

The Cultural Politics of Blood, 1500–1900. Kimberly Anne Coles, Ralph Bauer, Zita Nunes, and Carla L. Peterson, eds.
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“Strange is it that our bloods,” muses the king of France in Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well*, “Of colour, weight, and heat, poured all together, / Would quite confound distinction, yet stands off / In differences so mighty” (2.3.114). The essays collected in *The Cultural Politics of Blood, 1500–1900* pose a variety of approaches to the paradox informing the king’s comments and embedded in so many scholarly investigations of blood: that all bodies bleed would seem to reaffirm similarity, but blood is consistently and vigorously used to define and defend human difference. Covering four centuries in England, Spain, and the Anglo- and Ibero-Americas, the essays in this volume are motivated by the interconnection between blood and the concept of race. Just as blood may hold shifting, contradictory metaphorical power alongside its material significance, race undergoes no singular, linear evolution over the geographic and temporal scope of this book. Crucially, *The Cultural Politics of Blood* works to interrogate and often undermine the most commonly accepted cultural histories of blood and race.

Scholars intrigued by this collection’s title may find it initially disorienting, as the essays vary widely in method and scope. Anna More’s thoughtful analysis of the poem “First Dream” by the cloistered nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz — writing in seventeenth-century Mexico City — concludes that the poem invents “a language of desire” (129).

More's contribution is followed by Hannah Spahn's dazzling essay "Blood and Character in Early African American Literature," in which Thomas Jefferson's blood "is in some measure comparable to, and competing with, the ink of his writings" (146). For this reviewer, however, multiplicity of approach and focus is precisely the collection's chief strength: the essays in this book stake out positions that reveal the specificity of time and place to cultural attitudes toward (and politics of) blood.

To that end, the collection eschews chronological organization and instead divides its essays into three sections: "Race and Stock," "Moral Constitution," and "Medicalizing the Political Body." The essays of the first part attend to the inherency of blood to racial logics as well as the complex ways in which such logics intersect with divisions of class and genre. Rachel L. Burk argues that the metamateriality of *Don Quixote* reveals that blood purity "is itself a fiction, based in part on a much-falsified paper record to support and define bodily identity" (41). Similarly, Jean E. Feerick's analysis of seventeenth-century pastoral dramas by Fletcher and Milton claims that they ultimately strike "deeply at the idea of an hereditary order and the account of immanence on which it depended" (81). In part 2, the essays explore the relationship of soul to body within the context of medical discourses, illustrating the degree to which religious belief was naturalized, embodied, and racialized through the language of blood. M. Lindsay Kaplan revisits medieval blood lore about Jews that posited, among other things, that Jews were subject to an unnatural, menstrual-like bleeding disease. In contrast to many scholars who argue such lore was intrinsic to early modern representations of Jews, however, Kaplan shows that Jewish "somatic inferiority" was in fact waning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The third part addresses blood's role in various models of the political body. Robert Appelbaum argues that William Harvey's writings of the circulation of the blood ultimately transformed the heart from a metaphorical "sun, an author, a king" to a "de-metaphorized . . . mechanical device" (176). The notion that blood was the substance of life and the heart a mere pump thus "had a decisive impact on how the operations of the body politic could be understood" (173). James Downs's trenchant contribution on representations of suffering during and after the American Civil War illustrates the stark difference between bleeding white and black bodies in the period; the former "gave the abstract concept of the nation corporeality" (217), whereas the latter were "not recorded or documented because [they] did not symbolize the nation" (222).

This challenging and provocative collection will be of great value to scholars of blood, race, or any related concept within the period covered. The editors argue that the volume "charts the traffic of blood in the circulation of the race concept and suggests a compelling history of race written in blood" (18). That history is — as would be expected from any bloody writ — as messy as it is deeply compelling.

Ariane M. Balizet, *Texas Christian University*