

experimental science, Eggert casts it as a rare, bizarre, and patently false form of knowledge. She claims that her account of disknowledge helps her “crack one of the enduring puzzles of late seventeenth-century intellectual culture: Why did groundbreaking geniuses of mathematics, science, and political theory such as Isaac Newton, John Locke, Gottfried Leibniz, and Robert Boyle remain enamored of alchemy long after its foundational texts had been exposed as far less ancient than claimed, and despite centuries of doubt over its methods and results?” (p. 243). Eggert opposes geniuses to alchemical crackpots; the former’s choice to revert to laughable alchemy requires explanation. This view sets aside what we now know to be true—that alchemy, while rife with internal and external criticism, was a diverse, rapidly evolving, compelling, and often very successful set of practices and texts whose appeal isn’t very hard to understand.

Alchemy would seem to be one of the period forms of knowledge least well suited to that first notion of disknowledge (which, despite Eggert’s initial dismissiveness, continues to crop up throughout the book). For if there was one enterprise that encouraged epistemic risk taking, it was alchemy. Alchemy certainly does not provide a theory of the world remarkable for its “familiarity and safety,” as Eggert claims (p. 211). Seeing it as a form of disknowledge that seeks to delimit knowledge and make it comfortable is a non-starter. And seeing it as a form of disknowledge that is profoundly untrue would be hopelessly positivist.

So many of Eggert’s readings of alchemical references seem doubtful that it feels unfair to review *Disknowledge* according to historical standards of proof. At times it seemed like Eggert was playing at disknowledge herself. She reveals this to be the case in the afterword, where she identifies literary study as a whole with disknowledge and with a particular form of disengaging from the wider world of knowledge making to create a redoubt of pleasurable “falsehoods taken quite consciously for true” (p. 247).

Historians, who do aspire as best they can to arrive at an approximation of truth, will not find these deliberate attempts at disknowledge a useful guide to literary relations with alchemy. Eggert’s first, dismissed notion of disknowledge, however, is well worth thinking about. The book is at its best when it engages with this first meaning in the least alchemical sections of the chapters “How to Avoid Gynecology” and “How to Skim Kabbalah.”

Vera Keller

Vera Keller is Assistant Professor of History in the Robert D. Clark Honors College at the University of Oregon. She is the author of Knowledge and the Public Interest, 1575–1725 (Cambridge, 2015), and numerous articles.

Early Modern

Justin E. H. Smith. *Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference: Race in Early Modern Philosophy.* ix + 296 pp., figs., bibl., index. Princeton, N.J./Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015. \$39.95 (cloth).

Our understanding of how thinking about human diversity transformed in the early modern period has been greatly enriched over the past two to three decades, thanks to a number of exceptional studies on the subject in various national and transnational contexts. Justin Smith’s recent contribution stands out for its breadth of scope and its fresh take on a vast and complicated conceptual terrain. His main aim is to understand the origins of the modern idea of race using the method of historical ontology, the study of how things that appear to be in nature itself come into being as objects of scientific research. His study is particularly refreshing in that he focuses on an aspect of the history of modern racial classification that has been neglected in the scholarship on the subject to date: how racial classification fits into the history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century taxonomy and the emerging field of biology. Much of the attention in the literature is focused on the politics and economics of slavery in engendering the modern racial

worldview, and Smith is wise to remark that “the explanatory priority of the economic over the intellectual will not be disputed here” (p. 6). But he is equally wise to point out that there might be more to the story of the origins of modern racial classification than the politics and economics of “race-based” slavery, and his attention to the complex relationship between the modern race concept and the broader issue of scientific taxonomy in the early modern period is a welcome contribution.

Smith begins with an overview of the recent scholarship from cognitive psychology, genetics, philosophy, and sociology on the present-day phenomenon of “race,” and his command of this enormous and variegated literature is truly impressive. His assessment is that race may be a “natural construction,” the result of the propensity of the human mind to organize the world in a particular way, even though modern racial groupings are not truly natural kinds. He then delves into the historical material, arguing that throughout the early modern period Europeans acknowledged indigenous “know-how”—not least because they depended on that know-how for their very survival—but denied Native Americans true knowledge or rationality. His survey of the polygenism of Paracelsus, Giordano Bruno, and Isaac La Peyrère lays solid groundwork for a discussion of the concept of degeneration and the “lower boundary” of the human species in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

This is where one of the central theses of *Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference* comes to the fore, as Smith demonstrates that for Edward Tyson and Linnaeus, among others, despite a commitment to the Christian conception of man as a creature made in God’s image, their inclusion of humanity in a wider zoological order made the scientific study of humanity’s place in nature possible. His analysis of François Bernier and Leibniz sheds light on one of the main issues at stake in early modern racial classification—namely, how the focus on physical differences rendered metaphysical dualism moribund and fractured the older conceptualization of a single human family unified by the possession of an immaterial soul. Leibniz’s philosophy was antithetical to the nascent modern idea of race because he conceived of humanity as existing on the same horizontal plane, possessing reason and a soul. Smith discusses the Enlightenment and race in the final two chapters, focusing on the fascinating Afro-German philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo, as well as Kant, Herder, and Blumenbach, to argue that, by the mid-eighteenth century, the idea of race as worldly destiny seeped deeper into European consciousness.

Smith is sensitive to the political and scientific issues at stake in the rise of the modern concept of race and synthesizes an impressive amount of primary and secondary source material. While his argument that metaphysical dualism served as a bulwark against essentialist theories of human difference is convincing on the whole, he seems too eager to exculpate Leibniz from the charge of racism, although he acknowledges that Leibniz defended, and even proposed a scheme for, the enslavement of non-Christians. He remarks that Leibniz’s justification of slavery is significant in that it was not grounded in a theory of racial inferiority, failing to mention that “race-based” justifications of slavery were very rare in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and that Leibniz was entirely mainstream in using Christianity to defend the enslavement of “barbarians” and “idolaters”: deep-seated prejudice did not need racial theory to be destructive.

Nonetheless, Smith’s survey of the race concept in the early modern period is original, provocative, and stimulating all at once, balancing a sharp awareness of the enormous damage that the idea of racial divisions has had and an appreciation of how the concept relates to advances in our understanding of humanity’s place in the natural world. His study is a powerful demonstration of the role history can play in raising ethical awareness of such dangerous and tenacious concepts as race.

Devin Vartija

Devin Vartija is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at Utrecht University, where he is researching the complex interplay between equality and racial classification in the Enlightenment. His essay “Empathy, Equality, and the Radical Enlightenment” is forthcoming in The Ashgate Research Companion to the Radical Enlightenment.