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Blurring the Lines of Race & Freedom: Mulattoes & Mixed Bloods in English Colonial America. By A. B. Wilkinson. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. 320 pages. \$95.00 cloth; \$34.95 paper; \$26.99 electronic.

With a focus on people of mixed heritage—various combinations of African, European, and Indigenous—A. B. Wilkinson's *Blurring the Lines of Race & Freedom: Mulattoes & Mixed Bloods in English Colonial America* examines racial formation and the legal history of the regulation of people of mixed heritage. Wilkinson explores the history and experiences of people of mixed ancestry in the British colonies from the early seventeenth century to the eve of the American Revolution, ranging from the Chesapeake Bay region, the Carolinas, the northern colonies, and the several British colonies in the Caribbean. In British North America, European planters stole labor to build their own wealth and enslaved both African and Native American people. As Wilkinson argues, people of mixed ancestry, born from Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans, “complicated colonial systems of servitude and slavery” and “the struggle for freedom by people of blended ancestry and their families prevented colonial elites from firmly establishing a concrete socioracial order” (3). Going beyond previous scholarship in early American studies focused on the solidification of monoracial categories, this is an important contribution to the history of racial construction that explores the experiences of people of mixed heritage who posed challenges to British colonial society, class structure, and the institution of slavery.

While in all of the British colonies white settlers ascribed to hypodescent ideology—white superiority and the inferiority of those of African or Indigenous descent—how people of color were legally regulated varied widely between colonies. In the first half of the seventeenth century, racial categories were in the process of solidification and there was flexibility for people of color and of mixed heritage. By the 1660s, however, “officials sought to subordinate people of mixed descent, along with Africans and Native Americans, in a social hierarchy that favored those with solely European bloodlines” (25). The regulation of mixed ancestry people in legal codes was most strict in the Chesapeake, Maryland and Virginia, as well as the colony that later became North Carolina. These were colonies with high numbers of enslaved people and with significant intermixture. In South Carolina and the Caribbean colonies there were fewer such legal codes, despite much higher proportions of enslaved people by population. Indeed, officials saw racial mixture as inevitable because of the presence of so many enslaved people of color, often outnumbering white colonists, and took fewer legal steps to curtail intermarriage or regulate people of mixed heritage. In the northern colonies, enslaved people were a smaller proportion of the population and officials in those colonies likewise enacted fewer regulations than in the Chesapeake and North Carolina.

Wilkinson argues that, despite ever restrictive legislation meant to control people of color and keep them in bondage, those with some European lineage enjoyed more potential avenues to freedom than enslaved people with no European ancestry. Although these avenues remained few, enslavers were more likely to manumit

enslaved people of mixed heritage for a variety of reasons. But more importantly, those with European ancestry sought freedom in the colonial legal system by invoking their white heritage. White colonists held people of mixed heritage in various states of unfreedom, including slavery and indentured servitude, but people in bondage routinely fought for their freedom. As Wilkinson asserts, the parentage of people of mixed ancestry greatly affected their bids for freedom. Because so many children of mixed heritage were the product of rape or other nonconsensual or consensual relationships between white men and African or Native women, officials changed descent laws so that children inherited the bondage status of their mothers. This ensured that most of the resulting children would be enslaved and an economic benefit to their enslavers. Still, many mixed-heritage people managed to fight their way into freedom, and, over time, people of full African ancestry came to be equated with slavery, while people of mixed heritage were associated with communities of free people of color.

This association with freedom, or essentially a form of white or “mulatto” privilege, meant that people of mixed ancestry were more likely to acquire freedom than other enslaved people. Wilkinson argues that people of mixed ancestry had more success when they ran away from bondage because they could blend into free communities of color, which were comprised predominantly of people of mixed heritage. Escaped enslaved people could more easily blend into such communities than escapees of darker skin. Eventually some people were able to pass as white, but more importantly, mixed people with European heritage had more opportunities to pass as *free* than did their fellow enslaved people of full African or Indigenous lineage. Mixed people, often called “Mulattoes” or “Mustees” during this period, were also more likely to be trained in skilled professions, giving them yet another advantage when seeking freedom.

Although Wilkinson’s focus on racially mixed people and inclusion of people of Native American heritage pushes the conversation in new directions, and throughout he is clear that people of Indigenous heritage were part of this history, nonetheless the book’s main weakness is lack of engagement with scholarship in Native American studies. Incorporating work by Jean O’Brien and Nancy Shoemaker, for instance, would have brought additional nuance to this important topic. Even more conspicuously absent is the work of Tiya Miles, Claudio Saunt, and James Brooks, whose books specifically examine issues of mixedness among people of African, Native American, and European ancestry. Despite these absences, *Blurring the Lines of Race & Freedom* is a useful and well-researched addition to the literature on race in early America, packed with intellectual complexity and sophistication that brings new ideas on race and mixedness to the conversation in a readable and engaging way. Readers interested in the Atlantic World, early American history, slavery, and race, especially, will find much of value here.

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