

The Anatomy of Blackness: Science & Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment

Review Number: 1379

Publish date: Thursday, 14 February, 2013

Author: Andrew Curran

ISBN: 9781421401508

Date of Publication: 2011

Price: £15.00

Pages: 328pp.

Publisher: John Hopkins University Press

Place of Publication: Baltimore, MD

Reviewer: Stephen Kenny

In his first book, *Sublime Disorder: Physical Monstrosity in Diderot's Universe* (1), Andrew Curran focused on the different means by which corporeal and moral monstrosity were figured and evoked in the celebrated Enlightenment thinker's work. Curran continues to explore the role of bodies in the epistemic cultures of a long 18th century, the formation of conceptual criteria, and markers of identity in *The Anatomy of Blackness*, where his admirable skills of translation, close-reading, contextualization, and comparative analysis are applied to the question of how black African bodies became the primary scientific basis for race-making in the French Atlantic world.

While Curran's study is largely concerned with the representation of black Africans in French Enlightenment thought, his approach and findings make significant contributions to historical debates on 'othering', the invention of race, the association between slavery and race in different colonial contexts, as well as a more recent, related, and rapidly developing line of inquiry that examines the role of colonial anatomies in making race and legitimizing slavery. The invention of race in the Americas, or the so-called 'origins debate' – over whether slavery resulted from white racism, or racism produced slavery – was very active in the 1970s and 1980s. Eminent historians such as Winthrop Jordan, George Fredrickson, Edmund Morgan, and Barbara Fields argued productively about both the precise date at which slavery might be identified as an institution based on white racial prejudice and also definitions of race and racism. Jordan's work on the negative framing of blackness in early-modern English culture was particularly inspiring to historians of the Iberian Atlantic, who subsequently managed to find evidence of European racism deep in the Middle-Ages. Curran positions *The Anatomy of Blackness* directly in relation to this debate and argues that blackness played many roles in the Enlightenment-era: allowing 'Europeans to produce new definitions of whiteness'; providing a 'coherent concept around which the first "scientifically based" human classification schemes were organized'; and replacing 'theological and even economic justifications as the most compelling rationale for African chattel slavery' (p. 168). Indeed, a core aim of Curran's work is to highlight the interplay between anatomy's investigation of African bodies and other ways of knowing blackness, a messy process his overlapping narrative style tries to recapture, and one that gradually crystallized into biologically-grounded concepts of blackness and whiteness (p. 6).

'Tissue samples in the land of conjecture' serves as Curran's broad 'Introduction' and sets the scene with a

few lowlights in Western anatomy's dismal history of dissecting black bodies in pursuit of racial essence. While there is plenty of evidence to suggest that early-modern European anatomists had an abiding curiosity in discovering the causes of racial difference, Curran argues that from the 1730s the question of 'the *nègre*'s' origin began to be 'debated much more intensely and from a [wider] variety of perspectives'. The previously little known Académie royale des sciences de Bordeaux's 1739 essay competition - offering a prize for the best explanation of the physical cause of '*nègres*' color' - is identified by Curran as a key moment in the Atlantic world's intensification of interest in the origins of blackness (p. 2). One of the 16 submissions, by Perpignan physician Pierre Barrère, stood out as it moved away from theological and environmentalist explanations of blackness. With reference to dissection studies conducted on African slaves in French Guyana (which became the basis of his influential 1741 *Dissertation sur la cause physique de la couleur des negres* ...), Barrère offered an anatomically focused explanation - claiming that blackness 'was derived from a dark bile that tainted the skin and blood alike' (pp. 2, 122).

In the decades that followed, theories of racial difference became ever more dependent on biological arguments, with a new generation of European anatomists - including Germany's Johann Friedrich Meckel, France's Claude-Nicolas Le Cat, and Dutch geographer Cornelius de Pauw - all using dissection studies to evoke ever 'deeper, organ-based differences' (p. 125). By the late 18th century, anatomically-oriented explorations of African skin, blood, brains and sperm metastasized - or, perhaps more accurately, materialized - into full-blown human classification projects offering justifications for slavery and the legitimization of colonial hierarchies - the genesis of new racial science that viewed blacks not only as lesser beings, but also as a separately created species. Joining the important work of Londa Schiebinger on science and the making of race and gender in the colonial Atlantic world (2), Curran highlights the awful irony and perverse contradiction of a natural history knowledge produced in an era of supposed natural rights, inventing 'natural' differences, and leading to very unnatural inequalities.

Charting the black African's gradual reduction to biology through anatomical discourse, Curran's study foregrounds the importance of the shifting influences of genre and geo-political context in understanding this process. Thus the first chapter, 'Paper trails: writing the African, 1450-1750', chronicles the representation of Africa and Africans in various sorts of travel accounts produced by the early modern Atlantic world's major colonial powers - with Portuguese, Dutch, and English authors especially prominent - before examining closely related and re-circulated compilations of this growing body of literature, as a means of exploring how Europeans came to know and 'textualize the black African'. In an effort to replicate 18th-century reading practices, Curran suggests travel accounts are where most 18th-century white European thinkers began their consideration of black Africans, emphasizing important distinctions between the type of information available from 'properly Africa-oriented' texts and those produced by an 'increasingly authoritative Caribbean "ethnography"'. Travel accounts written from Africa were replete with stereotypes of blackness and other misinformation, but, compared to texts produced in the plantation colonies, they were more typically concerned with the social and cultural lives of Africans, while Caribbean writers were "more generally interested in the utility of particular ethnicities, and how to get the most work out of their labor force" (pp. 19, 52). Jacques Savary's *Parfait negociant* (1675) is cited as one widely translated example of these Caribbean travel accounts, in which black Africans were also increasingly seen through a mercantilist lens - associating black bodies with other forms of tradable goods and commodities. Alongside the various travel accounts, Curran notes that 18th-century thinkers had access to legal codifications of colonial slave regimes, such as the *Code Noir*, and the first-hand accounts of slave owners, such as Jean-Baptiste Labat's best-selling *Nouveau voyages aux isles de l'Amerique* (1722) and that these texts also performed important cultural work in transforming the overall image of the black African and justifying the system of slavery.

Chapter two, 'Sameness and science, 1730-1750', fully unleashes Curran's methodological strategy of overlapping narratives as a means of unpacking intellectual genealogies and exploring the rich intertextuality of Enlightenment culture (p. ix), layering sustained critical commentaries of the Bordeaux academie royale des sciences essays on the question of blackness, Maupertuis's *Venus Physique* (1745), Buffon's *Histoire naturelle* (1749), and the role of the 'category-defying' African albino. Here Curran argues that while a troubling presence in a society increasingly anxious about the prospect of race-mixing, the albino (or '*nègre*

blanc’) was a useful servant of natural science, providing a key concept for the crafting of a monogenic, but ultimately white-centric theory of humankind (p. 22, 87–105). As living examples of human beings evading neat categorization, black albinos were subject to intense scientific curiosity, often invasive physiological scrutiny, and extensive public display. Curran’s book features the example of Genevieve, the so-called young white nègresse that a 70-year old Buffon physically examined in 1777 and framed as a ‘fluke’ in his *Histoire naturelle* – an early ‘unusual human’ forerunner of the African females fashioned into exoticized cultural spectacles for the West’s 19th-century freak-shows and human zoos.

In focusing on anatomy’s cultural influence, Curran’s work adroitly highlights that the ownership, inspection, dissection, analysis, exchange, and display of black bodies, body fragments, and specimens of blackness became the fundamental evidential base of the new Enlightenment/colonial science of human difference, as well as a key raw material resource through which individual, professional, and collective European social identities were crafted and advanced. As Ruth Richardson, Elizabeth Hurren, Michael Sappol, Ann Fabian, Alexander Butchart, Helen MacDonald, and Marieke Hendriksen have all shown, for different colonial contexts in the same long 18th century, anatomical practices and performances, as well as the production and dissemination of anatomical narratives (in various genres), granted authority and status to bourgeois individuals and the disciplines of science and medicine in which they worked. Sappol’s work on the cultural history of anatomy in late 18th- and early 19th-century North America highlights the rise of anatomy as a project of professional and bourgeois self-making, a process that was crucially dependent on the bodies of ‘subaltern or subordinate’ groups: ‘black people, the poor, criminals, prostitutes, Indians, the Irish, and members of other immigrant groups’ who until recently ‘made up a greatly disproportionate number of anatomical subjects’.⁽³⁾ From Curran’s evidence, a very similar process was at work in Enlightenment-era France through the circulation and increasing influence of anatomical discourse about black Africans. ‘Textualization’ of the black African through anatomical discourse was both a way of making race more material, more real, but also a way of making scientific reputations for white European intellectuals.

After such an intensive fine-grained analysis of natural histories, anatomical treatises, and travel narratives, and an extensive excavation of the intellectual networks within which these texts emerged, mutually influenced and circulated, there still remains the important issue of how anatomy was practiced in the French colonial context, the exact source and supply of the corpses dissected – the elusive human specifics of the colonial anatomical economy – as well as the question of how these anatomy texts were produced and their broader reception and influence. Ruth Richardson’s *The Making of Mr. Gray’s Anatomy* (2008) provides one model of answering such questions, offering a micro-historical analysis of circumstances underlying production of the modern era’s most famous textbook and could also be applied to anatomical practices in the French colonial context. The question of influence is answered to a large extent in Curran’s *Anatomy* by some very impressive intertextual analysis, but another approach might be to explore the library borrowing and subscription records of Enlightenment-era intellectuals and those of professionals working in colonial contexts, while marginal notes and annotations made in personal library collections could also be of value in both understanding the formation of racial thought and 18th-century reading practices.

The Anatomy of Blackness is an intense and challenging reading experience, but one that certainly repays the effort. Andrew Curran takes the reader deep inside the white racial framing mechanism of Enlightenment France and underscores the value of a narratological approach for understanding the formation of identities – especially those of elite white intellectuals. Further, outlining the creation of racialised anatomical knowledge in the early modern era, Curran’s work draws attention to the many intersections between slavery and the science of anatomy – in many ways indicating that they were mutually constitutive colonial projects with a profound legacy for the black African.

Notes

1. Andrew Curran, *Sublime Disorder: Physical Monstrosity in Diderot's Universe* (Oxford, 2001).[Back to \(1\)](#)

2. Londa Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Sexual Politics and the Making of Modern Science* (London, 1994).[Back to \(2\)](#)
 3. Michael Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies: Anatomy and Embodies Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford, 2002), p. 17.[Back to \(3\)](#)
-

Source URL:<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1379>

Links

[\[1\] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/49797](https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/49797)