

# WRITING RACE ACROSS THE ATLANTIC WORLD

Edited by  
Beidler and Taylor



WRITING RACE ACROSS THE  
ATLANTIC WORLD

## SIGNS OF RACE

General Editors: Philip D. Beidler and Gary Taylor

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ATLANTIC WORLD  
MEDIEVAL TO MODERN

*Edited by*  
*Philip D. Beidler and Gary Taylor*

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## GENERAL EDITORS' PREFACE

I have never been to Alabama before, but it is and will forever remain seared in my memory as the place where black Americans challenged America to live up to the meaning of her creed so as not to make a mockery of her ideals.

—August Wilson (September 26, 2001)

The first thing you see when you enter the permanent exhibits at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute is a pair of drinking fountains. Over one hangs a sign that says “White.” Over the other hangs a sign that says “Colored.”

As an inquiry into the cultural history of race, the series “Signs of Race” has its own obvious historical origins. It springs from a series of symposiums at the University of Alabama—the place where George Wallace made segregation’s last stand. But the series finds its larger cultural and intellectual impulses in a deeper and wider history that surrounds us here. Black, brown, red, and white; African American and Afro-Caribbean; English, French, and Spanish; Celtic and Jewish; native American and northern European, creole and mestizo: such cultural categories, wherever they are found, in whatever combinations, and in whatever arrangements of historical interaction and transmission, constitute the legacy of the oceanic interculturalures of race in the early modern era. In Alabama, the very landscape is steeped in such history. Twenty miles to the south of the town of Tuscaloosa, the home of the University, is a vast city of pre-Columbian mounds, the capital of a Mississippian empire that flourished at the time of the Norman Conquest and then disappeared two centuries later. The town of Tuscaloosa itself is named for a great Chief of the Alabamas, known as the Black Warrior, who engaged the Spanish explorer DeSoto in the 1540 battle of Maubila, to this day thought to be the largest single combat ever fought by native Americans against Europeans. The European settlement of the Gulf Coast pitted English, French, Spanish, and American colonizers against each other well into the nineteenth century. The Revolutionary War found native



tribes, their ruling families frequently intermarried with Scots-Irish traders, allied with loyalists against American nationalists? The early-nineteenth-century wars of extermination and removal against native peoples—Creeks, Choctaws, Cherokees, Chickasaws, and Seminoles—and the filling up of the rich agricultural lands thereby opened to a vast slave empire, were determining events in the southward and westward expansion of slavery eventuating in civil war.

In more recent historical memory, particular words and phrases constitute a litany of particular racial struggle. Jim Crow. Ku Klux Klan. Separate but Equal. The Scottsboro Boys. Autherine Lucy. Rosa Parks. The Schoolhouse Door. The names of major cities and towns ring forth as the Stations of the Cross of the Civil Rights Era: Selma, Montgomery, Birmingham, Tuscaloosa. Most recently, Alabama, like much of America, finds itself newly Hispanic, with large influxes of population from Mexico and the Caribbean, South and Central America.

To the extent that every social identity is to some degree local, the meanings of race in Alabama necessarily differ, in some demographic and historical particulars, from the meanings of race in North Dakota and Northern Ireland, New York and New South Wales, Cape Town and Calcutta. But the same questions can be asked everywhere in the English-speaking world.

How do people signal a racial identity?

What does that racial identity signify?

This series examines the complex relationships between race, ethnicity, and culture in the English-speaking world from the early modern period (when the English language first began to move from its home island into the wider world) until the postcolonial present, when it has become the dominant language of an increasingly globalized culture. English is now the medium of a great variety of literatures, spoken and written by many ethnic groups. The racial and ethnic divisions between (and within) such groups are not only reflected in, but also shaped by, the language we share and contest. Indeed, such conflicts in part determine what counts as “literature” or “culture.”

Every volume in the series approaches race from a global, interdisciplinary, intercultural perspective. Each volume in the series focuses on one aspect of the cross-cultural performance of race, exploring the ways in which “race” remains stubbornly local, personal, and present.

We no longer hang racial signs over drinking fountains. But the fact that the signs of race have become less obvious does not mean

that they have disappeared, or that we can or do ignore them. It is the purpose of this series to make us more conscious, and more critical, readers of the signs that separate one group of human beings from another.

Philip D. Beidler and Gary Taylor

## INTRODUCTION: *E PLURIBUS VERUM*

*Philip D. Beidler and Gary Taylor*

Civilization does not have one color, one religion, or one geographical orientation.

—August Wilson (September 26, 2001)

The following essays speak for themselves. One need not patronize authors or readers with attempts at summation and paraphrase. This introduction reflects briefly on their significance as part of an ongoing attempt to trace out both a discourse and a subject of investigation in a rapidly evolving field of multidisciplinary inquiry. The immediate focus of this collection is constructions of race in the early modern Atlantic world. But that needs to be understood within the larger study of race, literature, and ethnicity, projected in the “Signs of Race” symposiums and volumes—and within the wider world which affects us all, as scholars and human beings.

In the first year of the twenty-first century, organizers of the University of Alabama Symposium Series, “Signs of Race,” proposed and received approval for an ongoing set of multidisciplinary conferences on race, ethnicity, language, literature, and cultural difference. From the beginning, the programs were envisioned as bringing together speakers from a wide array of disciplines: literature, critical theory, linguistics, history, cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, religious studies, and so on. Several were also projected to feature eminent keynote speakers and performers from the contemporary arts—literature, drama, film, music, dance—whose careers and major achievements had centered on cultural representations of race.

The events of September 11, 2001, were still in the future when these plans were made, and the first symposium was innocently scheduled to begin on September 26, 2001. Since the speakers were coming from as far away as Hawaii, the grounding of all commercial air traffic in the United States in the immediate aftermath of the Al Qaeda

attacks threatened to make the projected gathering of minds and disciplines physically impossible. But planes began to fly again, in time, and all but one of the invitees—already, as that person put it, “a nervous flyer,” who would have been departing from, of all places, New York—arrived. The symposium began in Morgan Hall, a building erected in 1911 and named for J. T. Morgan (1824–1907), Alabama secessionist, Brigadier General in the Confederate Army, and United States Senator for thirty years. From the stage of the restored Edwardian theatre in that building, dedicated to one of the architects of segregation, the eminent American playwright August Wilson told a spellbound, overflow, interracial audience something about his own experience, as an artist and a citizen of African heritage, with race and cultural difference in contemporary America. Even before the rigorous security measures imposed at airports in the wake of the 2001 attacks, Wilson noted wryly at one point, he had already found himself invariably selected from boarding passengers on flights for “random” screening. “I guess I’m just a random kind of guy,” he concluded.

There was nothing random about Wilson’s condemnation of “the politics of exclusion, damning and damaging to our global world.” The rhetoric and practice of exclusion has, since Wilson spoke, only intensified, lengthening the roll-call of victims of real or putative randomness. Whatever the differences between George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden, they both apply righteous and violent binaries to the thick complexity of interactions between the world’s many peoples. “The present is the consequence of history,” Wilson reminded us, “given form and function.” The contributors to this collection describe some of the forms and functions that the righteous, violent binaries of race have historically taken, and some of the effects of that past upon our present. The anthology of stories this volume tells should teach us the colossally tragic consequences of any division of the world into black and white, good and evil, us and them.

Much of the importance of such a volume as this lies, beyond its specific content, in the collaborative framing of an investigatory enterprise. When the coeditors—one of us a specialist in early modern England, the other an early Americanist—first envisioned this project, we began with the simple idea of making sure we represented both sides of the Atlantic. This may seem elementary, but in fact the fault-lines of academic disciplines usually confine a scholarly career, or a classroom, to one side or the other of “the pond.”

This is not to say we were without major points of reference in contemporary scholarship. Focusing on the legacy of African slavery

in British postcolonial experience, Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* stood as a model of inquiry into the sociology of race as a function of Anglo-American transatlantic cultural exchange. Similarly, Ira Berlin's *Many Thousands Gone* revealed the depth to which cultural constructions of race in the slave world of the British Caribbean and colonial North America intertwined themselves from the outset with complex administrative, legal, and ethnological myths of color and heredity. An abundant general literature existed concerning the English, American, Dutch, French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Islamic participations in the African slave trade. An important tradition of intellectual history involving well-known writers as diverse as Winthrop Jordan, David Brion Davis, Toni Morrison, David Eltis, and Orlando Patterson had also traced out the western racialization of blackness in its relation to corresponding myths of whiteness attendant upon African slavery and its cultural legacy. And a number of texts had begun to enlarge our previously limited knowledge of complex constructions of race erected by major early modern nationalities as a result of the colonial enterprises bringing them into contacts with New World native peoples—Caribbean as well as North, Central, and South American. In Early American colonial studies there was Jill Lepore's *In the Name of War*; in French, Gordon Sayre's *Le Petit Sauvages*, and in English, Karen Ordahl Kupperman's *Indians and English: Facing Off in Early America*. In early modern English studies on literature and race, there were Kim Hall's *Things of Darkness* and Arthur Little Jr.'s *Shakespeare Jungle Fever*. We were fortunate enough to attract three of these authors as symposium participants and contributors to this volume.

What we believed we might bring newly to such conversation was an attempt to locate such historical questions of race within the particular cultural-studies context that Joseph Roach, another of our contributors, has described as the world of early modern oceanic intercultural spaces—that is, a space of transatlantic interchange in which early modern colonial cultures may have frequently devised models of their interaction with each other and with enslaved and conquered peoples according to emergent theories of racial difference; but a transatlantic intercultural space as well in which they frequently conceived and reconceived such difference within the ranks of their own populations and others both at home and abroad. In the wake of the reconquest of the Iberian peninsula, for instance, formerly Moorish Spain, now redesignating itself a Christian empire, found a need to redefine previous ethnicities according to new religious categories. Newly converted Islamic believers became *moriscos*; newly converted

Jews became *conversos*. Meanwhile, in New Spain Creoles distinguished themselves on one hand from *peninsulares*—European Spaniards—and *mestizos*, *negros*, and *indios*. Similarly, in the outpost of New France soon to be known as the Haiti of the black revolutionary Toussaint L' Overture, four major racial groupings—*gran blanc*, *petit blanc*, *mulatto*, *negro*—provided the contours of political struggle in a colony that *in fact* administratively acknowledged 128 separate racial definitions. Vernacular categories likewise followed the course of empire. In English, the definition of “moor” became increasingly dissociated from the idea of the North African region of Mauritania. A new coinage came into being: blackamoor. Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603) is repeatedly called “black” as well as a “moor.” A similar eliding of terms appears in Samuel Purchas' 1625 voyage collection. By the eighteenth century, a “moor” had simply become “black.” Even the visual evidence is there: in the engravings of Hogarth, addressed at some length by Joseph Roach in these pages, a blackmoor, frequently depicted in arabesque haute couture as a decorative adjunct of conspicuous wealth, is clearly no longer a North African but a sub-saharan Negro.

Simultaneously, oceanic intercultural provided a space of realignment within racial terms of international relationships and colonial rivalries between and among western nationalities themselves. The English “race” distinguished itself from the Spanish “race” according to the quasi-religious post-Reformation myth of the Black Legend. Meanwhile, at home, there was the nagging problem of Ireland, again dividing itself along lines mixing religion, race, and ethnicity. For the English, French, and Spanish alike there was frequently the need to accommodate both within and without older cultures of difference such as Judaism and Islam.

On these issues *Writing Race across the Atlantic World* offers a kind of progress report. It makes a contribution to our collective search for some measure of meaning in the past. We are proud of what is here. By virtue of it, at the same time we are also made distinctly aware of what could be here and what needs to be part of the future record. All fields of knowledge, at whatever stage of definition they happen to have reached, are porous. They construct themselves continuously from within and without, with each addition or subtraction reconfiguring the field. They take shape by virtue of an attempt to comprehend what has been said, what is being said, and what has yet to be said—even as the prospect of knowledge envisioned critiques the deficiencies of knowledge current and past. To acknowledge this, too, is an important function of collaborative scholarship.

A book or essay by a single author almost inevitably conveys an impression of autonomous, directed, fulfilled purpose. By contrast, any collaboration is necessarily and evidently a story of purposefulness and randomness. We regard this mix as a strength, not a weakness, because the apparent randomness introduced by collaboration forces purpose into new channels, which might never have been explored by a single purposed mind in isolation. "As an African American," August Wilson emphasized at the outset of our collective enterprise, "improvisation is the keystone, the hallmark of my aesthetics." As mentioned above, one of the invited speakers—who would specifically have addressed the experience of African slavery in the Atlantic world—found herself forced to withdraw because of the events of September 11. As symposium codirectors, we attempted to address the problem with two improvised contributions. Philip D. Beidler's response—stimulated directly by the Al Qaeda attacks, and included here—addresses the historical role of the Islamic slave trade in early modern conceptions of race and slavery in Anglo-European and early American African slave culture. Gary Taylor's response, an examination of the interacting co-construction of white and black identity, grew into the book *Buying Whiteness*, concurrently issued as the second volume in the Palgrave *Signs of Race* series.

For all this print production arising from a three-day symposium—both a collection of essays and a related single-author volume—the account of discovery even here would be incomplete should we not acknowledge a profound awareness of what continues to be missing. We were unable to address significant representations, for instance, both originally in English and in contemporary translation, of the French colonial enterprise, with regard to enslaved Africans and to conceptions of native peoples. None of the essays significantly addressed race in the early modern Caribbean world. Even more curiously, none of them addressed the critical role played by the geography of the Atlantic itself in the interaction of circumatlantic peoples, sometimes as obstacle, sometimes as facilitator, but always as an overwhelming physical reality.<sup>1</sup>

Between the symposium meeting and the issue of this book, the conversation on race in the Atlantic world has been enlarged and invigorated by Ira Berlin, Mary Floyd-Wilson, Joyce Green MacDonald, and James H. Sweet, whose recent contributions have joined the working bibliography of any serious investigator.<sup>2</sup> It is our hope that this and further texts in the Palgrave *Signs of Race* series will continue to enlarge the discourse and to serve what Wilson called every writer's—and we would add, every reader's—"grave obligation to the truth."

## NOTES

1. Gary Taylor hopes to address that issue in a future volume in the series.
2. Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Joyce Green MacDonald, *Women and Race in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kingship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1700* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). Mary Floyd-Wilson was a participant in the 2001 symposium, and we had hoped to include her lecture on the construction of race in *Othello* in this collection, but it reached print as a chapter of her book before our own volume was published. We strongly recommend it to anyone interested in the issues addressed here.



NATIVE EUROPEANS AND NATIVE  
AMERICANS

# A MIRROR ACROSS THE WATER: MIMETIC RACISM, HYBRIDITY, AND CULTURAL SURVIVAL

*Barbara Fuchs*

It is my contention that the complexities of race in the New World cannot be adequately understood without a concomitant understanding of metropolitan, European racism. This essay first traces these transatlantic connections through the racial system in the Spanish Americas and then examines their refraction in the writings of an indigenous critic of the Conquista, Guaman Poma de Ayala. Finally, it takes Poma's denunciation of hybridity as the occasion to interrogate our own critical fascination with the term, and with such figures as Poma himself.

In its focus on genealogy, the racial system in the Spanish colonies in the New World can be traced partially to the obsession with "limpieza de sangre," or blood purity, in the Iberian peninsula.<sup>1</sup> What began in Spain as religious and cultural intolerance gradually became, over the course of the sixteenth century, an essentializing obsession with genealogy and blood that marginalized even those Jews and Moors who converted, however unwillingly, to Christianity. This ideology, honed and exacerbated over the same decades in which the Spanish were carrying out their conquest of the New World, translated into a system of white/Spanish privilege in the colonies that persisted despite the increased frequency of interracial unions over the generations.

The situation in Spain was very complex. After 700 years of cohabitation by Moors, Jews, and Christians, el-Andalus, as southern Spain was known, was a multicultural society with much mingling among groups. Religion and phenotype by no means coincided: there were, for example, Moors of all colors, including blondes. In an inventory

of Moriscos (Christianized Moors) captured in the rebellion of the Alpujarras (1568–71), they are described as “de color moreno,” “de color negra,” “de color blanco que tira un poco a membrillo cocho,” and even, frequently, “de color blanca” [“tawny,” “black,” “white tending to cooked quince,” and “white”].<sup>2</sup> The linguist Manuel Alvar notes that there were no specific terms to name the offspring of mixed unions in this period, which suggests that they were not perceived as particularly different from the rest of the population.<sup>3</sup> With the fall of Granada to the Catholic Kings in 1492—the same year in which Columbus reached the New World and the Jews were expelled from Spain—the territorial and political unification of Spain seemed viable. In this context, the myth of the Reconquista, or “reconquest” of territory from the Moors, by an ancestral Gothic, Christian nation provided a sense of cohesion and purpose for the newly centralized state. But it was largely a convenient fiction, one that ignored the myriad exchanges and points of contact between Christians and Semitic peoples over hundreds of years. As Ferdinand and Isabella—and the Hapsburg monarchs after them—harnessed the power of religion to the new state, Spain’s Semitic strains were ever less welcome. With the Reformation, the Crown increased its efforts to equate Spain with the one true religion, as Defender of the Faith. And where the defeated Moors had initially been offered broad assurances of tolerance and respect for their culture, as the century wore on they found themselves increasingly persecuted for their origins. Much like the *conversos* (converted Jews), the Moriscos (Moors who had been converted to Christianity) were persecuted not only for their anomalous cultural practices, but for their heredity. As Deborah Root has convincingly suggested, it was the opacity and unknowability that resulted from the forced conversions of “New Christians” that eventually led to this degree of persecution.<sup>4</sup> Because the true conviction of the convert could never be known, he or she always represented a threat to the homogenizing state. Whereas *conversos*, especially, had once occupied positions of great power and social prominence, over the course of the sixteenth century “New Christians” were generally prevented from occupying civil and ecclesiastical offices, attending university, emigrating to the New World, and so forth.<sup>5</sup>

All Spaniards, even those who boasted most loudly of their Old Christian blood were vulnerable to accusations of unclean blood. There was even a legal process, the *averiguación de limpieza*, or inquiry into cleanliness, which served to establish that all of one’s ancestors were Christians. That elusive chimaera, “pure” or “clean” blood, was never written on the face of an individual subject, so that

it was often possible for New Christians to confound the exclusionist system that oppressed them. Literary representations by writers sympathetic to the Moriscos suggest that these passed routinely for Spanish Christians, which, of course, many of them *were*.<sup>6</sup> And whatever their innermost conviction, the Moriscos could perfectly approximate Spanishness. Moved in part by their profound mistrust of New Christians, the Crown turned to controversial and extreme measures: in 1609, the Moriscos, Moors who had lived in Spain for countless generations and had converted a century earlier, were summarily expelled from Spain.

### CONSTRUCTING RACE IN THE NEW WORLD

In the New World, the first stages of the Conquista were not marked by the same racism as the later sixteenth century. The Spaniards were initially quite willing to marry native women, especially if they were part of the indigenous nobility. The early *cédulas* (official proclamations) promoting marriages between Spanish men and Indian women recognized that these unions could be hugely advantageous for the conquerors—and sometimes also for the indigenous nobility—in political, social, and economic terms. Elizabeth Kuznesof has demonstrated that race itself was assigned differently to men and to women in the New World, with many examples of “racial drift”—women noted as *mestizas* or Indians in baptismal records, but white in marriage records—through the eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> As Stuart B. Schwartz argues, in the earliest stages of the Conquista parental recognition—that is, legitimacy—and lineage seem to have mattered more than “race.”<sup>8</sup> Some of the children of these early unions were completely assimilated into Spanish society in the New World, holding *encomiendas* and other privileges; some even lived out their lives in Spain. In many cases, they were simply known as Spaniards. The key distinction, of course, was the status of the Indian women who participated in these unions. For the undistinguished, and unrecognized, offspring of what were often forced unions, there was little chance of recognition by Spanish society. These mestizos lived most often in Indian society or drifted uncomfortably between two worlds. Because this latter scenario was actually the norm, mestizos quickly became equated with illegitimacy. As the Spaniards consolidated their presence in the New World, mestizos suffered a further loss of status, as their loyalty to the Spaniards became increasingly suspect.

It is important to note that, as for the Moriscos who passed as Christians in Spain, identity was for these mestizos partly a matter of