

Reading Forster, Reading Race: Philosophy, Politics, and Natural History in the German Enlightenment

JENNIFER MENSCH • MICHAEL OLSON

Georg Forster (1754-1794) was one of the very few men in the eighteenth century who could credibly claim to have been a *Weltumsiegler*. At the age of eleven, in 1765, he accompanied his father, the clergyman and naturalist Johann Reinhold Forster, on a Russian-financed expedition to inspect new German immigrant settlements along the Volga, travelling some 2300 kilometers from Nassenhuben, Pommerania, to Saratov across fields and dusty steppes. Georg's father had brought him along to aid his scientific observations, to keep records, and to draw up accounts of the hundreds of natural specimens the two collected on their trip. This early experience was formative, and when Georg moved to London with his father the following year, he worked alongside him in the antiquarian networks interested in the fossils and other items the two had brought with them. In an early sign of what would become an enduring economic lifeline for the Forster family, Georg published at age thirteen a translation of Russian history into English, followed in short course by his English translation of the travelogue prepared by the French explorer Bougainville. By then JR Forster had begun to lecture at the progressive Warrington Dissenter's Academy in northern England, allowing Georg to be enrolled as a student while continuing his natural history pursuits. In 1772 Georg published his first independent work, a short text on the Polynesian breadfruit. This was enough to convince the British admiralty to allow the seventeen-year-old to accompany his father, newly appointed as the ship's naturalist aboard Captain Cook's HMS Resolution as it set out to explore the South Pacific between 1772 and 1775. Georg Forster's subsequent account of the voyage, published in English (1777) and then in a German translation in two volumes (1778 and 1780), secured his fame as one of the foremost naturalists of his day, and led to his appointment to academic positions in Kassel (1778-1783) and Vilnius (1784-1788), and ultimately as a specialist librarian at the University of Mainz (1788-1793). Forster stayed in Mainz until his support for the revolutionary Mainz Republic saw him banished from the Holy Roman Empire; he died in Paris some six months later at the age of thirty-nine.¹

Georg Forster brought the insights won over the course of his eventful life to bear on a wide range of intellectual interests and emerging academic disciplines. His *Voyage Round the World* became an instant classic of Enlightenment travel literature, impacting ethnographic studies on the

peoples of the South Pacific, especially Tahiti. Forster brought his experiences to bear more generally on debates about the nature and implications of human racial difference, debates which otherwise relied almost exclusively on second- and third-hand information from returning voyagers. His three studies of the breadfruit tree offered, moreover, crucial examples of the way botany was entangled with European colonial expansion. Georg Forster's largest impact, however, might well have come from the work he was least interested in, but nonetheless financially dependent upon: translation. Aided by assistants, and later his wife, Forster worked tirelessly as a conduit of maritime reporting, travelogues, and colonial narratives gathered from across Britain's wide territories. In addition to South Seas literature, Forster was especially interested in accounts from India, producing twenty-eight separate reviews of literature devoted to the subject. Forster published the first German rendering of the ancient Sanskrit drama *Sakontala* from William Jones's English translation,² a work which set off a period of ›Indomania,‹ with burgeoning interest in Indian languages and culture from such notable figures as Herder, Goethe, Schlegel, and Wilhelm von Humboldt.

While the life and writings of Georg Forster have been of perennial interest,³ scholarly work on Forster was significantly enhanced by the preparation of a critical edition of his works started by the Akademie Verlag in East Germany beginning in 1958, thereby transforming discussions of not just Forster, but of the most celebrated authors, themes, and legacies of the German Enlightenment. For example, a great deal of attention has been paid in recent years to Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) writings on race, work which Forster himself targeted for public criticism in 1786, but which can now also be traced across his letter exchanges at the time.⁴ Another target of Forster's criticism, the Göttingen philosopher and historian Christoph Meiners (1747-1810), has been the subject of renewed scholarly interest in the context of eighteenth-century German anthropology and race theory.⁵ Other scholars have turned their attention to Herder, whose appreciation for cultural diversity – like Forster's – contrasts favorably with the judgmental eurocentrism of Kant and Meiners.⁶ Finally, Forster's robustly international life supports historical studies of the German Enlightenment aiming to show just how engaged Germans were with intellectual and political currents across Europe, Britain, and their colonial possessions in both the Atlantic and the Pacific.⁷

Befitting its focus on Forster, the present forum is a product of a string of international, interdisciplinary collaborations. With support from the Goethe Society of North America, Michael Saman has since 2020 organized an online reading group dedicated to the discussion of literary, anthropological, philosophical, and historical writings touching on the topics of race and imperialism in the German context. For us as historians of

philosophy, these discussions have allowed the insights and expertise of our colleagues trained as Germanists, cultural historians, literary critics, and historians of science to broaden our own view of the intellectual dynamics of the German Enlightenment.⁸ Inspired by these fruitful interdisciplinary discussions, we organized a seminar on the topic of the German philosophical reception of travel literature from the South Pacific at the 2023 meeting of the German Studies Association in Montréal. The papers that follow grew out of the three mornings of conversations last year in Montréal (and many more since then).

*Western Sydney University, Australia, and
Marquette University, Milwaukee, USA*

- 1 Forster's eventful life has been the subject of several recent biographies. See Ludwig Uhlig, *Georg Forster. Lebensabenteuer eines gelehrten Weltbürgers (1754-1794)*, Göttingen 2004; Jürgen Goldenstein, *Georg Forster. Zwischen Freiheit und Naturgewalt*, Berlin 2015 (translated into English by Anne Janusch as: *Georg Forster: Voyager, Naturalist, Revolutionary*, Chicago 2019); and Todd Kontje, *Georg Forster: German Cosmopolitan*, University Park, PA 2024.
- 2 *Sakontala oder der entscheidende Ring*, translated by Georg Forster, Mainz and Leipzig 1791; *Georg Forsters Werke. Sämtliche Schriften, Tagebücher, Briefe* (in the following cited as GFW), vol. 7, Berlin 1958, pp. 277-436.
- 3 The best history of Forster's reception, both of his person and his works, remains Helmut Peitsch, *Georg Forster: A History of his Critical Reception*, Frankfurt a. M. 2001.
- 4 *Georg Forster, Noch etwas über die Menschenrassen. An Herrn Dr. Biester, Der Teutsche Merkur*, part 4 (1786), pp. 56-86, 150-166; GFW 8: 130-156. Some examples of recent discussions of Kant and race include: David Baumeister, *Kant on the Human Animal: Anthropology, Ethics, Race*, Evanston, IL 2022; Manfred Geier, *Philosophie der Rassen. Der Fall Immanuel Kant*, Berlin 2022; and Huaping Lu-Adler, *Kant, Race, and Racism: Views from Somewhere*, Oxford 2023.
- 5 See, for example, Stefan Klingner and Gideon Stiening (eds.), *Christoph Meiners (1747-1810). Anthropologie und Geschichtsphilosophie in der Spätaufklärung*, Berlin 2023. For a broader analysis of anthropology and race in the period, see Carl Niekerk, *Enlightenment Anthropology: Defining Humanity in an Era of Colonialism*, University Park, PA 2024, especially chapter 4, *Race – An Enlightenment Problem* (pp. 109-142).
- 6 See, for example, Gerhard Sauder (ed.), *Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). Einheit und nationale Vielfalt*, Hamburg 1987; John H. Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*, Chicago 2001; Sonia Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference: Enlightened Relativism*, Cambridge 2011; and Nigel DeSouza (ed.), *Herder and Naturalism: Philosophy, History, Language, Religion*, Berlin 2025.

- 7 See, for example, Michael Maurer, *Aufklärung und Anglophilie in Deutschland*, Göttingen 1987; Helmut Peitsch, *Georg Forster. Deutsche ›Antheilnahme‹ an der europäischen Expansion über die Welt*, Berlin 2017; and Brandan Simms and Torsten Rlotte (eds.), *The Hanoverian Dimension in British History, 1714-1837*, Cambridge 2017.
- 8 For another product of this collaboration, see the contributions to Michael Saman (ed.), *Forum: Race and Imperialism in the Goethe Era*, in: *Goethe Yearbook*, vol. 31 (2024), pp. 84-157.