The Alien Forms of Race in Early Modern England

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When people ask about the nature of my research, I usually describe it as a project that investigates how race as a category of identity was instantiated in Western Europe during the early modern period. This response often invokes something of a puzzled expression from my interlocutors. “Hasn’t ‘race’ always been around,” they suggestively inquire? “Haven’t there always been people of color and systems of discrimination to navigate those color lines?” “In what way can you say that race as a category of identity is locatable in time, that it has a history, a certain set of historical trajectories?” To many, the claim I make in a project I’ve provisionally titled “Out of England: Relocating Race in the Renaissance” is a counterfactual,
something that basic commonsense argues against. Imagining a world before race as we know it seems for many a near impossibility.

In fact, despite the work of race theorists, scientists, sociologists, and others in repudiating the widespread cultural assumption that race is an empirically valid designation (as opposed to one that is socially “real”), race continues to be an aspect of identity that many take to be natural, one many believe we are born into and that constitutes an inseparable part of who we are as individuals. As an identity tag, it seems to stretch back into the distant reaches of time, an ascription that presumably has always been and will always be. As long as there have been people, this logic argues, there have been “races.” But categories that seem natural and immutable, as the work of poststructuralist theorists has been demonstrating for years now, tend to be culturally specific even if purporting to be universal. In fact, the greater the aura of eternity, the greater should be our resistance, our skepticism in the face of a concept that, I would suggest, should instead be seen as catalyzing a social formation, distilling a rather specific cultural logic. Powerful transmitters of ideology, social categories like race tell us a good deal about how a society organizes itself. And, like the societies they make sense of, such categories change across time.

In my sustained reading in and around the cultural productions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England—in texts ranging from the literary, to the popular, to the loosely scientific—I have seen the category of race used in compellingly different ways than we use it today. Race, it seems, describes a different social configuration than what we have come to accept as normative. How, then, do we deal with this strangeness, the foreignness of the past, as evidenced even within a period that some would identify as the beginning of “modernity,” the beginning of how we think today? Do we translate this strangeness of the past into forms proximate to our own, so that we see a version of ourselves in what has come before us? Such an approach predominated in traditional historiography, which tended to emphasize continuities of form between now and a distant past, weaving a history of ideas across vastly different periods. But more recently, poststructuralist theory has forced literary critic, historian, anthropologist, and ethnologist alike to acknowledge that in translating the forms of the past into contemporary terms we have been “reading through” and implicitly disregarding the “syntactical strategies” structuring the past. With regard to “race,” we assume that there is some object called race “out there,” which is invoked variously in different periods. To presume as much is to treat language as a transparent container of evidence about the past, as a “value-neutral instrument of representation,” a move that poststructuralists identify as a gross misrepresentation of the operations of language.1 An alternative approach might be to consider how any given object—even an “object” such as race—is constituted, not just described,
by the different modes of discourse available at any given moment. What happens, that is, if we actually try to inhabit the difference of past discursive systems, rather than “unmasking” such difference by reading the past through the lens of modern systems of thought?

In bringing together a group of scholars who are actively investigating how such changes should be interpreted, the Warren Center seminar “Premodern Others: Race and Sexuality” has provided me with the ideal context in which to develop my ideas about how premodern paradigms of difference break with modern paradigms. As a group, our interests are connected in that we do not presume that the category of race is a transhistorical and immutable fact of biological and social life. Instead, each of us is engaged in various ways in testing the claims of literary scholars and historians who have argued that the tendency to subdivide the human race into groupings governed by phenotype may be a relatively recent phenomenon in Western history. Some of the arguments we are actively engaging suggest that the emergence of racial categories should be connected to the scientific “developments” of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, such as evolutionary theory and the drive toward biological taxonomies. In the seminar, we began our collective investigation into such claims by reading the work of historian George Fredrickson, who has suggested that as a subdivision of humanity, race in its modern association with phenotype and biological essence appears as late as the nineteenth century. I found myself particularly intrigued by Fredrickson’s further claim that racial stratification necessarily follows on the heels of the massive social reorganizations carried out by the revolutionary struggles of the late eighteenth century. According to this argument, the European West had first to break with deeply hierarchical social structures before the logic of racial classification could take hold as a real social force. Although this may seem counterintuitive, in this account racial classification and the racisms that it spawns emerge as something of a “safety valve” for or a correction to the radical drive of egalitarian philosophies. Once “all” men were produced as equals, Fredrickson proposes, a theory had to be devised to systematically exclude some from full personhood.2

But what does race mean in a social system that does not claim to represent all men as equals, as was certainly the case in early modern England? What are the differences of kind that such a social system purports to describe? I agree with Fredrickson’s suggestive point that any account of race in the earlier periods must take account of the vast divergences of social structure between then and now and ask how these alternative ways of imagining the social body shaped how difference was understood. Perhaps I can begin by directing our attention to aspects of identity to which early usages of the term race do not stand in relation. I find compelling and centrally problematic for those tracing continuities between then and now the fact that early usages of the term “race” do not privilege skin color or complexion in the way that modern racial paradigms do. Dictionaries record references to race in association with the human race, or to describe different breeds of horses, or to describe the connections among kin groups through bloodlines. But there is little evidence that race was put in syntactic relation to skin color. This is not to say that differences of skin color were not a part of English and European ethnographic accounts of distant lands. They were. But it is to say that skin color was not the central node of identity that it would become. As Roxann Wheeler has suggestively argued for eighteenth-century Britain, “White is not a term of subjective identification but an attribute.”3 In fact, early modern theories of color work against modern racial
theories in compelling ways. For one thing, the period positions discussions of skin color within a larger discourse of the body rooted in Galenic humoralism. This model perceived the body as constituted by four fluids, called humors, which existed in different combinations in any person. Both one’s internal complexion (also called temperament or disposition) and one’s external color followed the qualities of the humor that dominated in one’s body. Humors were nothing like static essences but rather fluids determined in part by one’s environment, components of a bodily system permeated by a surrounding world. For this reason, humoral dispositions were thought to vary in accord with the qualities of the climate one inhabited.

Early modern complexions, therefore, need to be seen as abiding by a logic of alterability that contrasts in compelling ways with the logic of modern racial systems, which thrive on notions of biological determinacy. Earlier embodied theories observed a variety of factors that could change complexions, both internal and external. As Europeans encountered Native Americans, for instance, one of the prevailing theories used to explain difference of skin color looked to the widespread native practice of applying dyes and paints to the skin. This practice was seen as having the accumulative effect of altering the natives’ collective color and suggests that differences in complexion were considered relatively superficial. But the complexions of Englishmen, it needs to be emphasized, were hardly immune to these same transformations. Although we might see them and classify them as a group of “white” European colonists, they by no means enjoyed such epistemological certainty. Indeed colonists newly transplanted to Virginia and even New England, not to mention the West Indies, wondered how their own complexions might be transgenerationally altered with the change of climate. This is a topic I explore more fully in readings of plays of the Jacobean stage, which, I argue, were imaginatively working through the various challenges that the colonization of Virginia, then actively underway, presented to the nation at large. I read both Shakespeare’s Cymbeline and Fletcher and Massinger’s Sea Voyage as sustained engagements with how foreign soils and climes might renature the bodies of English people. Part of the motive on the part of propagandists who argued that the climate of “New” England was comparable to that of “old” England despite substantial evidence to the contrary was to respond to such fears. English people from a range of subject positions—planters, dramatists, poets, and royalists—were involved in different ways in actively sorting through the implications of being displaced from English soil and the networks of power, prestige, and identity which that soil embodied.

As this overview might suggest, this earlier, widely embraced understanding of embodied life presents a series of challenges to those who seek to trace notions of difference in this period to skin color. Firstly, skin color as theorized in a humoral model is not at all a permanent state. It varies with the humors, which in turn vary with climate, diet, and passion among other factors, sometimes profoundly. Secondly, the logic that enfolded early ideas of skin color does not abide by the oppositions upon which modern racial thinking thrives. Accounts of skin color in the period are observant of a range of different skin colors, including green and yellow, no less than black and white. Science and popular knowledge would need to undergo profound shifts before a modern taxonomy of difference rooted in skin color could carry the force of a racial system. If, then, the Renaissance sits at a “racial crossroads” of sorts, not least because it is the period
wherein colonization and the slave trade begin to take root, first, among the Spanish and Portuguese, and, subsequently, among the French, English, and Dutch, it is important to emphasize that profound ideological shifts would necessarily accompany the rise of those dominating systems. Rather than assuming that a modern ideology of race was already available to justify these systems, my research demonstrates the unevenness of the process that enabled it. If many critics of race search out its early manifestations in practices and analyses surrounding skin color, I follow a different trajectory, one that tries to return race to the signifying system to which it was conjoined in early modern England. If critics have tended to see race as axiomatically connected to skin color, I emphasize that usages of race in the period connect it to an embodied system rooted in blood, the period’s ultimate carrier of difference and the substance that justified the organization of society into its two basic kinds: elite and common members. This older idea of race organized the social body vertically, hierarchically, and in accord with ranks. If there is a crucial border that race-as-blood insists on, then, it is less that between an imagined collectivity within a state, as against a set of visibly distinct others “out there,” than hierarchies internal to the state. That is, it is a border that articulates the distinctions between an elite body and a mass body, between those of rank, who enjoy the privilege and visibility of having a race and blood, and the nameless and unremembered many. The Winter’s Tale encapsulates this logic of difference when it juxtaposes members of a “nobler race” with those of a “baser kind” (4.4.95). Moreover, if as modern readers we, following Iago, define Othello as a “black man,” we should also observe and ask what it means that he describes himself with reference to his race, blood, and stature, as a man “of royal siege” (1.2.22). Such identifications rooted in blood, race, and lineage have much to do with this period’s racial stories, even if they have been marginalized thus far by the histories we have told. In what way, I ask, were these older notions of race adjusted in the crucible that was colonization?

Such adjustments crowd the textual record on English colonization, although we will not necessarily detect them if we only consider race in relation to skin color. In texts across a range of genres that work through the implications of English migration to foreign climes and soils, intense discussion of the impact of such change on blood crowds the record. Insofar as we have imagined English colonizers as united in their whiteness, we oversimplify their positioning. Men, and then women, of a range of social ranks came to the colonies in the first decades of the seventeenth century. Those who stayed at home, again from a range of social positions, imagined what would happen to them and theirs over time. What their narratives tell us is that they hardly considered themselves united along an axis of skin color, as members of a white race. Instead, their sense of themselves as English is inflected by their sense of themselves as occupying a precise station within the social fabric that constituted England. Moreover, as they work through the displacements to identity that colonization enabled, I see evidence that this language of blood, which was the axis upon which identity at home was structured, begins to give way to new readings of the body, so that the values that blood embodies begin to shift. You might wonder how English writers who were invested in the plantation effort expressed their imbrication in a system of race built around the symbolics of blood. Let me offer a few suggestive readings. Writing his romance epic The Faerie Queene largely from his “home” abroad in Ireland, Edmund Spenser urges colonists in his tightly woven allegory to pay strict attention to tempering the passions of their blood in attempting to subdue the Irish abroad. Blood, in this account, is the
key to a whole system of difference. If the Irish are not legible as “other” through an optic that emphasizes skin color, they are othered through an elaborate system of distinctions that lodges difference in the qualities of blood. In portraying them as having impassioned and distempered blood, Spenser describes them through a language often used to describe commoners, people of “base blood” at home in England. A sign of an inability to self-govern, the turbulent and passionate blood that describes both individual Irish bodies and the Irish social body at large works to justify the conquest of the Irish. In his political tract on Ireland, this theme takes new form in his insistence that planters carefully supervise the upbringing of their children, so that young heirs do not have prolonged contact with the breast milk of Irish nurses. If we understand that in earlier theories of the body breast milk was homologous with blood—that it was literally blood in heated form—this might resonate with worry about how elite English blood is being remade in Ireland. His concern about how English offspring are nurtured, that is, obliquely registers a concern about social displacement, about how noble blood might be jeopardized through plantation in Ireland. For settlers like Spenser, this was no theoretical matter, since they had found an earlier round of English colonizers virtually indistinguishable from the native Irish. Spenser’s attention to the details of embodied practice, I argue, functions as a defense against a similar degenerative slide.

I read texts about English plantations in the West Indies as similarly worrying about what the alterations to blood that the new environment and the new cultural practices it elicited would involve. A settler for a short time in the late 1640s and early 1650s, Richard Ligon urged that planters carefully regulate the body’s spirits—a term closely connected to blood. As a royalist gentleman, Ligon’s sense of himself as English was entangled with his sense of himself as a member of an elite group connected through a semiotics of blood. It is not surprising to find his account of how the foreign air of Barbados is modulating his physical identity to be mediated through a discussion of how it is altering his properties of blood. For Ligon, properties of blood have everything to do with how much and what kinds of labor a person should perform. Insofar as planters allow their blood to become distempered through the consumption of hot liquors, they disrupt the hierarchies governing the plantation system and are reproved by Ligon, as by other visitors to the fledgling plantations. If dark skin begins to acquire its modern form in and through a plantation system based on the labor of slaves and indentured servants, Ligon’s text reveals the extent to which this early period continued to draw heavily on another language of difference rooted in blood.

If I have thus far pointed to fears and worries about the malignant force of non-English milieus, my project also attends to arguments, dramatic and propagandistic, to the effect that plantation could serve as a purgative force, an activity with the potential to “quicken” bodies grown lethargic at home that, arguably, betrayed a decline from an originary British stock. Such an argument was often deployed in the context of settlement of Virginia. By grappling in implicit and explicit ways with perceived changes to blood, these writers worried about the remaking of a substance that was intimately connected both to their place within a social hierarchy (i.e., as elite, middling, or base men) and to their sense of themselves as English. They also were actively involved in rewriting that social body. If, as one fictional plantation account records, one could leave England with only a modest claim to blood and race, the crucible that was colonization enabled different emphases to
be made. Barring a claim to elite blood, planters could describe themselves instead as having English blood or Christian blood in order to gain access to social power in these emerging polities.

In the language of tempered or distempered blood that is so prominent in texts of a colonialist nature, writers of the period begin to reorganize what blood and race could mean. Once Englishmen imagined planting themselves beyond the shores of England, I suggest, blood’s meanings altered. Often not entitled to colonial lands by virtue of old systems of blood, planters found new ways of justifying their claims to colonial lands. They also struggled for a language that would demonstrate their proximity to those who remained in England. By actively establishing and attempting to abide by various physical regiments, they sought to identify themselves as properly English, as anything but alien. If, as modern readers, we allow ourselves to be guided by postcolonial theoretical models that presume the “hegemony of imperial systems of control,” we overlook a whole species of moments that reveal the “precarious vulnerability” of the English colonizer as he sought to wiggle his way out of a longstanding racial system rooted in blood.5 In part, I argue, English colonizers slowly succeeded in doing so by inventing a new system of race, one that sought to displace blood as the carrier of difference with the difference of skin color. But this new social system would be a long time in the making, and differences of blood would be entangled around it from the very start. How colonization forced the unraveling of an earlier social system rooted in blood so as to make way for a system of race structured around skin color is the process I seek to elucidate in the project supported by my fellowship at the Warren Center.


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