Racial Profiling

Even before my son was born, I became acutely aware of how differently his body, as a Black boy and man, would navigate the world from mine. But I was not prepared for the fact that I would watch my son grow with a pride that mixed with increasing alarm. Every inch, I worry: his self-confidence, his mouth, the accruing strength of his body—all of these things are requisite for the life in front of him, and all place him in further jeopardy. I live in a country that makes me afraid of his body, as if it were a growing threat. This fear acknowledges the moral encoding that attaches to his body. Not to him: to his skin. The meanings that his skin conveys in public space have a history, but it is not his history. It is not the history of his life, his character, his behavior—it has no attachment to what he has lived or what he has accomplished. The moral meanings that attach to his skin have a history of ideology to which he has, as yet, hardly contributed but from which he will nonetheless derive his identity.

The history will become his history. His identity will emerge, has emerged, as mine has, from how his body is read in political space. But while the materials of its making are the same as mine, his body signifies differently in the society it inhabits. The outer form will shape the interior: the social signification of his body will impress his psychic life, and facts about his relationship to juridical and social power will cause him to believe fictions about himself. When we inquire into the processes and histories of embodiment, the inquiry is never without self-interest. The bodies that we have create us. The representation of the body in political space—how the social and political ambient enacts upon and interacts with it—informs its modes of survival and the means by which it is clothed, fed, and protected. If identity is never privately engaged, because publicly derived, these issues of survival and security are the terms that animate it and structure its social and political imbrication.

One of the chief problems of attempting to historicize race is that the consequences of racial strategies are borne into the present, even if their conduct
is not without revision. So too, embodied identity is particular to its time and place, but our point of entry into understanding it is always now. We are circumscribed by the histories that create us. But understanding those histories also allows us to evaluate the terms and relations that rendered them possible in the first place. If our bodies appeal to a history that is cultural, not personal, then the burdens of our cultural history need to be unpacked. The meanings that attach to my son’s skin were “stamped from the beginning” of English colonial settlement. “Black skin [was] an ugly stamp,” Ibram X. Kendi explains of his use of this phrase from a speech by Jefferson Davis for the title of his book on the history of racist ideas in America, “a signifier of the Negro’s everlasting inferiority.”1 Davis rationalizes an unequal share of social and political power in terms of proprietorship: White Europeans built America because White Europeans owned the labor of slaves and built it by proxy.2 The guarantee of ownership is secured by surface markings that assure the servile status of Black people. But the story that Davis tells of Black servitude stamped on the skin is not far wrong. The institution of chattel slavery is the catalyst that galvanizes a long history that articulates a relationship between black melancholy and wrong religion. It is the unique convergence of a theory of bad humors with the historically contingent institution of slavery that accounts for the reading of black skin as pagan. Marked for damnation, the obdurate bad faith of dark people became the premise for their permanent servitude.

*Bad Humor: Race and Religious Essentialism in Early Modern England* charts the process whereby religious error, first resident in the body, becomes marked on the skin. Early modern medical theory bound together *psyche* and *soma* in mutual influence. By the end of the sixteenth century, there is a general acceptance that the soul’s condition, as a consequence of religious belief or its absence, could be manifest in the humoral composition of the physical body. Certain strategies of color, I argue, were premised upon religious identity and identification in a system that assumed the corporal manifestation of belief and that read the body for its moral codes. The concept of race as it is understood in the modern Anglophone world is certainly not transhistorical, but it also does not have a discrete point of origin. Its history is composed of various strands, braiding together classically informed scientific theories of the human body with late medieval conceptions of hereditary blood.3 But the specific agendas of settler colonialism compel the weaving together of these ideas.4 The racial logic of hereditary blood in the early modern period guaranteed the stable transfer of power and wealth through the assurance of superior physiological and moral traits as a family inheritance. The same logic, adapted
as a narrative of moral decline and degeneracy in Old English families, and the corruption of the Gaelic Irish, authorized English troops to slaughter the Irish people and seize their land for the use of New English planters. A similar logic of inherent degeneracy and inherited depravity secured a workforce of Black Africans in perpetuity in the New World. I have argued elsewhere that “race in the early modern period is a concept at the crossroads of a set of overlapping concerns of lineage, religion, and nation.” This book is about how these concerns converge around a pseudoscientific system that confirmed the absolute difference between Protestants and Catholics, guaranteed the noble quality of English blood, and justified English colonial domination.

This research is in concert and conversation with the work of critics such as Janet Adelman, Dennis Austin Britton, Urvashi Chakravarty, Jane Hwang Degenhardt, Ania Loomba, and M. Lindsay Kaplan. But medievalists have shown that the genealogy of this thinking is long-standing. It was common in the texts of medieval and early modern Europe to describe religious outsiders, minorities, and foreigners in terms of color. The sources for Robert Burton’s final section on “Religious Melancholy” in his 1621 Anatomy of the disease shows that for a century prior, doctors and divines had discussed the physiological foundations of atheism, irreligion, and religious despair. But the specific history that this book unfolds describes developments in natural philosophy in the early part of the sixteenth century that force a reconsideration of the interactions of body and soul and that bring medical theory and theological discourse—or, science and religion—into close, even inextricable, contact. This cultural crisis produces a discursive concerning psychosomatic relations that is particularly pliable to economic and political agendas. What I hope to show is that the absolute correspondence of black skin and paganism could not have happened with either one of the forces operating on its own terms. In the racial narratives described here, science and religion meet nascent capitalism and colonial endeavor to create a taxonomy of Christians in Black and White.

Bad Humor specifically appraises how early modern science, or natural philosophy, is applied to the racialization of people who are expelled from the faith as religious outsiders. English colonial activities were largely directed against other Christians. But the violence of the colonial project could not be effected against members of the same faith. These members—Irish Catholics, Spanish Catholics, converted Africans, and Indigenous peoples—had to be forcibly evicted. Of course, this is problematic as the doctrine of Christianity, in particular Pauline Christianity, insisted that all who were baptized in the spirit were incorporated in the faith. In Becoming Christian,
Dennis Britton has brilliantly exfoliated how in arguing against the necessity of baptism, John Calvin, and subsequently Calvinists, created a race of Christians—of those born into faith. A Protestant sect that denied the value of sacraments offered permanent election to parents anxious about the fate of their unbaptized children. The account that Britton provides is of a rhetorical remedy, where heredity is based upon assurance and secured by sacramental theory. The racial narratives outlined here argue for religion, or irreligion, as a somatic condition that descends through bloodlines as a bodily concern.

Both Patricia Akhimie and Urvashi Chakravarty have examined lineage and rank, as well as constructions of service and servitude, as sources for structures of race and early modern racialized slavery. Both have understood the indelible marks of servitude as part of a system that promoted “stigmatized somatic difference” in the production of “the racialization of class difference.” In understanding hereditary blood and rank as a necessary component in the racialization of religion, my work sees a prior system of moral difference and moral constitution applied to assessments of religious affiliation and religious essentialism. The humors—the four bodily fluids of yellow bile, black bile, phlegm, and blood—were thought to be in equilibrium in noble subjects. This condition supplied them with better physical, intellectual, and moral capacities and conferred their right to rule. If an earlier racial ideology licensed particular people to rule through their presumed moral authority, later developments of racial logic condemned other people to serve premised upon similar ideas of the internal manifestation of moral capacity. Dark bodies were inserted into, and subsequently read through, the prior system of encoding that marked moral differences.

Theologians, moralists, and physicians from the mid-sixteenth century to the early seventeenth century resorted to Galen as a model for understanding the body as a contact point between the immaterial soul and the physical world. But the soul’s transactions with the body created the possibility that it might take corruption from the body. Melancholy, as a bodily humor that affected the mind—and therefore infected the rational soul—captured the danger that this contact presented to the soul. Marsilio Ficino writes in Platonist Theology that “festering” in those who are atheist “is . . . a disease of the soul and a . . . doubting that stems from their body’s depraved complexion.” The “disease of the soul” that Ficino invokes is atheism or irreligion, which he attributes to an excess of black bile in the “complexion,” or balance, of humors. Love of God, it was maintained, was natural to man—an inclination toward the pinnacle of beauty and the highest good. The corruption of this disposition
was considered a form of madness. This was Burton’s rationale in classifying “Religious Melancholy” as a species of love melancholy.\textsuperscript{15} Black melancholy was responsible for the lunacy of atheism or irreligion: “so from the corruption of the complexion is born not religion, but . . . impiety.”\textsuperscript{16} The humoral imbalance of melancholy resulted in the redirection of the soul’s itinerary.

This book outlines the physical mechanics of a process that put dark people beyond the reach of baptism. Lineage assumed the descent of humoral superiority. The pseudoscientific system that secured the permanent depravity of certain colonial subjects relied upon similar ideas of humoral inheritance. The differentiation of groups of people as manifestly and materially holding right or wrong belief—and as capable of conversion or not—exploited the interchange between body and soul.\textsuperscript{17} But it also traded upon older systems of racial logic that relied upon hereditary blood. The colonial project demanded subjects that were not Christian—slaughter and enforced servitude could not be enacted against other members of the faith. As Holly Brewer notes, Charles II admitted the possibility of justifying the freedom of slaves through conversion by being willing to bring converted slaves into the commonwealth as low-status subjects. And both theological and legal arguments from the sixteenth century onward throughout Europe in general, and in England in particular, held that Christians could only enslave heathens.\textsuperscript{18} (This was never actually written into English law, but as Matthias Fischer has shown, many colonists of the Anglo-Americas thought that it was and acted accordingly.)\textsuperscript{19} Since many of the casualties of English colonial policy actually were Christian, they had to be proven non-Christians. This proof took the form of a permanent, heritable condition of irreligion—the mark of which was black melancholy—that passed from parent to child and that made baptism or conversion to Christianity impossible for certain groups. Thus a 1682 Virginia statute defined “as slaves all those without Christian ancestry or ‘parentage.’”\textsuperscript{20} But the statute exploited a long history of aligning black melancholy with wrong religion; what is new is the legal and absolute alignment of dark skin and permanent bad faith. Prior to 1682, Africans who arrived converted, or Indigenous people who were converts, could be impressed “for noe longer time then the English or other christians are to serve.”\textsuperscript{21} After 1682, there were no conditions under which they would be legally accounted Christian. In a system that assumed the heritability of belief—and of heathenism—surface markings eventually became both evidence and justification for holding groups of people outside of Christian communion.

No medical discourse—and certainly no theological one—is ever monolithic. The status of the soul, and the corruption that the body offered to it,
was an active debate throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This book traces its passage through a number of cultural materials. But literature in particular is used as an index of how pervasive it was. Race is a strategy. Each time that we examine such strategies of naturalization, we better understand the strategies themselves—how these polemics serve specific interests (political, economic, social). In a powerful presentation titled “Race After the Reformation” at the September 2019 “Race and Periodization” symposium, Britton insisted that “if race and religion are mutually constitutive in the medieval and early modern periods . . . studying race alongside Christianity also begs for [both a] transhistorical . . . and historically specific analysis.” These appear to be mutually exclusive scholarly approaches. But Britton rightly asks, “What might the transhistorical . . . analysis of race and Christianity tell us about any historically specific manifestation?”

The moral encoding of raced subjects informs later incarnations of racial logic, although the particulars of each occasion inform precisely how. As Atiya Husain cogently puts it:

The ongoing urgency of understanding race and religion as two key features of American life that shape the distribution of resources, life chances, and domination and oppression suggests a need for advancing scholarship on their interrelation. . . . [S]ince the moment that “race” was born in early modern Europe, religion was racialized. After that moment, religion is embedded in the racialized social system. As a result . . . the question scholars should be asking is not if religious groups are racialized [and vice versa] but how and to what end.

In early modern England, the underlying assumptions of the system of lineage—that the inheritance of humoral constitution secured social position—become the argument for the rationalization of permanent and perpetual enslavement. But in the revised racial logic of the early English slave codes, the black melancholy that identifies the pagan, and the enforced labor that attends this surface marking, was the heritage that was assured. One’s relationship to God was marked on the skin. The negotiations of New World labor betray the soul’s condition as the argument for whether a body could be pressed into service; and they reveal the complexion of belief as the premise for what bodies—and what lives—matter.