

On the menu, but not at the table

Susanne Lettow, ed., *Reproduction, Race, and Gender in Philosophy and the Early Life Sciences*, SUNY Press, Albany NY, 2014. vi + 294 pp., £52.00 hb., £19.95 pb., 978 1 43844 949 4 hb., 978 1 43844 948 7 pb.

This collection contributes to an increasingly important issue in philosophy and the history of ideas, examining the emergence of the interrelated discourses of reproduction, 'race' and gender. How the naturalization of these ideas is to be resisted or overturned is not examined here, but bringing these discourses to our attention is in itself valuable and helpfully directs us to the relatively recent revival of critical debates around the history of the anthropological question: what is man?

Recent student-led campaigns (especially the Why is My Curriculum White? campaign), ongoing campaigns against racist policing and intergovernmental (and grass roots) debates concerning reparations, all in their different ways connect to the history of this question. While some forms of explicit 'race' and gender discrimination have been successfully challenged, we are far from living in a time in which we can look back at this question in a 'disinterested' manner. This is an illusion, however, that *Reproduction, Race, and Gender in Philosophy and the Early Life Sciences* runs the risk of supporting. The collection would have benefited from an African philosophical contribution because, as one campaigning student recently put it, 'we are too often on the menu but not at the table'.

In his exchange with Robert Bernasconi in *RP* 119, Joseph McCarney argued that 'Our antiracist critique will then end up proving far too much', as a result of which 'the entire canon of Western Philosophy ... is likely to stand convicted.' Ironically there are, as McCarney warned, New Right ideologists who would welcome this 'conviction', already toasting Kant's racism whilst claiming him as one of their own. There are also separatist movements that regard Western culture as irredeemably racist. Against both of these related positions there has been a desire to protect Kant from an association with racism and to bracket off his writings on 'race' from his wider work. The only alternative to these opposing extremes is a radical critique in which the ideas of 'race' and 'sex' are considered in the context of their historical emergence. Lettow points out in her Introduction that 'a critical analysis of gender and race discourses has to address the multiplicity of [these] concepts.'

The book draws out this 'multiplicity' in illuminating ways. But it does not look deeply enough at the question of what, if anything, this multiplicity of concepts have in common and it does not critically interrogate the question of the natural biological ideas of 'race' and 'sex' upon which these concepts are based. Work by Robert Bernasconi, Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze and Christian Neugebauer on 'race' and by Stella Sandford on 'sex' have sharpened the critical approach in a way that is underexplored in this collection. Following Kwame Anthony Appiah's 1985 argument that 'race' does not exist, the concept is widely regarded today as lacking scientific coherence, having been superseded by molecular biology and population genetics (which show, for example, that there are wider genetic variations between different African populations than there are between African and European populations). But, in addition to the ongoing *political* significance of 'race', Staffan Müller-Wille points, in his essay, to a 'recent resurgence of racial categories in genomics', which makes the interrogation of the origins of the concept of 'race' all the more urgent.

Bernasconi has shown that Kant provided the concept of 'race' with its first stable meaning and Eze's 1995 essay 'The Color of Reason' and Tsenay Serequeberhan's work also re-examined Kant's concept of 'race' and its place in the political economy of the Enlightenment. In his introduction to *Kant and the Concept of Race* (the previous book in the SUNY series in which this volume appears) Jon Mikkell argues that Eze was not sufficiently familiar with Kant's work to notice what Pauline Kleingeld had called 'Kant's second thoughts on race'. This was further attributed to a failure on Eze's part to engage with Kant's reception of Buffon and, in particular, Buffon's rejection of early preformationism. This criticism, however, sidesteps the argument that, although Kant's 'second thoughts' on 'race' were partly rooted in his abandonment of preformationism in favour of Buffonian epigenesis, his was a form of epigenesis ('generic preformation') with a strong pre-formationist base (see Sandford's 'Spontaneous Generation', *RP* 179).

Bernasconi develops this argument in his essay here and demonstrates – through examining the reception of Kant's concept of 'race' in the work of

Girtanner and Schelling – that Kant retained a strong preformationist base at the heart of his ideas of ‘race’ and reproduction and therefore did not have second thoughts of a kind that could be meaningfully distinguished as non-preformationist. Girtanner’s reading of Kant – published in 1796 – was endorsed by Kant himself in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798) and so provides researchers with another important textual base from which to interpret Kant’s abiding views which combined natural history, the idea of germs (*Keime*) and ‘race’.

Bernasconi’s essay also discusses the significance of Kant’s concept of ‘race’ in the work of Schelling, who, as Allison Stone argues, sought to move beyond Kant’s critical claim that judgements of purposiveness in nature could not be more than merely ‘regulative’ without leading to dialectical illusion. Schelling developed an account of the way that nature must be independently of how we know it – that is, composed of products whose purposiveness dwells within themselves. If human minds are natural products, then the study of any and all such products should be (re)interpreted in the light of what is known about human minds because, for Schelling, nature prefigures human self-organization. This attempt to go beyond Kant’s bifurcation of nature into noumena and phenomena continues along a course already prefigured in the *Critique of Judgment* and, as John H. Zammito argues, leads directly to the high points of German Idealist philosophy.

Schelling’s understanding of a polarity of philosophically fundamental forces – *entgegengesetzter Kräfte* – which determine the structure of matter, magnetism, electricity, chemistry and physiology develops in his published works from the 1797 *Ideas For a Philosophy of Nature*, and 1798 *On the World Soul*, through to his 1799 *First Outline of a System of Philosophy of Nature* in which sexual difference – *Geschlechtsverschiedenheit* – becomes the culminating manifestation of this polarity. Male ‘production’ represents one pole and female ‘inhibition’ the other. Stone points to the ‘enormous influence’ of Plato’s *Timaeus*, but the critical analysis of the concept of ‘sex’ is overlooked here in favour of the historical development of Schelling’s position. Stone shows that Hegel similarly sexualizes the polarity of ‘concept and matter’ as nature’s fundamental constitutive opposition, which he then characterized as male and female respectively.

As Stone points out, Hegel also developed a ‘racial’ hierarchy on the basis of this polarity in which the African allegedly remains at the level of

matter while the European is alone able to recognize spirit in nature and thereby make history through the self-realization of the concept. Stone shows that while the African and the female are identified with matter in the Hegelian concept/matter distinction, ‘sexual’ difference is, for Hegel, dynamic whereas ‘racial’ difference is not. While this is an interesting difference between ‘racial’ and ‘sexual’ diversity in Hegel’s philosophy, it overlooks the place of the African woman, who, as such, is both dynamic in her ‘sexual’ difference and yet static in her ‘racial’ diversity (*Rassenverschiedenheit*). By uniting this difference in a body of experience, the African woman may make a critical contribution to Stone’s feminist project of ‘creating new bodies of thought, knowledge and practice out of women’s sexually specific forms of embodiment’.

Stone explicitly contrasts her feminist project with the work of Peter Hanns Reill, who argues that Romantic *Naturphilosophen* redefined the politics of sexual subordination in the post-revolutionary period, pointing to the Enlightenment’s revolutionary transcendence of the gender roles associated with the ancient regime in favour of what Reill argues was a culturally liberating androgyny. For Stone, by contrast, this liberating androgyny was somewhat superficial in so far as the valued characteristics of intellect, activity and productivity remained ‘male’. Although women could rise to prominence through the cultivation of these qualities, their symbolic identification as masculine meant that woman as woman remained in negative opposition to man as man.

Reill draws a distinction between late Enlightenment thinkers and the *Naturphilosophen* in order to oppose those who argue that Enlightenment thinkers developed the ‘two sex model’ that objectified gender inequality. For Reill this criticism ought rather to be aimed at the *Naturphilosophen* Lorenz Oken and Carl Gustav Carus, the latter a professor, physician, gynaecologist and author of the influential textbook *Lehrbuch der Gynakologie* (1820). Reill contrasts these authors with Wilhelm Von Humboldt, who, in Reill’s essay, represents the late Enlightenment’s valorization of androgyny. Laquer argued that during the eighteenth century this androgynous or ‘one sex’ model was replaced by a ‘two sex’ model which highlighted ‘sexual dimorphism’, restoring gender hierarchies in the post-revolutionary period on the new basis of the emerging life sciences. Whereas Laquer attributes this to Enlightenment thought itself, Reill argues that it was the Romantic *Naturphilosophen* who initiated this move. If, however, feminism is defined by the



challenge it poses to a presumed ‘naturalness’ of male supremacy (as Kate Soper puts it), it is difficult to see how either of these two models of ‘sex’ could be straightforwardly relied upon to give evidence in support of the feminist cause. The opposing one- and two-sex models and their different interpretations in the context of gender politics must raise the question of the presumed naturalness of the object ‘sex’ – whichever way it is conceived – and the question of ‘sex’, as distinct from gender, ought to have been considered.

Lettow agrees with Reill that the restoration of pre-revolutionary hierarchies on the new scientific basis of the life sciences led to the formation of a ‘biopolitical gaze’, and Florence Vienne’s account of investigations into *Urthiere*, primordial or spermatic animals, and the so-called ‘reproductive substance’, during the period 1749 to 1805 similarly reflects Reill’s periodization of the development of the two-sex polarity. Jocelyn Holland, by contrast, looks at the ‘romantic discourse on procreation’ through an analysis of the relationship between the concepts of *Fortpflanzung* (procreation) and *Zeugung* (generation), which complicate any simple reading of developments in the book’s central organizing concept: ‘reproduction’. Notions of ‘reproduction’ (a

late-eighteenth-century neologism) were influenced by Abraham Trembley’s research (published in 1744) into the freshwater polyp’s ability to reproduce dissected parts of its body, and stimulated Buffon’s development of the idea of an active power superseding the earlier forms of preformationism, raising the question of what, exactly, could be reproduced – the species, the ‘race’ or the individual organism? This, in turn, stimulated changes in the understanding of the ‘temporalization’ of life, which could no longer be thought of as having been created in a divine time in which every individual organism was preformed and encased, one in another, like an infinite series of preformed Russian dolls. Ideas of heredity and developments in the natural history of the species and the ‘races’ called into question what could be inherited, and from which parent, and all in a period in which distinct disciplinary boundaries were as yet unformed.

In his contribution to this volume, Renato G. Mazzolini (somewhat uncritically) goes through various offerings from racism’s menu and argues that colour prejudice was the result of colour-based slavery and that ‘social and political classifications of Africans preceded the scientific classifications and the anatomical investigations of skin colour’.

This is not, however, a repetition of Eric Williams's Marxist account of the development of racist ideology from racist relations of production, but, perhaps perversely, an account of its development in relation to the revolutionary resistance to these relations. Mazzolini writes:

In fact, from a chronological point of view, the idea [of biologically inferior and superior races] gained ground and imposed itself as the majority view, just as the campaigns for abolition of first the slave trade and then slavery got under way, but especially after the revolts in the Caribbean and the enactment, on the July 8, 1801, of the first constitution of St. Domingue.

Leaving aside the question of this 'majority view' (*de jure* slavery had been abolished in the French parliament, after all), Mazzolini turns from the task of interpreting these ideas of black inferiority to what he proposes as a new explanatory model, 'leucocracy', and asks, 'Why did Europeans consider themselves to be superior?' However, without reference to what African people thought, we find here an unwitting repetition of one of racism's characteristic moves – to make the African present, as an object, without any presence as a subject. This form of racism underlies the different models Mazzolini covers, but he misses this shared and characteristic ideological function.

Penelope Deutscher's essay examines Mary Wollstonecraft's use of analogical reasoning in connecting chattel slavery with the plight of middle-class women. Deutscher teases out a certain 'rhetorical profit' won through these analogies and argues that 'Wollstonecraft's expression of antislavery sentiment was consistent with her also supposing the subordination and inferiority of certain classes of humans.' Middle-class European women, Deutscher argues, were simultaneously compared to, and held apart from, those in slavery or the 'servant class', through an 'insinuation of aberration'. Whether this is really as mercenary a gesture as Deutscher suggests will be a question for the reader, who, having studied Sara Figal's fascinating piece, may be inclined to conclude that Wollstonecraft's analogies might more fittingly have been drawn between the ladies of Europe and the 'eroticized' Circassian slaves of the 'oriental' harem.

In their shared confinement to the private sphere these two groups – who were first called 'Caucasian' in this period – were chiefly tasked with producing only one form of that sweetness industrially extracted from the sugar islands: in addition to the varying forms of sexual exploitation the African woman

had also to (re)produce more 'slaves' and so, like the working women of Europe, also produced labour power in the form of *proles* – that is, offspring. In this way women remain at the heart of capitalist production, and in a pioneering exercise of consumer power women's groups organized sugar boycotts as well as a range of public awareness campaigns directed against the slave system.

While Wilberforce and the 'Saints' advocated the gradual abolition of slavery – and refused women's signatures on their petitions – Elizabeth Heyricke's *Immediate not Gradual Abolition* and the Peckham Ladies African and Anti-Slavery Society's boycott campaign suggest another reading of the wider feminist influence. 'Ladies Associations' up and down the UK petitioned and actively produced the political strategies that pressured the British Parliament on the question of immediate abolition. Against their identification with 'passive matter', these women – African and European – actively defied the pseudoscientific definitions of what made one fully human. In the post-Hegelian period the status of matter itself was philosophically challenged, but the status of the workers most identified with matter did not automatically undergo a similar change because, in part, as Joan Steigerwald shows, the development of the new science – which Treviranus, the subject of her essay, was one of the first to call 'Biology' – uncritically incorporated much from the earlier debates and, as she concludes, should be read as revealing the problems associated with 'first attempts to articulate a science of Biology in the years around 1800'.

The metaphysician interested in repairing our relations with nature, and each other, will find much in this volume that discusses the pathological dis-ease that still plagues our institutions and hampers our efforts towards sustainable democratic development. Philosophy is still being called to the bar of history to provide its expert evidence. But the question is not whether philosophy is racist or sexist, but what philosophy can diagnose about racism and sexism in an effort to be rid of their toxic effects. Judging from the essays in this collection there remains a lot to be said, and more – much more – still to be done.

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