

Self, Race, and Species: J. F. Blumenbach's Atlas Experiment

In 1796, the renowned anthropologist and professor of medicine Johann Friedrich Blumenbach produced a scientific atlas entitled *Abbildungen Naturhistorischer Gegenstände*.¹ Seven of the book's one hundred illustrations provide instruction in the natural history of the human species; the subset of five with which the book opens are identified as "characteristische Musterköpfe von Männern aus den 5 Hauptrassen im Menschengeschlechte."² Given Blumenbach's prominence in European debates about taxonomic categories like "race" and "species," particularly as they might be applied to human beings, this primacy of place granted human types is not surprising. It is Blumenbach, after all, who is credited into the 20th century with naming what several generations of students learned to identify as the "five races of man." As Robert Bernasconi, John Zammito, Phillip Sloan, and others have demonstrated in recent years, attributing the invention of race to Blumenbach may have been a standard gesture of 19th- and 20th-century histories of science, but it is nonetheless a misleading simplification.³ It took Blumenbach many years to accept the use of "race" as a classificatory term, and once he did, he was always careful to stress that association with a particular race did not have bearing on individual or collective human capabilities. While this qualification is dutifully cited by critical historians of race thinking, Blumenbach's recognition of five races was cited with far more resonance by generations of subsequent scientists.⁴

This bifurcation of Blumenbach's reception into two equally simplistic though somewhat incompatible judgments is an instance of historicizing at its worst: it results from separating multiple meanings that were coexistent and even codependent in Blumenbach's texts, and then selecting those most appropriate or convenient for inclusion within particular disciplinary narratives. As Giorgio Agamben notes, "every reading of a work must necessarily reckon with the growing distance between different levels of meaning that is caused by time."⁵ In the case of Blumenbach, posterity has taken advantage of differentiated strata of meaning that time and historians have rendered distinct in order to formulate, for the most part without comment or complication, either an "objective" statement of his contribution to the structure of

scientific thinking about race or a relatively simplistic description of his “non-racist” beliefs. If, however, again with Agamben, “it is also true that a genuine reading takes place only at the point at which the work’s living unity, first present in the original draft, is once again recomposed,” then it shall be the work of this essay to begin the necessary process of recomposition for the *Abbildungen* of Blumenbach.

This odd and neglected book may be hard to read precisely because it seems so easy to read. A reader is invited to study the illustrations framed by brief descriptions, and move on. If we stop instead to interrogate (with patience and curiosity) the elements of composition that are all too easily read over, literally overlooked, we may recognize that the atlas’s “living unity” includes a remarkable textual negotiation of conflicting epistemologies. Or it might be better described as a sophisticated separation of epistemologies: present throughout Blumenbach’s collective work and highlighted by the *Abbildungen* is the certainty that, on the one hand, race can function as a category of physical classification, and on the other hand, race must be rejected as an analytic category of culture. Over the course of many years, Blumenbach did maintain the existence, within the limited scope of scientific knowledge and discursive convenience, of five races within the human species. But his caveat, which appears to have been all but incomprehensible to his contemporaries as much as to his successors, attests to the very real problem of any categorical regulation when it comes to individual human beings. Blumenbach’s struggles to communicate what he thought he knew of race—which become clearer when we turn to the *Abbildungen*—are a lesson in the limits of knowledge.

It appears at first glance that the *Abbildungen* offer a comfortable conjunction of expectation (that Blumenbach would provide unambiguous illustration of the natural world) and artifact (the book itself, a supplementary atlas to his authoritative *Handbuch der Naturgeschichte*⁶). This, however, is deceptive in the case of these first five offerings, for Blumenbach uses his atlas to convey a mode of seeing and thinking about “race” that drastically compromises its signifying power. What Blumenbach states elsewhere about the limited significance of the nature of race, he communicates in the *Abbildungen* through what amounts to a sophisticated experiment with—even exploitation of—his primary medium of communication, the textbook.

This was a medium Blumenbach knew well; by the time he designed the atlas, his *Handbuch der Naturgeschichte* was in its fifth edition, a crucial academic source for the parameters of what was known and an index to what might prove knowable about animal, vegetable, and mineral life; more to the point, it was a standard reference for current knowledge of the process of human generation, the nature and history of the species, and the causes and significance of human diversity. Of this work, a colleague would remark in 1840: “If it can be said of any scientific work of modern times, that its utility

has been incalculable, such a sentence must be pronounced on Blumenbach's *Handbook of Natural History*. Few cultivated circles or countries are ignorant of it."⁷ Once the *Abbildungen* was published, all subsequent editions of the *Handbuch* included direct references to the atlas, indicating an assumption that a reader would have access to, and make use of, both books. And the atlas itself appeared in four editions between 1796 and 1810—critical years for the emerging disciplines of anthropology, comparative anatomy, physiology, zoology, and natural history, and for debates concerning the race question.⁸

In order to appreciate Blumenbach's representations of race, we have to situate the troublesome category between two others, that of the individual self and that of the collective species. The 18th century produced (albeit amidst fevered debate) a new physiological and historical understanding of species, one that is still largely operative today. According to what is now identified as the "biological species concept," a species comprises a set of organisms actually or potentially capable of reproducing fertile offspring.⁹ The concept gained new currency at mid-century, when the French naturalist Comte de Buffon defined "species" as not merely a collection of beings with common traits, but rather a continuous line of reproducing individuals.¹⁰ According to the genetic definition, a species can be said to "exist" only as the totality of all individuals comprising all generations, the entire genealogy of which one can only imagine. In other words, the (human) species that we identify and describe as real is always a hypothetical projection, and as such a representation; because of the constant flux of death and birth, this representation of a projected whole continually requires emendation. The "real" genealogical species is, in fact, apprehensible only through (and constituted by) a combination of the genealogical species *concept* and continually changing information.

This information is provided by each new member of the species. The significance of this point—the assertion that each individual human being's constitution directly determines the identity of the collective—cannot be overestimated, though it tends to be overlooked. If we adhere to the logic of the scientific species concept as it takes shape during the late Enlightenment, the human species can never be self-identical from one moment to the next, since its constituent membership is never static. Of course, the implications of this provoked consternation in some scientists and philosophers, who recognized that to control the shape (and color and culture) of the species, one had to radically limit its members; thus we might understand the desire to believe in multiple human species (polygenism) that found expression during the period. Within the parameters of a monogenetic species concept, however, there is no escaping the problem of a species's unrepresentability. Every individual member might serve as an equal representative, but no representative could function as a model from which to extrapolate and

systematize a defining set of traits that make clear what the nature of the human being encompasses.¹¹

According to the scientific construction of species, the whole is precisely the sum of its parts; however, the relationship of part to whole is asymmetric. That is, the part (the individual) is a proper part of the whole (the species group) but not equivalent with it, and the individual is a determining factor for the identity of the (continually changing) whole. However—and this is an important element of the definition—the species-whole does not determine or restrict the identity of the part. That is, one's species-identity can in no way limit one's individual identity. This differs significantly from concurrent understandings of race. When race emerges as a scientific category, it is positioned along the already established line connecting individual and species. Significant complications become apparent when we consider the relationship of individual to race. Unlike species, race was not conceived as a category defined by the sum total of characteristics of all its natural members. On the contrary, race was identified as a group of people who exhibit a defined set of characteristics distilled from a finite sample group. Having identified that sample, a particular race thereafter can include only those members who exhibit the defining traits that preserve its distinction as a subset. Because the category was set up this way and because scientists and anthropologists and ethnographers used race this way, the very structure of the race category placed a limiting function upon the individual identity of its members. Thus, while an individual was understood to contribute to the definition of a species, to actually shape its nature, he or she could—and potentially must—only illustrate limited aspects of the established race group (or a liminal hybrid, indeterminate group) to which he or she was already assigned.

Troubled by the easy misapplications of the race idea, Blumenbach maintained that races did not have the status of small species, but were functionally similar to other types of impermanent (if historically significant) variation:

Nur dass [kann behauptet werden], da alle auf den ersten Blick auch noch so auffallende Verschiedenheiten im Menschengeschlecht bey näherer Beleuchtung durch die unmerklichsten Uebergänge und Mittel-Nüancen ineinander fliesen, keine andere als sehr willkürliche Grenzen zwischen diesen Spielarten gezogen werden können.¹²

While reminding his readers often of the “unmerklichsten Uebergänge” and the “willkürliche[n] Grenzen” that prevented race from being a historically stable category, Blumenbach adopted the terminology of race—with caveats—as a useful scientific convention by which to organize perceived patterns of difference. However, he strove throughout his career to separate the scientific process of identifying and charting apparent patterns of “racial” traits

from the prevailing tendency to overlay those traits with moral and cultural valence. On this count, however, the weight of his scientific authority was not sufficient to turn either expert or public opinion from its escalating interest in ethnographic understandings of racial difference.

Among Blumenbach's many public positionings on the race question, the *Abbildungen* is arguably the most interesting, because it is so radical in its form. Within this atlas, Blumenbach replaces evidence and argument, his customary discursive tools, with visual and linguistic portraiture; and he does so in a way that demonstrates, rather than explains, the inability of the category "race" to function as an epistemological premise for the pursuit of knowledge of human nature or culture. A recognition of the atlas's break with convention seems, however, to be a perspective born of historical distance. At the time of its publication and use, the *Abbildungen* was simply accepted as another valuable contribution to scientific study. A five-page review of the initial volume appeared in the *Magazin für das Neueste aus der Physik und Naturgeschichte* in 1797: it is less what we might consider a review than a descriptive recommendation. The review effectively recapitulates the book's main concerns and descriptions—emphasizing the images of race—often in Blumenbach's own language, reproducing without comment the very formulations that I have found sufficiently startling to justify the work of this essay.¹³

A reading of this book must begin (as indeed Blumenbach's reviewer began) with an introductory discourse on method, providing instruction both in how to produce and in how to read a book of instructive illustration. Blumenbach attempts to make both his pedagogical aims and his process clear when he explicitly addresses the need for representational integrity of scientific language images.¹⁴ Such a concern with illustrations was hardly unique to Blumenbach; it was an ongoing priority for creators of illustrated scientific books. Atlases, in particular, because of the burden of meaning and the presumption of factual representation placed primarily upon images, often convey a consciousness of shifting priorities and techniques. In their now classic study of the scientific atlas, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison observe that "the strong association between the visual and the factual made atlases prime bearers of the new objectivity,"¹⁵ and analyze the rise of self-surveillance on the part of scientists to represent truthfully and to eschew subjective interpretation. According to their history of illustrative modes, Blumenbach's book ought to be classed as an example of the 18th-century "characteristic" atlas (indeed, he uses the term himself), in which "an individual object (rather than an imagined composite or corrected ideal) is depicted, [and] is made to stand for a whole class of similar objects."¹⁶ As the following analysis will show, however, the *Abbildungen* violates this premise to such a degree that it cannot be regarded as anything but a unique work that

does unique work: Blumenbach's atlas is an experiment in form and a multimedia statement of ethical position toward science's regard for (the) human being.

Before presenting his collection, Blumenbach takes extraordinary care to defend the mimetic reliability—and thereby the scientific usefulness—of all the pictures included. By assuring us of the particular talent of the various artists, we may conclude that what we see is equivalent to what exists. Beyond merely assuring us of the fidelity of the collected representations (which alone could be taken as an invitation to study the book without further consideration of its artifactuality), Blumenbach urges more generally that the practices of printing images in books be thoroughly reexamined, insisting that a useful work must avoid “alle überflüssige typographische Zierathen” and must further illustrate “nur die wenigen Figuren [...] die ohne Illumination undeutlich bleiben würden.”¹⁷ Here—in line with the “characteristic” atlas—Blumenbach breaks with a long-standing tradition of surrounding an object of scrutiny, particularly one likely to be alien or alienating, with ornamental or allegorical background settings. To wit: only images that conveyed unique information otherwise incommunicable belonged in a book designed for the edification of the scientific eye. Further, each illustration page should contain only a single figure or, in rare cases, two closely related figures for comparison, and there should be an explanation of each illustration laid out on a separate page. Only by eliminating the superfluous distractions found in most books could the illustrated scientific text be counted a reliable tool; if the cognitive metaphor “seeing is knowing” may be identified as the presupposition of a work like an atlas, then it was all the more important to refine what was seen. Blumenbach even goes so far as to account—partially—for the size of the illustrations offered in the *Abbildungen*, referring to the production decisions necessary in publishing the book and thus making the reader aware of the text as a deliberately manufactured artifact and (inevitably imperfect) research tool. Following this preface, the book proper opens with an introduction to its first five images: the “characteristische Musterköpfe von Männern aus den 5 Hauptrassen im Menschengeschlechte.” Acknowledging the copious images of non-European peoples recently available, Blumenbach nonetheless stresses the scientific importance of his selected set; he does not criticize other illustrated works, but he does claim that his etchings constitute the first complete presentation of “ächte, porträtmässige und charakteristische Abbildungen der wichtigsten Rassen im Menschengeschlecht.”¹⁸

What kinds of images were the basis for his implicit comparison? Illustrations and physical descriptions of the known peoples of the world abounded in books of natural history and travel; most images in circulation presented non-European “difference” through some combination of ethnographic detail and exaggerated physiological characteristics.¹⁹ Blumenbach's readers

might have anticipated a series of images in which representative (characteristic) persons bearing the expected set of physiological traits (especially skin color, hair texture, facial features) would be supplemented with “realistic” exotic costumes, cultural artifacts, and landscape elements. Additionally, given Blumenbach’s initial comments, readers might have expected some attention to the legitimacy of each image as a representation of the race in question.

Instead of introducing his select engravings with reference to the defining criteria of the particular races, Blumenbach turns the readers’ attention to the issue of representational fidelity. He identifies the five portraits as “characteristic” and “of the various races,” and stresses also that all were produced by great artists, “masters” who had their subjects before them (“von Meisterhand nach dem Leben gezeichnet”). That is, we are assured of the mimetic skill of the artist and the authenticity of the representation. Of course, authenticity was increasingly a concern of ethnographic illustration, and an artist’s claim to having drawn or painted *in situ* was a powerful argument for the faithfulness—or perhaps, more crudely, the accuracy—of the image. However, Blumenbach continues by asserting that each of the subjects is or recently has been in Europe, so that “die vollkommen getroffene Ähnlichkeit” of these illustrations can be attested to by qualified judges who personally knew the individuals portrayed.

In their double function as works of art and scientific indices, the images promise a degree of faithfulness. Let us say, with Richard Brilliant, that when speaking of art, this idea of faithfulness should be “understood as a satisfying approximation, mediated by some acceptable relationship between the original in the world of nature and the portrait image, the latter a product of artistic (re)presentation.”²⁰ With this in mind, it is striking that Blumenbach was determined to stress the above named particular conditions of acceptability: the hand of a “master artist,” and the fidelity of the portrait to its subject which may be judged personally by the subject’s acquaintances. This differs significantly from the acceptable alternative for an atlas, namely the rendering by a natural scientist of a subject in his “natural” environment, judged by an objective, educated, scientific eye.

Blumenbach’s formulation lays stress upon a mimetic relationship between image and individual subject, and it suggests a fidelity not merely of image but of identity at some deeper level due to the personal acquaintance of subject and judge. These concerns align Blumenbach’s understanding of the function of an artistic portrait with contemporary theories of portraiture advanced by Johann Georg Sulzer, whose *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste* (1771–1774) was considered an authoritative encyclopedia of the fine arts, and Johann Caspar Lavater’s *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1775–1778) which was a bestseller. Blumenbach knew Lavater’s work, and while he was skeptical of its overarching project (its theory of physiognomic types), he certainly

seems to echo Lavater's assertion that successful portraiture constituted a representation of the particular reality of a person. Citing Sulzer, Lavater asserted: "Jedes vollkommene Portrait [ist] ein wichtiges Gemählde . . . , weil es uns eine menschliche Seele von eigenen persönlichen Charakter zu erkennen giebt."²¹ Sulzer himself went so far as to assert that a portrait revealed more of the "gute und schlimme Eigenschaften des Geistes und des Herzens" of an individual than nature itself.²²

This understanding, however, runs oddly counter to the *Abbildungen's* ostensible goal. While there is a strong emphasis on the fidelity of portraiture, no mention is made about the fidelity to racial type, which ostensibly justifies the image's inclusion in Blumenbach's book. In this brief section of the atlas, the anticipated "characteristic" presentation of the individual as type defers to the individual as unique personality.

Interestingly, Blumenbach utterly disregards the aesthetic dimensions of his portraits. He draws no significance from the fact that he reproduces engravings that involve a re-scaling and re-framing, and that eliminate all elements from the image except the head; he does not acknowledge that his images wrest the faces from their source contexts in order to reframe them *also* as anthropological examples. Having created his images thusly, Blumenbach does not read them aesthetically; nor does he respond to them, as he might have, as sources of ethnographic or anthropological information. He does not read the faces as Lavater might have, as indices of character, national, or racial type; in fact, he does not read the images at all.

What do we make of the fact that, after conspicuously drawing the reader's attention to issues of authenticity regarding the portraiture of human subjects, Blumenbach says nothing more about the images themselves? I believe it would be a mistake to take this as an indication of Blumenbach's aesthetic naiveté. Rather, in reframing, rescaling, and recontextualizing these portraits, Blumenbach himself must be interrogated as a portraitist. If, as Richard Brilliant observes, "portraiture is such a calculating art of (mis)representation that no beholder can be completely innocent" (*Portraiture* 35) then Blumenbach is doubly complicit in his role as beholder and recycler of these images.

I propose that we understand Blumenbach's silence with regard to his images as a complex process of elimination—the elimination of an entire set of visual hermeneutic tendencies. In publishing etchings that reduce complex portraits to the face itself, Blumenbach eliminates (or at least greatly reduces) the potential for an ethnographic reading, focused upon artifacts and ornaments surrounding the body. Presenting us with faces, as if to indicate them as the denotative keys to race, Blumenbach substitutes the expected linguistic description of the image with a verbal portrait of each personality that is construed by an assemblage of references to texts and cultural associations.

One might well ask: what does the reader learn to distinguish with regard to racial types from this carefully considered presentation? On the page of the atlas just prior to the first portrait, Blumenbach lists tersely the names of the five races and remarks that the significant physiognomic differences among them may be found listed in the third edition of his *De Generis*. What follows is his sole remark on the nature of race:

Hier nur soviel: — Die Caucasische Rasse ist nach allen physiologischen und historischen Datis wahrscheinlich der Urstamm, der mit der Zeit durch die verschiedenen Ursachen der Degeneration in die beiden Extreme, nämlich einerseits in die Mongolische R. mit dem platten Gesichte; und anderseits in die Aethiopische mit den prominirenden Kiefern, ausgeartet. Die Americanische macht in der Bildung den Übergang von der Caucasischen zur Mongolischen, so wie die Malayische den zu der Aethiopischen.²³

Without further comment, Blumenbach turns to the portraits. They are ordered along the spectrum he has identified, beginning with one “extreme,” the Mongolian, and moving through the American, Caucasian, and Malaysian to end with the other “extreme,” the Ethiopian.

The carefully selected illustrations and their accompanying text prompt the following questions: What is asserted by an image that is identified both as a representative, typical, scientifically authorized specimen and as a portrait of a particular, historical individual? What does it mean to imply that an individual may serve metonymically for a race—that is, a biologically defined collective? And what meaning can a prescriptive category of race hold for questions of human life and culture when an individual, presented ostensibly as a type, is deliberately revealed to be not merely a singular being but a “self”—a psychologically and historically situated person who, to a great degree, is self-consciously self-determining?

With the *Abbildungen*, Blumenbach literally shifts the 18th-century eye from the images of non-European races it had come to expect to portraits of famous individuals—the Mongolian painter Feodor Iwanowitsch, the Mohawk leader and diplomat Thayendanega, the Ottoman ambassador to Britain Jusuf Efendi, the celebrity Omai, and the writer and clergyman Jakob Capitein—whose personal achievements are described in lieu of “racially” typical traits.

In presenting Feodor Iwanowitsch as his first “Musterkopf,” Blumenbach wastes no time in confounding his categories. After identifying his subject as a “kunstreicher, allgemein bewunderter Zeichner in Rom,”²⁴ Blumenbach shifts his attention to the reproduced image as an artifact, explaining the conditions of its production. It is a self-portrait, drawn by Iwanowitsch and given to Blumenbach, who included it without an identifying signature (“ohne Unterschrift”) as part of his anthropological collection (Figure 1).

As if to emphasize the complex status of such an image within an anthropological collection, Blumenbach emphasizes that the value of the work rests both on its "unübertrefflichen geschmackvollsten Manier" as well as on the likeness that he describes as "sprechend, wie aus dem Spiegel genommen."²⁵ The tension here between claims of absolute faithfulness and the attribution of discernibly superb aesthetic "manner" do not concern Blumenbach; he seeks to establish the authority of the portrait on multiple registers, not to explore it.

Why then, we might ask, would Blumenbach, given the brevity of his text below the portrait, choose to emphasize the image's lack of a signature when hung in his collection? Would this not detract from its status as a portrait, transforming Iwanowitsch the artist and subject into an anonymous specimen or race type? On the contrary, the noted lack of a written signature serves rhetorically to prompt Blumenbach's argument that such identification is unnecessary: first, it is unnecessary because observers who know Iwanowitsch recognize him immediately (thus the fidelity of the portrait is ensured); and second, because the aesthetic manner is so unique that the artistic signature is an intrinsic part of the image itself. The lack of "Unterschrift" is merely the lack of a label. Stressing the overall representational power of the work rather than its particular qualifications as an anthropological artifact, Blumenbach declares of the image: "Jene aber ist so ganz ausnehmend, dass das Bild von Künstlern und andern Kennern ohne alle Ausnahme als ein in dieser Manier fast unbegreifliches Meisterstück bewundert wird."

Clearly, this portrait of a Mongolian named Feodor Iwanowitsch is not contextualized as an image that might serve to represent *the* Mongolian. Instead of a specimen type, a stable object of scientific scrutiny, this illustration represents its own subject's control of the medium and the mode of representation. The Mongolian whom we see is less our object of scrutiny than the director of our scrutiny; as the creator of a self-portrait, he directs our eye to see him as he chooses. What Louis Marin has noted about the full-face portrait may be applied here to the challenge issued by Iwanowitsch: "as if the sitter here and now were speaking by looking at the viewer: 'Looking at me, you look at me looking at you. Here and now, from the painting locus, I posit you as the viewer of the painting.'"²⁶

This dynamic exchange is mediated by Blumenbach, who stages the relationship among artist, image, and viewer as a moment of self-conscious education that efficiently subordinates any issue of "race" to the recognition and appreciation of "unfathomable" art. It should be noted that the eye *may* read "race" if it chooses; Blumenbach's inclusion of the portrait in his anthropological collection does imply that visually apprehended racial traits are adequately reproduced by the picture, and it confirms that Blumenbach regarded such patterns as worthy of scientific interest. Indeed, if one consults

the *Handbuch der Naturgeschichte*, one reads the following description of the Mongolian race:

meist waizengelb (theils wie gekochte Quitten, oder wie getrocknete Citron-schaalen); mit wenigem, straffem, schwarzem Haar; enggeschlitzten Augenliedernl plattem Gesicht; und seitwärts eminirenden Backenknochen. Diese Rasse begreift die übrigen Asiaten, mit Ausahme der Malayen; denn die Finnischen Völker in Europa (Lappen etc.) und die Eskimos im nördlichen America von der Beringsstraße bis Labrador.²⁷

These facts, while salient for the project of natural history, carry no meaning within the particular framing of Blumenbach's atlas text. The atlas is a different realm of inquiry and signification, in which the visible patterns that might speak to "race" are sterile, contributing nothing to the areas of knowledge and culture invoked, whether it be Iwanowitsch as producer and as subject of art, high culture in general, or the existence of an educated elite that profiles a model reader.

The atlas's second image of "the American" is equally confounding, and if anything more overtly ironic in its treatment of race. It is a portrait of Thayendanegea, also known as Captain Joseph Brandt, a Mohawk leader and diplomat to Europe, and a translator of a portion of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer into the Mohawk language (Figure 2). The particular engraving selected by Blumenbach was taken from a splendid portrait done in 1776 by the great British society painter George Romney. In the life-sized painting, Thayendanegea brings a degree of defiance to his conventional pose; his challenging stare is reminiscent of many genius portraits of the time and strikingly like one of Romney's own self-portraits. This painting is notably unlike a far more typical portrait of the same subject done by Gilbert Stuart in London in 1786, which combines exotic ornamentation, dramatic skyscape, and a pensive, unspecified gaze to romantic effect. Gilbert's portrait offers Thayendanegea up to his viewer as the object of a primitivist fantasy; in contrast, Romney (and, thereafter, Blumenbach) presents us with a culturally complex and challenging portrait of a man. Even Thayendanegea's garb mocks clear cultural demarcation, combining the feathered headdress and tomahawk assigned to a "wild American" with a fine European ruffled shirt.

Blumenbach's textual portrait similarly balances elements evoking both American and European culture. He draws attention to an essay by this "so genannte Wilde": namely, a contribution to the *Philosophical Transactions* of 1786 in which Thayendanegea explicitly refuted notions about the nature of Amerindians that had been used to demonstrate the fundamental physical (and cultural) differences between Europeans and New World peoples.²⁸ Significantly, Blumenbach's careful and spare presentation conveys misleading information. In truth, the article to which he refers was written by Richard

McCausland. Beyond indirect citation in the prose of McCausland, Thayendanegea's literary contribution amounts only to one unremarkable paragraph.²⁹ Blumenbach's implication—facilitated by the brevity of the text—that Thayendanegea himself published a philosophical essay for the European intellectual community thus falsely credits him with educating elite European readers (in a European language, in a European journal, in a European genre) about the spurious project of racializing cultural difference.

As with the first text-and-image portrait, Blumenbach here, too, shares his pedagogical role. The ostensible object of a lesson in racial typology, "the American," becomes (particularly through Blumenbach's textual deceit) the director of the subject at hand. This Thayendanegea is presented to the reader not as "the (racial) American" but as a protean self embedded within multiple cultural traditions, a man who stares his readers in the eye and challenges them to rethink what they think they know about race.

It is only with the third subject—the Caucasian—that Blumenbach mentions racial categorization. This is of interest in part because other writers of the period—and one may think here of Kant—tended to de-emphasize the racialization of the white Europeans, thereby underscoring an implicit association of "race" with "otherness." As cited above, Blumenbach did maintain that the Caucasian race was biologically closest to an original and no longer existent human stock—the same idea that other writers extended to describe European bodies and cultures as pure, original, and superior compared with other derivative, degenerate, inferior races. Blumenbach's discursive gesture in the atlas should be read as a performative refutation of this mode of thinking. Whereas with his four non-Caucasian portraits, he deemphasizes the signifying range of the facts of race, with his third portrait he explicitly and provocatively racializes the Caucasian.

Blumenbach's Caucasian subject is Jusuf Aguih Efendi (alternatively, Yusuf Agah Efendi), the first Ottoman ambassador appointed to England in 1793 (Figure 3). In commenting upon his choice of Efendi as the typical Caucasian (the race, as Blumenbach notes tartly, "*wohin überhaupt die nach unsern Begriffen von Schönheit bestgebildeten Menschen gehören* [emphasis in original]," Blumenbach stresses that he could as easily have chosen "a Milton or a Raphael."³⁰ The creation of such a cohort of alternatives—Milton, Raphael, and Efendi—implies that the three men are potentially exchangeable in terms of their racial identity. They also share professions which mediate representations, be they literary, visual, or diplomatic; the first two figures signal synechdocically the heights of European cultural achievement. Blumenbach explains that he selected Efendi, however, as most appropriately representative of the race not based upon cultural attributes or physical traits that the picture might convey, but specifically because his home ("Heimat") is closer to the Caucasus, where the race itself was originally "*zu Hause*" and from which it derives its name. This information refers to the priority of

origins, a concern at the core of race and species theories; in Blumenbach's brief text, it serves to reassign the topic of race to its appropriate realm, that of scientific speculation into the natural history, rather than the current or future cultural expressivity, of various peoples.

This identification of Efendi with the Caucasian race and its original racial "Heimat" also distances the Western European Old World from its purported racial origins by selecting an image of the "Caucasian" with whom a (Western-European Caucasian) reader might not readily identify, be it physically, culturally, or even politically. With his other portraits and descriptions, Blumenbach combats what Hal Foster identifies as "the primitivist fantasy" by actively conveying the selfhood of his subjects, all of whom represent for a typical European reader of the time some combination of racial and cultural otherness. Yet in presenting an exemplary Caucasian, Blumenbach requires of his reader "a recognition of an alterity in the self" (Foster).³¹ Efendi, depicted as a turbaned, Ottoman diplomat to Britain, serves not only as a diplomatic translator of multiple cultural languages on the European stage; his role as a go-between is compounded by Blumenbach's use of his image to mediate (and thereby render visible) tensions between various forms of difference. By enabling his readers to discern a potential discrepancy between racial categorization and personal, cultural, or national identity, he encourages them to recognize this discrepancy in other peoples categorized within other races.

Blumenbach's exemplary Malaysian is Omai, a Tahitian who became a celebrity in London in the 1770s as he was considered a living example of the inborn grace and refinement of the Noble Savage (Figure 4). The full-figure portrait from which this engraving was made is an icon of 18th-century art, painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds and shown at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1776. Reynolds's painting is renowned for its creation of a complex set of relationships between Europe, classical antiquity, and a romantic vision of the New World populated by Noble Savages.³² Blumenbach compliments this image with a similarly selective anecdote: recounting Omai's arrival in England and his effortless adaptation to the "feinen Londner Weltton," Blumenbach reports, "daß der berühmte Dr. Johnson, da er einst mit ihm in Gesellschaft speisste, und O-Mai neben Lord Mulgrave dem Dr. gegen über an der Fensterseite saß, so daß diesen das Licht blendete, er, seinem eignen Geständniß nach, bey der Eleganz von O-Mai's Manieren, ihn anfangs nicht von dem Lord unterscheiden konnte."³³

As Blumenbach deploys this brief anecdote, Omai's refined manner is evidence of the permeability of cultural boundaries that belies intrinsic, race-based difference. Elsewhere Blumenbach took issue with Voltaire's declaration that "none but the blind" might dispute the essential differences dividing the races of humankind; here, he uses momentary blindness to undermine the significance of what is visible, as if *only* the blind might understand the

lack of essential differences among the peoples of the earth. While Omai's facial features are, in fact, famously non-European, the anecdote suggests that the famous cultural critic Dr. Johnson is able to hear in Omai's "cosmopolitan tone" his cultural equivalence to an English aristocrat, once he is no longer distracted by the obvious visible difference.

Blumenbach's choices of portrait and anecdote work together effectively—too much so, in fact. While Blumenbach's visual and literary portrait of Omai does skillfully convey his governing concern in this portion of the atlas, it is not a particularly honest portrait of Omai himself. Indeed, a portrait of Omai by William Hodges is, as David Bindman notes, "barely recognizable as the same person depicted by Reynolds."³⁴ Similarly, Blumenbach's colleague Georg Forster reported that, while Omai "has for some time engrossed the attention of the curious," the actual man did not at all resemble the legend that developed around him.³⁵ More caustic was the tone of an anonymous "letter from London" published in the *Deutsches Museum* in 1776, lamenting the fate of Omai who was shaped by "famous men of learning" ("berühmter Weltweisen") and now displayed, "[a]lle Narrheiten und Ausschweifungen von ganz Europa."³⁶ Such judgments leveled by the popular press not withstanding, the iconic, grandly romantic Omai was Blumenbach's choice for his atlas. And in making good use of this simplified and disingenuous portrait, he ironically replicates the unjust gesture—that of instrumentalising an individual for ideological purposes—that he so carefully deconstructs in the context of race typification.

The fifth and final image of race presented by the atlas breaks in interesting ways with a pattern established by the previous four. The other portraits each contained some visual trace of non-European culture in their garb, which helps to maintain a productive tension between cultural difference and sameness, or alienation and identification skillfully generated by Blumenbach. These figures are described as creative participants in European culture, and yet they maintain a surplus identity in their own right. With this fifth image, however, Blumenbach presents us with the portrait of an African, the representation of "the Ethiopian race," who is in every way visually assimilated to European norms; even his hair—a generally fetishized marker of the African's racial difference—is covered by a fashionable and socially respectable European wig.

The portrait is of Jacob Joseph Eliza Capitein, a former slave, Dutch clergyman, writer, and missionary (Figure 5). Blumenbach identifies it as an engraving taken from the painting by the prominent Dutch artist Philip van Dijk, a work that depicts its subject as a clergyman holding and pointing to a Bible. He is every bit the refined European man of learning—whose skin happens to be black. This is a rare image of a black man who is *not* in any way visually coded as "African" or "primitive," but whose clothing, posture, and setting communicate signs of social elevation and religious authority familiar

to the European viewer.³⁷ We can read Blumenbach's choice of images two ways: it may be that he selected Capitein as an exemplary subject since he had already written about him in another text also devoted to dispelling racist preconceptions; alternatively, Blumenbach might have selected this portrait, wittingly or not, because proof of the sheer capacity to assimilate to European cultural norms constituted a challenge to racist theorists who in some cases denied full human status to Africans.

Blumenbach's accompanying text also breaks a pattern set by the other four entries: here he does not devote himself to his exemplary subject, but merely notes:

Von diesem auch durch seine Predigten und andere Schriften so er in lateinischer und holländischer Sprache herausgegeben, bekannten Neger, habe ich im 1ten Theil der Beyträge zur Naturgeschichte S. 99 u.f. Nachricht gegeben, wo ich überhaupt genug Beyspiele von talentreichen Negern, zumahl von solchen die sich als Schriftsteller ausgezeichnet, aufgestellt habe.³⁸

This statement makes clear, perhaps more than elsewhere in the atlas, both Blumenbach's purpose—to provide sufficient examples of accomplished individuals to dispel myths about natural racial limitations—as well as a certain impatience at having to do so over and over again. He continues with a brief mention of the recent accomplishments of the African American mathematician and scientist Benjamin Banneker, and concludes with the report that

Herr Jac. Mac Henry zu Baltimore hat eine Nachricht von den Lebensumständen desselben drucken lassen, und sieht, wie er sich darin ausdrückt, “diesen Neger als einen neuen Beweis an, dass sich die Geistesfähigkeiten nicht eben nach der Hautfarbe richten.”³⁹

This citation—a strategic demonstration of the proper interpretative conclusions to be drawn from such narrated lives—constitutes Blumenbach's only direct reference to skin color and physical racial traits in his atlas.

Blumenbach intervenes with portraiture as his pedagogic mechanism precisely at the point where race might otherwise have structured or superseded notions of personhood. He wreaks havoc with conventions of both artistic and scientific representation in making each entry serve the double function of rendering its subject as type and as self. Insofar as his atlas portraits do communicate knowledge produced by and for natural science, they demonstrate that the richly multi-faceted individuality of his “Charakterköpfe” indeed conforms to, and offers evidence of, the species concept. While implicitly making a case for the cultural unity of the human species, Blumenbach's book demonstrates that the scientific category of race, both in its logic and in the face of life, cannot accommodate the individual self.

Unlike the illustrations of non-human subjects that make up the bulk of the atlas, the five images of race are designed to function not simply as objects of visual consumption, as proofs that seeing—at least by a trained eye—is knowing. They are presented by Blumenbach (as their first engaged observer) to a reader (a second observer) as partners in an exchange performed among historical personages, portraits, their reframing as illustrations, the author, and the reader. The important term here is “performed”: Blumenbach has effectively opened a performative space for an ethical exchange—albeit textually mediated—among people. In other, more conventional and oft-reprinted works on natural history, Blumenbach had tried to explain his understanding of the semantic limits of race, but to no avail. With his atlas, he sets a complex, intertextual and mixed-media stage for a different kind of pedagogical encounter. Blumenbach decouples the opposition between subject and object that anchors the scientific epistemology put forward in the introduction of his own book; and this decoupling invites the reader to recognize that the exemplary figures portrayed are just as much creative participants in the possible forms and facts of their own racial and cultural identities as the reader himself (much less frequently herself).

It is in the context of this dynamic that we have to attend carefully to Blumenbach's *Abbildungen*: a careful recognition of the implications of this book can contribute novel insights to our understanding of race as a category in enlightened Europe and challenge its subsequent historization. Blumenbach provides us with a lesson on the relationship between categories of species and race vis-à-vis their relation to real individuals. He takes the categories off of the abstract taxonomic chart, where they differ only in order of magnitude; and, without denying a scientific use for the classificatory category of race, he demonstrates that what might actually be real and historical for scientific discourse is incoherent and useless for discourses of culture and personhood.

Blumenbach presents each race via a portrait that is constructed as an assemblage of texts; he does so with an intention to correct the presumptions and simplifications that were emerging in the disciplinary guise of (racist) ethnographic authority. Blumenbach's reader, who has opened the book in order to see in order to learn, learns that simply seeing—particularly seeing *someone*—is not knowing. In engaging Blumenbach's atlas, the careful 18th- (or 21st-) century reader must see not only the five portraits but also him- or herself in the act not of learning but of unlearning an identity of (and personal identification with) race. In the process of unlearning race, the reader of the *Abbildungen* also potentially learns to negotiate the limits of scientific discourse as one among many ways of knowing by and about human beings.

Figure 1. *Feodor Iwanowitsch*.
Johann Friedrich
Blumenbach,
*Abbildungen
Naturhistorischer
Gegenstände*
(Göttingen:
Heinrich
Dieterich, 1796).



Figure 2.
Thayendanega.
Blumenbach,
Abbildungen.



Figure 3. *Jusuf
Aguiah Efendi.*
Johann Friedrich
Blumenbach,
*Abbildungen
Naturhistorischer
Gegenstände*
(Göttingen:
Heinrich
Dieterich, 1796).



Figure 4. *Omai.*
Blumenbach,
Abbildungen.



Figure 5. *Jacob Joseph Eliza Capitein*. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *Abbildungen Naturhistorischer Gegenstände* (Göttingen: Heinrich Dieterich, 1796)



Notes

¹ Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *Abbildungen Naturhistorischer Gegenstände*. Nr. 4–100 (Göttingen: Heinrich Dieterich, 1796, 1810).

² *Abbildungen*, Preface; the book is unpaginated.

³ Both Bernasconi and Zammito have discussed Blumenbach's adoption of the term and the influence of Kant's work upon his decision. See, for example, Robert Bernasconi, "Kant and Blumenbach's Polyyps: A Neglected Chapter in the History of the Concept of Race," *The German Invention of Race*, ed. Sara Eigen and Mark Larrimore (forthcoming, SUNY P); Robert Bernasconi, "Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant's Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race," *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Blackwell, 2001); John Zammito, "Policing Polygeneticism in Germany, 1775: (Kames,) Kant and Blumenbach," *The German Invention of Race* (forthcoming). See also Phillip R. Sloan, "Preforming the Categories: Eighteenth-Century Generation Theory and the Biological Roots of Kant's a Priori," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 40.2 (2002): 229–53.

⁴ With a few notable exceptions—Bernasconi, Sloan, Lenoir, and Zammito cited above and below—most references to Blumenbach in the context of racial thinking reduce his contribution to one or two statements in support of the achievements of "Negroes" as evidence of his objections to racist thinking. See Stephen Jay Gould, "On Mental and Visual Geometry," *Isis* 89.3 (1998): 503; Philip D. Curtain, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780–1850* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1964) 47; Gustav Jahoda, *Crossroads between Culture and Mind: Continuities and Change in Theories of Human Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993) 87; Londa Schiebinger, "The Anat-

omy of Difference: Race and Sex in Eighteenth-Century Science," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 23.4, Special Issue: The Politics of Difference (1990): 390; Robin Hallett, "The European Approach to the Interior of Africa in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of African History* 4.2 (1963): 200, note 24.

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem. Studies in Poetics* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999) 43.

⁶ Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *Handbuch der Naturgeschichte* (Göttingen: Johann Christian Dieterich, 1779).

⁷ K. F. H. Marx, "Life of Blumenbach," trans. Thomas Bendyshe, *The Anthropological Treatises of Blumenbach and Hunter*, ed. Thomas Bendyshe (Boston: Longwood P, 1865, 1978) 12.

⁸ On relevant debates concerning generation and race, see Sloan, "Preforming the Categories"; also Phillip R. Sloan, "Buffon, German Biology, and the Historical Interpretation of Biological Species," *British Journal for the History of Science* 12.41 (1979): 109–53; C. Correia, *The Ovary of Eve: Egg, Sperm, and Preformation* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997); Timothy Lenoir, "Kant, Blumenbach, and Vital Materialism in German Biology," *Isis* 71 (1980): 77–108. On the development and context of Blumenbach's position, see Bernasconi, "Kant and Blumenbach's Polyps"; Zammuto, "Policing Polygeneticism"; Frank William Peter Dougherty, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zu Themen der klassischen Periode der Naturgeschichte* (Göttingen: Klatt, 1996).

⁹ See E. Mayr and P. D. Ashlock, *Principles of Systematic Zoology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991).

¹⁰ Buffon's definition of species was fully developed in his essay on "L'Âne," in Georges Louis Leclerc Buffon, *Histoire Naturelle* (Paris, 1753). Although disputed, this definition was nevertheless cited as authoritative in Diderot's and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*. On Buffon and the species controversy, see Sloan, "Buffon." See also Phillip R. Sloan, "The Gaze of Natural History," *Inventing Human Science. Eighteenth-Century Domains*, ed. Roy Porter, Christopher Fox, and Robert Wokler (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995) 112–51.

¹¹ For a discussion of attempts made to objectively render a "typical" subject from the 17th to the 20th centuries, see Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, "The Image of Objectivity," *Representations* 40, Special Issue: Seeing Science (1992): 81–128.

¹² Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *Beyträge zur Naturgeschichte, Erster Theil* (Göttingen: Johann Christian Dieterich, 1790) 81.

¹³ [Anonymous], "Blumenbach, J.F.: Abbildungen Naturhistorischer Gegenstände. H.1. No. 1–10. Göttingen: Dieterich 1796: Rezension," *Magazin für das Neueste aus der Physik und Naturgeschichte* 1 (1797), unpaginated.

¹⁴ In his early work, Blumenbach claimed that his text communicated "untrügliche[] Deutlichkeit" and made his science "durchschaubar." See 83–86 in Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *Über den Bildungstrieb* (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1791), a reprint of the 1781 edition.

¹⁵ Daston and Galison 84.

¹⁶ Daston and Galison 94.

¹⁷ *Abbildungen*, preface.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Consider, for instance, the late-17th-century Brazilian paintings by Dutch artist Albert Eckhout, or the racial/ethnographic illustrations to the enormously popular

History of the Earth (1774) by Oliver Goldsmith; and even Johann Caspar Lavater's best-selling *Physiognomic Fragments* (1775–78). See variously: David Bindman, *Ape to Apollo. Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th Century* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2002); Peter Mason, *Infelicitities: Representations of the Exotic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998); Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race. Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2000).

²⁰ Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991) 39.

²¹ Johann George Sulzer, *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste in Einzelnen, nach alphabetischer Ordnung der Kunstwörter auf Einander folgenden Artikeln Abgehandelt.*, 4 vols. (Leipzig: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1793) 3: 719. Cited in Johann Caspar Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente, zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe*, 4 vols. (Zürich: Orell Füssli, [1775–78] 1968) 2: 79–80.

²² Sulzer 719.

²³ Blumenbach, *Abbildungen*, preface.

²⁴ Iwanowitsch was a known figure of his day, who was later appointed Court Painter in Karlsruhe.

²⁵ This echoes Lavater's requirements for scientifically useful "physiognomic portraiture," a discipline (or a medium) he hoped someday would be developed.

²⁶ Louis Marin, "Towards a Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts: Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherd*" in S. R. Suleiman and I. Crossman, eds., *The Reader in the Text* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), 306. Cited in Brilliant, *Portraiture* 43.

²⁷ Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *Handbuch der Naturgeschichte*, 6th ed. (Göttingen: Johann Christian Dieterich, 1799) 63.

²⁸ Blumenbach here credits Thayendanegea with providing a capstone argument to a debate that had been launched by Cornelius de Pauw and Antoine Pernet in Prussia beginning in 1768. For more on de Pauw and his influence on German perceptions of American "savages," see Susanne Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies. Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770–1870* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997) 46ff.

²⁹ Richard Mc Causland, Joseph Planta, Jos. Brant Thayendanegea and John Butler, "Particulars Relative to the Nature and Customs of the Indians of North-America. By Mr. Richard Mc Causland, Surgeon to the King's or Eighth Regiment of Foot. Communicated by Joseph Planta, Esq. Sec. R. S.," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 76 (1786): 232.

³⁰ *Abbildungen*, unpaginated.

³¹ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT P, 1996) 178.

³² For a detailed assessment of Reynold's painting, see "Mason, *Infelicitities* 126.

³³ *Abbildungen*, unpaginated.

³⁴ Bindman, *Ape to Apollo* 148.

³⁵ Cited in Bindman, *Ape to Apollo* 148.

³⁶ [Anonymous], "Auszug eines Briefes aus London," *Deutsches Museum* 2 (1776): 759.

³⁷ For a discussion of several unusual portraits and sculptures of Africans produced during the 18th century, see Bindman, *Ape to Apollo*. See Brilliant's analysis of Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson's *Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Belley* (1797), in *Portraiture* 32–37. Allison Blakely identifies exceptional studies executed by Dürer, Rubens, Van Dyck, and Rembrandt. Allison Blakely, *Blacks in the Dutch World* (Bloomington: Indiana UP,

1993) 119. On yet another, similar portrait of Capitein, Blakely notes that this image "announced through the composition's oval frame that blacks could rise to new heights in European society." Blakely, *Blacks in the Dutch World* 122.

³⁸ *Abbildungen*, unpaginated.

³⁹ Ibid. James McHenry's text reads: "I consider this Negro as a fresh proof that the powers of the mind are disconnected with the colour of the skin, or, in other words a striking contradiction of Mr. Hume's doctrine, that 'the Negroes are naturally inferior to whites, and unsusceptible of attainments in arts and letters.'" From "Benjamin Banneker a free negro," a short biography in the form of a letter written by McHenry. It appears on 300-301 in *The Universal Asylum, and Columbian Magazine, For November 1791* (Philadelphia: William Young, 1791). It also appears in Banneker's own popular almanac, *Benjamin Banneker's Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland and Virginia Almanack and Ephemeris For the Year of Our Lord 1792*, (Baltimore: William Goddard and James Angell, 1791).