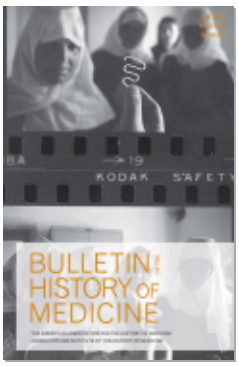
Beauty and the Brain: The Science of Human Nature in Early America by Rachel E. Walker (review)



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simplistic portrayals of Carolingian medicine. Her book will surely encourage debate for decades to come about Carolingian culture and the intersections of medicine and religion in the Middle Ages.

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Rachel E. Walker. *Beauty and the Brain: The Science of Human Nature in Early America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023. 273 pp. Ill. $45.00 (978-0-226-82256-3).

Rachel E. Walker's *Beauty and the Brain: The Science of Human Nature in Early America* concerns the pervasive fixation on interpreting moral and intellectual qualities, and constructing social and political hierarchies, from the face and skull—physiognomy and phrenology, respectively—around the period of 1770–1860 in the United States. The book opens to the transatlantic craze for a "new science" of human nature, propelled by Swiss writer Johann Caspar Lavater's physiognomic texts printed within months of the opening battles of the American War of Independence. Thereafter, the book follows how wide swaths of the public in the United States, across divisions of race, gender, and class, made common and conflicting use of physiognomy's (and, later, phrenology's) promise to make the inner secrets of character and intellect externally visible. Walker dubs physiognomy and phrenology "popular sciences," as they were "doctrinally flexible" disciplines which "traversed the boundaries of elite science and popular culture" and "validated people's belief in human perfectibility" (p. 196). Consequently, *Beauty and the Brain* focuses not only on the well-documented deployment of these disciplines by privileged white males as justification of existing inequalities, but also on their adoption by Black Americans and white women "creatively interpreting human minds and bodies in their efforts to fight for racial justice and gender equality" (p. 4).

Six chapters between the introduction and conclusion attend to physiognomy, phrenology, and a diverse set of themes centered around race, gender, and the politics of the early United States. Chapter one, "Founding Faces," addresses how physiognomy shaped claims about whose countenances modeled republican virtue, manifest in the portraits, illustrations, and facial analyses in the nation's earliest museums, encyclopedias, and periodicals. Chapter two, "A New Science of Man," follows the spread of phrenology alongside physiognomy in the United States in the first decades of the nineteenth century, surveying how these imported European sciences largely served in their American appropriation to "reconcile the nation's egalitarian rhetoric with its palpable inequalities" (p. 79). The next chapters move toward the middle of the nineteenth century and complicate the mainstream narrative of physiognomy and phrenology as racist, sexist, and

elitist pseudoscience. Here, these sciences of facial and cranial analysis become properly "popular." Chapter three, "Character Detectives," traces how white and Black American women used the popular sciences to challenge gendered beauty standards and demonstrate their intellectual abilities and capacities, although often by reinforcing tropes of the exceptional individual, self-improvement, and anti-Black aesthetics. Chapter four, "The Manly Brow Movement," shows how "women's rights activists imagined phrenology as an exciting new science that might establish the intellectual equality of the sexes" (p. 117) and often made phrenology a collateral target of anti-feminist criticism by gender conservatives. Chapter five, "Criminal Minds" details how social reformers in the same period employed popular sciences to differentiate "penitent and reformable wretches" from "hardened, recidivistic criminals" (p. 164). Finally, chapter six, "Facing Race," considers how Black Americans used popular sciences as "alternative, more accessible, and more ethical ways of thinking about human character and capacity" (p. 167) than the craniological scientific racism developing in white medical schools and scientific societies in the nineteenth century.

Beauty and the Brain's topical breadth and relative brevity mean that many of each chapter's specific themes are addressed more elaborately elsewhere, such as the adoption of physiognomy and phrenology by Black Americans in Britt Rusert's *Fugitive Science*, phrenology and crime in the nineteenth century United States in Courtney Thompson's *An Organ of Murder*, and transatlantic currents of phrenology in James Poskett's *Materials of the Mind*.[1] *Beauty and the Brain* stands out within recent scholarship for its intersectional focus on gender and race within popular discourses of the so-called popular sciences in the early United States. The book draws on diverse and extensive sources, often providing striking examples, such as a compelling analysis of portraiture and illustration to argue for phrenology's influence on wealthy white women's hairstyles ca. 1830–1860, and the importance of photography for Black thinkers and abolitionists wary of distorted physiognomic impressions formed from biased illustrations of Black people. Historians interested in the broad cultural, literary, and visual traces of physiognomy and phrenology in the United States, as well as its diverse political mobilizations, will find ample material in this book. The role of professional scientists and elite institutions in forging and contesting the legitimacy of physiognomy and phrenology in the nineteenth century among wider publics is only mentioned in passing. For example, the rejection of phrenology and physiognomy by a critical mass of professional anatomists and physiologists is only referenced as an explanation for why Black writers abandoned invocation of these disciplines in the mid-1860s.

1. Britt Russert, *Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2017); Courtney E. Thompson, *An Organ of Murder: Crime, Violence, and Phrenology in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2021); James Poskett, *Materials of the Mind: Phrenology, Race, and the Global History of Science, 1815–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

Beauty and the Brain challenges readers to take phrenology and physiognomy seriously, demonstrating that dismissing them as mere pseudoscience misses their remarkable political, cultural, and social effects in the nineteenth century. Walker shows that marginalized Americans reformulated popular sciences to challenge the status quo, hanging liberatory political hopes on cranial features. But, Walker argues, this engagement ultimately tended to "solidify a broader commitment to . . . the desire to scrutinize people's bodies and scientifically justify existing social distinctions" (p. 198). As detailed in the book's final pages, the persistent appeal of and to physiognomic thinking in popular and scientific discourse suggests that reckoning with this history is worthwhile.

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Nima Bassiri. *Madness and Enterprise: Psychiatry, Economic Reason, and the Emergence of Pathological Value*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024. 318 pp. $35.00 (978-0-226-83089-6).

The romanticization of mental illness is nothing new. As the anthropologist Emily Martin has explored, bipolar disorder (or more specifically, its manic manifestations) has often been valued for its creative and productive potential.[1] Similarly, Elizabeth Lunbeck has demonstrated how, in the late twentieth century, Americans began to view narcissism as an economically advantageous trait.[2] As the social theorist Nima Bassiri notes, even Donald Trump (alongside co-author Tony Schwartz) once hailed the virtues of a "controlled neurosis."[3] One need not search long for examples: from the late Steve Job's obsessions to Elon Musk's continued erraticism, our economy seems bound to what Bassiri calls an "entrepreneurial madness" (p. 77). However, in his recent book, *Madness and Enterprise*, he explains how this "pathological value" was discovered much earlier, in the nineteenth-century discourse surrounding eccentrics and other "borderland" figures (p. 29).

While the term is his own, historians of psychiatry should be familiar with these ambiguous individuals: many, including Lunbeck herself, have already demonstrated how the profession expanded its purview by scrutinizing — and ultimately, dissolving — the boundary between insanity and normality.[4] Bassiri adds to this

1. Emily Martin, *Bipolar Expeditions: Mania and Depression in American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

2. Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Americanization of Narcissism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).

3. Donald J. Trump with Tony Schwartz, *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (New York: Ballantine, 1987), 64.

4. Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).