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Book Review: The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century. Kyla Schuller: Duke University Press, Durham and London: 2018, 296 pages.

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***The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century.* Kyla Schuller: Duke University Press, Durham and London: 2018, 296 pages. Photographs, excerpts, notes and index included. \$61.04 hardcover, \$21.55 paperback. Reviewed by Rosemary Onyango, Eastern Illinois University**

By Rosemary Onyango¹

Kyla Schuller's *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* is an impressive synthesis of historical and theoretical work. The discussion presents biopolitics and biopower of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as complex and contentious concepts anchored on various narratives of power and support involving institutions such as the government, religious organizations, educational and agencies. Drawing from diverse disciplinary perspectives, Schuller examines theories of evolution, eugenics, and heredity and in turn, their influence on reproductive rights and assumptions of racial, ethnic and gender hierarchies. The breadth of discussion, delineates how marginalized groups have historically and presently been controlled, manipulated and exploited as well as how they have challenged their condition (e.g. geographical distribution and isolation, reproductive rights, raising of children). This book makes an important contribution to scholarship on biopolitics and biopower and offers opportunity for readers to contemplate a number of issues including limitations of human thinking in different epochs and the influence of theories on promoting social hierarchies and inequalities.

The book is divided into five chapters and has an introduction and epilogue, all of which are carefully titled, documented and opened with intriguing quotations that grab the reader's attention. Every chapter explores the sentiments and realities of biopolitics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries particularly, the centrality of race and gender logic to the rule of life, reproduction and death attributed to preoccupation of Anglo-Saxons with social, biological and reproductive control of species perceived as a threat.

The introduction titled "Sentimental Biopower" amplifies the topic and how every chapter highlights biopolitical discourse. This section delineates multifaceted core concepts such as impressibility, sentimentalism, biopower and biopolitics. Impressibility refers to the body's capacity to be affected by external agents, while sentimentalism denotes how to incorporate the effect of external agents and make sense of their influence on progression. Schuller states: Sentimentalism stimulates the moral virtuosity and emotional release of the sympathizer and her affective attachment to the nation-state at the expense of the needs of the chosen targets of her sympathy, typically those barred from the status of the individuated Human: often the impoverished, the racialized, the conquered, the orphaned, and/or animalized (2).

Schuller draws from Michel Foucault's idea of "biopolitics," (social and political power over human life) which encompasses "biopower" (execution of biopolitical imaginations) and explains ways in which these intertwined concepts are instrumental in enforcing a system of governance that classifies human beings according to their presumed impressibility. Furthermore, this system places them on hierarchies based on race, gender, ethnicity and class in ways that determine perceptions of their worth and worthlessness. She states, "Within biopower, racialization and sex difference do the work of unevenly assigning affective capacity throughout a

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population” (11). In essence, nineteenth century science is based on feelings rather than concrete evidence and deems the racialized inferior, uncivilized, socially inept and intellectually substandard.

Chapter one “Taxonomies of Feeling” fleshes out evolutionist perspectives on species, race and sex differentiation and exposes multiple philosophical intricacies including those steeped in prejudices. Schuller notes that American evolution theorists including Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Joseph Le Conte challenged Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection, and instead promoted Lamarck’s paradigm that favored a self-devised version of evolution. The chapter examines nineteenth century politics of human sciences, race and sexual differentiation. This politics of this era influenced racialized and gendered discourses related to eugenics, presumptions about the effect of heredity and environment on human traits, and who counts as a properly developed human and who falls short of these standards. While the analyses presented in some sections of this chapter can get mired in theoretical convolutions, Schuller’s ideas indicate that like Darwin’s theoretical perspective, American evolutionists’ model was flawed and incomprehensive.

The second chapter, “Body as Text, Race as Palimpsest” explores exemplars of black feminist perspectives on biopolitics articulated by Frances Harper and Anna Julia Cooper who were raising awareness about black women’s rights in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It documents the interplay between biopolitics of racial degradation of multi-ethnic reformers and black feminists’ commitment to biopolitics of racial uplift and women’s rights. This chapter lends insight into the inherent biased set of beliefs in racial and gender politics promoted to undermine sensations of women and people of color. Schuller documents that black feminists represented by Harper and Cooper shunned the notion that the black race is a static artifact of the past. Instead, Schuller explains how they challenged white supremacist logic that distorted gender and sexual differences and fragmented racial formation in ways that projected black women as incapable of achieving true womanhood in the Victorian sense. Harper and Cooper confronted biopolitical discourse of this epoch on racialized groups and women, arguing that misconceptions about black bodies prevented African Americans from exercising their full potential. Schuller asserts that in their endeavor to promote socially uplifting discourse, these black feminists affirmed that the black race is dynamic and viable, malleable looking to the future and capable of shaping its destiny. This chapter reminds readers of the importance of promoting feminist politics that is attentive to the influence of transecting forms of domination including gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity and class that often augment different kinds of prejudice.

Whereas in the preceding chapter black feminists challenged gender and racial inequalities, Schuller devotes Chapter 3, titled “Vaginal Impressions,” to examining archival research on sexual differentiation of the nineteenth century focusing on medical theories on vaginal impressions promoted by two early white women physicians: Elizabeth Blackwell and Mary Walker. In the context of an American version of evolution, feminist ideas of this era and racial history of sexuality, white women were considered well developed mentally and physically, and morally superior thus, impressible. Schuller details how Blackwell and Walker’s race and professional standing as physicians provided opportunities for social, sexual, political and professional agency enabling them to assert their sexual self-determination, womanhood, reproductive potential, superior sensations and same-sex relationships. While this chapter endorses white supremacist ideas, it appears to challenge biopolitical discourses that ranked women’s senses as inferior to men’s (discussed in chapter 2). The chapter concludes with statements about the social and intellectual legacy of biopolitics of feeling, “which plays out in the realms as varied as affect theory, white feminisms, the criminal justice system, mainstream gay rights movements, and trans

exclusionary radical feminism” (133). Since this legacy continues to influence rationalities in politics of sexuality, class, gender ideals and the body, this chapter reminds readers that it is crucial to re-examine ways of conceptualizing with feminist theories and activism. This requires taking cognizance of women’s diverse experiences, identities, knowledge and strengths in pertinent contexts.

Chapter 4 “Incremental Life” explores a valuation of life that projects Anglo-Saxons as more evolved, impressionable, sentimental and civilized than other races seemingly devoid of racial fitness. It highlights biopolitical strategy of population management during the eras of industrialization, urbanization and immigration and underscores the centrality of immigrant labor to American economy. Schuller argues that sentimental biopower is predicated on the threat of growing populations of immigrant and street children to the middle class that necessitates molding these children, according to the needs of capitalist economy. Using multiple sources including notes pinned on abandoned infants, oral histories and photographs, Schuller details the shipping of two hundred thousand children by train from New York to rural farms, their separation from financially stable parents as well as desperate poverty-stricken biological parents, and the harrowing experiences they endured in return for free room and board.

Schuller dedicates a substantial section of chapter 4 to Charles Loring Brace’s Emigration Plan project undertaken by Children’s Aid Society (CAS) during the mid to late nineteenth century to exemplify the influence of American evolution theorists on population regulation. The chapter delves into the roles played by individuals, the state, religious organizations and private institutions in establishing orphanages, foster homes, juvenile reformatories, and industrial schools to isolate children and execute a process intended to rewire, regulate and transform them from their perceived primitive stage to “civilized” and reliable domestic laborers. Although Native American children were taken from their families to off-reservation boarding schools to be subjected to drills, religious education and menial labor, Schuller adds that CAS preferred Irish, Italian, German and Jewish male youth as adaptable to new behavior. Conversely, CAS perceived girls as less adaptable and African Americans and Native Americans nearly extinct and irredeemable. “Indeed, the United States was often figured as an orphan of Europe, a parentless and youthful empty continent. Yet when targeting the allegedly malleable bodies of Irish-and German-origin children through tactics of urban charity, biophilanthropists worked... through...rebirthing immigrant children into the family of whiteness” (164). Schuller observes that this evolutionary scheme of American civilization via isolation and character training was viewed as a method of overriding genetic wiring.

W.E.B. Du Bois’s emancipatory intellectual activism and his rebuttal to evolutionists and contribution to the eugenics debate is the focus of chapter 5. Schuller argues that while proponents of racist eugenics preserved an oppressive racial structure and viewed social reforms that could prolong the lives of those deemed unfit as detrimental to the nation’s future, intellectual activists like Du Bois promoted a more empowering version of biopolitics for marginalized races. Du Bois challenged the discourse of white supremacy inherent in Darwinism and American evolutionists whose “scientific” logic about black inferiority validated their pushing for contraceptives, sterilization and racial discrimination. He re-conceptualized how best African American women can regain their reproductive liberty and parenting capability by becoming agents that control their own reproduction potential. Schuller further documents that Du Bois critiqued taboos against respectable social mixing of the races as tactics of white supremacy. His counter narratives on evolution and anti-racist theories on eugenics strived to unsettle stipulations that belittled African Americans and coerced black women to control/cease reproduction. In essence, he promoted a

more empowering version of biopolitics, which was vital for affirming black women's humanity, dignity and agency in relation to their reproductive freedom and quality of life.

Finally, in an epilogue titled "The Afterlives of Impressibility" Schuller recaps the salient points of the book, reflects on the enduring legacy of the subjugating tendencies of biopolitics and biopower and reexamines the limitations of the social construction theory of race. Noting that the twenty-first century has witnessed the emergence of paradigms arising from genetic breakthrough, Schuller cautions that these paradigms are still in flux and very much influenced by the vocabulary of the past which can lead to previous traps. She suggests that paradigm-shifting models need to be adopted in innovative ways in order to illuminate the interplay between genetic and social influences. A series of insightful questions posed in the epilogue capture issues including race, gender feminist perspectives, and child welfare reforms. Schuller asserts that these issues can provoke a critical re-assessment of intellectual, cultural and political frameworks and have the potential to promote social justice endeavors for the wellbeing of humankind.

Overall, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* is a well-documented critique of society and valuable contribution to scholarship on biopolitics that addresses persistent issues that can spark intellectual discussions. The book would be useful for scholars across disciplines such as Philosophy, Health Studies, Critical Race Studies, Ethnic Studies and Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies.