

Ashley Elizabeth Kerr. *Sex, Skulls, and Citizens: Gender and Racial Science in Argentina (1860-1910)*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2020. 240 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8265-2272-6.

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Sex, Skulls and Citizens by Ashley E. Kerr explores the role of scientific racism, sexual desire, and gender in the process of constructing Argentina's racial identity as a white European nation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In contrast to a historiography of racial science in which women are invisible, Kerr shows that women were active contributors to the whitening of Argentina. They participated as mothers, writers, or by working in social and religious organizations. By highlighting the role of women, Kerr connects *mestizaje*, a central concept of racial politics in Latin America, with interracial sex. Through this perspective, Kerr shows that gender and sexual encounters (either voluntary or forced) are central to the production of anthropological knowledge as well as to how indigenous people were described and governed (either by policies of assimilation or eradication).

Kerr bases her research on a wide variety of late nineteenth-century sources including the works of renowned Argentinian anthropologists in parallel with contemporaneous works of fiction through which scientific ideas of race and gender were popularized. From a literary perspective, she treats these texts "not as objective truth but as culturally created narratives, dependent on rhetoric and literary conventions" (p. 10). This combination of materials and interpretative approach help

Kerr to present a richer cultural context in which scientists, writers, and politicians lived and wrote. In addition, the use of fiction allows an examination of "how elite scientific projects become collective identities" (p. 124), and how these collective identities become perdurable ways to interpret past and current racial politics in Argentina. In addition to written works, she analyzes scientific photographic material produced in the Museo de la Plata found in the Boote Collection and the Archaeology Section of the Archivo Fotográfico General. These materials reveal a heterogeneous scientific racism with diverse points of view regarding the role of indigenous people in the construction of the Argentine nation, what is also known as the "Indian problem."

The first two chapters center on the anthropological works of Lucio V. Mansilla, Ramón Lista, Francisco P. Moreno, and Estanislao Zeballos. These authors not only enjoyed a reputation in the local and international scientific worlds (having correspondence with Paul Broca and Paul Topinard) but also worked in the government, were involved in military actions such as the Conquest of the Desert, and developed public policies. The only one without a legislative role was Moreno, who instead was the director of the Museo de la Plata and a *perito* (expert) for the Argentine National government. For these reasons, their writ-

ings are not only scientifically relevant but also central to politics. The upper-class origin of these four authors, their whiteness, their commitment to Christian values, and their common desire “to improve” the country shaped their relationships with the indigenous people they met, and, accordingly, their works.

Chapter 1 centers on these authors’ characterizations of indigenous gender roles and family life in works from 1870 and 1895. Two main tropes were: the lazy indigenous male incapable of contributing any value to the nation and, on the other hand, the hypersexualized Indian, whose animality and violence proved his primitiveness. Both stereotypes confirmed that indigenous men could not be part of modern Argentina. While indigenous women were perceived in better terms (as industrious and malleable to urban Christian life, also discussed in chapter 5), the indigenous family was considered dysfunctional and in need of intervention. Family separation became a key policy with the arrival of thousands of captive Indians to the cities after the Conquest of the Desert, a clear example of the complementarity of science and politics at the time.

In chapter 2, Kerr explores what she calls “the margins of the written record” and pays attention to “gossip and the unsaid” (p. 38) in the works of Ramón Lista and Lucio V. Mansilla. The case of Lista is an exemplar regarding the focus of the book. Kerr shows that Lista radically changed his appreciation of indigenous people after having a long-lasting romantic relationship and conceiving a daughter with Clorinda Coile, a Tehuelche woman. This change is evident in his works, especially in *Viaje al país de los onas* (1887) and *Los indios Tehuelches: Una raza que desaparece* (1894). Kerr suggests that the case of Lista and Coile should not be taken as an exception. In fact, in many ethnographic works, women had at least the role of main informants, which further focuses attention on their role in the history of anthropology. The power asymmetries in these relation-

ships are, however, not explored by Kerr. The case of Lista is not only a good example against assuming a value-free anthropology, but also opens a question regarding the utilitarian dimension of personal relations and intimacy in ethnographic fieldwork. Lista suggests that establishing personal ties does not violate objectivity but provides an opportunity for “the kind of extensive study that leads to truth” (p. 46). Kerr asks, could intimacy and sex be a resource used by Lista to obtain more information about Tehuelche life? This provocative question remains unanswered.

In the case of Mansilla, flirtation, desire, and sex are explicit in his writings, even if there is no evidence of a concrete love affair. To Kerr, the sexual content in Mansilla’s work fits his monogenism as well as his views on mestizaje as an improvement of mankind (p. 59). Despite these views, by 1885 Mansilla supported exclusionary policies regarding indigenous access to property, citizenship, and government assistance (p. 60). Kerr attributes this contradiction to a common fascination among writers with an ideal Indian, who represents freedom and purity and, at the same time, a rejection of real indigenous people.

The remaining chapters are concerned with the popularization of scientific racism by means of museum exhibitions and fictional literature. Chapter 3 deals with photographic material from the Tehuelche *caciques* Incayal and Foyel and their families by photographer Samuel Boote, commissioned by Francisco P. Moreno in 1884. An analysis focused on gender offers new interpretations and challenges the common conceptualization of scientific photography “between heroic science and genocide” (p. 68). This approach shows that men and women were photographed following expected roles of gender, race, power, and status. While men were photographed alone, suggesting independence, women were photographed in groups, with children, pots, and rosaries, to highlight their roles as mothers and domestic workers, and their religiousness. In contrast to

common standardized racial photography in which individuals appear naked, in these photographs most Tehuelche wear clothes, indicating their potential for civilization. By looking at the individuals in these pictures, Kerr restores their humanity and reveals their family relations. This reading also challenges the value of scientific photography as representative of racial types.

In the last two chapters Kerr examines popular fictional works in which central ideas of scientific racism, evolutionary theories (creationism vs. Darwinism), political projects, and moral values are presented. Chapter 4 centers on two novels by Estanislao Zeballos, *Painé y la dinastía de los zorros* (1886), and *Relmú. Reina de los Pinares* (1888), as well as two poems, *Tabaré* (1888) from Juan Zorrilla de San Martín, and *Lin-Calél* (begun in 1885 and published in 1910), written by Eduardo L. Holmberg. These four works provide love stories to question interracial relationships and present their scientific problems and moral difficulties. In this way, romance “becomes a cautionary tale” (p. 106). As these works show, some racial couples are possible but not desirable. Despite the positive characteristics granted to mestizo protagonists, all suffer a tragic end, suggesting that racial mixing is doomed.

The analysis continues in chapter 5 with the works of two female writers: Eduarda Mansilla’s *Lucía Miranda* (1869), and two children’s books written by Florence Dixie, *The Two Castaways* (1890) and *Aniwee, or, the Warrior Queen* (1890). In their works, both writers develop strong female indigenous characters with personality traits which are favorable for civilization. But these traits must be nurtured by “the true force of civilization” which in both novels is personified in white women (p. 133). Thus, despite the positive representation of indigenous people, they are still portrayed as inferior to the white colonizer.

The combination of scientific and literary materials as well as the focus on gender, desire, and sex provides a new understanding of the politics

of anthropological knowledge production during the nineteenth century in Argentina. This approach also suggests that gender and sex need to be studied in other national contexts and in the history of anthropology in general. A second achievement of Kerr’s is connecting the history of eradication and assimilation of the Indian to current repatriation debates. With this, Kerr urges for the public revision of the myth of the disappearance of the Indian in Argentina and its consequences.

Despite these achievements, two issues could have been addressed in the book. The first is the lack of contextualization within broader Latin American racial politics, especially those providing positive views on mestizaje. It would be important to discuss how these views (for instance in chapter 2) relate to later works such as José Vasconcelos’s *La raza cósmica* (1925). The second issue concerns the potential biologization of race that Kerr only hints at but does not discuss: she writes that “recent genetic studies of the Argentine and Uruguayan populations have demonstrated the continued presence of indigenous genetic material, more closely approximating [Eduardo] Holmberg’s ‘raza nueva’ than Zorrilla de San Martín’s” (p. 125). She refers to studies that prove that 50 percent of the population in Argentina and 31 percent in Uruguay have “indigenous ancestry on mitochondrial DNA.” However, these two versions of race (mitochondrial markers obtained from specific reference populations which are determined in a laboratory, and Holmberg’s “raza nueva”) are not the same. The link between the two might suggest a reification of biological race that Kerr perhaps would prefer to avoid.

Besides these small points, the book is a rich analysis of an innovative combination of materials that offers a new reading of the history of scientific racism and anthropology. Similar contributions are needed to uncover even more of how gender and sex, usually marginalized from the study of racial science, have shaped our current

understandings of identity and national belonging. The book should become part of university study programs interested in feminist approaches to the history and philosophy of anthropology and those aiming to problematize conventional historical narratives of race, gender, and identity.

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