Race-religion constellation: An argument for a Trans-Atlantic Interactive-Relational Approach

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Abstract
In this article, I argue that a trans-Atlantic account of the constellations of race and religion demands that we understand racist thinking to be constituted by complex conceptual formations and relations. The failure to identify the conceptual complexity and interactive relations in racist thinking has led to universalist and exclusionary definitions of racist thinking and limited conceptions of the constellations of race and religion. Because the supposed universal definitions of racist thinking are formulated from particular regions of the trans-Atlantic, it has led to the masking and rejection of other formations of racist thinking from other regions of the trans-Atlantic. To avoid this, this article proposes a Trans-Atlantic Interactive and Relational Approach (TAIRA) that can help us to continue unmasking and understanding the trans-Atlantic connections between race and religion.

Keywords
Race, Race-Religion Constellations, Religion, Trans-Atlantic, Interactive-Relation

Introduction
This article aims to offer an approach to unmasking the trans-Atlantic constellations of race and religion in their relational complexity. There is substantial literature that lays the ground for understanding the role which western Christianity or religion played and keeps playing in racialized discourses and practices (Wynter 1984, 1995, 2003; Mudimbe 1995; Masuzawa 2005; Carter 2008; Gordon, Grosfoguel, and Mielants 2009; Jennings 2010; Anidjar 2014; Meer 2013; Jansen and Meer 2020; Vial 2016; Heng 2018; Topolski 2018, 2020; Westerduin 2020). Some of this literature (Wynter 1984, 1995, 2003; Jennings 2010; Maldonado-Torres 2014a, 2014b; Jansen and Meer 2020) studies the trans-Atlantic (connections between Europe, Africa, and the Americas) and even global formations of the entanglements of race and religion. Central to how this literature unmasks
the trans-Atlantic constellations of race and religion is their conception of what defines racist thinking. What is considered racist thinking shapes the theorization of the connections between race and religion, and consequently determines what is considered racist and what is not. But for a complex sociopolitical formation such as the trans-Atlantic, what emerged in one region as racist thinking was not exactly the same as in other regions. In this article, I argue that some conceptions of racist thinking overrepresent some forms of racist conceptions as the only configuration of racist thinking which obscures and rejects other formations of racist conceptions in ways that limit our understanding of the trans-Atlantic connections of race and religion.

For a useful approach to unmasking the various ways in which the connections of race and religion emerged and was configured in different regions of the Atlantic, I propose that we understand that racist thinking, in the entanglement of race and religion, took on various forms and conceptual arrangements as they emerged and were configured in different regions of the Atlantic. By studying debates on the 15th and 16th century rise of racist thinking, I argue that the different forms of racist thinking were constituted by various conceptual arrangements which interacted in multiple ways as they co-constituted each other and constituted the trans-Atlantic. By presenting this argument, I submit a Trans-Atlantic Interactive Relational Approach (TAIRA), to unravel the constellations of race and religion. Since there are multiple sociopolitical communities entangled in the trans-Atlantic complex, by way of TAIRA, I propose that it is more useful to approach the trans-Atlantic constellations of race and religion as a space constituted by multiple nonlinear and interactive formations of racist thinking.

The imperative to take a TAIRA in unmasking and unravelling the trans-Atlantic constellations of race and religion makes, at least, three interventions. First, it allows us to have a more adequate understanding of the various and connected historical moments and different conceptual configurations of the constellations of race and religion without pitting them against each other in search for what may count as “proper” racist thinking. Second, TAIRA has the explanatory capacity to account for the pliability of the constellations of race and religion in response to different situations and the kind of power relations they have been employed to retain in the last 500 years. And lastly, TAIRA helps us understand how the malleable constellations of race and religion continues to be altered today to retain and maintain racist conditions. In other words, by studying the complex, dynamic, and non-linear and non-singular constellations of race and religion in the emergence of the trans-Atlantic, it helps us understand how the mechanisms are still in operation today in the racialization of Muslims, Jews, people of color, and the Roma in different and sometimes contradictory ways.

The article is divided into four sections. In the first part, I discuss how Nelson Maldonado-Torres defines racist thinking as it emerges in the formation of the trans-Atlantic, and how his conception of racist thinking privileges the Americas and thereby obscures other forms of racist thinking in Europe and Africa. In the second section, I discuss Sylvia Wynter’s conception of racist thinking in relation to Maldonado-Torres’ formulation. Engaging Willie James Jennings, the third section argues that racist thinking emerged with expressions that simultaneously denied the humanity of racialized subjects and recognized their humanity as two dimensions of racist thinking. I argue that a useful account of the trans-Atlantic entanglements of race and religion recognizes the conceptual complexity of racist thinking. In the last section, I challenge the view that a single category enabled other racist categories to emerge across the Atlantic. I propose that various related categories interacted across the Atlantic to form the constellations of race and religion. By showing the interactive relations of racist thinking on both sides of the Atlantic, I show the imperative of taking a TAIRA.
Racist thinking and the trans-Atlantic entanglements of race and religion

In his definition of racist thinking, Maldonado-Torres rejects what some scholars claim to be forms of racist thinking in Africa and Europe by arguing that racist thinking began to emerge in the Americas with the arrival of Christopher Columbus. Maldonado-Torres presents his conception of racist thinking and the Americas as the conceptual standard by which to define the emergence of the trans-Atlantic entanglement of race and religion. To be sure, in some instances, I read Maldonado-Torres’s work to be arguing against the privileging of anti-black racism as a basic lens by which to understand the racialization of other human populations, a discourse that has overshadowed the racism against Native Americans. This is a move I am sympathetic to. But the move to question the privileging of certain racist formations and conceptions over others is fundamentally undermined when Maldonado-Torres offers his own rendition of Columbus’s conception of racist thinking as marking the beginning of racist thinking across the Atlantic. In my reflection on Maldonado-Torres’s work therefore, I will focus on those arguments that obscure and dismiss the nonlinear, dynamic, and complex conceptual configurations of the constellations of race and religion at the dawn of the trans-Atlantic.

For Maldonado-Torres, race and religion have played a central role in the way non-Christian peoples and their ways of life have been perceived, constructed, and organized by western Christianity. Maldonado-Torres (2014b, 699) is particularly interested in showing how the category of religion became an anthropological category that was intimately entanglement with the logic of race at the dawn of modernity. A brief explanation of how Maldonado-Torres conceives of race as intrinsic inferiority is in order before I later show how it is constrained by a limited view of trans-Atlantic relations.

Critically engaging with Columbus’s comment that the native people of the Americas have no religion, Maldonado-Torres argues that the notion of religion was for the first time attributed with ontological and anthropological implications.

The absence of religion indicates the possible absence of a soul—as the perceived primary constituent of humanity that serves for establishing a relation between human beings and the divine. The concept of the nonreligious being also brings up a binary logic of its own that defies the triadic Christian view of peoples as Christians, infidels, or idolators. The triadic Scholastic Christian view of peoples presupposed the fundamental character of a divide between having true and having false religion, which presupposed the existence of religion and therefore of a soul. The concept of the non-religious proposes a different schema, based on the binary religious/non-religious, which presupposes the possibility of beings without souls and opens up a logic of differentiation that can culminate in the opposition between soul and non-soul. (Maldonado-Torres 2014b, 699)¹

In Maldonado-Torres’s view, the transformation of religion into an anthropological category working through the polarity of having a soul and not having a soul, translates into a human and non-human binary. Certainly, Maldonado-Torres compellingly illustrates how the native peoples of the Americas were forcibly inserted into an expanding western Christian world on the basis of questioning their humanity, illustrating one of the central characteristics in some tropes of racist conceptions and practices.

In transforming the category of religion, Maldonado-Torres argues that Columbus also invents “a subject who personifies inferiority in his [or her] very nature, and with respect to whom any action is possible, [and] establishes the beginnings of a radical subversion of the medieval theological world”

¹ Maldonado-Torres 2014b, 699
Three important points should be identified in Maldonado-Torres’s claims. First, race means inherent or intrinsic inferiority which translates into sub-humannon-humannity. Second, the invention of the subject of intrinsic inferiority and the beginning of racist thinking is marked by the transformation of the category of religion from an epistemological category to an anthropological category which underscores the co-constitution of race and religion (Maldonado-Torres 2014a, 651–652; 2014b, 700). And finally, as a consequence, Columbus begins the invention of racial modernity and the subversion of the medieval theological framework (2014a, 651–652). According to Maldonado-Torres’s view, from Columbus’s invention of the subject of intrinsic inferiority, white Christians would start to conceive of “themselves as a race, and gradually as ‘white,’ and no longer solely as cristianos/Christians. Here is where race enters the scene, proving to be intrinsically connected to the emergence of the anthropological view of religion and to the birth of the modern human sciences” (Maldonado-Torres 2014b, 700).

This definition of racist thinking has trans-Atlantic implications which should be taken seriously if we are to think of the trans-Atlantic as a space of numerous sociopolitical communities, geographies, and histories in interactive relations. Based on his definition of racist thinking, Maldonado-Torres claims that the Americas is the birthplace of racist thought across the Atlantic. Further, Maldonado-Torres’s efforts to set the Americas apart from Europe and Africa is coupled with the commitment to set the medieval and modern epistemological paradigms apart by way of rupture or discontinuity, even when he shows that religion plays a fundamental role in the rise of racist thinking. Let me briefly explain how Maldonado-Torres illustrates the epistemological and sociopolitical relations of the trans-Atlantic at the dawn of the trans-Atlantic constellations of race and religion.

As intimated, Maldonado-Torres suggests that race and modernity, not in the Americas, but across the Atlantic ocean, began to emerge with Columbus’s invention of the subject of intrinsic inferiority and the subversion of the medieval theological world. Of course, Maldonado-Torres does not argue that Columbus single handedly developed racist thinking. Rather, he contends that it was Columbus’s unique way of thinking about religion in relation to Native Americans and the discovery of the Americas that marked the beginning of racist thinking which nonetheless took a century to develop into modern racist epistemologies. He argues that before Columbus, forms of identifications and human differentiations in western Christendom were generally based on the discourse of *vera religio* (true religion) which questioned the epistemic veracity of Judaism and Islam, without fundamentally questioning the humanity of the adherents of these “religions.” Situating the discourse of *vera religio* in medieval scholars such as Maimonides (Moses Ben Maimon 1139–1204), St Albert the Great (n.d. – 1218), St Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), and Peter the Venerable (1092–1156), Maldonado-Torres argues that these thinkers, laid the foundation for the anthropological conception of religion or the rise of racist thinking. Among these medieval thinkers for Maldonado-Torres (2014a, 640), it was Peter the Venerable who questioned the humanity of Jews, and Maimonides who pushed the discourse of *vera religio* to its extreme by arguing that the people who do not have religion lack laws and rationality, and therefore are not human beings. In Maldonado-Torres’s view, religion was conceptualized as an anthropological category and became the seed of racist thinking. Even though dehumanizing articulations existed in the medieval western Christendom, Maldonado-Torres insists that “in the 12th century, Christian conceptions of the ‘Saracens’ were more than anything else defensive reactions against the power and prestige of the Arab-Muslim Empire” (2014a, 644), rather than racist conceptions.

Conceptually, Maldonado-Torres seems not to be troubled to argue that Columbus was the first to invent a subject of intrinsic inferiority, while he shows that both Peter the Venerable and Maimonides before Columbus conceptualized subjects of intrinsic inferiority through the category of
religion. Of course, there is a question of power relations which are accompanied by racist expressions. This line of inquiry remains underexplored in Maldonado-Torres’s exploration of the connections between medieval western Christianity and the emerging modern racial trans-Atlantic.

Moving from the height of the Middle Ages (circa 1000 to CE 1250) to the 15th century, the time of Columbus’ discovery and invasion of the Americas, Maldonado-Torres (2014a, 645–56) looks at the discourse of *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) and the Inquisition as modes of conceptualizing human difference, and as discourses of socio-political and economic intercourse. *Limpieza de sangre*, was an idea that developed in Spain (cir. 1443) to distinguish Christians with an older ancestry from those who had recently converted from Judaism and Islam. The idea held that non-convert Christians in Spain had pure Christian blood, and recent converts to Christianity (*contratos* and *moriscos*) had impure Christian blood. The impurity of the blood of the converts was polluted by the former “religions” of Judaism and Islam. The discourse of *limpieza de sangre* made an ontological connection between religion and blood, thereby making Christianity “proper” something one inherits through bloodline, and humanly superior to the inferior “polluted or impure” blood of recent converts or “New Christians” (Nirenberg 2014). In 1492 before Columbus invaded the Americas, Jews were expelled from Spain because of the statute of *limpieza de sangre* (Gordon, Grosfoguel, and Mielants 2009, 3). The Holy Inquisition (which was an institution of the Catholic church set to combat heresy through interrogation, torture, and lawful killing of innocent people), and the expulsion of the *conversos* (Jews) from the Iberian Peninsula by way of the discourse of *limpieza de sangre* in 1492, may have played an important role in the formation of Europe as fundamentally Christian in opposition to Jews and Muslims. But for Maldonado-Torres (2014a, 646),

the connection between blood relation and religious [*limpieza de sangre*] adherence established by the Tribunal of the Holy Inquisition represented another step toward the integration of political power with social control. This, however, still did not produce the relationship between religion, race, and empire that would be so fundamental for the modern/colonial world.

Regarding the capture of black Africans in Guinea (West Africa) by the Portuguese and Spanish traders and militants of western Christendom, which I will discuss later as another racial configuration, Maldonado-Torres argues that black Africans were seen as Moors, therefore a people with religion, albeit a false religion. Maldonado-Torres, therefore, concludes that enslavement of Africans was not based on racist thinking. He writes that:

The expansion of the category “Moor” to include [black] Africans was not strange, since *moro* is etymologically related to the Latin term for *negro* or black. Moor, then, was an ethnic and geopolitical category based on skin pigmentation and religion. It would be Columbus, on his first voyage to what Latin Christianity would come to know as the New World, who would transpose the basis for the identification of subjects to the uninhabitable zones. (Maldonado-Torres 2014a, 650)

For Maldonado-Torres therefore, a properly racist mentality begins to emerge with Columbus in the Americas. He argues that different conceptions and practices of human differentiation and socio-political and economic exclusion in western Christendom and Africa, particularly in the 15th century, prior to Columbus’s invention of the subject of intrinsic inferiority, do not amount to properly racist thinking. What is central to racist thinking, Maldonado-Torres contends, is the conception that some people are inherently not human which first appeared with Columbus’s encounter with native Americans. But when we engage other views on the conception of racist
thinking, we will see that Maldonado-Torres’ conception of racist thinking masks and rejects various ways in which racist thinking was constituted by the entanglements of race and religion across the Atlantic. It also blinds us to the multiple conceptual formations of the entanglements of race and religion, even within the Americas.

Racist thinking and dehumanization

To begin to show that a richer account of the trans-Atlantic constellations of race and religion emerged with various and complex forms of racist thinking which cannot be reduced to particular conceptions of dehumanization, I discuss Sylvia Wynter’s thoughts on what counts as racist thinking, how it emerged across the Atlantic, and how it relates to Maldonado-Torres’s conception. By doing this, I also begin to develop and show the relevance of TAIRA.

According to Wynter (1984, 1995, 2003), western Christianity provided the fundamental cognitive and epistemic structures from within which racist thinking emerged. Wynter develops her view of the trans-Atlantic constellations of race and religion and what constitutes racist thinking by way of her theory of the human. Here, I simplify Wynter’s complex theory of the human for the argument I am making in this article. Wynter argues that human beings, as a species, do not have an intrinsic or pre-given sense and meaning of what it means to be human. Rather, humans in every culture define what it means to be human by and for themselves. Every cultural conception of what it means to be human is invented in opposition to what is constructed as non-human or what she calls the “Human Other” (Wynter 2003, 265). According to Wynter’s theory of the human, every cultural construction of the human has with it, a discourse of the non-human that questions and denies the humanity of those it constructs and perceives as threats to its culturally constructed idea and practices of the human.

It is within her theory of the human that Wynter (2003, 265) argues that western Christianity emerged during the medieval times and “had defined the human as primarily the religious subject of the [Catholic] Church.” And “the physical referents of the conception of the Untrue Other to the True Christian Self [less than and non-human] had been the categories of peoples defined in religious terminology as heretics, or as Enemies-of-Christ, infidels, and pagan idolaters (with Jews serving as the boundary-transgressive ‘name of what is evil’ figures, stigmatized as Christ-killing deicides)” (265–66). According to Wynter, the denial of the humanity of others, both in actual sociality and in the imaginary, was central to the western Christian conception and practices of the human. The conception of non-Christians as less than and non-human shaped the organization of western Christian societies and structured the sociopolitical intercourse with Jews, Muslims, heretics and pagans as non-Christians, and therefore not only as less than human but as non-human. The critical point Wynter makes is that, while dehumanization is central to racist thinking, it is not unique to it. In addition, Wynter points us to a fundamental connection between race and religion. In Wynter’s view, one of the connections between religion and race is that they both fundamentally carry within them the logic of dehumanization because they are both discourses of the human.

Further, Wynter explicates the entanglement between race and religion as a secularized Christian discourse of the human. She writes that

The new symbolic construct was that of “race.” Its essentially Christian heretical positing of the nonhomogeneity of the human species was to provide the basis for new metaphysical notions of order. Those notions provided the foundations of the post-1492 polities of the Caribbean and the Americas, which, if in a new variant, continue to be legitimated by the nineteenth-century colonial systems of Western Europe, as well as the continuing hierarchies of our present global order. Such legitimation takes
place within the mode of subjective understanding generated from a classificatory schema and its categorial models, which, mapped onto the range of human hereditary variations and their cultures, would come to parallel those mapped onto the torrid zone and the Western Hemisphere before the voyages of the Portuguese, and that of Columbus. (Wynter 1995, 34)

Racist thinking is different from other discourses of the human because it is the secularization of the western Christian idea of the human in opposition to the non-human, as they first emerged in the construction of Native Americans and black Africans as less-than and non-humans. The fundamental connections between race and religion, in Wynter’s view, is found in the fundamental isomorphic logic of producing humans and non-humans or what she calls “nonhomogeniety of the human species” [ontological differences between groups of human beings] within western Christianity (Wynter 1995, 36). From the medieval “nonhomogeneity of the human species,” a “new symbolic construct of Race or of innately determined difference” emerges as a secular discourse of the human (11).

There are, at least, two important differences between the role of religion in medieval western Christianity and the globally ascending and self-secularizing western Christianity. One is geographical and the other is epistemological. The two, however, can not be separated because they reinforced and constituted each other. Firstly, Wynter argues that race, as it emerged in western Christianity, came to bear on a more expansive geographical space (which fundamentally changed the medieval geography of the world) and incorporated human populations who were never thought to exist during the medieval times. This discovery of new lands and new/different peoples changed western Christianity’s discourse of the human and non-human to include these new lands and peoples in their construction and understanding of themselves and the world (Wynter 1995). Secondly, the discovery of new lands and new peoples went hand in hand with the shifting knowledge systems from supernatural (religious) systems of knowledge to natural (secular) systems of knowledge which was driven by the 15th century renaissance humanism in western Christendom. Explaining the continuity of the production of difference among human beings from a supernaturally based to a nature-oriented episteme, Wynter writes that:

If at first the stereotyped image of “idolator” that had regulated Columbus’s own behaviors toward the indigenous people had, in the beginning, been the obstacle to a more inclusive propter nos [for us humans], it was soon to be replaced with a new “stereotyped image” based on the Aristotelian concept of natural slaves. This concept was generated from a new and powerful symbolic construct that would come to take the place, in the now-secularizing Judaeco-Christian cultural system, that religion and the sanction of the supernatural had earlier taken for the role-allocating structures of the feudal-Christian order, one that had been based on the principles of caste. (1995, 34)

On the relationship between Europe, Africa and the Americas, Wynter does not propose a fundamentally radical epistemic rupture or complete discontinuity between the medieval and the rise of the modern. She argues that the logic that came to produce race precedes the discovery and invasion of the Americas. In her trans-Atlantic approach, Wynter shows how the fundamental logic of religion or western Christianity, which later morphed into racist logic, shaped the formation of sociality in western Christianity and the relations between Christians to Jews and Muslims. It also shaped the discovery and invasion of Guinea (West Africa) and the enslavement of Africans before the discovery and invasion of the Americas.

For Wynter, the discourse of limpieza de sangre in Spain functioned within the emerging secular notion of the state, which was itself part of the larger secularizing discourse in western Christendom.
Shifting from the medieval western Christian construction of the human as a subject of the Catholic church, the discourse of *limpieza de sangre* began to construct the human as the subject of the Christian national monarchical state while retaining the centrality of the western Christian logic of the human. She writes that

the imposition of a single orthodox faith, that of Christianity, under the aegis of the Inquisition as an agent of the new state had given rise to the problem of the conversos or converts, either Moriscos (Muslim converts) or Marranos (Jewish converts). It was, therefore, in the context of the shift from being a primarily religious subject, for whom the “name of what is evil” was/is that of a common enslavement by all mankind to Original Sin, to that of being a political subject of a state (yet unified on the basis of its Christian creed) that the Other to the norm of this subject was to be the category of the conversos, both Marranos and Moriscos. A specific reprobation was therefore now placed on these two categories: that of their impurity or uncleanness of blood, and also of their faith, because descended from ancestors who had practiced the Jewish and the Islamic creeds. (Wynter 2003, 308)

For Wynter, contrary to Maldonado-Torres, the discourse of *limpieza de sangre* cannot be construed as mere rhetorical tropes because it figures in the discourse of the human and non-human or those who threaten to stain or corrupt what western Christianity in Spain was then constructing as the human. Even though the discourse of *limpieza de sangre* is a discourse of the human and its “Human Other,” Wynter does not name it racial, until it is deployed in the Americas. It became racial, not because it did not question the humanity of those it considered not properly Christians, but rather because it was being applied on global populations beginning with Native Americans and black Africans. And more importantly, in the Americas unlike in Iberia, it was enunciated from within a developed secular metaphysical order based on a natural metaphysical order, as opposed to a supernatural metaphysical order that governed the conception of the human in medieval Christianity.

Maldonado-Torres engages with Wynter’s conception of racist thinking and finds it insufficient. He argues that his main aim for engaging with Wynter (2014b, 700) is to show that the “idolator was not the only category that was mobilized to refer to the indigenous people of the Americas, but that the category of Indio/“Indian” was created as well.” In this claim, Maldonado-Torres seem to be proposing a similar point to that I put forward here, that is, there are various categories and conceptual arrangements which were mobilized in the production and practice of racist thinking. However, it seems Maldonado-Torres’s variety is limited to the Americas, while I am proposing that we must also unmask the variety of categories on the eastern side of the Atlantic. Maldonado-Torres (2008, 18, 182) argues that,

At the same time, Indio/“Indian” was not simply an extension of the already known category of the idolator, but also an anthropological expression (before the birth of the modern human sciences) mounted on the idea of the being without religion that indicated that Europeans began to conceptualize the world as being divided, not simply between those with true and false religion, but more fundamentally between subjects with different degrees of substance—thereby producing what I have referred to elsewhere as sub-ontological difference, or difference between Being and the active negation of being—as in some practices of dehumanization.

But one gets the sense that he is not taking into account Wynter’s (1995, 32) argument that the category of the “idolator,” as it emerges in medieval western Christianity, already fundamentally carried with it an anthropological difference founded on different ontological degrees of the human.
In Wynter’s theory of the human, the category of “idolator” bellied a sub-ontological difference from the category of the Christian subject of the church as the figure of the proper human in medieval western Christianity. Wynter (2003, 291–292) argues that European colonization of Africa and the New World was carried out within the order of truth and the self-evident order of consciousness, of a creed-specific conception of what it was to be human—which, because [of] a monotheistic conception, could not conceive of an Other to what it experienced as being human, and therefore an Other to its truth, its notion of freedom. Its subjects could therefore see the new peoples whom it encountered in Africa and the New World only as the “pagan-idolators,” as “Enemies-of-Christ” as the Lack of its own narrative ideal. This was consequential. It set in motion the secularizing reinvention of its own matrix Christian identity as Man.

It is therefore clear in my reading of Wynter that the category of the “idolator” was an anthropological category expressing a sub-ontological difference from the Christian subject who was the narrative ideal of the human. As earlier intimated, Maldonado-Torres is committed to showing that something novel in the way of thinking emerges when Columbus encounters Native Americans, and this novelty begins to shape the emergence of racist thinking. Further, this new way of thinking about Native Americans by Columbus both fundamentally shapes conceptions and modes of sociality in the Americas, and it also effects and enables, or to use Maldonado-Torres’s words, “led to the formation” (2014b, 699) of new conceptions of human difference on the eastern side of the Atlantic (Africa and Europe), as he writes “from then on [after the transformation of religion as an anthropological category on native Americans] Europeans would begin to conceive themselves as a race, and gradually as “white,” and no longer solely as cristianos/Christians” (2014b, 700). Of course, there are other accounts of how Christians began to see themselves phenotypically as white Christians that predate Columbus’s violent encounter with native Americans as I will show in the next section.

Racist thinking and conceptual complexity

The trans-Atlantic constellations of race and religion emerged by way of complex and various conceptual forms. Hegemonically, there was no single conception of non-whites and non-Christian as less-than human and non-human. In most cases, the questioning of the humanity of those considered Others to white Christians was coupled with the recognition of their humanity which, taken together, was employed to legitimize colonization, expulsion, domination, and consequently dehumanization. The tendency to reduce racist thinking to explicit dehumanization only, whilst leaving out modes of recognition and imposition of a certain definition of the human, obscures the complex ways by which racist thinking emerged and functions to exclude and dehumanize. In this section, I point out some of the conceptual complexities that formed the trans-Atlantic constellations of race and religion to show the imperative of TAIRA.

In The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origin of Race (2010), Willie James Jennings shows some entanglements of race and religion by arguing that racialization began from within western Christian thought and practices. Jennings marks the rise of the trans-Atlantic constellations of race and religion at the beginning of the direct link between the Iberian Peninsula and West Africa. I want to highlight two of Jennings’s arguments.

First, Jennings argues that racist conceptions in Iberia emerged by way of the western Christian hierarchical conception of human difference through human phenotype which centered on the
disregard of the humanity of black Africans, Muslims (Moors), and Jews which muddies the centrality of the Americas in narratives of the emergence of racist thinking. Second, Jenning’s reflection on Zurara’s discourse on human hierarchical difference invites us to uncover that racist thinking, as it emerged trans-Atlantically, was not only expressed by way of denying the humanity of the racialized, but also in the conferring of humanity on black Africans.

In 1444, Portuguese explorers and invaders had captured about 235 West Africans who were later turned into slaves. At the arrival of these captured Africans in Lagos, which was a momentous occasion in the growing overseas colonial enterprise, the Portuguese imperial chronicler Gomes Eanes de Zurara in his 1452 imperial chronicle of the 1444 event described the captured Africans as follows:

On the next day, which was the eighth of the month of August, very early in the morning, by reason of the heat, the seamen began to make ready their boats, and to take out those captives, and carry them on shore, as they were commanded. And these, placed all together in that field, were a marvelous sight; for amongst them were some white enough, fair to look upon, and well proportioned; others were less white like mulattoes; others again were black as Ethiops [Ethiopians], and so ugly, both in features and in body, as almost to appear (to those who saw them) the image of the lower hemisphere. (Zurara [1452] in Jennings 2010, 18)

In analyzing the above passage, Jennings argues that Zurara establishes a “scale of existence,” that is, the degrees of humanity, based on a human phenotype with white at one end and black on the other: “There are those who are almost white—fair to look upon and well-proportioned; there are those who are in between—almost like white mulattoes; and then there those who are as black as Ethiopians, whose existent is deformed. Their existence suggests bodies come from the farthest reaches of hell itself” (Jennings 2010, 23). Zurara also connects the blackness of Africans to the lands of the lower hemisphere. In making the connection between black Africans and the lower hemispheres, Zurara establishes the condition that justified Christian authority over black Africans and their enslavement. The “existential scale” takes up not only aesthetic judgements in terms of skin color and beauty, but it is primarily an ontological scale that is founded on the biological and socio-political construction of human difference within a western Christian imaginary. Black Africans come from the “farthest reaches of hell itself” (which explains their deformity), Zurara thought, and the only way to save their souls is to transform them into chattel within Christian history (Jennings 2010, 22–23).

More importantly for my argument, in addition to questioning the humanity of those peoples whom he believed came from the lower hemisphere, Zurara does not claim that the captured Africans do not have souls in order to legitimize their chattel enslavement and consequent dehumanization. Rather, it is precisely because black Africans have souls that Zurara believes Africans need to be transformed into chattel slaves to save the humanity of the Africans. It is the humanity of the captured Africans that Zurara believes he wants to save from deformed non-white bodies. To be sure, Zurara identified the common humanity between him and the captured Africans when writes that: “if the brute animals, with their bestial feelings, by natural instincts understand the sufferings of their own kind, what wouldst Thou have my human nature to do on seeing before my eyes that miserable company, and remembering that they too are the generation of the sons of Adam” (1899, 81). Here, in a true Christian political fashion, Zurara establishes the shared humanity between him and the captured Africans, which he employed to legitimize the disregard of their humanity by way of enslavement.
While holding that black Africans are human as he is, Zurara also claimed that black Africans were descendants of Ham, which made them inherently slaves because they were cursed by God to be slaves of all peoples, even to light-skinned Moors (Russell-Wood 1995). Zurara writes that a captured light-skinned Moor asked his Portuguese capturer Antam Gonçalves to take him back to his country, where he declared he would give for himself five or six Black Moors; and also he said that there were among the other captives two youths for whom a like ransom would be given. And here you must note that these blacks were Moors like the others, though their slaves, in accordance with ancient custom, which I believe to have been because of the curse which, after the Deluge, Noah laid upon his son Cain, cursing him in this way;—that his race should be subject to all the other races of the world. And from this race, these blacks are descended. (de Zurara 1899, 54)

In Zurara’s construction of black Moors, we see a complex conception of racial difference that is at once founded on the idea of inherent shared humanity because all people are “generations of sons of Adam.” And besides the view of a shared humanity, there is also the view of the innate difference and intrinsic inferiority of black Africans through the curse of Ham. To emphasize one conception over the other is to miss the conceptual relations of the two conceptions within a single racist thinking. To define race as only innate difference or intrinsic inferiority, blinds us to the complex conceptual relations of how conceptions of race emerged across the Atlantic, and limit our capacities to unravel the multiple ways race and religion entangle.

Zurara’s double conceptual form that I discuss here was also shared by Columbus in his designation of native Americans as lacking religion, the view that Maldonado-Torres translates into an absence of a soul. Here, I will cite Maldonado-Torres’s quote of Columbus:

They all go naked as their mothers bore them.... I supposed and still suppose that they come from the mainland to capture them for slaves. They should be good servants and very intelligent, for I have observed that they soon repeat anything that is said to them, and I believe that they would easily be made Christians, for they appeared to me to have no religion. (Colón 1969, 55–56 in Maldonado-Torres 2014a, 638)

In addition to this quote, Maldonado-Torres writes that

Later, on Tuesday, 27 November 1492, Columbus also writes that it will be easy to convert the Indians to Christianity since ... “they don’t have religion nor are they idolaters” (Colón 1986: 110). Other observations that appear in Columbus’[s] travel log include an entry from December 21 of the same year, which indicates that Columbus already counted the Indians as Christians and subjects of the King, and that the only thing lacking was teaching them the Castilian language and to “command them” ... “because they will do everything that is asked of them without questioning” (Colón 1986, 141). (Maldonado-Torres 2014a, 638–639)

While Maldonado-Torres reads Columbus’s view that Native Americans lacked religion to mean that they lacked souls, Columbus concomitantly believed that Native Americans could make good Christians, which meant that he considered them human beings. Certainly, one needs to be human to become Christian—an argument that Bartolomé de las Casas will pick up decades later. Yet, Columbus’s conception of Native Americans as people who can become Christian is fundamentally tied to the view that they can only occupy a lower and instrumental position within a Christian sociopolitical community. Conceptually, it seems to me that, in part, it is because of Columbus’s
recognition of Native Americans as human beings that justifies his perception of Native Americans as potential subjects of the Spanish monarch and their subsequent subjugation to the emerging white Christian world. Further, Columbus did not avoid ranking Native Americans on what Jennings has called an “existential scale” between white and black that one also finds in Zurara’s discourse, thereby contributing to establishing the trans-Atlantic racist conceptual formations interactively (Jennings 2010, 29–31).5

Zurara’s conception and justification of African enslavement is one form of racist thinking that stands in relation with others, which Maldonado-Torres’s exclusionary view of racist thinking obscures and refuses to recognize. In addition, in the conceptions of race as intrinsic inferiority, there are conceptual differences across the Atlantic that were facilitated by spatial and temporal differences. For example, even though both Columbus’s transformation of the category of religion from an epistemic to anthropological category (on Maldonado-Torres’s reading) and the curse of Ham have a sense of producing subjects of intrinsic inferiority and innate difference, they are nonetheless conceptually constituted differently. For Maldonado-Torres, the categories of race and religion were co-constituted to produce subjects of intrinsic inferiority, i.e. the category of religion was transformed into a racial category. On the other hand, the Hamite co-constitution of race and religion is the transformation of a religious category of Ham (not the category of religion itself) into a racial category. The failure to identify the complexity of the conceptual relations in the early trans-Atlantic emergence of the constellations of race and religion leads to the dismissal of differently configured racial conceptions because they do not resemble or fit into a proffered singular definition of race as innate difference or intrinsic inferiority which emerged in a specific spatial-temporal configuration. What I am suggesting is that, if we wish to unravel the trans-Atlantic emergence of racist conceptions to better understand how race and religion configure today, we must be open to seeing multiple racial conceptions in different locales across the Atlantic. We need to understand that the trans-Atlantic constellations of race and religion emerged in an interactive-relational fashion even at the conceptual level.

**Interactive relationality of multiple ideas**

In thinking about the different categories and conceptions that constituted the trans-Atlantic constellations of race and religion, I propose that it is more useful to read ideas as moving back and forth across the Atlantic as they sedimented racist thinking and practices. This opposes Maldonado-Torres’s claim that the category of “idolator” gave way to the category of “Indios/Indian,” which in turn “led to the formation of the notion of the “nigger”” (Maldonado-Torres 2014b, 699). But this linear projection of the movements of conceptions and categories may account for some of the conceptual developments in some parts of the Americas, but it does not account for dominant conceptual developments in the Americas more generally and on the eastern regions of the Atlantic in Africa and Europe. For the notion of the “nigger,” an English translation of the Portuguese and Spanish negros, as the non-human other to the white western Christian subject, did not emerge out of the category of the “Indios/Indian.” To be sure, the category of negros as a less-than and non-human category emerged before the discovery and conquest of the Americas. While Wynter and Maldonado-Torres focus on the Spanish settlements in the Americas, the early Portuguese settlers in the Americas had different dominant categories for the Native Americans from the Spanish settlers. For instance, John Monteiro’s (2018) historiography of early Portuguese settlements in today’s Brazil shows that Native Americans were commonly referred to as the Negros of the Land (negros da terra). This nomination was a translation of the anthropological and sociopolitical conceptions of black Africans that the Portuguese had constructed on the eastern
Atlantic. Rather than arguing that one category ("Indios" or "negros") preceded the other, I am contending that it is not useful to narrate linear movements of these ideas if we are interested in unmasking the trans-Atlantic constellations of race and religion. Categories and their conceptual content moved back and forth across the Atlantic as they founded and sedimented racist thinking and practices that created the different conditions for the dominance of white Christianity.

Black Africans, Jews and Muslims in Europe and Africa did not go through the baptism of the category of "Indios" to be conceptually and socio-politically constructed as racialized subjects of western Christian modernity. Even though the discourse of the “Indios” played a co-fundamental role in the rising of the secular conception of the human and contributed to transforming conceptions of Jews, Muslims, and black Africans on a trans-Atlantic platform, it did not give rise to the notions of the negro, Jews and Muslims, as racialized subjects. My argument is that they were reinforcing each other in various ways.

The emergence of racist conceptions depended on the interactive relations between local configurations of human phenotype, religious difference, socio-economic needs and the emerging trans-Atlantic and global white Christianity. On a similar point, Goldberg argues that

The globalization of the racial is predicated on the understanding that racial thinking and its resonances circulated by boat in the European voyages of discovery, imported into the impact zones of colonization and imperial expansion. Racial ordering, racist institutional arrangement and racial control were key instruments of colonial governmentality and control. Made local to apply to lived conditions of the everyday, the colonies became in turn sites of state experimentation, as Bernard Cohn (1996) has long argued, laboratories for metropolitan class rule, the maintenance of order, rehearsals in the intimacies and morals of class life (Stoler 2002; 2006). (Goldberg 2009, 1275)

The idea of globalization in Goldberg’s claim, when thinking about the dawn of the trans-Atlantic constellations of race and religion, can be misleading if it is taken to mean the global spread of already constructed racial conceptions and practices. In the emergence of the trans-Atlantic constellations of race and religion, globalization itself was the process that marked the interactive relational beginnings of racist conceptions and practices, not the distribution of already sedimented ideas, practices, and institutions. The process of the globalization of Christian history brought about interactive relations between and among different global human populations and histories by way of violence and dehumanization as the norm for sociopolitical intercourse.

The failure to see the interactive and multiple configurations of racist thinking may lead to privileging some conceptions of racist thinking and the regions from which they emerge, over others. This has been particularly the case with the Americas. TAIRA, therefore, challenges the centrality of the Americas in relation to Africa and Europe in the rise of the trans-Atlantic entanglements of race and religion. Benjamin Braude wrote that the study of the rise of modern racism “privilege[s] the discovery of America over that of Africa, which both must be seen as intimately related parts of the same process” (1997, 104). Wynter’s work allows us to see some related aspects of the emerging process of the trans-Atlantic constellations of race and religion, although in some instances she also seems to suggest that the Americas is the birthplace of racist thinking. Next to the discovery of Africa, I wish to emphasize the place and role of Europe in the formation of the trans-Atlantic triangle. Importantly, the trans-Atlantic triangle should be approached without a privileged region, if we are to understand the multifaceted trans-Atlantic constellations of race and religion at the dawn of modernity as the same process intimately entangled in different regions and temporalities across the Atlantic.
To be sure, chronologically speaking, Maldonado-Torres’s claim that the modern racial conception began to emerge in the Americas through Columbus’s violent encounter with the native peoples of the Americas has been challenged. Echoing Russell-Wood’s (1995) and Jennings’s (2010) claims about the rise of modern racist thinking in the Iberian peninsula before 1492, Rima L. Vesely-Flad argues that “Columbus was only one representative of the racial imagination that had taken hold in Portugal and Spain in the 15th century” (2017, 6). However, to present Columbus’s expression of the constellations of race and religion and what came after in the Americas as only representative of what had earlier developed in the Iberian peninsula is not compelling and risks masking novel and numerous ways in which the connections between race and religion emerged and became established at the dawn of modernity across the Atlantic. In this way, chronology tells us nothing about the interactive-relational configurations of these events besides their chronological order. This approach to conceptualizing the trans-Atlantic constellations of race and religion becomes reductive and impoverished. This leads to stereotypical definitions of racist thinking that mask their conceptual and material particularities and relations, and displaces the singularities of other racial configurations in different places. Without taking a TAIRA to unmask the connections of race and religion both at the dawn of the trans-Atlantic and in our present sociopolitical conditions, we lose sight of the multi-configurational interactive-relational characteristics of the emergence of the constellations of race and religion across the Atlantic.

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Notes
1. For a slightly different formulation, see: Maldonado-Torres (2014a, 641).
2. A different view on the genealogy of the discourse of true religion with the focus on Europe is given by Topolski 2018; 2014.
3. At Zurura’s time, the lower hemisphere was understood to be the region beyond the Cape of Bojador. Zurara writes that it was believed that “beyond this Cape [of Bojador] there is no race of men or place of inhabitants: nor is the land less sandy than the deserts of Libya, where there is no water, no tree, no green herb” (de Zurara, Beazley, and Prestage 1899, 31). A belief that was challenged by the Portuguese when they encountered black Africans and vegetation beyond the Cape of Bajador as Zurura goes on to show.
4. Italics, brackets and square brackets are Maldonado-Torres's. Direct quotes are Columbus’s words translated by Maldonado-Torres from Spanish.
5. It is also important to point out that racist thinking and practices did not only figure by way of the “existential scale” within white and black binary. There are other lines of hierarchy such as religion, idolator, and pagan.
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