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Phrenology Applied Through Colonization: Impacts on Africa

The pseudo-sciences of phrenology and others based in visual classification of people were once believed to be the next forefront of science, technology, and humanity. However, we now know these sciences to be nearly entirely false, their only redeeming qualities laying in what real sciences they inspired the development of. Unfortunately, without the measuring of skulls and approximation of 'organs' in the brain that control behavior, neuroscience and psychology would have had a harder path to carve. As phrenology is a highly racialized/anti-color subject, the proliferation in publication and usage matches this history of colonization in Africa, especially in relation to the British Empire's efforts.

As one of the handful of pseudo-sciences that developed in concert into the practice of scientific racism was phrenology. This was the 'methodology', "a science of character analysis", based on "the theory that the human mind could be divided into thirty-seven faculties with distinct locations in the brain."¹ Referred to also as "the science of bumps", phrenology maintained that the brain was the "organ of the mind and that each mental faculty had a seat in the head", focusing on the brain as "a physiological marker of humanity."² Psychological characteristics (supposedly) were "determined by the size and proportion of the controlling organs in the brain", which were 'measured' "by noting the shape of the skull, and especially,

¹ Bank, Andrew. "Of 'Native Skulls' and 'Noble Caucasians': Phrenology in Colonial South Africa." *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 22, no. 3, Sept. 1996, pp. 388.

² Sivasundaram, Sujit. "Imperial transgressions." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 35, no. 1, 1 May 2015, pp. 158.

any protuberances, since the cranium corresponds closely to the shape of the brain beneath.”³

These characteristics, dubbed “faculties”, were sorted into two orders: “feelings” that were either “propensities” or “sentiments”, or “intellectual faculties”.⁴ Propensities are “those faculties – ‘combativeness’, ‘destructiveness’, ‘secretiveness’ – that man shares with all animals”, while sentiments are “faculties – ‘veneration’, ‘firmness’, ‘hope’ – that are proper to man alone.”⁵ The intellectual faculties include “external senses (such as taste and smell) as well as perceptive faculties such as ‘language’, ‘comparison’, and ‘causality’.”⁶ According to these ‘principles’, someone with a “large skull with a particularly high and full brow indicates that the individual has highly developed intellectual capacities.”⁷ With this tenets, “an individual’s capabilities are basically determined at birth”, with people being “endowed with different talents and deficiencies which make men inherently unequal and society unalterably stratified.”⁸ With inherent, insurmountable ‘deficiencies’ determined, people such as “criminals and the insane suffer from diseases for which they are basically not responsible.”⁹ Such “criminals are only following their natural animal propensities towards destructiveness, secretiveness, and combativeness.”¹⁰ These ideas of permanent, distinctly different ‘criminals’ were then applied to imperialism and colonialism, Europeans justifying their destruction of continents of ‘lesser’ people. In the Cape of South Africa, phrenology was “applied primarily to the issue of racial classification and deviance, although there are echoes of its association with crime.”¹¹

³ Parssinen, T. M. “Popular Science and Society: The Phrenology Movement in Early Victorian Britain.” *Journal of Social History* 8, no. 1 (1974): 2.

⁴ Parssinen, “Popular Science”, 2-3.

⁵ Parssinen, “Popular Science”, 2.

⁶ Parssinen, “Popular Science”, 2.

⁷ Parssinen, “Popular Science”, 3.

⁸ Parssinen, “Popular Science”, 6.

⁹ Parssinen, “Popular Science”, 6.

¹⁰ Parssinen, “Popular Science”, 6.

¹¹ Banks, “Of ‘Native Skulls’”, 390.

The British, generally, were the demographic that established, published, and applied phrenology towards foreign peoples with the most ‘fervor’. British social ideology and racialized pseudo-sciences “produced a belief in the existence in Africa of distinct Caucasoid and Negroid types, each with its own attributes, to which absolute (and variously ranked) values could be assigned.”¹² The ‘doctrines’ of phrenology “in essence innatist and deterministic and [in] this aspect fed directly into the growing racialism of British thought.”¹³ Specifically, ‘historian’ Sir Harry Hamilton Johnston writes, “the Negro, more than any other human type, has been marked out by his mental and physical characteristics as the servant of other races...in a primitive state [he] is a born slave.”¹⁴ Johnston continues with practically every stereotype of Black people, which are recognizable in how Americans felt about enslaved people prior to 1865, with are not only disgusting to imagine but factually inaccurate. Johnston’s notion that “[the Negro] has no sympathies for other negroes; he recognizes, follows, and imitates his master independently of any race affinities” is one small example of the massive, horrific rhetoric that proliferated in Britain for centuries.¹⁵ These ‘historians’ believed “obviously born slaves were incapable of creating anything that could be deemed worthy of historical study” and “there could be little doubt that Europe brought history to Africa.”¹⁶ The false belief of a ‘blank slate’ for colonizers to fill has resulted in gaps in true African history that remains involved with scholarship and popular culture into the modern day.

From the ideology stemmed ‘experimentation’ and ‘observation’ from territories that had been ‘explored’ by the British and other imperial powers. Craniometry, under the umbrella of

¹² Davis, R. Hunt. “Interpreting the colonial period in African history.” *African Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 289, Oct. 1973, 384.

¹³ Banks, “Of ‘Native Skulls’”, 390.

¹⁴ Hunt, “Interpreting the Colonial Period”, 384.

¹⁵ Hunt, “Interpreting the Colonial Period”, 384.

¹⁶ Hunt, “Interpreting the Colonial Period”, 384-385.

racial pseudo-sciences, “became a popular science of the nineteenth century across Europe, linked to measurement, especially of the cephalic index.”¹⁷ The collection of human skulls was “connected to the scientization of ideas of tribe, nation, race, and character”, serving as a “critical space for the study of types.”¹⁸ (Additionally) Problematically, “human skull collections were curated alongside animal crania”, with entire “catalogs of collections of human skulls referenc[ing] animal remains, too.”¹⁹ The catalog of “proslavery and polygenist physician Samuel George Morton, of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia”, “perhaps the largest collection of skulls in the world”, contained “867 human skulls and 601 of what Morton termed ‘inferior animals’, which were sent to him by friends across the globe.”²⁰ This collection was organized according to “racial types, under the headings of ‘Caucasian’, ‘Mongolian’, ‘Malay’, ‘Aboriginal American’, and ‘Negro’, but it also listed the titles ‘Mixed Races’, ‘Lunatics’, and ‘Idiot.’”²¹ Each skull had a measurement denoting the “facial angle” and “internal capacity”, and were mixed with the grouping of animal remains “not accidental[ly]; it had a bearing on race theory.”²²

In Colonial South Africa, the British settler community on the “Eastern Cape frontier were the most receptive to scientific racism as theories of biological determinism were used to buttress their growing pessimism regarding the civilizing mission”, becoming commonplace among the colonial elite shortly after.²³ These elites used the principles of phrenology to justify extreme racial policies and ‘send gifts’ to their friends in Europe, “which relied on colonial raw

¹⁷ Sivasundaram, “Imperial transgressions”, 158.

¹⁸ Sivasundaram, “Imperial transgressions”, 157.

¹⁹ Sivasundaram, “Imperial transgressions”, 158.

²⁰ Sivasundaram, “Imperial transgressions”, 159.

²¹ Sivasundaram, “Imperial transgressions”, 159.

²² Sivasundaram, “Imperial transgressions”, 159.

²³ Banks, “Of ‘Native Skulls’”, 392.

materials and case histories.”²⁴ While previous travelers “had transported Khoikhoi, Bushman, and Xhosa crania back to the Berlin and Paris museums” decades prior, now colonists started to “furnish European racial scientists with skulls.”²⁵ With scientific knowledge relying on individuals and their relationships, rather than a system or general access to all medical knowledge, medical ‘practitioners’ in colonies sent their articles and ‘materials’ back to European countries for information dissemination. Between 1824 and 1836, for example, “the number of phrenological societies had grown from one to twenty-four” and “fifty-seven books and pamphlets on phrenology – a total of 64,250 volumes – had been published.”²⁶

Also circulating through Europe, (again, due to the British), were the Gothic novel and the use of visual discernment of evil or villainy. Gothic literature featured villains that possessed “not simply human faces, but faces of evil.”²⁷ “Physical deformity” and indications (used in sciences like phrenology) of inner characteristics or capabilities were used to “judge individual character” on sight, without interaction or interparty understanding.²⁸ Through the language of phrenology or physiognomy, “bodily indicators of evil were elevated to the status of medical science”, culture giving credence to “the idea that evil could be read on the face and body of the evil-doer.”²⁹ In a culture preoccupied with racial differentiation and classification, the spreading concept of “how appearance match reality” turns dangerous for non-white people, particularly Africans or non-African Black people.³⁰ Literature’s features that discerned the “lower, criminal race” were “the ape-like qualities”, “inferior traits including ‘greater skull thickness, simplicity

²⁴ Banks, “Of ‘Native Skulls’”, 391.

²⁵ Banks, “Of ‘Native Skulls’”, 391.

²⁶ Parssinen, “Popular Science”, 1.

²⁷ Marshall, Bridget M. “THE FACE OF EVIL: PHRENOLOGY, PHYSIOGNOMY, AND THE GOTHIC VILLAIN.” *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 6, no. 2 (2000): 161.

²⁸ Marshall, “Gothic Villain”, 161.

²⁹ Marshall, “Gothic Villain”, 161.

³⁰ Marshall, “Gothic Villain”, 162.

of cranial sutures, large jaws, precocious wrinkles, low and narrow forehead, large ears, absence of baldness, darker skin, greater visual acuity, diminished sensitivity to pain, and absence of vascular reaction (blushing)'.³¹ Many of these features then were ingrained in Black stereotypes for centuries (still present in the example of lower 'sensitivity to pain' etc.). For the "disciple" of phrenology, these features were not only "unattractive, but clear indicators that the individual was mentally and morally inferior."³² Given that no other race or larger continental group of people have had the same level of targeted features of inferiority, any of those components applied to fictional characters in literature must be considered in the context of real-life persecution and suffering. The rise of Gothic literature, featuring such immoral evil-from-birth villains, aligns with the rise in racialized pseudo-sciences and 'happens' to flourish during the age of imperialism.

During/after centuries of established inferiority of Blackness in literature, culture, and politics, African culture responded. The view that the colonial period was "completely disruptive of the fabric of African life and therefore totally negative in its effect", famously characterized through the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe that shows a functioning society that "disintegrates in the face of white missionary and administrative intrusion."³³ Achebe's view stems from political scientist Abiola Irele's statements that "the establishment of colonial rule in Africa brought with it a drastic reordering of African societies" that created "a state of cultural fluctuation."³⁴ Negritude formed from the efforts to resist French assimilation, its leader Leopold Sedar Senghor, the first president of Senegal, speaking to the process of rebuilding nations based

³¹ Marshall, "Gothic Villain", 164.

³² Marshall, "Gothic Villain", 164.

³³ Hunt, "Interpreting the Colonial Period", 389.

³⁴ Hunt, "Interpreting the Colonial Period", 389.

on “recapturing that past.”³⁵ Senghor compares the definitions of ‘*latinite*’ and ‘*negritude*’: As “*latinite* expresses a concept which defines the qualities of Latin civilization, the word *negritude* expresses the same for the whole range of values of civilization of all black peoples in the world.”³⁶ Pan-African identity through the same “rhythmical images” within an art like jazz provides “unity within diversity, a repetition which does not repeat itself”, Senghor describes feelings that emerge from interacting with Black originating works or arts that cross ethnic or national lines.³⁷ “Therefore”, in the modern day, he urges people to ground themselves “deeply in the values of the black peoples, but, at the same time, also in opening [themselves] to other civilizations.”, not seeking to repress the centuries-old oppressors of Black peoples.³⁸ Cheikh Thiam proposes a “renaissance” of Senghor’s philosophy in the 21st century that generates a “particular Africentered epistemology and ontology” to mind the gap between previous views of Africanness and Blackness in post-colonial regions.³⁹ Stretching beyond, but not fully refuting all prior views on post-colonial African identities, Thiam insists that negritude is not entirely subjective or objective in presenting “the sum total of Negro cultural values.”⁴⁰ Thiam demonstrates negritude to be “understood as a reaction to Western modes of understanding people of African descent”, not grasping all realities of Western Black people *or* establishing the differences between the Western world and Africa and its people in the 21st century, so people require the next step in this intellectual path.⁴¹

³⁵ Hunt, “Interpreting the Colonial Period”, 389.

³⁶ Senghor, Leopold Sedar. “Negritude.” *Indian Literature*, vol. 17, no. ½ (January – June 1974), pp. 270.

³⁷ Senghor, “Negritude”, 271.

³⁸ Senghor, “Negritude”, 272.

³⁹ Thiam, Cheikh. “Negritude, Eurocentrism, and African agency: For an Africentered Renaissance of Léopold Sédar Senghor’s philosophy.” *The French Review*, vol. 88, no. 1, Oct. 2014, pp. 149.

⁴⁰ Thiam, “Renaissance”, 157.

⁴¹ Thiam, “Renaissance”, 160.

Due to the gaps in scholarship and global, cultural understanding, the impacts of the colonization of Africa are just starting to be understood. As such, the ramifications of pseudo-sciences and the surrounding culture are also beginning to be identified and (hopefully) reversed in modern society. Phrenology colored the treatment of Africans during the colonial period through reinforcement of the most racist prejudices, reporting 'observations' from the 'new' nations that found its way into art and literature. From scholarly and secular publications flooding European markets with anti-Black stereotypes and false assumptions, European culture, which stretched across the globe through economic and governmental influences, reflected the incorrect characterization of Black people and those of other non-white races. With the far-reaches of European influences, thanks to imperialism, traces of these historical mistakes continue to be found and disproven in the modern day.

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