

A Hideous Monster of the Mind American Race: Theory in the Early Republic

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In 1852 the African-American physician and writer James McCune Smith described the '*negro*' as 'not an actual physical being of flesh and bones and blood, but a hideous monster of the mind'. (quoted on p. 247, McCune Smith's italics) Yet in Bruce Dain's detailed, subtle, and fascinating book, race theory appears more like a virus. It originated in Enlightenment 'natural science', flourished in the fecund atmosphere of American revolutionary libertinism, and finally mutated into various, sometimes dangerous, strains in the fetid environment of republican and antebellum slavery.

Dain acknowledges that race prejudice abounded in colonial America, shaped by cultural connotations of blackness in medieval Europe and Judeo-Christianity. But systematic race theory began when Enlightenment natural history attempted to answer new questions about the morality of slavery and prejudice raised by the American Revolution. Thomas Jefferson did much to raise those questions when he wrote in the Declaration of Independence that 'all men are created equal' and had 'unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) he tried to answer them with recourse to race theory. In *Notes* Jefferson agonised about slavery, a stain on the republic, an institution that engendered tyranny and threatened republican virtue. Yet he thought emancipation impossible due to white prejudice, black resentment, and the 'real distinctions which nature has made' between the races. His scientific evaluation of black inferiority was so extreme that some historians see him as America's first 'hard' racist, a polygenist believer that blacks and whites were separate species.

For Dain, however, Jefferson was an Enlightenment man who believed blacks unfit for citizenship (and fit only for enslavement if they could not be removed from white society) because they were incapable of Lockean reason, imagination and sensibility. Furthermore, he based his judgements on outward appearances, using Linnaean natural history, rather than on the internal anatomy pioneered by Johann Gottfried von Blumenbach and Baron Georges Cuvier and favoured by nineteenth-century science. Indeed, Jefferson's judgements were aesthetic ones, in a very eighteenth-century sense, denigrating blacks' 'eternal monotony' and claiming that black men favour white women as male orang-utans favour black women. (p. 32) Yet, as Dain observes, Jefferson was ultimately unclear about the origins and extent of racial differences. Some historians have explained Jefferson's ambiguities and equivocations as products of intellectual dilemmas over slavery and liberty, or of internal psychological conflict engendered by anxieties over his own animal

nature that were reinforced by his sexual relationship with the African American Sally Hemings. In Dain's view, however, Jefferson's evasions and circumlocutions imply intent. Jefferson did not invoke Henry Home, Lord Kames's polygenism, despite knowing it, and he employed the ambiguous term 'race' rather than 'species' – a term that would have implied the polygenesis in which Jefferson probably believed, but which contradicted his deeply-held notions of natural and republican harmony. Thus, according to Dain, his 'deliberate obscurity regarding 'race' in a purportedly scientific discussion was integral to his construction of the American slavery problem as intractable.' (p. 3)

Dain thus argues that the disingenuously modest disclaimer in Jefferson's statement that 'I advance it as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstance, are inferior to whites' allowed Jefferson to suggest polygenesis without committing to its disturbing implications. (p. 30) Yet Dain is sometimes as ambiguous and equivocal as Jefferson was. He states earlier that Jefferson's assessment of blacks was 'equivocal, *I suspect* disingenuously so', and calls him '*probably* partly disingenuous' and '*perhaps* more calculating' (p. 39) than other historians have allowed. (pp. 3, 38, 39: my italics) Dain even acknowledges another interpretation of Jeffersonian complexity, by stating that his ambiguous use of the term 'race' was 'part of his testimony to the inadequacy of human reason.' (p. 30) I suspect Jefferson was genuinely uncertain about the complexities of racial difference, and perhaps Dain is genuinely (and understandably) uncertain about the complexities of Jefferson.

Whether one questions Dain's interpretations or not, the great strength of his book is its detailed contextualisation of racial thinking. As Dain makes clear, Jefferson's racial thought was shaped by Enlightenment reason and natural history, agonising doubts about natural history's notions of harmony with regard to race, personal psychological anxieties, deism and residual Calvinism, the 'Dispute of the New World' (*Notes* was in some senses an answer to the attack on America by Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon), the exigencies of the War of Independence (*Notes* was written in 1780-81, a crisis point in the war, in part to prove to French doubters that American independence was worth investing in), as well as the dilemmas of liberty and slavery created by the American Revolution.

Dain is similarly thorough in his analyses of post-Jefferson racial thinkers. Samuel Stanhope Smith, the early Republic's leading monogenist, answered Jefferson and Kames through the prism of Scottish common-sense philosophy and insights from Blumenbach. Stanhope Smith also had an enlightened New World need for reassurance that people encountered through colonization possessed the same faculties of reason and sensibility as Euro-Americans (similarly, Jefferson believed Native Americans the probable equals of whites). He also had to reconcile monogenism with the continuing existence of blackness (a belief that 'Negroes' would whiten up to the human 'norm' was one Eurocentric example of Enlightenment-Revolutionary optimism) and to reconcile God's intentions with environmentalist science. Stanhope Smith theorised that God endowed humans with a flexible, natural economy that allowed limited adaptation (though nothing as complete as Cuvier's vital force or Blumenbach's formative force) so that humans could explore and conquer the earth. Although thereby coming close to a relativist concept of neutral adaption, Stanhope Smith was as blinded by Eurocentric aesthetics as Jefferson, and the 'faultline' in his work was the 'tension between seeing human diversity as the fruit of positive adaptation or of moral and mental degeneration.' (p. 45) Despite extensive borrowing from Blumenbach, he saw American 'Negroes' as products of West Africa's tropical heat (which produced the bile that 'discoloured' the skin), miasmas, savagery, and sin. (p. 47) Also, while believing that blacks could become regenerate (without becoming white) if freed and allowed to live unmolested in temperate North America, he conceded that political expediency and fear of rebellion made immediate emancipation impossible any time soon. Like Jefferson, he failed to escape Enlightenment and American revolutionary dilemmas.

As Dain shows, every theorist inspired others to extend or oppose their arguments, and every decade witnessed events that created new, although sometimes contradictory, ideas and imperatives. Revolution in St. Domingue was for abolitionists a warning that racial apocalypse awaited the United States, unless slavery was abolished immediately (possibly with blacks to be removed there). For moderates it showed that blacks were capable of Christian civilisation and should be freed and then colonized to redeem Africa, while for

slaveholders the 'Affranchi' revolution proved that although 'Negro' slaves were docile, free blacks and especially 'mulattoes', were dangerous and must be removed for public safety. Industrialisation in America furthered notions about human capacities for individual self-improvement, to the point that northern Garrisonian radical abolitionists adopted a liberal environmentalism that eschewed the concept of race altogether. On the other hand, Stanhope Smith's success in arguing that external appearances indicated the unity of humankind inspired early polygenists like Charles Caldwell to examine inner anatomy in order to prove human plurality: a cause furthered by the American School of Ethnology, especially Samuel George Morton and southerner Josiah C. Nott.

Dain also deserves great credit for including black thinkers in his discussion of the American debate about race. For Dain, while blacks and whites certainly responded to each others' writings, there was no simple dialectic. White opinion was too diverse, as was black, and in any case both responded to their own myriad and often distinct intellectual imperatives, as well as to each other. In some early black writings such as Ukiawsaw Gronniosaw's 1770 *Narrative*, blackness was equated with savagery and sin redeemed by Christianity; although by the time of Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789) black suffering and redemption became a reproach to white cruelty. Equiano, like Phyllis Wheatley and Benjamin Bannaker, eschewed race as a natural category and redefined blackness as a community with shared historical experience of suffering. As slavery and prejudice continued despite revolutionary promises, black inversions of the notion of blackness as righteousness rather than sinfulness became increasingly insistent, and the Haitian Revolution emboldened black speakers and writers such as Prince Hall into greater degrees of vehemence, if not radicalism.⁽¹⁾

As slavery spread across the South, however, and as prejudicial labour laws, segregation, and disfranchisement proliferated in the North throughout the early nineteenth century, black thinking radicalized. From 1827, *Freedom's Journal*, at least under Samuel Cornish's editorship, printed dozens of usable histories of Ethiopia and Egypt, some of them exegeses of earlier anti-racist works by Constantine Chassaboef, Compté de Volney and Abbé Henri Grégoire, but many with the intent that blacks must, as Cornish editorialised, 'plead our own cause'. (quoted on p. 121) As well as highlighting historical black achievement and contributions to civilisation, these works refuted notions of degeneration in favour of, in one important article's title, 'The Mutability of Human Affairs' (probably written by Cornish and John Russwurm but published anonymously). Such works went beyond white abolitionists, arguing for race consciousness. For some, the significance of race remained historical and circumstantial only, but anger at continued oppression also inspired an incipient black natural history. Robert Alexander Young's revolutionary *Ethiopian Manifesto* (1827) posited that slavery had detrimental though temporary effects on the black mind and body. David Walker's equally messianic *Appeal* (1829) parodied Jefferson, asking but not answering whether whites were naturally inferior to blacks.

In the continuing absence of a great slave revolt and the growing presence of a backlash against anti-slavery, including northern anti-abolition violence and southern proslavery from the 1830s, desperation grew. Disillusion was especially close to the heart of Hosea Easton, an African American preacher, leader of the 1820s black uplift movement, and principal in the American Society of Free Persons of Colour (its annual conventions began optimistically in 1831 but petered out by 1835, while their college in New Haven and church in Hartford were burned down). Some historians see his 1837 *Treatise on the Intellectual Character, and ... Condition of the People of the U. States* as an angry rant, but for Dain it was 'a remarkably careful self-conscious text' which argued that sin deformed babies in the womb (Easton's Christian evangelist interpretation of natural history's idea of 'maternal impression') and thereby blamed slavery for blacks' conditions; Easton thus converted the notion of white prejudice as a argument for gradualism or colonization, or even, for Jefferson, the indefinite continuation of slavery, into an argument for immediate abolition. (p. 179)

For Dain, then, there was no simple dialectic between monogenism and polygenism, or between black and white writing, and no straightforward teleology from eighteenth-century natural history to nineteenth-century biology. There was inter-textual reflexivity, but each theory was constructed from a complex matrix

of imperatives that included political events, economic and social change, and individual experience, as well as reactions to previous writings. Indeed, Dain's book is so informative because for him theory is never abstract; he places every race theory and their every evolution in these historical contexts. In fact, so detailed and complex are Dain's arguments, and so numerous and complicated are the ideas he traces, that I wished for a little more assistance from the author. His prose can be difficult – 'Other, sometimes antiracist, theories were advanced that were as meaningful and resonant as the well known biological racist ones, and no more illogical or absurd, if not less so' (p. viii) – although things improve later in the book. Style aside, a longer preface and a conclusion would improve future editions. Still, these are minor criticisms: this book merits and rewards close attention.

More significantly, while Dain knows his racial theory, he eschews engagement with historical theory. This omission seems odd enough in the field of the history of science, but given Dain's mastery of early republican scientific epistemology, it seems almost perverse that he does not examine today's historical epistemology. He mentions those to whom he owes direct intellectual debts and those with whom he disputes minutiae in the history of racial thinking – David Brion Davis, Winthrop Jordan, George Fredrickson, Stephen Jay Gould, William Stanton, and others – but there is no big picture, no mention of Thomas Kuhn, his successors, or of structuralism or postmodernism. One senses that, like Samuel George Morton, the famous craniologist whose writing inspired the extremities of polygenist pro-slavery (but who did not publicly commend polygenism until 1849), Dain possesses a dogged determination to let his empirical work stand by itself. Yet Dain criticises Morton's pretended indifference about the larger implications of his racial theories, and Dain can rightly hope that his findings will fare better and for longer than Morton's. Perhaps therefore, Dain sees himself as more like James McCune Smith, unwilling to allow his thought and writing to be defined by those of others. Indeed, Dain plainly admires McCune Smith's recounting of individual African Americans' stories and their effective but only implicit attacks on the generalisations of invidious racial theories. Equally, Dain is uncomfortable with McCune Smith's explicit and 'self-consuming, even morbid' and defensive engagement with the works of the minor polygenist Ephraim G. Squier. (p. 247)

If I can draw out Dain's historiographical implications as he draws out race theorists' implications, I would say that his empirical contextualisations of racial thought and discourse represent a reproach to postmodernism. This is perhaps inevitable: the history of American racial thought is perhaps only aced by the Holocaust in illustrating the inadequacies of postmodern notions of history as nothing more than texts of equal validity. Furthermore, for Dain there was good science and bad science (although he judges scrupulously according to the standards of the time). He recounts the replications of Morton's craniological experiments undertaken by scientist Stephen Jay Gould, accepting Gould's results as proof that Morton's were empirically wrong, though, like Gould, Dain attributes Morton's methodological errors to unconscious action. He also, at least implicitly, sees science as sometimes regressive. Without being teleological, one cannot help believing that nineteenth-century thinkers who rejected Enlightenment liberalism in favour of the 'hard' science of racial inequality were not exactly moving forward intellectually.

Because Dain distains historiographical debate, he is unable to press home (though he mentions in passing) an insight by McCune Smith that has considerable contemporary resonance. Continuing the theme of the aforementioned 1852 article, McCune Smith wrote of 'a *constructive* negro ... that haunts with grim presence the precincts of this republic, shaking his gory locks over legislative halls and family prayers' (my italics). McCune Smith wrote these words, with remarkable literary as well as analytic prescience, over a century before the modern 'cultural turn' supposedly revealed that some social phenomena are constructions in the mind. Unlike some modern intellectual constructionists, however, McCune Smith always recognised (as does Dain) that there were real African Americans, as well as hideous monsters of the mind.

Indeed, McCune Smith used the term 'Negro' in reference not to African Americans but to intellectually-constructed blackness, which leads me to a final point. Dain uses 'Negro' presumably for the same reason, though once again chooses not to explain himself (perhaps an even odder silence, given modern and mostly laudable sensitivities about the language of race). If I am wrong in my readings of Dain's historiographical

implications and linguistic intentions, then perhaps the postmodernists are right about the limits of authorial control over textual interpretation. I look forward therefore, with some trepidation, to Bruce Dain's response to this review (should he choose to engage).

Notes

1. James Sidbury's extended discussion of the influence of the Haitian Revolution on African Americans in *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730-1810* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1997) is inexplicably omitted in Dain's discussion and notes. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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