

Who's Black and Why? A Hidden Chapter from the Eighteenth-Century Invention of Race

Henry Louis Gates Jr., Editor

Andrew S. Curran, Editor

Belknap Press (Mar 22, 2022)

Hardcover \$29.95 (336pp)

978-0-674-24426-9

Collected by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Andrew S. Curran, the essays of *Who's Black and Why?* represent a fascinating look into the eighteenth-century invention of the concept of race.

In 1741, the Bordeaux's Royal Academy of Sciences put forward one of its biannual prize competitions. Essayists were asked to offer theories on the cause of Black people's dark skin and hair textures. The winner would be the one whose theory was deemed the most plausible.

The question itself had a social and economic impetus: it was raised in response to the fact that slave-trafficking had benefited France's economy to a staggering degree, and needed to be justified. Decades later, in 1772, a new competition continued to center this preoccupation with Blackness, although in a much more concrete way: it sought to find ways for fewer enslaved people to die aboard the ships. This interest was purely economic, though.

The book is split into two sections: one, presenting all sixteen essays submitted to the 1741 contest; and the second, featuring the three essays submitted to the 1772 contest. Descriptive titles, provided by Gates and Curran, make the theories advanced clear from the beginning. They reflect the societies in which they were written. The first contest's submissions, in particular, make for an exercise in patience: their claims are so absurd as to be laughable, and so racist as to be enraging. Indeed, the theories range from Black babies being born so due to their mother's imagination, to Blackness being a sign of moral degeneration.

Enriched by the contextualizing information that surrounds them, the essays of *Who's Black and Why?* show how concepts of race, and color-based racism, were invented.

CAROLINA CIUCCI (March / April 2022)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. No fee was paid by the publisher for this review. Foreword Reviews only recommends books that we love. Foreword Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.