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This blog series will cover various topics of interest within the confines of early American science and medicine. The hope is that the reader can be exposed to the topography of field, while also joining me on my journey through my comprehension exam reading list. I hope to cover ideas from a few books for each post, while expanding on these themes through reflection and other writings that I have come across in my studies.

Image: “Skulls” by Josiah Clark Nott and George Robert Glidden, 1857. Nott and Glidden wrote *The Indigenous Races of the World* (1868) which used skull measurements as quantitative data to compare the superiority or inferiority of the various races of the world using inaccurate diagrams such as this one.

With the notion that the term “science” was not coined until the 19th century, the field that we know of today as science originated from the practice of natural philosophy. This derivation is key to understanding the history of race in early America. Natural philosophy was the metaphysical study of natural science or physical science through empirical collection of data. Thus, science was the practice of using the senses to make conclusions about the natural world. This process of study, as many historians have covered, is both flawed and extremely biased. I hope to reinforce this fact as I discuss the origins and practice of race in the early Americas. It is worth noting that I taught this history to undergraduates earlier this month in an English literature course on 19th century

colonial science. Many of the arguments made in this post, points from the texts that I discuss, and my reflection on the topic draws heavily upon our discussions and my lecture notes from this two-day unit of the course.

Race is a product of the differentiation between the physical attributes of humans and the initial attempt by Westerners to comprehend the origin of humans. Through monogenic and polygenic theories, the thought that different races of men stemmed from one ancestor (monogenic) or each race had its own separate ancestral history (polygenic), circulated throughout the Atlantic world as colonialism advanced in the early modern period. One idea was widely accepted, though: that people of various skin colors were fundamentally distinct from white people, were inferior in most ways to white society, and thus should be treated differently.

There are a handful of books that discuss the history of racial science in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the last few years, academics have come to focus on the ways in which this idea of scientific race fundamentally solidified difference and inferiority between communities; stereotypes that are still ingrained in many Western societies today.

*Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture* by Brit Rusert exposes the reader to the fact that African American communities in the 19th century were responding to these heinous conclusions made about the inferiority of the colored races that developed from polygenic and monogenic theories.[1] In particular, these responses were made to Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, which was the basis for many racial understandings from the 18th century onwards.[2] Through a mixture of intellectual history and a rich archive of pamphlets, plays, and social history, Rusert introduces the fact that black communities sat quietly while scientific racism abounded in the 1800s, its theories created an abundance of dissent and debate from the African American population. The research in this text is integral to the complete story of race as a science in the early period of the American republic because it gives agency to the voices of the black communities in 19th century United States.

Another book in this field that excels at uncovering another piece of this history is Rana Hogarth's *Medicalizing Blackness: Making Racial Difference in the Atlantic World 1780-1840*. [3] Hogarth writes a discourse on early Atlantic history that emphasizes how influential racial theory impacted affairs of plantation life. It was once believed that plantation owners ignored the circulation of scientific racial theories that was happening around the American continent, but this was not true. This narrative reveals how physicians used blackness as a marker of difference on plantations and used that medical difference between races, that of skin color and other biological differences, to reinforce plantation labor efficiency and white supremacy. The text also highlights the frequency in which white physicians extorted the fact that slaves used their own ideas of medicine to heal as a major instance of difference between races. By practicing their own forms of medicine, slaves were creating an example of how they were other species of humans that used these other forms of medical healing to survive.

These two texts in particular highlight the way in which biased observations by white men transitioned into powerful statements and laws that built the foundations of American colonies. Yet the history of racial understanding is not solely constrained to the British colonies in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. James Sweet writes a microhistory of one slave's life that expands our understanding of race, science and medicine in the colonial period by focusing on the Portuguese empire. This book, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World*, may seem like quite an outlier in this post because it is about South America, but I think that is why it is so necessary to include it in this piece.[4] Sweet stuns the reader with an deep analysis of one black man, Domingo Álvares, who is taken away from his home in Dahomey (what is now the Republic of Benin), sent to work in Brazil as a slave, but continued to practice the cultural knowledge of healing he learned back in Africa. By piecing together Inquisition records, Sweet documents Álvares' medical profession, from funding his manumission in Rio de Janeiro through his medical work, to a series of arrests and witchcraft trials in Brazil and later in Portugal, where the records end. The book is rich with history of the Portuguese slave trade, the traditions of 18th century Rio, and parts of the Inquisition that are not regularly covered in history courses. From Sweet's book, knowledge of how race was seen in this empire is made clear. Religion was the marker of inferiority for this culture. Science and medicine seemed to play no role in racializing people in Brazil. The only way in which science and medicine were brought up was through the history of Rio de Janeiro and the rich medical marketplace that culminated from a multitude of cultures living in close quarters. These practices were accepted, as long as they kept out of Catholic practice of religion and spirituality. At the edges of South American society, scientific racism was not practiced.

The history of race is simple and complicated. It is simple because it is a direct product of white, colonial, empirical observation that later became the cornerstone and foundation of Western science. It is complicated because these observations, over the years, were solidified into Western society as fact without acknowledgement of those who questioned its validity. Because racial hierarchy was explained by scientists of the day, the inferiority of other societies became a fact that is still widely believed and practiced today. The history of race is also complicated because other cultures in the early modern period did not believe or practiced these ideas, like those in the Portuguese empire. The science of race sprung out of the British empire, and later spread like a disease as Westernization took root across the globe. From this post, I hope it is apparent that the science of race was a product of biased examination that widely became accepted as truth.. This fictionalization of racial inferiority also illustrates how powerful discourse and observation can go when it falls within the parameters of "science." Early American science and medicine were the major origins of race, and both of these subjects were tools that continued to uphold that hierarchy for centuries. In the classroom, it is imperative that these histories be divulged with open discussion. Coming from someone who taught this history quite recently, the tough and enlightening conversations that stemmed from the class revealed to me how necessary these discussions are, and how willing many students are in talking about it.

[1] Rusert, Brit. *Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture*. (New York,

NY: New York University Press, 2017).

[2] Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. (Paris, France, 1785).

[3] Hogarth, Rana A. *Medicalizing Blackness: Making Racial Difference in the Atlantic World, 1780-1840*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

[4] Sweet, James Hoke. *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

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