

REVIEW

The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century, by Kyla Schuller (Duke University Press, 2017)

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Kyla Schuller's *The Biopolitics of Feeling* takes a refreshingly head-on approach to the historical entanglement of race and sex in the United States. In a stunningly convincing argument rooted in the rise of biopower, modern theories of heredity, and eugenics, Schuller argues that beginning in the nineteenth century, sex became a racial-imperial project, in which binary sex begins to "accomplish the work of racial differentiation" (17), a strategy that stands at the center of the biopolitical production, sorting, and relative valuation of populations.¹ Such an argument has crucial implications for the rooting of feminist origin stories in the women's suffrage movement, a historical narrative propped up, as Schuller shows, by a nefarious presumption about the innocence of white women's actions and political subjectivities: "As the struggle for the rights of women coincident with the category's new ontological status [the category of woman], feminism derives its political purchase from and within the larger framework of biopolitics. If woman is the product of racial thought, nineteenth-century feminism itself becomes a civilizational and biopolitical strategy, and not only in its explicitly imperial variants" (p. 18). Refusing self-congratulatory origin stories, Schuller reminds her readers

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again and again of feminism's historical alignment, not just with the neglect of anti-racist action, but with the operations of white supremacy itself. Meticulously tracing the rise of what she calls "evolutionary feminism," she refuses to let readers be naïve or nostalgic about the history of (white women's) feminism and the way it has continued, if sometimes obliquely, to shape contemporary movements and epistemological frameworks. *The Biopolitics of Feelings* offers a careful history of US feminism's imbrication in theories of biological inheritance in order to produce a history of the present that might take the field in new and less racist directions. Throughout, it offers a crucial pre-history to many conversations and controversies in feminism and queer studies today: the deployment of gender and enforcement of the gender binary as a tactic of securitization; the overdetermination of white women's feminism as feminism itself; trans-exclusionary radical feminism; new materialism's grounding in a disingenuous, pre-political innocence that turns out to be the position not of the object but of whiteness itself.

For scholars working in the nineteenth century, *The Biopolitics of Feeling* provides a new way to think about the animating power of sentimentality across the century: rather than offering new readings of sentimental novels, Schuller suggests that, by the late nineteenth century, the tropes of sentimentality could be found across evolutionary discourse, articulating and solidifying what she calls "sentimental biopower." Perhaps most crucially, Schuller reveals the long reach of Lamarckianism across the entirety of the nineteenth century. While feminists have battled over Charles Darwin and the question of his salvageability, *The Biopolitics of Feeling* instead suggests that the overemphasizing of Darwin has obscured Lamarckian theories that had a powerful afterlife in the United States, long after the 1859 publication of the *Origin of Species* and the mainstreaming of the theory of descent by natural selection. Focusing on the Lamarckian "sciences of impressability," Schuller traces how such theories reproduced ideas that Anglo-Saxon people could *direct* evolution and thus the course of civilization itself. Populations of color, on the other hand, "were assigned the condition of unimpressability, or the impaired state of throwing off affects but being incapable of being affected by impressions themselves" (p. 13) and thus unable to direct evolution. Moving from the imperial and eugenical dimensions of impressability, two chapters take up the transformations of impressability for anti-eugenical purposes in the writings of Frances E. W. Harper and W. E. B. Du Bois. The

strongest chapter, “Vaginal Impressions,” delves into the detailed and sometimes fantastical theories of sex and reproduction produced by white women physicians of the period such as Elizabeth Blackwell and Mary Walker. That chapter turns into a surprising excavation of postbellum homonationalism routed through medical discourse. Schuller shows how queer white women physicians such as Walker actually participated in the project of white supremacy through the valorization of white women’s reproductive control and civilizing influence. Yet again sounding a warning about feminist self-righteousness and claims to innocence, Schuller reminds readers of the dangers of a feminism that does not center the intellectual work, materialities, and experiences of women of color.

The Biopolitics of Feeling is perhaps most admirable for how it follows but also fruitfully extends Foucault’s (2007) “historico-philosophical” method. While scholarship on biopower has convincingly shown the many ways that the politics of life itself determines and shapes both structures and subjectivities, that work has, at times, been too presentist, and not enough attuned to the historical development of this regime of power. Schuller contributes to the biopolitical turn by carefully historicizing biopolitics; in this way, she suggests how our own moment came to be, but also how we might escape its biopolitical grip on the present. In an optimistic gesture at the end of the study, Schuller suggests that activism, art, and protest serve as crucial sites of resistance to biopower. Her own attention to the eugenical and imperial dimensions of the women’s movement in the postbellum and Progressive Era would at the same time warn us against uncritical embraces of activism today, pointing instead to the emancipatory micro-politics that animate social movements in and against the micro-fascisms they sometimes reproduce.²

While drawing on a broad and interdisciplinary nineteenth-century archive, Schuller boldly draws connections to debates within feminist, queer, and trans studies, suggesting that these fields have inherited and continue to bear the traces (or impressions) of biological models of sex, as well as presumptions about how genital morphology relates to both identity and desire. By turning back to a set of neglected and surprisingly influential theories of heredity, Schuller suggests that the field should unmoor itself from these dangerous nineteenth-century inheritances—including the persistence of what she calls “vaginal feminism”—while finding new and more nuanced approaches to embodiment and materiality

more broadly. Moving from the nineteenth century to the present, Schuller's epilogue encapsulates both the risk, but also the necessity, of feminist, queer, and critical race engagements with the biological. In an age of climate change, police brutality and death, and the increasing precarity of and risk to human life (always unevenly distributed), Schuller suggests that we ignore bodies and their differential valuation by biopower at our own peril. Nearing the end of the study, she moves from impressability to plasticity, ultimately landing on and finding hope in theories of neuroplasticity that help to illuminate "biological processes as imbricated effects, rather than causative agents, of power relations" (p. 210). Here, Schuller makes reference to recent studies of gender as being produced and reinforced through "dopamine reward cycles" in young children as well as Sylvia Wynter's (2003) interest in an ontogenic theory of consciousness that includes findings from neuroscience. Given the warnings issued from the archive throughout the book, I wonder, is it possible to positively value the hormonal, and the neurochemical more broadly, without reproducing essentialisms of the past or the neoliberal capitalist captures of the present (including, in this case, the global pharmaceutical industry). Do theories of plasticity help to illuminate or possibly continue to obscure how differentially valued populations are interpellated within structures of state violence? For example, I'm thinking about Sayak Valencia's (2018) recent arguments about the brutal and often spectacular forms of violence that undergird contemporary drug markets, including the production of hormones. In her account, the production of emancipatory models of (white) gender through the hormonal, like those found in Paul Preciado's (2008) *Testo Junkie*, actually obscure the violence exacted on non-white populations through the markets and forms of "extreme neoliberalism" that are currently being constructed on the frontiers of capital. In Schuller's final turn toward more nuanced approaches to race, affect, and materialization, I further wondered if psychic life can be accounted for within feminist and queer materialisms. In other words, how do we theorize embodiment in an expansive way—in Schuller's terms, as the specific ways that race and affect take bodily form—while not losing sight of imagination, fantasy, and the psychic life, especially since all three are crucial to the reproduction of white supremacy but also to liberation itself?

Midway through the study, Schuller articulates her most urgent and timely intervention this way: "biopower is feminism's enabling condition" (p. 105).

Readers will find an abundant resource of theoretically informed readings of postbellum and Progressive Era science and literature throughout the study, but they will be also unable to ignore Schuller's urgent warning about feminism's embeddedness in the machinations of biopower.

Notes

¹ On the specificities of biopolitical surveillance and control today through the production and sorting of populations according to capacity, see Puar (2017).

² On micro-fascism, see Deleuze & Guattari (1983).

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Bio

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