

# *Species, Variety, Race: Vocabularies of Difference from Buffon to Kant*

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*Eighteenth-century German writers with broad interests in natural history, and in particular, in the kind of ethnographic reports typically included in travel and expedition narratives, had to be able to access and read the original reports or they had to work with translations. The translators of these reports were, moreover, typically forced more than usual into the role of interpreter. This was especially the case when it came to accounts wherein vocabulary did not exist or was at least not settled, and more importantly where scientific understanding was uncertain or altogether lacking, a situation that could only make the creation of semantic categories all the more significant. With this state of affairs in mind, this essay concentrates on Immanuel Kant's work to develop a specialised racial vocabulary, and does so in a manner that reveals the importance of Buffon's account of variation as a resource for Kant, even as Kant sought to position the new vocabulary as an improved template for transforming taxonomy or Naturbeschreibung into a genuine historical science or Naturgeschichte.*

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We have borrowed race from the French; it seems very closely related to *racine* and *radix* and signifies descent in general, though in an indeterminate way. For one talks in French of the race of Caesar in the same way as of the races of horses and dogs, irrespective of the first origin, but nevertheless always with tacit subordination under the concept of a species. It would be a great mission for an individual who had nothing else to do, to develop in what sense each writer has possibly used this word.

Georg Forster<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Forster, *Noch Etwas über die Menschenraßen* (1786); Eng. trans. by Jon Mikkelsen in Jon Mikkelsen (ed.), *Kant and the Concept of Race: Late Eighteenth-Century Writings*, SUNY