

**American Lazarus:  
Religion and the Rise of  
African-American and  
Native American  
Literatures**

*Joanna Brooks*

**OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS**

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## American Lazarus

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## Introduction

Oh Mary don't you weep,  
Tell Martha not to moan,  
Pharaoh's Army  
Drowned in the Red Sea,  
Oh Mary don't you weep,  
Tell Martha not to moan.

*American Lazarus* tells a story of redemption and regeneration. It reconstructs the founding moments of African-American and Native American literatures. These American literary traditions emerged during the era of the American Revolution, when blacks and Indians faced not only the crushing legacies of slavery and colonization but also the chaos of war, epidemic, resettlement, exile, and the political uncertainties of the new nation. In this portentous and dangerous time, pioneering black and Indian writers used literature to create a new future for their peoples. They redirected the democratizing, charismatic, and separatist energies of American evangelicalism and its powerful doctrine of rebirth into the formation of new religious communities, new theologies, and new literatures for people of color. By adapting, politicizing, and indigenizing main-line religious discourses, African-Americans and Native Americans also established a platform for their critical interventions into early national formulations of race. This book tells the story of how the earliest black and Indian authors established themselves as visionary interlocutors of secular nationalism and the American Enlightenment.

The most famous proponents of that Enlightenment did not regard their black and Indian contemporaries so highly. This is what Thomas Jefferson had to say about one of America's first black authors: "Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately; but it could not produce a poet. The

compositions published under her name are beneath the dignity of criticism.” Jefferson issued this blunt and bruising judgment of Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), a work itself designed to defend American nature and culture against charges of inferiority. The French philosophe Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte du Buffon, had argued that environment and climate determine human development; the North American environment, he judged, was so poor as to be degenerative. Jefferson countered Buffon by compiling his own observations on Virginia’s rich natural resources; the quality and variety of its flora and fauna; and the laws, customs, and cultures invented by its “native” inhabitants, aboriginal and modern. Among those distinctly American social inventions were certain laws sustaining a system of race slavery. This system, too, Jefferson attempted to naturalize as the necessary consequence of the inherent inferiority of the enslaved, who were by his estimation incapable of improvement. Phillis Wheatley was no natural genius, he insisted, but rather an unnatural and artificial production. Critics of Jefferson joined the argument with their own interpretations of Wheatley’s career. Thomas Clarkson, an advocate of African colonization and author of *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African* (1786), presented Wheatley as “proof” that blacks might attain equality if their “impediments” under slavery were “removed.” In *The Capacity of Negroes for Religious and Moral Improvement Considered* (1789), Richard Nisbet repented of his previously published opinions against black intelligence by offering the “moral natural and ingenious productions of Phillis Wheatley” as evidence of her race’s capacity for “rational moral” agency. Finally, Gilbert Imlay, a would-be rival in the field of natural science, argued in his *Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America* (1797) that no “white person upon this continent has written more beautiful lines” than she had.<sup>1</sup>

Wheatley did not live to see her role in this political and scientific controversy: she died impoverished in Boston in December 1784. However, her letters and poems reveal her to have been an acute critic of the limitations of rationalist philosophy and empirical science. In a February 1774 letter to her friend, the Mohegan minister Samson Occom, Wheatley criticized the inconsistencies of American slaveholders, “our modern Egyptians”: “How well the cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Powers over others agree,—I humbly think it does not require the penetration of a Philosopher to determine.” Her poem “To the University of Cambridge, in New-England” chastises the privileged “sons of science” who “scan the heights” and “mark the systems of revolving worlds,” yet cannot appreciate the implications of their studies. The worlds *do* revolve; the heavenly systems are *not* fixed; rather,

a sovereign God who will redeem the just and damn the unregenerate orders their motions. "Improve your privileges while they stay," Wheatley warns the young scientists. Speaking as an "Ethiop" with the voice of ancestry and prophecy, she exhorts them to remember that the powerful and chaotic forces of sin will quickly sink their ethereal aspirations into an "immense perdition," reducing the "transient sweetness" of privilege and human presumption to "endless pain."

This is what Phillis Wheatley knew that the "sons of science" were unwilling to acknowledge: that neither rational causes nor natural forces governed the events of this world. Having been seized by a slaver from her African home; having survived the horrors of the middle passage; having arrived in Boston wearing a scrap of dirty carpet at the age of six or seven, or so they guessed by her missing front teeth; having been purchased by a white family and named for the schooner which conveyed her—Phillis knew that there was nothing inevitable or natural about her arrival in America. Indeed, there was nothing inevitable or natural about the expropriation of 12 million Africans to the Americas and their perpetual enslavement. Reason did not appoint the death of at least 4 million North American Indians consequent to colonization, nor did nature direct the European appropriation of their aboriginal homelands.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, there was nothing inevitable or natural about the state of Virginia, the state of Massachusetts, nor the newly incorporated United States of America, notwithstanding the rhetoric of "natural rights" espoused by those who organized its national formation. Those "sons of science" would never acknowledge it, but Phillis Wheatley knew it, and Thomas Jefferson knew it too.

Jefferson knew that the "natural" nation was no inevitability but rather an argument to be won through careful scientific and political reasoning. Moreover, he knew that this construct was particularly vulnerable to the African-American population within its borders, then numbering more than 750,000 and comprising almost 20 percent of the United States total. According to Jefferson, this unnatural presence, this dark "blot" on the national body, threatened the stability of the whole:

Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest. . . . I think a change already perceptible, since the origin of the present revolution. The spirit of the master is abating, that of the slave rising from the dust, his condition mollifying,

the way I hope preparing, under the auspices of heaven, for a total emancipation, and that this is disposed, in the order of events, to be with the consent of the masters, rather than by their extirpation.<sup>3</sup>

Jefferson did not think himself a supernaturalist. His was “Nature’s God”—a deistic set of regulating principles, expurgated of miracles and mysteries—a force as straight and solid as the law of gravity. But this rare and fearful moment in the natural-scientific *Notes*, this vision of a “supernatural interference” in the course of human events, establishes a competing pattern and a haunting presence. Who was this other God reaching for the “wheel of fortune”? Was this the darker God dwelling in the shadows of the system, working unnamed and silent alongside the slaves to maintain its timely order? Did they plot together, God and the slaves, in the holy darkness of their Monticello quarters, behind an inscrutable veil of blackness, to overturn that very system? Was it not this same God who also “produced” through “religion” a slave poet named Phillis Wheatley? Jefferson’s mind grouped slave poets and religion, slave emancipation and divine intervention, into the same occultish and threatening space. Indeed, it appears that for Thomas Jefferson, God was black.<sup>4</sup>

Jefferson correctly sensed that the birth of the American nation was closely shadowed by a parallel rebirth, a resurrection, a “rising from the dust” in its communities of color. Like an American Lazarus, African-Americans and Native Americans were creating from the chaos of colonization and slavery new identities, new communities, and new American literary traditions. The 1760s and 1770s saw the first published works by black and Indian authors: *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, A Negro Man* (1760); enslaved poet Jupiter Hammon’s “An Evening Thought. Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Cries” (1760); Mohegan minister Samson Occom’s *Sermon at the Execution of Moses Paul* (1772); and Wheatley’s *Poems* (1773). These pioneering works were soon followed by Occom’s *A Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1774); John Marrant’s *A Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, A Black (Now Going to Preach the Gospel in Nova Scotia)* (1785), *Sermon to the African Lodge of Freemasons* (1789), and published missionary *Journal* (1790); Prince Hall’s two *Charges to the African Lodge* (1792, 1797); and the *Narrative of the Black People* (1794), penned by Absalom Jones and Richard Allen during the 1793 Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic.<sup>5</sup>

Now, more than two centuries after their initial imprints, the foundational works of African-American and Native American literature have been resurrected from the archives and restored to literary publication, study, and instruction.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, there is a significant need for more

information about pioneering black and Indian authors, the extent of their careers, and the diversity of their literary products. This book will introduce new and little-known works by eighteenth-century authors of color and establish the contexts for their creation. It strives to answer the questions raised by these lately remembered, twice-born texts: how did literature take shape out of the imposed chaos of slavery and colonialism? What were the necessary conditions for this genesis? How did slaves, ex-slaves, and indigenous peoples assume and exercise literary authority in the new United States of America?

In 1955, R. W. B. Lewis produced an abidingly influential account of American cultural and literary formation in *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. Lewis distilled from classic American literature a powerful and pervasive myth, which held that history began anew in the American experiment and which personified America as a prelapsarian Adam. He described this mythic persona as follows:

An individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. . . . His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. The world and history lay all before him. And he was the type of creator, the poet par excellence, creating language itself by naming the elements of the scene about him. All this and more were contained in the image of the American as Adam.<sup>7</sup>

This ingenious summary characterization of early nationalist ideology has shaped the way we think about our literature and its history. After Lewis, it seems, the American Adam appears everywhere in early national literature, striding with protagonistic boldness through novels, narratives, histories, and poems. Indeed, it sometimes appears that the American Adamic myth has taken on a life of its own as a master narrative for the “birth” of American literature. Adam’s footprints appear wherever scholars propose an innocent and ahistorical account of American literary beginnings, whenever we neglect the messier aspects of our history so as to preserve an exceptionalist or ethnocentric concept of national culture.

The earliest African-American and Native American authors did not share in this mythology. To them, the history of cultural and national origination was no fable of foreordained progress but rather a chronicle of cataclysmic change and determined survival. Their American story be-



gins not in the natural inheritance of the garden, but rather in the unnatural horrors of enslavement and colonization, in the Middle Passage, in forced displacement, in near extermination. From the residue of this shared suffering, from the detritus of scientific and political racism, they conscientiously constructed new identities as black and Indian people. The first black and Indian authors wrote from this space of instability and transformation. If their first forays into literature seem accidental, if their earliest works seem simple, this image masks the deeper paradox of their circumstances: the imperative to express inexpressible losses, to create community out of mutual alienation, to assert authority despite being denied basic humanity. It makes sense, then, that when they turned to their Bibles, early African-American and Native American authors sought out stories that honored their haunted and paradoxical circumstances and offered some key into the mystery of personal and community redemption. Their primary concern was not genesis but regeneration: not the static economies of prelapsarian innocence, but the tumultuous and emancipatory traversing of the Red Sea, the forty years' wandering in the wilderness, the deliverance from the tomb. The collective character of their stories resembles not the prototypical American Adam but instead an American Lazarus.

In this book, I will use the term *American Lazarus* to characterize a complex of concerns textualized in early African-American and Native American literatures. The biblical character Lazarus appears in two New Testament stories. The first, related in John 11, features Lazarus the ailing brother of Mary and Martha. Four days after his death, this Lazarus is summoned forth from the tomb by Jesus in a demonstration of the overruling power of God. His resurrection transforms Lazarus into a living example of this godly power, or even into a spectacle. But his witness is mute: if he did speak of his own experience, his words were not recorded in scripture. Thus the story of Lazarus invites unsettling questions: how does the world look to one who has faced and survived death? Is it possible to convey in human terms such a profound break in consciousness and existence? How is catastrophic change processed in body, mind, and spirit? What effects does it have on the body, experience, memory, relationship, and language? Similar questions arise in relationship to early African-American and Native American cultures. How does the world look to those who have faced and survived death, be it the involuntary deaths of kinspeople in the dark holds of slave ships, the suicides who threw themselves into the Atlantic rather than surrender their lives to slavery, or the carnage of colonial contagion—epidemic diseases, smallpox blankets, famine, and alcohol? Slavery and colonization entailed not only physical

but also social death, as the distinguished sociologist Orlando Patterson has explained, in alienation from homeland, family, culture, language, and humanity. How does the world look to those who have faced and survived this social death, to those who have been appropriated as chattel, displaced from ancestral lands, disabused of their native languages, rent from their kinspeople, hated, and hunted? Is it possible to convey in language—indeed, in the language of the enslaver and colonizer—such a profound break in consciousness and existence? How does such catastrophic change affect experience, culture, and language, not only in the first generation but in perpetuity? Unlike the resurrected Lazarus, African-American and Native American peoples did not remain entirely mute on these subjects. Their early writings reflect the imposed discontinuities, cruelties, and mortalities of life under slavery and colonialism, and they demonstrate the drive to claim life from death and meaning from chaos.

Just as the story of Lazarus encompasses both death and resurrection, this book will show how communities of color reclaimed and revived themselves in eighteenth-century America. Religious revivalism played a critical role in their creation of new black and Indian identities, new communities, and new literatures. Without exception, the first African-American and Native American authors were deeply implicated in the evangelical movements inspired by the first Great Awakening. Phillis Wheatley first won wide literary recognition for her “Elegiac Poem on the Death of That Celebrated Divine, and Eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the late Reverend, and Pious George Whitefield” (1770), wherein she ventriloquizes and thus resurrects the voice of this celebrity preacher and friend to the Wheatley family. Whitefield’s sponsor, Selina Hastings, the countess of Huntingdon, endorsed the publication of Wheatley’s *Poems* in 1773. Jupiter Hammon also chose religious themes for his first publication, and his literary career benefited from his associations with the New Light preacher Ebenezer Pemberton and with the Society of Friends. Samson Occom was educated by the New Light preacher Eleazar Wheelock at Moor’s Indian Charity School and later ordained by the Long Island Presbytery. His *Sermon at the Execution of Moses Paul* drew a large audience on the day it was preached at the gallows and later became a best-selling publication. John Marrant, Richard Allen, and Absalom Jones were also ordained ministers, empowered by the separatist impulses of evangelicalism and by the pressing needs of their own peoples to create their own churches, theologies, and modes of worship. Their pioneering contributions to American literature came about in connection with this broader regeneration, and they reveal how religious formulas such as conversion, revival, and resurrection answered the alienating and mortifying effects of slavery, colonialism, and racial oppression.

Tropes of revival and resurrection in general and the story of Lazarus in particular have long been important features of black religious and popular culture. Lazarus has figured in black visual arts, religious music, and popular music; this chapter opened with lines from “Mary Don’t You Weep,” a spiritual that compares the resurrection of Lazarus to the deliverance of slaves from Egypt, thus paralleling resurrection with freedom. This book shows that the Lazarus tradition reaches back into early black and Indian literatures, where we find the story of Lazarus explicitly referenced and implicitly incorporated in cycles of backsliding and renewal, in the life-and-death exigencies of survival on the colonial margins, and, importantly, as a performed feature of religious and spiritual ritual. The physical performances of death and rebirth I will describe in this book—baptisms by immersion, “falling out” at revivals, and Masonic ritual performances of resurrection—signified not only the transformation of the individual, but also his or her entrée into new communities which themselves sought collective regeneration. In choosing the story of Lazarus as a metanarrative for early black and Indian literatures, I do not seek to overimpose a Christian narrative against pre-Christian African and Indian cultural histories. Rather, Lazarus is also a surrogate for the multiple, unnamed, unspecified indigenous African and indigenous American belief systems that survived in and through Christian practices. The Lazarus trope recycles and binds together the multiple influences that constituted early African-American and Native American understandings of regeneration.

The figure of Lazarus also binds my work to recent studies of death and resurrection in culture and performance. In *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (1996), Joseph Roach writes that black and Native-informed performance traditions remember the role of “officially forgotten” “diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of the culture of modernity.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Sharon Holland’s provocative study, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (2000), asserts that literature and performance by black and Indian subjects can be understood as “speaking from the dead,” or, the rehabilitation of dispossessed and silenced spaces. In these “liminal” or “inverted” spaces—spaces outside the coercion of law, the state, the rational, the visible—“the living and the dead converge, mingle, and discourse,” remembering together unspeakable modern histories of violence and dispossession.<sup>9</sup> Both Roach and Holland situate literary and cultural criticism as a conversation with the dead, whose memories survive in text and performance, transgressing the boundaries modernity has constructed between this life and the next.

Finally, Lazarus represents questions of method and theory facing the

reader or scholar of early African-American and Native American literatures. These textual considerations are captured in a second New Testament Lazarus story. In Luke 16, a beggar named Lazarus dies and is taken up into the proverbial “bosom of Abraham”; meanwhile, the rich man who despised him is cast down into hell. The rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus as a messenger to his living relatives, to warn them of their imminent damnation. Replies Abraham, “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead” (Luke 16: 31). Like the story of Lazarus the resurrected, the story of Lazarus the beggar also indicates the overruling power of God in the overturning of human expectations and social hierarchies. It too assigns value to the lives of the afflicted and oppressed, suggesting that God chooses such lives as a medium for the revelation of the divine. However, Abraham raises an important question about the power of these Lazarus stories and the circumstances of their reception. He asks, Will those who ignore “Moses and the prophets” be convinced by a messenger arisen “from the dead”? Will those who ignored Lazarus the beggar in life hear him better in his death? Or, Will those skeptical of resurrection find any conviction in the testimony of Lazarus the resurrected? Abraham suggests that the significance of these Lazarus stories is contingent on the faith of the hearer or reader. Only those willing to see meaning in these lives, only those prepared for the strange and unsettling stories they tell will be able to fully appreciate them. The same may be said of early African-American and Native American literatures. It is not enough to recover these texts from the archival tomb. We must also be willing to believe in and search out their meaningfulness, even if that search entails a reformulation of our assumptions about literature, history, race, and religion.

Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd emphasize this important positivistic component of literary research in their introduction to *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (1990). They argue that “archival work”—especially as it unearths forgotten or neglected works by minority authors—can be a potent “form of counter-memory.”<sup>10</sup> This potential can be realized, however, only if readers and researchers are willing to value textual features specific to historically marginalized literatures, features that may indicate the legacies of historical oppressions. JanMohamed and Lloyd explain:

The positive theoretical work involves a critical-discursive articulation of alternative practices and values that are embedded in the often-damaged, -fragmentary, -hampered, or -occluded works of minorities. This is not to reassert the exclusive claim of the dominant culture that objective

grounds for marginalization can be read in the inadequacy or underdevelopment of 'minority' work. On the contrary, it is to assert that even the very differences that have always been read as symptoms of inadequacy can be reread transformatively as indications and figurations of values radically opposed to those of the dominant culture.<sup>11</sup>

Our challenge in the field of early American minority literatures is to recognize that differences in content, shape, and texture, which have been read as markers of "inadequacy," are in fact elements of signification. Even apparently simple texts can present a radical challenge to conventional understandings of American literature and, further, to the way we conceptualize literature, authorship, genre, tradition, nation, and history. In order to appreciate these radical possibilities, we must not underestimate the resourcefulness of early black and Indian authors. We must be willing to read in every textual feature the potential for intelligence and strategy. Understanding this literature requires a rigorous attention to details of publication, including place, printer, edition, and date; it requires careful examination of title pages, attestations, subscription lists, prefaces, and appendices; it enjoins us to consider carefully the mediating roles of amanuenses, editors, sponsors, and publishers, without summarily declaring a text compromised by association. Perhaps we must rethink our narrow notion of authorship as the exercise of an independent genius, for by that definition there were few authors in early America as a whole, let alone in its black and Indian communities. We must also use our full register of skills in literary analysis, to be alert to structure and repetition; to coded language use, unannotated scripture references, the shadows of earlier texts; to adaptations of or diversions from conventions of genre. We must consider the history of literary canonization: what happened to these texts after their initial imprints? Were they reissued? If so, when, where, how, and by whom? Did these texts remain important to specific social or religious communities? Who were the first literary critics or historians to remember them? We must review critically the various critical templates that have been recently applied to these literatures. Contemporary critical studies of early African-American and Native American literatures have been inclined to new historicism and especially to its concern with subjectivity. Is the lens of subjectivity the most germane and valuable way of viewing these texts? Does an occupation with subjectification not lead us to concentrate only on a narrow set of eighteenth-century life writings by authors of color, some of these narratives conscripted or confessional, and to ignore more interesting and complex works by the same authors? Take, for example, the literary career of Mohegan tribal leader and Presbyterian minister Samson Occom. Occom

scholarship has sometimes privileged an unpublished autoethnographic confession he delivered in 1768 to a prejudiced and skeptical faction of Boston ministers; almost no consideration has been given to the major literary project of his career, *A Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1774), a work groundbreaking in its interdenominational inclusiveness, rich with insight into the cohesive strategies of Christian Indian communities, and republished consistently into the nineteenth century. This book examines Occom's hymnal as well as underacknowledged works of early African-American literature. It seeks to locate meaning in the tropes, discursive devices, and tensions that emerge from these texts. I have sought to answer as many questions as I have raised, but I do not pretend to have mastered the often-occluded histories of early African-American and Native American authors and their writings.

Indeed, historical occlusion is a condition endemic to this field. This is because slavery, colonialism, and racism impacted not only the writing of literature but also the writing of histories and the keeping of records. Race, class, and gender determined the differential documentation of early American lives in government, church, business, and private records. Not all had equal access to literacy, political representation, church membership, or property ownership. Poverty, warfare, exile, illness, family separation, and forced displacement made poor conditions for the preservation of letters, manuscripts, and libraries. All of these factors make it impossible to reconstruct with confidence and perfect clarity the lives or careers of pioneering authors of color. More fundamentally, the way we conventionally think about history—as a continuous and developmental narrative, or as an epic driven by the decisions of individual heroes—denies the legitimacy of black and Indian experience in early America. Existing scholarship in African-American and Native American histories do provide information and insight essential to our interpretation of this literature. However, we must also be alert to the inevitable limitations of these scholarly histories, and we must consider the potential value of oral and tribal traditions as alternate means to decoding and understanding early literatures of color. Finally, no work of early African-American or Native American literature should be disqualified solely because we cannot verify against historical records the identity of its author or the authenticity of its contents. I do not mean to suggest that historical research is not important, or that vigilance is not required. Rather, I am arguing that the historical record is incomplete and that literature may in fact map out new facets of African-American and Native American experience. I would also argue that historical fidelity is not the first responsibility of literature. We are mistaken to think that early black and Indian authors did not exercise creative agency, even in texts presented as autobiographical.

What Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd argued for relationship of minority literature to conventional literary expectations may also be argued for its relationship to conventional history: “damaged,” “fragmentary,” “hampered,” or “occluded” historical documentation is not a “symptom of inadequacy” but rather a positive indictment of the difficult conditions under which early American writers of color worked and thus a consideration integral to the interpretation of their writings.

In summary, the story of Lazarus indicates the regenerative power of early American literatures of color as well as the methodological and textual challenges that attend their reading and interpretation. To honor those challenges, to appreciate now the value of eighteenth-century black and Indian writings is to participate in the regeneration of memory and thus the raising of the dead.

This book advances our understanding of how race was lived and how racial identities were formed in eighteenth-century America. I will show how the earliest African-American and Native American authors used religion and literature as instruments for transforming the meaning of race.<sup>12</sup> In their writings, race no longer designates some individuals for appropriation, expropriation, or annihilation; rather, it assumes new value as a site of common identification, shared histories and experiences, mutual allegiances and affiliations, and new communities—physical, social, cultural, theological, and ideological. This reclamation, recontextualization, and resignification is the same process Anthony Marx calls “race making from below” and which Howard Winant and Michael Omi term a “rearticulation” of racial identities.<sup>13</sup> Failing to recognize these processes of racial formation, too many contemporary literary critics have measured pioneering black and Indian authors against contemporary notions of racial authenticity. For example, some read Samson Occom’s profession of Christianity as compromising his Indian identity; others search in vain for a familiar black consciousness in the writings of Phillis Wheatley. While such readings imply that race is a transhistorical and natural essence, this book is premised on my understanding of race as a historically contingent and ideologically invested construction.

More recently, studies of early African-American and Native American literatures have focused on the ways authors strategically adopted dominant literary and cultural conventions to win and persuade white audiences. In *We Wear the Mask: African-Americans Write American Literature, 1760–1870*, Rafia Zafar describes this phenomenon as a wearing of literary “whiteface.” The calculated appeal to white readers both empowered and limited early authors of color, who sometimes masked their own profound revulsion, despair, anger, and frustration.<sup>14</sup> It is important to recog-

nize that interracial mediation or negotiation with Euro-American forms and audiences is not the only story encoded in early black and Indian writings—not the only, and perhaps not even the most compelling. *American Lazarus* engages another side of the story, revealing how early black and Indian writings mattered to black and Indian communities, documenting and instrumentalizing movements toward common identification and community regeneration. This book, then, redresses the misconception that early black and Indian authors wrote only for white audiences, that a significant filial community of readers and auditors did not exist until the nineteenth century. It resituates early literatures of color in relation to communities of color in early America.

In so doing, I honor calls by scholars of color to respect the intellectual integrity and longevity of their respective traditions. Native scholars like Jace Weaver (Cherokee), Robert Warrior (Osage), Craig Womack (Creek), and others have challenged readers to recognize the intellectual sovereignty of Native American literary culture. Weaver argues that the defining quality of Native literature is not its mediation of white expectations but rather its commitment to Indian communities, which he defines as a “we-hermeneutics” or “communitism.”<sup>15</sup> He explains:

Writing prepares the ground for recovery, and even recreation, of Indian identity and culture. Native writers speak to that part of us the colonial power and the dominant culture cannot reach, cannot touch. They help Indians imagine themselves as Indians. Just as there is no practice of Native religions for personal empowerment, they write that the People might live.<sup>16</sup>

Accordingly, I read early Indian texts as generative of new modes of community, new social histories, new theories and practices for Indian peoples.<sup>17</sup> I also read early black texts as both representative and constitutive of new social, cultural, religious, and political formations among African-Americans.<sup>18</sup> Together, then, this book takes early black and Indian literatures as builders of distinctive African-American and Native American intellectual histories.

As a study of early American racial formation, this book also responds to an emergent trend in early American studies to assert the ultimate “fluidity” or “hybridity” of race in early America, or to summarize early African-American and Native American literatures as products of “hybridization.” This trend often results from a misreading of postcolonial theory as simple anti-essentialism. The introduction of postcolonial theory to early American studies has furnished scholars with new models for understanding the circum-Atlantic movement of persons, cultures,



and ideas. However, some critics have mistaken concepts such as Paul Gilroy's black Atlantic to discount the power of race as a shaper of modern identities and cultures. For example, the editors of a recent collection of essays on early black Atlantic literature conflate Gilroy's formulation of the black Atlantic as a new geographical "unit of analysis" with the "de-centering of ethnic identity" propounded by Homi Bhabha; consequently, they claim that the very idea of a "black literary 'tradition'" is a "teleological distortion."<sup>19</sup> I find this claim objectionable for several reasons.

First, reducing the "black Atlantic" to a celebration of "fluid" identities overlooks the profound philosophical and political underpinnings of Gilroy's theory. For Gilroy, the black Atlantic is not only a supranational conceptualization of culture; the black Atlantic theorizes blackness as a "counter-culture of modernity" distinguished by its "politics of transfiguration." His formula demonstrates how black people have creatively, conscientiously, and electively reorganized the circuits of the slave trade into conduits for the expression of resistance to the violence of modernity. Locating the philosophical roots of blackness in the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, Gilroy suggests that blackness poses a fundamental challenge to modern conceptions of the nation, nature, reason, and freedom. Neither of these political or philosophical aspects of the black Atlantic is sufficiently articulated in the notion of "hybrid" or "fluid" identity.<sup>20</sup>

Second, declaring "hybridity" or "fluidity" of eighteenth-century racial identities wrongly suggests the ephemerality, immateriality, or evanescence of race in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. It is right to recognize that among eighteenth-century Europeans and Euro-Americans there was no consensual philosophical theorization, scientific formulation, or literary imagination of race. However, it does not follow that race was not a major determinant of lived experience. The inconsistency of learned discourses about race in eighteenth-century Europe does not correlate with the instrumental power of race in eighteenth-century America. Indeed, American legal theorists and historians of race have demonstrated that race—independent of scientific and philosophical theorization—consolidated as a legal concept in the British North American colonies from the 1660s onward. The determination of race in America was driven by political and economic conditions specific to the colonies and the new nation: the persistence of large-scale race slavery and the campaign to expropriate indigenous landholders. Gilroy's formulation accounts for these economic and historical forces driving the construction of race, as well as for the agency of people of color in reconstructing their own identities. The notion of "hybridity" evacuates these considerations of power.<sup>21</sup>

A third hazard that attends the classification of black and Indian cul-

tures as “hybrid” inheres in the historical usage of the term *hybridity* itself. As Robert Young demonstrates in *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (1995), the very notion of hybridity—especially as it is used in relation to people of color—originated in nineteenth-century racist theories of polygenism. Originally, it was developed to classify the offspring of interracial sexual unions; now, cultural critics use it to describe cultural production by non-European peoples under colonial and post-colonial conditions. The sexual overtones of the term *hybridity* suggests that these cultural products better reflect the successful penetration and replication of the colonizers’ culture than the original creative agency of the colonized.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, notions of “purity” and “hybridity” are often used to denigrate the legitimacy of modern Native American and African-American cultures.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, using hybridity as a rationale for rejecting the notion of “black literary ‘tradition’” devalues the continuing institutional and intellectual value of African-American studies. Early Americanists benefit tremendously from the labors of our predecessors and colleagues in African-American studies and American Indian studies. By their pioneering efforts in scholarship, teaching, and activism, by their determined defense of the intellectual value of these cultures, and by their struggles to obtain institutional support for work in these fields, they have made it possible to research, write about, and teach early American literatures of color. If we teach, write about, or profit from early American literatures of color without a conscientious reckoning of our relationship to the broader legacies and commitments of African-American and American Indian studies, then our labors can amount only to opportunistic antiquarianism.

Early African-American and Native American literatures demand that we grapple not only with race but also with the value of religion to early communities of color. Engaging the vital religious aspects of these writings is an enterprise fraught with its own complications. The scripture references—annotated and unannotated—that ripple through these texts privilege readers who know the Bible. Such references helped authors of color encode meaning and create insider discourse communities in the eighteenth century; in the contemporary college classroom, these same references can make outsiders of non-Bible literate students. Greater responsibility, then, falls to teachers of early African-American and Native American literatures to explicate the particular strategic and significant value of religion. This, of course, means that we must understand these values better ourselves. Our subject authors were trained, ordained, and sophisticated interpreters of major currents in American religious thought, as well as visionary innovators of new strands of religious belief

and practice. They were not merely dupes, apologists, or victims of missionary colonialism, as they are sometimes made out to be. Such views typically hinge on a rigid and outmoded Marxist rejection of religion as ideological delusion; they do not reflect a more contemporary cultural studies understanding of religion as a venue for creative and political agency.

Recent studies in early American literatures of color have called for this better understanding. For example, Katherine Clay Bassard in *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing* (1999) urges us to develop "greater sophistication in the theorizing of connections between literature and religion in general, given that it is becoming increasingly difficult to 'bracket' religion and religious experience as somehow extraliterary or not germane to issues of textuality."<sup>24</sup> Scholars in the fields of postcolonialism and subaltern studies have also called for greater attention to the role of religion in histories of empire and anti-imperialism. Gauri Visnowathan has presented an especially compelling analysis of conversion among the religious minorities and colonial subjects of the British Empire in *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (1998). Conversion, she argues, should not be interpreted merely as missionary mastery over the convert but rather as a convert act of resistance against traditional hierarchy, imperial control, and nascent secular nationalism. Following Visnowathan, we may read the religious aspects of early African-American and Native American writings as potential expressions of resistance against the ascendant secularization and rationalization of the late eighteenth century. Tropes of conversion figure the processes—death and resurrection, loss and reclamation, scattering and gathering, forgetting and remembering, abjection and testimony—through which blacks and Indians became "peoples." Religious discourse thus mattered not only to individual African and Native Americans but collectively as a language for their common condition. Acts of conversion were acts of self-determination.

Given their religiously expressed commitments to community regeneration, these literatures invite us to consider the regenerative possibilities of our own work as literary scholars and teachers. Who are we but revivalists, breathing life into old texts as we read them? If, as Derrida notes, the word *religion* can be traced to dual Latinate roots in *relegere*—"bringing together in order to return and begin again"—and *religare*—"linking religion to the link, precisely, to obligation, ligament"—is not our effort to rehabilitate these forgotten literatures in some measure a religious undertaking?<sup>25</sup> Walter Benjamin, in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," characterized historical research as a work of redemption and revelation: