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"Wherefore She Made Suit": African Women's Religious and Spiritual Determinism in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England

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Abstract: Historical evidence of early modern English religious communities demonstrate that culturally negative perceptions of skin color and ethnicity contributed to theological notions of black inferiority which supported societal hierarchies based on racial and gender discrimination. This essay analyzes three accounts of a group typically ignored by religious scholars on early modern England: sixteenth and seventeenth century African women. Despite living in a period that arguably witnessed the ideological birth and development of the racial construct in tandem with British colonialist and imperialist expansionism, these women defiantly crafted their own brand of spiritual determinism to wield personal agency in the face of racist theological discourse, ecclesiastical institutions, and legal authorities.

Keywords: early modern England; African women; spiritual determinism; religious determinism; birth of race

How did societal, cultural and religious perceptions of skin color and ethnicity impact the religious identification and spiritual flourishing of African women in early modern England? Did this historical period—the end of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—which arguably witnessed a burgeoning nexus of theological and literary ideologies that eventually emerged as social constructions of racial difference, affect the personal identity formation of some African women struggling to survive in this society? Do historical accounts of African women negotiating the confluence of religious categorizations on Black and female bodies during this seminal period of race and gender construction shed light on later developments of intersecting structural and hierarchical oppressions established by white heteronormative patriarchy?

In this essay, historical narratives of the religious and spiritual lives of three early modern African English women: Marye Phyliss, Francis of the Broadmead Baptist Church, Bristol, and Dinah the Moor, are analyzed to provide insight into these questions. Black African women in early modern England faced racial and religious stigmatization due to emerging constructions of categorical difference within doctrinal tenets of the Christian faith. Forced to confront theological beliefs structured around the implicit understanding of blackness as sinful, these women were indoctrinated with Protestant discourse that reflected a developing understanding of racial difference. Although the assessed records are third-party accounts and were not composed by the women themselves, they offer a rare window into the religious lives of Africans in early modern England, an understudied subject.

From these accounts, it can be deduced that African women exercised religious agency through their interaction with ecclesiastical institutions, faith communities, and political structures. Despite operating in a politically and socially stratified society which marginalized them because of their race and sex, the women studied in these accounts wielded enough presence to have their stories historically preserved. Secondly, these women demonstrated spiritual resilience in a religious and political context fractured by theological divisiveness and polemical controversy. Within this setting,

religious discourse imbued with literary and cultural tropes demonized blackness and denigrated the integral worth of African persons. In the midst of this environment, African women affirmed their humanity and dignity through religious expression, political agency, and legal action. Finally, in spite of the fact that the ecclesiastical institutions and religious communities represented within the historical accounts affirmed Reformed doctrine, which limits human agency based on the tenets of unconditional election and predestination in the salvific process, these three African women's actions reflect their own brand of spiritual determinism which declares selfhood as a reflection of the imago Dei.

1. Literature Review

Gay L. Byron (Byron 2002) has demonstrated that rhetorical uses of blackness and ethnic tropes, reflective of the ways that Ethiopians (catch-all term for persons with black skin in the ancient world) are present in early non-canonical Christian texts, many deriving from biblical interpretation (Byron 2002). Willie Jennings (Jennings 2011) examines this historical legacy by investigating the theological trajectory broadly of Western European colonial consciousness, and the birth of race therein (Jennings 2011). However, as Dennis Austin Britton stresses in *Becoming Christian: Race, Reformation, and Modern Romance* (2014), the particular impact of early modern English theology on the development of the social construct of race has been relatively ignored by scholarship, despite one study of black rhetoric reflected in the idioms of the English Renaissance (Smith 2010). Britton helpfully analyzes theological constructions of race in early modern English literary texts. Yet, there has been no assessment of the legacy metaphors of blackness had in biblical studies or theological discourse in early modern England.

Although John Coffey's *Exodus and Liberation: Deliverance Politics from John Calvin to Martin Luther King Jr.* is one of the few texts on the English Reformation that reviews the impact on race, this work examines the way biblical texts were used as a source of liberation and deliverance from Catholic dominance during the Reformation and passed down to the Civil Rights movement in the fight against white supremacy. However, specific readings of blackness in biblical interpretation and theological discourse are ignored. In fact, this essay implicitly critiques Coffey's conclusions, by arguing that despite the rhetoric of liberation gleaned from Protestant readings of biblical narratives, the legacy of theological rhetoric birthed during the Reformation excluded Africans from the theme of deliverance.

Indeed, an extended, racial conversation based on works including Diarmaid MacCullouch's recent *All Things Made New: The Reformation and Its Legacy* (2016) is needed (McCullough 2016). Protestant ideas about salvation, and thus, life and death, in relation to human agency also included beliefs about physical difference, namely, blackness and whiteness. Christopher Hill's usual historical attention to the least and last in early modern English society is evident in *The English Bible and the Seventeenth Century* (Hill 2014). However, focus on the ways that African women were affected by practical interpretations of the bible during this period widens the scope of different groups studied. This assessment is also relevant with regards to Patricia Crawford's breakthrough text *Women and Religion in England: 1500–1720* (1996) which explores English women's experience of the Reformation (Crawford 1996).

2. Historical Accounts of Three Remarkable Women

> She was of late servant with one Mr. Barber of Marke Lane a widower she said her father's name was Phyllis of Morisco a blackamore being both a basket maker and shovel maker. This Marye Phyllis being about the age of xx yeares, and having been in England for the part of xii and xiii yeares and as yet was not christened now being bound (?) servant with one Millicent Porter a sempster dwelling in the liberties of east Smithfield and now taking part . . . of faith in Jesus Christ was desyrous to become a Christian wherefore she made suit . . . to have sonme conversation with the curat of this the parish of st. buttolph without aldgate London . . . the curat named Christopher Threlkeld demanding of her

> certen questions concerning her faith whereunto she answering him quite Christian like; and afterwards she being by the said Mr. Christopher Threlkeld . . . to say the lord's prayer and also to repeat the articles of her belief which she did both say and repeat both decently and well. Concerning her faith then the said curat demanded of her if she weare desyrous to be baptized in the said fayth (whereat?) shee said yes. Then the said curat did go with her unto the fonte and desiring the congregation with him to call upon god the father through our Lord Jesus Christ that of his Bownteous mercie he wold graunt to her that thing . . . by nature she could not have that she may be baptized . . . " (Habib 2008, p. 325)[1]

In the spring of 1597, the parish priest of the St. Botolph Without Aldgate church in London received an exceptional caller. According to the parochial church registry, Marye Phyllis, a twenty-year-old African woman, "made suit" regarding membership in the Church of England.[2] Marye's African origins are indisputable, for she is described as the daughter of a "blackamore" with the appellation "Morisco", which suggests a Spanish or Portuguese background.[3] Marye must have come to England as a child, for the record notes she had lived in England "for twelve or thirteen years" and was employed in service to a seamstress. Boldly, Marye initiated contact with the church minister and requested christening independently of outside sponsorship. After professing her faith in Christ and sufficiently demonstrating the requisite knowledge of the Lord's Prayer and the Anglican Articles of Religion, she was declared ready to receive baptism under the witness of vicar and congregation. However, the minister made a unique request according to the archival account (written not in her own words). He entreated the people to call upon God for an exemption to "graunt to her that thing . . . by nature she could not have that she may be baptized . . . " This presumption of Marye's natural inability to receive salvation unless through divine dispensation instigated through communal prayer forms a curious intrusion upon an otherwise ordinary account of conversion. What was precisely Marye's "nature" and why did it necessitate special provision for baptism?

Insight into this question may be revealed in the story of Francis, an African woman living in mid-seventeenth century England.[4]

> By the goodness of God they had one Memmorable member added unto them namely a Blackymore maide named Francis (a servant to one that lived the Back of Bristol) which thing is somewhat rare in our dayes and Nation, to have an Ethyopian or Blackmore to be truly Convinced of Sin; and of their lost State without the Redeemer and to be truly Converted to the Lord Jesus Christ, as she was which by her profession or declaration at the time of reception; together with her sincere conversation; she gave greate ground for charity to believe she was truly brought over to Christ, for this poor Aethiopian's soule savoured much of God, and she walked very humble and blamelesse in her conversation, to her end; and when she was upon her death bed: she sent a remarkable exhortation unto the whole church with whom she walked as her last request unto them which argued her holy, childlike fear of the Lord, and how precious the Lord was to her soule . . . it

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1 *Registers of St. Botolph, Aldgate*, GL. I. 9220; cited in Imtiaz H. Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives 1500–1677* (Habib 2008).
2 The account reads "wherefore she made suit . . . to have sonme conversation with the curat of this the parish".
3 Spain's black population had originated largely from enslaved Muslim black Moors defeated in the Reconquista. Portugal's population arose from West Africans stolen in Christian raids against coastal states. Both of these events took place in the later Middle Ages. See Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (Loomba 2002, pp. 52–53).
4 See Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Buford Rediker. *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, pp. 73–74). Also the Bristol web page: http://www.discoveringbristol.org.uk/showNarrative.php?narId=471&nacId+474: "Many of the black people living in Bristol were Christians, and were baptized, married or buried in church. The church records often refer to their nationality or colour. One individual who appears in the church records of a Baptist chapel was called Frances. She was referred to as 'an Ethiopian or blackamoor'. Ethiopia was often used to refer to the whole of Africa rather rhan to the country in the North East. So the term Ethiopian probably meant that she was black African, not that she was from Ethiopia. Frances was a servant to a man who lived 'upon the back of Bristol' (now known as Welshback). Frances was a valued member of the Baptist congregation in the Broadmead area of Bristol. She died in 1640".

> being the dyeing words of a Blackmoore, fit for a White heart to store. After which this Aethiopian yielded up the Spirit to Jesus that redeemed her and was Honourably interred being carried by the elders and the chiefest of note of the brethren in the congregation . . . to the grave, where she must rest untill our Lord doth come who will bring his Saints with him. (Terrill 1847; Cited in Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, pp. 73–74)

Written by Edward Terrill, a church elder of the Particular Baptist Church of the Broadmead area of Bristol, the story of Francis, described as a "Blackymore maide", forms the bulk of a religious memoir recounting the origins of the congregation, which was founded in defiance of the Church of England during the turbulent civil wars of the 1640s. The entire narrative was actually completed over thirty years later as part of a compilation of oral and written testimonies. Terrill calls Francis, an African woman who worked as a servant in Bristol, a "Memmorable member" of the Broadmead Baptist Church. However, it quickly becomes apparent that her memorability is primarily due to her ethnicity. He states that it was "somewhat rare in our dayes and Nation, to have an Ethyopian or Blackmore to be truly Convinced of Sin; and of their lost State without the Redeemer". Terrill's shock at the existence of a bona fide African Christian in their midst is heightened by evidence of her sincerity as one "truly Converted to the Lord Jesus Christ". Thus, she is regarded as a spiritual anomaly in the religious community.[5] Terrill repeatedly contrasts what he perceives as the unique juxtaposition of Francis' ethnicity and her faith, writing "this poor Aethiopian's soule savoured much of God". It is implied therefore that due to her ethnicity Francis possessed a nature inherently incompatible with Christianization. Yet through a miracle of God's grace, she was chosen for election by Christ among Reformed believers. Even as an elect member of the body of Christ, and thus justified by faith, the road to sanctification was somewhat different for Francis as an African Christian. The sinful inclinations of her nature were transformed with great effort through cooperation with Christ, requiring that she present herself deferentially in the midst of the congregation (Habib 2008, p. 214). Terrill esteems her effort, and praises the memory of her "very humble and blamelesse", demeanor among the sisters and brothers in which she expressed a "holy, childlike fear of the Lord". Evidence that her living witness of faith was viewed in contradistinction to her color and ethnicity is apparent in Terrill's description of Francis' last words of exhortation to the church as, "the dyeing words of a Blackmoore, fit for a White heart to store". These words suggest that Francis' blackness, perceived as an essentially corrupt nature, was being transformed to whiteness due to her holiness of life. Further, Terrill writes that at her death, "this Aethiopian yielded up the Spirit to Jesus that redeemed her" to "rest untill our Lord doth come who will bring his Saints with him". Did Terrill and his community imagine that Francis' blackness would become literally white in her glorification? And if so, did these implicit theological views associating blackness and whiteness with evil and sin impact the personal faith struggles of African women in early modern English society?

The 1647 story of "Dinah the Moor", also known as "Dinah the Black", revealed in the memoir of the celebrated Baptist spiritualist Sarah Wight as recorded by her amanuensis, the Particular Baptist preacher Henry Jessey, addresses these issues of color conversion and spiritual struggle. Part of the conversation between Dinah and Sarah is recorded here.

> *Mrs. S.* Do you see a want of faith?
>
> *Maid.* I am a filthy wretched sinner.
>
> *Mrs. S.* Are you tempted against your life?
>
> *Maid.* I am often tempted against my life.
>
> *Mrs. S.* Why what causeth it?

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[5] The cultural, social, and religious association of evil with black Africans, persistent in early modern English culture, is ironic considering contemporary knowledge of the history of the Christian tradition in Ethiopia, North Africa and Egypt (certainly more ancient than in the British Isles).

> *Maid.* Sometimes this, because I am not as others are, I do not look so as others do.
>
> (Jessey 1658, pp. 95–97; Cited in Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, p. 89)

Listed as the "Maid" in dialogue, Dinah is also recorded as "Dinah the Black" in the list of visitors and "a blakmor" in the table of contents of the 1658 edition of Sarah Wight's memoir.[6] In the introduction to the account, Jessey, the transcriber, admits difficulty at times in understanding Dinah's speech, calling attention to the fact that he was forced to "sometimes guess . . . the Answers given to [Sara]". (Jessey 1658, pp. 95–97; Cited in Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, p. 89) This honest rendering thus incorporates Dinah's voice in a corrupted manner (Habib 2008, p. 210). In the account, Dinah complains of despair and depression leading to suicidal thoughts that she is "a filthy wretched sinner". (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, p. 89) Sarah offers spiritual comfort, assuring Dinah of the efficacy of salvation through Christ.[7] However, Dinah, evidencing a Reformed understanding of unconditional election, doubts that salvific grace is applicable to her. She states, "He may do this for some few, but not to me". (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, p. 89) Why does Dinah suspect she is not elected to salvation? One clue emerges from her statement, "I am not as others are, I do not look so as others do", which implies that as an African woman arguably forced to endure multiple manifestations of discrimination in early modern English society, she struggled with feelings of inferiority. Renaissance England was a deeply color-conscious culture which stigmatized black Africans in music, literature, and religion (Habib 2008, p. 211). Africans also experienced societal marginalization in politics and the economy. The majority were forced to work in the lowest stratum of society as servants and slaves. Despite her desire for redemption, the pervasive negativity surrounding blackness likely caused Dinah to fear the rejection of Jesus Christ. In the narrative, Sarah attempts to counteract this thinking.

> [Christ] doth not this to one onely, nor to one Nation onely; for many Nations must be blessed in him. He came to give his life for a ransome for many, to give himself for the life of the world. He is a free agent; and why should you exclude your selfe?[8]

However, in a significant passage, Sarah goes on to associate blackness with evil despite assuring Dinah of God's love and acceptance. Sarah states, "When Christ comes and manifest himself to the Soul, it is black in itself and uncomely, but he is faire and ruddy and he clothes the Soul with his comeliness . . . and makes it comely therein". (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, p. 89) The fact that Sarah uses the imagery of blackness indicates that Dinah's African identity was a prominent cultural and social issue. This metaphorical understanding of justification by faith—the covering of black evil with the white salvation of Christ—was prominent in early modern English religious texts and had important implications for the social, political, religious, and personal lives of Africans.[9] Importantly, as developed in the next section, the figurative use of blackness and whiteness in

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[6] That Dinah was the woman in the 1647 conversation of Sarah Wight recorded by Henry Jessey is plausibly suggested by his description of her as "a Moor" in his introduction to the episode, and is noted by Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra* (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, p. 368). Barbara Ritter Dailey points out that Jessey names her as Dinah Black in "The Visitation of Sarah Wight: Holy Carnival and the Revolution of the Saints in Civil War London", (Dailey 1986).

[7] Sarah Wight also struggled on her own with depression, suicidal impulses, and spiritual despair. See Lorraine McNeil, *Mystical experience and the Fifth Monarchy women: Anna Trapnel, Sarah Wight, Elizabeth Avery, and Mary Cary* (McNeil 2001); and Marcus Nevitt, *Women and the Pamphlet Culture of Revolutionary England*, 1640–1660 (Nevitt 2016).

[8] Jessey, *The Exceeding Riches of Grace* (Jessey 1658, pp. 95–97); Cited in Linebaugh and Rediker, *Many Headed Hydra* (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, p. 89).

[9] Winthrop Jordan's landmark study *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro* (1968) which holds that blackness as a concept is already firmly embedded in medieval English epistemology and associated with dirt, evil, sin, and the devil. This definition was widened to include persons with black skins in the early modern period. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "Black is deeply stained with dirt; soiled, dirty, foul . . . Having dark or deadly purposes, malignant, pertaining to or involving death, deadly; baneful, disastrous, sinister . . . Foul, iniquitous, atrocious, horrible, wicked . . . Indicating disgrace, censure, liability to punishment, etc". [Quoted in Jordon, 6]. "In each [European] language the word for "black" carried a host for disparaging connotations. In Spanish, for example, "negro" also meant gloomy, dismal, unfit, and wretched; in French, "noir" also connoted foul, dirty, base, and wicked; in Dutch, certain compounds of "zwart" conveyed notions of anger, irascibility, and necromancy; and "black" had comparable pejorative implications in Elizabethan and Stuart England (Alden T. Vaughan, *Roots of American Racism: Essays on the Colonial Experience*, (Vaughan 1995, p. 6)).

Protestant theology, inspired by Renaissance culture, foreshadowed the ideological emergence of race as a social construct used to justify societal hierarchies that denigrated Africans in early modern England and the British empire.

3. Blackness and the Christian Tradition in Early Modern England

Paraphrases, the glosses of scripture prepared by Renaissance humanist Erasmus of Roterdam, renowned for his Greek and Latin translations of the Bible, includes a thought-provoking interpretation of Acts 8: 26–40.[10] Erasmus suggests that prior to baptism by Phillip, the sins of the Ethiopian eunuch were evident in his black skin.[11] The fullness of salvation not only saved the man's soul by grace but also "change[d] his naturall complexion in the fonte of baptisme". Black skin is an external corruption, just as sin afflicts the soul.

Erasmus' interpretation was not novel. Belief in the incongruity of blackness with faith is not uncommon in the Christian tradition. The apocryphal second-century CE *Acts of Peter* features a dream by the Roman senator Marcellus in which a demon, described as "a most evil-looking woman, who looked like an Ethiopian", attacked him before being cut into pieces by Simon Peter. As Gay Byron demonstrates, early monastic writings tend to portray Ethiopian or Egyptian devils, often in the form of women, tempting desert holy men in search of spiritual purity.[12] These figurative devices extend to medieval texts. Hildegard's visionary *Scivias*, dictated in the twelfth century, describes "black children" entering the womb of the Virgin Mary only to encounter the infant Christ who rips off their skins and clothes them in white salvific light (Hildegard 1990, p. 169). An anonymously written fourteenth century text, *Cursor Mundi*, depicts black and blue skinned Muslims miraculously transformed white after Christian conversion.[13]

During the early modern period, it was also widely believed that religious identity was a reflection of the inner self and appeared in external characteristics (Loomba 2002, p. 24). The notion of an evil African nature made visible by physical blackness and inherently incompatible with Christianity even found formal expression in government decree. In 1601, an official royal proclamation from Elizabeth, the Queen of England, called for the expulsion of all "Negars and Blackamores" from the country because "the most of them are infidels, having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel".[14] People with dark skins—popularly associated with North African Muslims, Ottoman Turks, and sub-Saharan Africans of all religious backgrounds, were believed to be innately sinful.[15] Since the English arguably prejudged Africans as radically different in essence, based on a combination of their perceived 'lack of

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[10] Latin re-expressions of the New Testament; the Book of Acts was completed in 1524. An English translation, commissioned by Edward VI overseen by the playwright Nicholas Udall, was published in 1548.

[11] An England translation, overseen by the playwright Nicholas Udall, was published in 1548.

[12] Gay L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian literature: Blackened by Their Sins, Early Christian Ethno-Political Rhetorics about Egyptians, Ethiopians, Blacks and Blackness* (Byron 2002, pp. 15–52); Apophthegmata partum 5.5.

[13] Quoted in Ania Loomba and Jonathan Burton, *Race in Early Modern England: A Documentary Companion* (Loomba and Burton 2007, p. 13). Similarly, in the medieval romance *King of Tars*, a Christian queen forced to marry a Muslim king has a black child who is whitened upon baptism.

[14] Frederick A. Youngs, Jr., *The Proclamations of the Tudor Queens* (Youngs 1976, p. 38). For additional analysis of the expulsion see Kim F. Hall's "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? Colonization and Miscegenation in The Merchant of Venice", (Hall 1992) and "Reading What Isn't There: 'Black' Studies in Early Modern England", (Hall 1993). In 1596, Queen Elizabeth sent two letters to the Lord Mayor of London requesting that "blackamoores" be deported out of England and calling for the merchant Caspar van Senden to take them to Spain and Portugal. (Queen Elizabeth to the Lord Mayor et al., 11 July 1596, in *Acts of the Privy Council of England*, n.s., 26 (1596–1597), John Roche Dasent, ed. (Dasent 1902, pp. 16–17). Queen Elizabeth to the Lord Mayor et al., 18 July 1596, in (Dasent 1902, pp. 20–21)). Elizabeth's Proclamation "Licensing Caspar van Senden to Deport Negroes" is listed as a "Draft" endorsed by the Queen in January 1601, on the Calendar, 11, 569; see also Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin, eds., *Tudor Royal Proclamations, Vol. III: The Later Tudors 1588–1603* (Hughes and Larkin 1969, p. 221). Although it is evident that Queen Elizabeth endorsed the draft with her signature, more than likely one or more of the advisors on the Privy Council authored the royal command. However, with the endorsement, the Queen authorized the symbolic meaning that the language of the edict can be understood to carry.

[15] Societal perception of the sinful nature of persons with dark skins also overlapped with cultural views that associated these groups with Islam.

religion' and skin color, systemic discriminatory treatment was justified, forming the origins of the racial construct.[16]

Contrary to traditional scholarship about race and the Enlightenment, English cultural and literary theorists affirm that ideological racialization took place during the early modern period.[17] Kim F. Hall is among those scholars who argue that ideologies emphasizing racial difference formed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in contemporary media (Korhonen 2005, pp. 99–100). The beginning of the conception of racial difference was characterized by notions of essentialism associated with physical features and became the basis upon which to assign class designations in society (Loomba and Burton 2007, p. 2). Political and economic changes in early modern English society had led to the presence of Africans in early modern England. Africans were also increasingly visible in dramas, narratives, poetry, and other printed and visual materials. Aesthetic expressions in Renaissance culture posited the binary of whiteness over blackness and became part of the larger structure of white supremacy and patriarchal hegemony.[18] Further, mainstream culture affected theological discourse and vice versa. Religious texts, particularly those that stress Reformed doctrine, incorporated images of blackness as symbols of sin and evil, further essentializing Africans. Politics, religion, and culture converged when Queen Elizabeth publically informed the English nation in the early seventeenth century that Africans were a "kinde of people" in the 1601 Edict of Expulsion to Remove Negars and Blackamoors.

In the following centuries, new methodologies in philosophy, biology, and science were developed to better "explain" racial difference. In other words, conceptualizations of what are understood as racial difference can be traced to earlier periods; the models or tools through which the ideas were formulated or interpreted evolved as a result of scientific and technological advances throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century. This understanding of separation by nature composed the racial conclusions proven by newer scientific and philosophical Enlightenment methodologies (Loomba and Burton 2007, p. 8). These ways of thinking about human difference as well as the organization of those patterns of thought according to beliefs, mythologies, societal structures and ongoing practices became deeply embedded in culture and society. By the modern period, racial separation, although originally based on cultural, theological, and social constructs, became understood as fundamentally axiomatic in understanding the nature of humanity.

4. African Women's Spiritual and Religious Determinism

The special dispensation mentioned in the parish account of Marye Phyllis's baptism was evoked not only because of negative perceptions of her skin color, but also beliefs that her physiognomy posed a hindrance to Christian salvation. As we have seen, in early modern conceptions of thought, physical appearance was linked to nature so that interiority was understood as a simulacrum of the outward state. The direct relationship believed to exist between "inner character and outer appearance" led to the association of skin color with morality in English Renaissance culture. Persons with dark skins were judged essentially heathenish and barbaric (Hall 1995, p. 95). There is no way of knowing how Marye interpreted the minister's call for divine dispensation to allow her baptism, nor if she internalized

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[16] Leo Africanus' *History and Description of Africa* (Africanus 1492) and George Abbot's *Briefe Description of the Whole Worlde* (Abbot 1599) emphasize the heathenish state of sub-Saharan black Africans being neither Muslims nor Christians and influenced the cultural and ideological climate, which led to the reasoning of the 1601 Elizabethan Edict expelling blacks from England on the basis of their incapability of acquiring true religion.

[17] For example, see Michael Neill, "'Mulattos', 'Blacks', and 'Indian Moors': *Othello* and Early Modern Constructions of Human Difference".(Neill 1998). What Michael Neill has described as a "racialist ideology" was taking place alongside Britain's nascent imperialism. See also Michael Neill, "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*."(Neill 1989); Loomba and Burton (2007, p. 8).

[18] Becoming most prominent during Renaissance England, whiteness was the most dramatic spectacle of beauty; hence blackness was the visual antithesis of that whiteness.

the cultural, social, and religious negativity associated with her color and ethnicity in England.[19] However, by directly approaching the priest to request baptism and further, having competently, even satisfactorily, "made suit" among individuals suspicious of her abilities and motivations, Marye expressed agency and self-determinism as a willful being in the midst of racist society.

The negative association between evil and black bodies is also implicit in the biographical narrative of Francis. Described as having remarkable spiritual gifts uncharacteristic of an "Ethyopian or Blackmore", she did not fit the stereotypical expectations. Her verbal articulateness and spiritual astuteness in dying words offered to succeeding generations of the faith community are described as "fit for a White heart to store", meaning they sounded European to the church members. This implies that, as a Christian, she was regarded as internally white both socially and spiritually by the brothers and sisters. They believed that her internal whiteness would become matched physically when "our Lord doth come" at glory and her sinful bodily blackness transformed. Since the account was not written by her hand, it is not clear if Francis herself embraced these theological and cultural ideas. Characterized as strong, resolute and passionate about her faith, Francis was a spiritual mentor and guide to believers in the community. Clearly, she believed in the love of God, in the hope of goodness. Her witness and example were powerful enough to create a lasting memory. Thirty years later Francis continued to be honored in the church. Despite the obstacles she faced, a historical narrative was penned about the African woman who lived among the English and inspired their faith.

The narrative of Dinah suggests that she also experienced travails and alienation in early modern English society. As a recipient of pastoral comfort from Sarah Wight, a celebrated spiritualist, Dinah was forced to also hear reasoning that overtly denigrated her blackness in theological terms. Sarah described justification as the imputed righteousness of Christ, characterized as white, covering the sinful black soul. In the ongoing process, the soul is eventually lightened, thus making it "comely". However, the reality faced by Dinah and all Africans who embraced the Christian faith is that, in doctrinal terms, despite salvation, they were regarded generally by religious communities as retaining a peculiar quality of sin evidenced by physical blackness. Only the work of sanctification, also given by grace and fully demonstrated in heavenly glorification, would fully cleanse the inner nature as well as the physical marks of sin. Since the black stain remained in this life, African Christians, as carriers of the external corruption of blackness (along with all other Africans) would always remain separate in church and society. This theological association of blackness with sin and whiteness with good expressed anthropologically, was an early ideological manifestation of racial difference which justified societal hierarchies and oppression in the imperialist states which adopted these ideas.

Did early modern English Christians like Edward Terrill and Sarah Wright literally believe that African Christians, upon sanctification, would eventually become white, even if only in heaven? The historical accounts imply that spiritual conversion meant that in addition to an inner change, the flesh would indeed become white. Evidence suggests that many seventeenth-century English persons were perplexed about the relationship between black bodies and souls as the historian Catherine Molineux has recently shown (Molineux 2012, pp. 90–99). London's first successful periodical, *The Athenian Mercury*, contained a section in which inquirers could pose questions to the editors. Popular debate regarding whether "Negroes shall rise so at the last Day", reoccurred repeatedly in the journal. Readers could not reconcile the idea that black bodies would to ascend to heaven along with white bodies at the Last Judgment.[20] Ultimately, they were informed by the editors that an African would slough off his blackness in the "darkness of the Grave, exchanging it for a brighter and a better

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[19] For example, did Marye even know how the parish register characterizes the event of her baptism? Was she literate? Did the register make her aware of the notation? These are questions difficult to answer beyond speculation.

[20] The Athenian Editors were John Dunton, a bookseller and publisher; Richard Sault, a mathematician and hack writer; Samuel Wesley, an Anglican clergyman and father of the abolitionists John and Charles Wesley; and John Norris, a neo-Platonist (Molineux 2012, p. 90).

at his return agen [sic] into the World".[21] It was therefore affirmed black bodies would become white in heaven. Yet in contrast to early modern Christian theologians, the editors of the *Athenian Mercury* rejected the belief that blackness was symbolic of sin. Instead, black skin color was viewed as an "accidental monstrosity", much as any other kind of birth defect. Through glorification, such imperfections would be corrected in heaven (Molineux 2012, p. 95). The fundamental social and cultural perception remained, however, that for most, blackness was incompatible with normality.

The question remains, did the African women studied here interpret theological and social justifications that denigrated blackness? We have seen evidence of Dinah's internalization of despair as partial result of living in a color-conscious society. What impact did her understanding of the Christian faith have on her life? Later accounts of Dinah suggest that she was moved to overcome angst and despair likely caused in large part by racial prejudice in early modern England. In fact, this supposition is quite evident from historical fragments of the July 1667 minutes of the Aldermen's Court in Bristol. A miscellaneous notation written by John Latimer in the court documents reads,

> July 1667: "A curious example of the practice of kidnapping human beings for transportation to America is recorded in the minutes of the Court of Aldermen in July. The justices note that one Dinah Black had lived for five years as servant to Dorothy Smith, and had been baptized, and wished to live under the teaching of the Gospel; yet her mistress had recently caused her to be put aboard a ship, to be conveyed to the plantations. Complaint having been made, Black had been rescued, but her mistress (who had doubtless sold her) refused to take her back; and it was therefore ordered that she should be free to earn her living until the case was heard at the next quarter sessions. The Sessions Book has perished. From the peculiar manner in which she is described, it may be assumed that Dinah was a negro woman captured on the African coast, and had lived as a slave in Bristol. (Jessey 1658, pp. 122–25; Cited in Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, p. 91)

Dinah, having lived in service for years in Bristol, petitioning the city court on her own behalf in order to actively resist her sale and exportation to America (most likely the Caribbean) as a chattel slave. Undoubtedly, she would have known about the hostile conditions of New World plantation slavery, which, in most cases, amounted to a rapid death sentence. Therefore, she refused to capitulate to treatment as a commodity despite its imposition by a former owner. Having been baptized in the Church, Dinah, like the widow who confronted the unjust judge in Luke 18: 1–8, argued her case before the Bristol city magistrates. By appealing to her status as a Baptist Christian, Dinah temporarily won her case to earn an independent living. Although, like so many accounts, the final outcome of the story is unknown, it is evident that Dinah exercised her own sense of self-worth by objecting to mistreatment and refusing to submit to the yoke of slavery. Further, it can be inferred that Dinah likely rejected the theological belief that despite salvation, her external nature was sinful. She refused to willingly submit to the notion of predestined suffering and oppression due to her blackness. Dinah transcended limiting biblical readings handed down to her in order to trust the "inner light" of her soul. Thus, she demonstrated self-determinism. Instead of meekly or blindly accepting her (so-called) fate, and waiting solely for heaven in order to experience freedom, Dinah fought to create her best life in the present. Like Marye and Francis, Dinah exercised spiritual agency by directly engaging contemporary institutions, both legal and ecclesiastical. In the midst of a deeply entrenched racial religion, culture, and society, these women defiantly defined their Divine worth.

5. Conclusions

Historical accounts of African women reveal the associations between ethnic identity and religious, cultural, and political exclusion in late sixteenth and seventeenth-century England. The accounts are

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[21] *The Athenian Mercury*, London, 23 May 1691; Quoted in (Molineux 2012, p. 99).

compelling because they shed light on the ways contemporary views of black ethnicity in relation to theological beliefs regarding salvation formed the core of ideological views that would contribute to the development of race as a construct. These historical narratives also make evident multiple dimensions of struggle in the lives of African women hampered by life in early modern England. Yet, there are signs of liberation forged by the women themselves, as they developed varying levels of righteous combativeness by embodying their faith in the midst of intersecting racist and sexist forces to assert spiritual determinism. African religious histories of early modern England beckon further scrutiny and analysis in order to unlock the complex and complicated aspects of related theological, cultural, social, economic, and political factors that contributed to modernity's establishment of white heteronormative patriarchal structures as well as ways that black men and women in these contexts resisted in order to create a legacy of militant spiritual resistance.

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