

(En)Gendering Race: Gendered Subtext in Kant's "On the Different Races of Man" and "On National Characteristics"

What engenders race? Against the eighteenth century backdrop of colonization and classification, this question of how race is produced and reproduced disturbed the mind of the white European thinker who sought to hold the outcomes of racial mixing in his theoretical grasp. In particular, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the first in Europe to invent a legitimizing concept of race (Bernasconi 146), looked to codify how physical and metaphysical markers of racial difference were born. His essays "On the Different Races of Man" (1775) and "On National Characteristics, so far as They Depend upon the Distinct Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime" (1764) define race as preformed by nature, women, and the feminine sex respectively. As such, reproduction for Kant is rife with gendered subtext. Informed by natural historicist connections between gender and race prevalent at the time, Kant uses metaphors of motherhood and images of female reproduction to perpetuate an Eurocentric racial hierarchy. Subtextually, "Nature," female reproduction, and the feminine "beautiful" serve to mother race, such that for Kant, "the feminine sex" plays the utmost role in germinating the "degeneration" of races (Eze 43, 49, 57, 55).

In "On the Different Races of Man," Kant positions "Nature" as the mother of race in order to establish racial difference as natural design. To begin, Kant broadly divides humanity into "four races of man" by invoking the naturalist "rule of Buffon": that "animals which generate between them fertile young" belong to the same species, and that humans who "generate between them children that are necessarily hybrid, or blendings (mulattoes)" are of different races (38, 40). Already, Kant conflates the rules of reproduction in animals and in humans, an important context for his use of birth imagery. For example, Kant draws a direct

analogy between birds developing a new layer of feathers and humans adapting to their climate. Interestingly, Kant describes this ability for adaptation as “the foresight of *Nature* to equip *her* *creation* with hidden inner furnishings against all sorts of future circumstances in order that it be preserved and suited to the variety of climate or soil” (43, italics mine). Here, Kant positions ‘Nature’ as the subject and ‘man’ as the object, specifically prescribing ‘Nature’ with the possessive ‘her’ to imply that ‘Nature’ is an active agent in supplying racial difference. ‘Nature’ is not only capitalized, but personified and feminized as ‘her,’ thus evoking an image of a mother giving birth in the context of Kant’s use of ‘fertil[ity],’ “organic body,” and ‘creation’ (42). Indeed, Kant repeats this birth imagery when he elaborates that racial variation allows ‘man’ to “appear in the course of generations to have been *born* to that place and made for it” (44, italics mine). It is extremely telling then, that Kant later describes “the Negro” as “strong, fleshy, supple, but in the midst of the bountiful provision of his *motherland* lazy, soft and dawdling” (46, italics mine). In other words, land and climate can be read as a womb that generates racial inferiority. Framing ‘Nature’ as an active agent in ‘provi[ding]’ for the inferiority of certain races allows Kant to assert that racial hierarchy is natural purpose manifest. This idea that race comes from the womb of ‘Nature’ lays ground for Kant’s subsequent racialization of female reproduction.

Further on in “On the Different Races of Man,” Kant implies that women literally shape racial difference by using language that draws upon eighteenth century anatomical fascination with the reproductive organs of non-European women. In order to assert the innateness of race, Kant must first address the physical origin of race, and he does so by defining “the generative force” as having “effect something that can reproduce of itself” (43). Beyond that, Kant does not offer a more exacting description of what such a force looks like, so therefore the meaning of

racial origin rests on ‘reproduc[ing] of itself,’ an ability generally ascribed to female reproduction. Given that ‘Nature’ is feminized as ‘her,’ one possible reading points to ‘the generative force’ being coded as the female reproductive organ. Such a reading makes sense in the context that Kant’s contemporaries were widely engaged in debates on how ‘Nature’ manifests in female reproduction to shape race. For instance, James A. Steintrager shows, in “Color and Caprice: The Politics and Aesthetics of Interracial Relations,” that “of particular interest to European observers well into the nineteenth century were the *steatopygia* and the *sinus pudoris* or elongated labia characteristic of some Khoisan women” (240). Indeed, Kant’s focus on reproduction takes on heightened meaning given the connections between women and race that were burgeoning in the eighteenth century and that became crystallized in the nineteenth century. In “The Anatomy of Difference: Race and Sex in Eighteenth-Century Science,” Londa Schiebinger posits that “one of the most remarkable ways in which race intersects with sex in this period is that women were commonly seen as helping to shape racial characteristics” (392). Specifically, the same Buffon that Kant draws from believed that, as paraphrased by Schiebinger, “mothers took the homogenous stuff of humanity and carved from it the peculiarities of national types” (393). Thus, situating Kant’s reproductive language in historical context shows that for eighteenth century European thinkers, the idea of ‘Nature’ engendering racial difference is inseparable from notions of how female reproduction literally produces race. As such, Kant not only enables ‘Nature’ to be seen as the metaphorical mother of race, he provides ground for women to be seen as the literal mothers of their specific race insofar that the act of female reproduction is seen to produce visible markers of difference that define race.

In “On National Characteristics,” Kant adds a metaphysical layer to the way in which women shape race. Not only through female reproduction, but through social function, women

play a defining role in representing the quality of a race according to Kant's gendered and racialized dichotomies of the noble and the beautiful, the civilized and the savage, the white and the black. Specifically, Kant uses Eurocentric visions of morality as evidence of European racial superiority and non-European racial inferiority. For example, he claims that "the inhabitant of the Orient...has no concept of the morally beautiful" (Eze 56). Furthermore, Kant describes "the Arab" as "the noblest man in the Orient, yet of a feeling that degenerates very much into the adventurous," thereby maintaining that non-Europeans are of a race that degenerates from the stem white European race because they fail to experience the beautiful (54). This racial hierarchy becomes gendered when Kant connects race, specifically the idea of the savage, to the feminine. In "What Nature Makes of Her: Kant's Gendered Metaphysics," Inder S. Marwah pinpoints how Kant uses women as tool for reinforcing racial hierarchy:

"Women play a fundamental role in furthering civilization by curbing the barbaric urges and impulses to which men are naturally prone and that inhibit the development of their rational faculties...Feminine qualities, Kant observes, remain latent and inexpressible in savage societies, effectively depriving women of their measure of social power. In savage nations, 'the woman is a domestic animal'; under a 'barbaric civil constitution,' she is treated as a piece of property as such societies' rule by force renders them unresponsive to the feminine qualities that comprise women's tools of social control" (553).

In his own words, Kant asks rhetorically, "In the lands of the black, what better can one expect than what is found prevailing, namely the feminine sex in the deepest slavery?" (Eze 57). By contrast, Kant elevates the French experience of the beautiful by highlighting the status of women in French society: "In France, woman gives the beautiful tone to all companies and all society...thus the fair sex [in France] would be able to heave a mightier influence to arouse the noblest deeds of the male and to set them astir than perhaps anywhere else in the world" (52-53). Therefore, Kant subtextually suggests that it is because the black man fails to recognize the beautiful in 'the feminine sex' that his race is inferior and degenerative. Thus, according to Kant,

the lack of moral feminine qualities in the women results in a failure to inspire feelings of the noble in the men, thus accounting for a degeneration in the race. Or, cyclically put, the quality of women is indicative of the quality of their race such that only lesser and ‘savage’ races would have their women in poor conditions.

Bringing together “On the Different Races of Man” and “On National Characteristics” to address racial mixing, Kant’s commentary on protecting “original disposition” illuminates the sinister subtext that controlling female reproduction enables controlled outcomes for race (Eze 43). In “After the German Invention of Race: Conceptions of Race Mixing from Kant to Fischer and Hitler,” Robert Bernasconi summarizes Kant’s stance on race mixing:

“Nevertheless, even if the possibility of race mixing was what necessitated the category of race and differentiated it from species, Kant believed that the existence of races was an indication that race differences belonged to the design of providence. This meant that race mixing was against nature” (93).

Kant can be seen as warning against racial mixing, notably right after he defines ‘the generative force,’ when he contends that “...nothing alien to the animal must enter the generative force which would be capable of gradually removing the creature from its original disposition of production real exspeciations that perpetuate themselves” (Eze 43). In the aforementioned contexts of feminized ‘Nature,’ female reproduction, and innately feminine qualities in women serving as the source of racial difference, Kant’s words can be interpreted to oppose the alien germs of another race entering into the female reproductive organ. Most insidiously, he is outlining a principle of reproduction for race, a tenet in the “system of laws” he mentions at the beginning of his essay (39). Kant indicates that by controlling the ways in which race is produced—through female reproduction—he can prevent racial mixing. To control the mother of race, is therefore to shape race itself. To name racial difference and declare certain reproductive means degenerative (the opposite of ‘original’), is to command the genesis of race. Racial mixing

is deemed an ‘alien’ and degenerative practice because it threatens such command of race, because it threatens to break apart Kant’s clearly delineated stem races that serve to reinforce white European supremacy.

A gendered reproductive reading of Kant’s essays reveals that his grip on race reaches deeper than his surface textual arguments about the four races of man. The subtextual meaning that ‘the feminine sex’ engenders race through ‘Nature,’ female reproduction, and feminine qualities is significant not only because Kant is oft-cited as a progenitor of scientific racial thought, but also because it highlights how race and gender have historically been interconnected. However, Kant scholars rarely focus on the relationship between gender and race, especially when such connections are connotative rather than forefronted. Yet, to gender race, to gender Kant, is to acknowledge that for as long as race was considered preformed before birth, women played a defining role in interpretations of racial difference. As shown, (en)gendering race is about controlling female reproductive means and the metaphysically feminine. By positioning himself as superior to women, the European white man could therefore assert control over the determination of racial difference itself—as has been the case, and as continues to be the case.

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