. This said, I am pleased to be able to engage with Dobie because—among other things—our methods are as divergent as they are complementary.

In *Trading Places*, Dobie studies how the enslavement of Africans “registered in works of literature and philosophy and in the sphere of material culture.”[1] In her view, “relations of domination are not always mediated by discourse, but can also be grounded in silence, ignorance, and various modes of cultural censorship and repression.”[2] Much of this theory is linked to her periodization-based belief that 1) until about 1770, there was little representation of the colonial reality and 2) “if the colonial world was sparsely represented, this was to a great extent because it was unrepresentable.”[3] Borrowing from a psychoanalytical point of view (and speculating on a cultural *imaginaire*), Dobie argues that colonial slavery (during the “unrepresentable” phase) was “regularly projected or ‘displaced’ onto two adjacent cultural terrains.”[4] The first of these imaginary geographies was the Oriental world (which was equated with slavery), while the second was the Americas (which was seen as “a terrain of encounters between Europeans and ‘noble savages’ or ‘native others’”).[5] As a corollary to this thesis, Dobie’s book also examines “material objects [e.g. textiles] as sites of representation, [considering] them as intersections between metropolitan and colonial histories and as potential vestiges of slave labor,” which she calls “one of the most fundamental but also one of the least tangible aspects of colonial experience.”[6]

While my reply to Dobie should not be a review of *Trading Places* (a work that I very much admire), her stated belief that power relations must be studied on levels that transcend scientific, academic, or literary discourse may illuminate what she deems to be some of the “problems” in *The Anatomy of*

Blackness. To put it simply, my work supposedly neglects the importance of the “cultural imprint of slavery.”

Dobie is certainly correct that I do not work on material culture; nor do I investigate an early modern *imaginaire* that, as she maintains in *Trading Places*, sublimated power structures related to enslaved Africans via strategies of ellipsis and/or geographical projection. And yet, I would reply that I, too, am seeking to flesh out our understanding of those early modern minds that reflected on the “problem” of the African. I have done so, as my book title points out, by examining (long-forgotten) scientific debates that often took place on the speculative microscopic or anatomical level. These seventeenth- and eighteenth-century texts are far from dead ends within the history of science. Indeed, the race-based anatomical structures I study in *The Anatomy of Blackness* are very much like the imaginary geographies that Dobie herself investigates: they are tremendously contested spaces where Enlightenment-era preoccupations regarding the Black African (and human bondage) often played out. [7]

Dobie’s comments on my research into this microscopic Enlightenment world, while quite laudatory most of the time, also indicate a slight frustration that my book does not place anatomy into a larger master narrative beginning in earlier eras. Two corollary critiques stem from this overall point of view. The first is that I concentrate on narrow subjects, such as the scientific study of skin in lieu of the wider context that she espouses in her own work. To emphasize this perceived shortcoming, Dobie implicitly invites me to tie my more empirical findings with sweeping conclusions. Citing the work of Jean-Frédéric Schaub, for example, Dobie states that skin color is much more than just skin: it was already “interwoven with issues of identity and difference, anatomy and moral character, heredity and environment” since the late fifteenth century. The second related critique is that my “anatomical” approach disaggregates the history of race from contemporary concerns about the subject.

Let me first address the perceived narrowness of my work. To substantiate this point, Dobie asserts that I concentrate (and attribute too much importance to) marginal works, such as the 1741 text on blackness published by the anatomist Pierre Barrère (whom I claim “ushered in a new era” in the construction of race). Barrère’s work is actually a perfect example of how the spurious anatomical findings contained in a pamphlet-length book could have profound pan-national repercussions within the overall construction of the African during the eighteenth century. Not only was his so-called “discovery” of black blood and bile quoted at length in the *Encyclopédie* articles “nègres” and “peau des nègres,” it was also accepted as fact by both Buffon and Diderot; it was absorbed and recontextualized by the Jamaican planter Edward Long as part of his “proof” that Africans were a different species; it was taught in Valmont de Bomare’s hugely influential natural history classes in Paris; and finally it was mentioned by Blumenbach in 1775 as he grappled with the question of human difference in his *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*. What is more, Barrère’s theories echoed well into the nineteenth century, during the era where a more formal *racialization* of humankind was taking place. One of the reasons that Dobie may not recognize the importance of Barrère is that she is reducing him to someone interested only in the question of *skin*, when Barrère was actually the key figure in transforming the humoral theories of Antiquity into a widely accepted (albeit contested) scientific conception of essential human difference. In short, Barrère’s small text not only “moved” the focus of race from the outside of the body (skin) to its interior physiology, but under his scalpel and his pen, the dissection of the *nègre* went from descriptive to diagnostic.

Dobie’s view that my overall analysis produces a clinical assessment of race that is overly historicized (and that it “obscures” the link between the past and the present) raises other issues. Regarding the actual comment itself, I hasten to say that I am certainly not interested in quarantining eighteenth-century conceptions of blackness from later paradigms and readings; I am fully prepared to identify genealogies and common structures when the links are demonstrable and make sense. One of the things that I do in the book, as Dobie herself notes, is make a case for writing Voltaire into a genealogy that includes some of the most virulent race thinkers of the nineteenth century. Along similar lines, I also

spend a great deal of time relating Buffon's fraught understanding of the Black African to the increasingly racialized *definition* of the human in the early nineteenth century (Martin S. Staum calls this the "riddle of Buffon" in his review essay). And yet, it has been my experience that looking back in time for concepts that are perfectly analogous to our own understanding of race is misleading. Heredity, which Dobie cites (via Schaub) as a possible example of "continuity" between earlier and modern eras, is a perfect example of the presentist trap into which one can fall. After all, how can the concept of heredity possibly mean the same thing during the Renaissance, seventeenth, eighteenth, and twenty-first centuries, when the very concept of heredity did not yet exist in earlier eras, and when human embryology was interpreted as the result of a single creative act undertaken by an all powerful and knowing God? If anything, it is the projection of modern ideas onto earlier eras that often muddles the understanding of the slow crystallization of race, not the contrary.

In addition to her discussion of the book's framing and historiography, Dobie also makes an important comment related to the eighteenth-century "ethnographies" I discuss in the book. These remarks are generated in the context of my discussion of the relative *utility* of slave traders' travel narratives:

Building on a point made by Catherine Gallagher, [Curran] suggests that colonial ethnography is not purely fictitious: it is a 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.).

Dobie's own understanding of ethnography in *Trading Places* relies heavily on the work of critics including Gyan Prakash, the latter who asserts that the era's ethnography reveals an overall telos, namely "embody[ing] the prehistorical other of civilized man." [8] Bearing this overall orientation in mind, it is perhaps no surprise that Dobie identifies my discussion of the comparative *usefulness*, *completeness*, and even ethnographic *qualities* of certain slave traders' travelogues (compared to those of simple travelers or explorers) as raising disturbing questions about these discourses of domination.

Ethnography and the question of truth is, of course, a critical question for scholars such as Dobie and myself. Both of us would probably agree, as James Clifford famously wrote, that ethnographic writing is determined by context, rhetorical and generic conventions, institutions, politics, and history. [9] But it was also Clifford who proclaimed that if ethnographic writing is always a *fiction*, this same fiction is not identical to a complete falsehood, or "pure fiction" as Dobie writes.

I am perfectly aware, and I hope I make clear in the book, that ethnographic writing—especially that produced by eighteenth-century merchants engaged in buying human beings—is always weighed down by its fragmentary nature, extreme partiality, and preconceptions. As for the portion of the book where I cite the slave traders' narratives, the paradox that I was trying to emphasize was not that they were *true*, but that they often contained some of the most culturally sensitive representations of Black Africans (a fact which was linked, of course, to business interests, not benevolence). I am far from the first person to identify some of these texts as having the most complete portraits of Black Africans during the era. Indeed, abolitionists including Anthony Benezet and Benjamin-Sigismond Frossard drew heavily from these texts in order to put forward their own counterdiscursive (and yes, equally fictional) "positive" ethnographies of the Black African.

The second critique that Dobie makes regarding the imagined geographies discussed in *The Anatomy of Blackness* relates to my discussion of Montesquieu's writings on slavery (and Black Africans) in his 1748 *De l'esprit des lois*. Here, Dobie questions my assertion that Montesquieu was thinking of Black Africans within his overall discussion of slavery and warm climates. Dobie, who has studied this text herself, is absolutely correct that much of what Montesquieu writes about slavery in the abstract relates to

“despotic” Asian regimes, and not Africans in particular. And yet, it is also true that slavery and the justification of slavery often function non-geographically in Books XIV and XV of *De l'esprit des lois*, and, to my mind, Montesquieu was clearly thinking of the Black African when discussing the effects of climate, and perhaps more so than other ethnicities, as Laurent Estève and other critics have maintained.[10]

My own belief that Montesquieu was considering Africans when he spoke of warm-climate peoples is related to two facts: first of all, the status of the enslaved African was the most prominent ethnographic “case” of human bondage cited in the famous fifth chapter of Book XV. More telling is the primary source from which Montesquieu learned about the supposed liabilities of the torrid zone peoples that he evokes in Book XIV, namely John Arbuthnot’s *An Essay Concerning the Effects of Air on Human Bodies* (1733). In this English work charting the casual links between climate and bodies (and resultant human mores), Arbuthnot explains that the severity of the slavish disposition corresponds to the passage from north to south (and not West to East) and specifies that “the degrees of slavery are most extreme [. . .] in some hot and fruitful countries.”[11] He also mentions Africa in this context at several points. This being said, I agree with Dobie that the lack of geographic specificity in *De l'esprit des lois* is problematic, and she is right to bring attention to it. And yet, in many ways, Montesquieu’s treatment of slavery in *De l'esprit des lois* may actually be an excellent example of what Dobie herself has so aptly identified in *Trading Places*, namely the geographic relocation of some of the most painful concerns of the day. And the relationship between (black) slavery and climate was clearly an uncomfortable and perhaps elided subject for Montesquieu. After all, raising the possibility, as he did, that certain “types” of humans living in specific climates might be suitable or prone to slavery meant that he could be naturalizing the African’s plight (à la Aristotle), something that he rejected elsewhere in *De l'esprit des lois* with great verve.

Dobie’s final major comments regarding my overall discussion of Africa and the Caribbean (and Africans and Africans enslaved on Caribbean islands) dovetail much more with points made by the other essayists. Dobie’s primary critique on this subject is that I have a tendency to “conflate narratives about Africa with representations of the colonial world.” In particular, Dobie cites my discussion of the Caribbean writers Jean-Baptiste Labat and Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix, both of whom I discuss within a larger tradition of Africanist travel. While Dobie is on firm ground here, I would argue that in the aforementioned case that she evokes, the supposed split between Africanist discourse and Caribbean-based writings corresponds more to our own contemporary breakdown of the disciplines than it does to eighteenth-century reality. As Dobie herself acknowledges, Africanist discourse ultimately drew increasingly heavily from the Caribbean laboratory. This is indeed very much a part of what I wanted to demonstrate in *The Anatomy of Blackness*, namely that Caribbean writings, including those of Labat, not only provided an important source of ethnography for Paris-based naturalists; these texts ultimately allowed thinkers including Buffon to project the colonies’ labor-based typologies back onto the overall understanding of African ethnicities still living on the continent.

Like Dobie, Carolyn Vellenga Berman raises an important point about my treatment of the Caribbean context, asserting that my presentation of eighteenth-century race science lacks a substantive treatment of some of the hybrid categories (Creole Africans) that informed the overall portrait of the Black African. As she puts it, “[b]y 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.” Jeremy L. Caradonna makes a very similar point: “Curran spends surprisingly little time discussing people of mixed-race heritage. [. . .] What was the ontological status of an individual who was half black-African and half Franco-French?” Both of these points have great merit. Here, I have to admit that I have perhaps concentrated too much on the reception and processing of colonial “data” regarding absolute racial categories, rather than looking at how such categories functioned in the actual colonial

context. While there are many points in *The Anatomy of Blackness* where I do speak of the importance of intermediary categories—including a discussion of how miscegenation played a critical role in naturalists' belief in a unified human species—I certainly could have engaged more fully with these structures. If it is of any consolation, it has long been my plan to do so in a later project where I would concentrate much more completely on the functioning of race in the colonial context, drawing on the work of historians such as James E. McClellan III and literature specialists including Doris Garraway.[12]

The vast legacy of Atlantic slavery has attracted one of the most diverse sets of academics working on a given topic. Cultural historians, statistically minded historians, intellectual historians, historians of philosophy, historians of science, literature specialists, and postcolonial specialists have been drawn to this “field.” As Berman, Caradonna, Dobie, and Staum all point out, my own approach borrows from several of these orientations, but overlaps most clearly with recent scholarship that studies the representation of Black Africans as a means of understanding both the corresponding construction of whiteness and the role of eighteenth-century science in both justifying and (more rarely) combatting the slave trade. Martin S. Staum, in particular, underscores this aspect of *The Anatomy of Blackness* in great detail, but he is also especially intrigued by my fundamentally ambivalent rendering of the minds we associate with this era and by how “the hierarchical strain of much of Enlightenment-era discourse could eclipse the egalitarian tendency of natural law.” This is, I hope, one of the main contributions that I am making to the study of the slave trade and the eighteenth-century understanding of slavery, namely breaking down the proslavery/antislavery and Enlightenment/anti-Enlightenment binaries that tend to superimpose themselves on what continues to be the most contested and pertinent subject in eighteenth-century studies.

Once again, I am genuinely appreciative for the virtual discussion that Professors Berman, Caradonna, Dobie, and Staum have begun with me. I am truly impressed both by their attention and thoughtful erudition.

NOTES:

[1] Madeliene Dobie, *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), xi.

[2] Dobie, p. xi.

[3] Dobie, p. xii.

[4] Dobie, p. xii.

[5] Dobie, p. 9.

[6] Dobie, p. xiii.

[7] Historians of science have generally neglected many of the texts I have worked on, even those produced by tremendously influential anatomists because the actual science contained within is often not only spurious, but difficult to absorb into a narrative of science's “progress.”

[8] Dobie, p. 129.

[9] “Introduction” (pp. 1-26) in James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), p. 6.

[10] Laurent Estève makes a similar point in his *Montesquieu, Rousseau, Diderot: du genre humain au bois d'ébène: les silences du droit naturel* (Paris: UNESCO, 2002), pp. 45-65.

[11] John Arbuthnot, *An Essay Concerning the Effects of Air on Human Bodies* (London: J. and R. Tonson and S. Draper, 1751), p. 153.

[12] James E. McClellan III, *Colonialism and Science. Saint-Domingue and the Old Regime* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); and Doris Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005).

Andrew S. Curran
Wesleyan University
acurran@wesleyan.edu

Copyright © 2012 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Forum nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor in-Chief of H-France.

Volume 7, Issue 4 (Fall 2012), No. 5