

BOOK ROUNDTABLE

Heathen Sight and the Problem of Anti-Africanness

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In his 1615 account of the Upper Guinea Coast *Etiópia Menor e descrição geográfica da Província da Serra Leoa*, Portuguese priest Manuel Alvares described at length the so-called “superstitions” of the Susu, Temne, and other inhabitants of the region which rendered the “Ethiopians” in need of the light of Christian intervention. According to Alvares, their superstitions were “those common to all heathen” and paralleled those of the “Moor and the Turk,” “heretics,” and “the Jews” who resisted Catholic missionaries’ evangelistic efforts on account of their incapacity for reason (262, 344–345). Consigning “Ethiopia and its peoples” to the realm of unbelievers, the priest proceeded to rally his fellow Christian brethren to the cause of enlightening those people who were bound to repeat the folly of their foreparents by adhering to ancestral traditions.

Alvares’s ruminations on the “heathen” foreshadowed the discursive tropes of later centuries that juxtaposed what Kathryn Gin Lum calls the “heathen world” against the culturally Western European, religiously Christian cultures that ultimately became bastions of privilege and Whiteness in various iterations around the globe. In her sweeping book *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History*, Lum traces the ways heathenism proliferated and permuted across geographical spaces and chronological periods as Western Europeans endeavored to cognitively, culturally, and physically apprehend the diverse peoples they encountered in the modern era. As Lum demonstrates, this was a multidirectional process: as those who would become known as Chinese, Africans, Indians, Hawaiians, and by other designations encountered Europeans and Americans, they returned the gaze. Moreover, they redeployed the epistemologies of heathenism to criticize their enslavers and colonizers, challenge racist stereotypes, and in some cases, underscore their own cultural superiority. Exposing the circulation of racializing discourses and images like that of the heathen as a multidirectional, polyvocal process, Lum not only turns the colonial gaze back onto itself, but also gives voice to those who have done so throughout history. In this way, *Heathen* offers a critique of “history” as an academic concept and discipline, and makes visible the intellectual underpinnings of racial perception. Far from a mere byproduct of more institutionalized manifestations of race, perception and other immaterial forces informed the violent capitalist projects that enabled the emergence of national “superpowers.” The power of racial perception to construct new cultural genealogies is perhaps most evident in the discursive, sociopolitical, and economic formation of African and Black identities. Despite concurrent colonial projects, Western Europeans devoted a

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disproportionate share of cultural energy toward their imaginings of the “African” and curated potent associations that became the cornerstones of modern racial hierarchies. Amid Lum’s many critical methodological interventions, two offer a route to unpacking the peculiar logics of anti-Africanness and blackness evident, in its embryonic form, in the work of Alvares and other cultural commentators of the early modern period. Her attention to the visual dimensions of racial logics, or “heathen sight,” and prioritization of nonlinear history in particular help to expose the particular underpinnings of anti-blackness as manifested at the intersections of race and religion.

“Heathen Sight”

Although an intellectual history, *Heathen* calls attention to the visuality of racial logics, or heathen sight, which names how racial ideas materialized in bodies and land. Through attention to the postures, symbols, facial expressions, and other features of circulating written and visual images, Lum invites readers to contend intellectually with the ways “heathens” have been known, engaged, and understood aesthetically. This is a form of “sight” that conditioned how colonizers, enslavers, missionaries, and others interacted with the so-called heathen world through the 20th century, and shaped the ways racist tropes masquerade as logical or raw perception inside and outside of the academy. In agreement with Lum, for Western Europeans and Euro-Americans, the objective of such ways of seeing was not only to ascribe meaning to, categorize, and racialize the so-called heathen Other, but also to function “as a ritualistic and racist incantation reassuring Euro-Americans of their own superiority and justifying their interventions in the world” (276).

As a Catholic missionary mired in the processes of Christianization, conquest, and colonialism, Alvares participated in the racial connotations that authorized enslavement, cultural violence, and other incursions upon the lifestyles, livelihood, and personhood of the peoples he encountered. In his writing, he depicted the inhabitants of the Upper Guinea Coast as not only superstitious and idolatrous, but also in need of European Christian intervention for their own salvation from ignorance. Yet, much of his account of the region that would become known as Sierra Leone revealed the fine line between fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Western European Christian metaphysical concepts and the residents of the Western African coast they purported to convert. A little over ten pages after his exposition of the particular hindrances to Christian enlightenment among Western Africans, Alvares offers a cautionary tale of a Jolof “diabolical sorceress” burned at the stake and her all-female “convent.” He does not question the veracity of the claims of the Jolof women’s “miracles,” but rather their source. To this end, he begins an exposition of how “because of their gross practices with the devil,” the women witches are able to transport their bodies through the air, occupy male forms, change themselves into animal forms, and enter into houses to kill children. In the latter case, it is the Devil who opens the window to allow the witches entry, just as it is the Devil who alters the perception of Christians to make witches appear to change shape (274). Alvares’s unequivocal confidence in the capacity for the diabolical spirit world to interact with, alter, and control events and people in the material world reveals how early Western European Christians to West Africa had to thread the proverbial needle’s eye theologically and intellectually in order to distinguish their religious practices, ritual objects, and metaphysical worlds from those of the so-called heathen.

In agreement with Lum’s point, Alvares’s narrative concretized the ways of seeing that legitimized claims to cultural superiority, however flimsy. Despite the difficulties

that characterized early incursions into Western Africa and the compromised solution of building alliances with local polities that enabled Western European presences, Africans appeared as a lazy, dependent, misguided, undifferentiated people in Western Europeans' later accounts. Lum's exposure of the monolithic nature of heathen as a category coheres with the construction of Africa and the African as monoliths, despite the diversity, albeit rudimentary, evinced in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century accounts. "Heathen sight" – ways of perceiving and visualizing alleged inferiority in real time and narrative – formed the intellectual metastructure for the obfuscation of African ingenuity, versatility, and expertise, which coincided with the reliance upon their labor for the success of many colonial projects in the Americas. Thus, the African could not exist without the structural prerequisites heathen sight afford: specifically, the capacity to reduce plurality to monoculture. Without such ways of seeing, the reductionistic aesthetics of the heathen appear posterous.

Linear Histories and The Problem of Anti-Africanness

According to Lum, the impulse to reduce multiple, varied cultures of non-European peoples into a single story is repetitive in ways that call attention to the disciplinary limitations of history and the presumption that history moves forward in a linear fashion. She instead asserts that, "Continuities matter as much as change" (275). The apparent absence of "progress" among "heathen" cultures according to Western European and American epistemological standards has historically aided the intellectual project of exclusion. Monovocal concepts of history accompanied the reduction of people into racial monoliths, and those responsible for these reductions became the architects of new intellectual disciplines like anthropology and history. Acknowledging the problem of heathenism that underlies academic disciplines and methods requires a reexamination of what counts as history, sources, and evidence. History and historical knowledge is both conditioned by the colonizing epistemologies that created archives, as well as the continued prioritization of written knowledge for validation. By underscoring the cyclical, iterative nature of the "heathen," Lum – like Charles Long, Sylvia Wynter, and many of the others she cites in her exposition of academic "counterscripts," – invites conversation about the imperative to decolonize academic discourses, processes, methods, and methodologies. Equally important, she calls historians' definitions of history to account for why and how the histories of peoples rendered "heathens" by Western Europeans, as well as their ways of qualifying and narrating history, have been marginalized in the discipline. The racial conflation that authorized the construction of the African in the early modern imagination also gave way to enduring racialized religious tropes that continue to undergird anti-Africanness and anti-Blackness. Racial and religious outsiders have attached terms like voodoo and fetishism to certain racially black African practices in ways that have had enduring consequences for Africana religions and the aesthetic cultures allied with them. While much work has been done to expose the historical violence shaping concepts of African and Black people, the ways of seeing that authorize commodification, humiliation, and violence often allude description. In the absence of demonstrated anti-Blackness as defined by historical scripts, it often becomes difficult to name the impulses, perceptions, and other immaterial forces that continue to authorize anti-Black ways of understanding. Lum's exposure of the aesthetics of heathenism offers a methodological key to making visible anti-Black ways of seeing.

In many ways, such a conquest of anti-Africanness and anti-Blackness remains one of many contemporary frontiers for critiques of heathenism. Anti-Africanness is

particularly pressing, because its religious aesthetics remain largely unchallenged in the mainstream. Instead, in film, print, and colloquial parlance, African religions continue to signify the mystical, foreign, exotic, demonic, and literal dark unknowns of the religious world. Lum's project of tracing the presence of an intellectual idea and the ways it manifests in ways of seeing and defining history underscores the need to dismantle the entire epistemological superstructure within which such ideas reside. *Heathen* is a call to challenge the intellectual and discursive processes through which cultural hierarchies are created and to, instead, begin the process of cultivating methods capable of encompassing the polyvocal, multidirectional ways so-called "heathens" have seen and told histories about themselves.

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