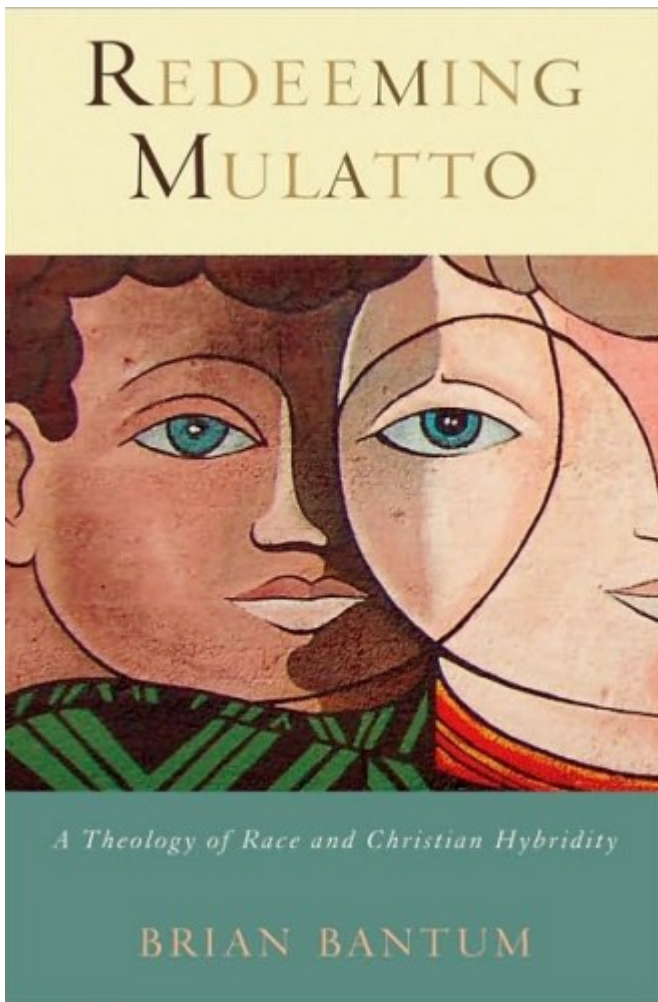


Black and white thinking

by [Edward P. Antonio](#) in the [February 8, 2012](#) issue

In Review



Redeeming Mulatto

By Brian Bantum
Baylor University Press

Read Jonathan Tran's cover story on [the new black theology](#)

Redeeming Mulatto presents a complex argument about theology and race. It is impossible to do it justice in a short review. Brian Bantum persuasively challenges traditional ways of thinking about race in the United States by theologically retrieving interracial identity as an important category that has been unduly neglected. In this way he addresses the American tendency to understand race relations in terms of the binary opposition between black and white.

Bantum describes the historical experience of being mulatto/a by suggesting that race in the U.S. functions like religion or as a form of discipleship into which we are all recruited. He develops a mulattic Christology in which Christ is a tragic mulatto who refuses racial kinship identity precisely by occupying a neither/nor space of in-between existence. Finally, he describes how we can become reborn into genuine Christian discipleship beyond the constraints of racial belonging and loyalties.

Several points of departure sustain the book's many arguments. First, Bantum contends that race is rooted in the history of slavery and the classification of peoples into racial groups that characterized human encounters in the New World. Second, the classification of races was created by the European and American (that is, Western) assertion that white particularity was the only viable way of being a person. Classification was premised on the racial purity of whiteness and on the idea that races are natural and fixed categories. There was white on the one hand and black on the other.

However, Bantum says that from the very beginning this binary was compromised when people of different "races" transgressed the boundaries of race, and mixed-race children "of rape, illicit desire, and even possibly love were born in this colonial encounter." These children existed "in between categories of colonizer and colonized, human and nonhuman, slave and free."

According to Bantum, "mixed-race bodies make visible a drama of identity that every body, every life engaged in then, during its time, and now, during our time. Race is the drama of our present condition." We can see this in our churches, homes, marriages and social and individual desires. The privileging of race in terms of the essential purity of whiteness and the essential inferiority of other races became not only the context in which Christian identity and Christian personhood were figured out, but also precisely the point at which race was shown to be both false and sinful.

One of Bantum's key arguments is that race is false, "a tragic illusion" because there is nothing natural about it. The existence of persons of mixed race shows this to be the case. In addition to being false, racial identity as the basis of life is sinful because it involves making choices and decisions and engaging in patterns of life that are incongruous with Christian discipleship. Indeed, Bantum goes further to say that racial identity is itself a form of discipleship because race is an ideal, transcendent reality in which whiteness defines what it means to be truly human. Racial discipleship is about how we become bound to certain racial kinship structures, and it is about the negotiation of everyday existence through race as a way of believing. It is about how we are formed and received into certain communities. White bodies are believed to be biologically and morally pure, and whiteness is offered as a form of salvation to people of mixed race.

Through an analysis of three novels—Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars*, James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*—Bantum persuasively shows how mulatto/a lives are put in a situation of refusing, desiring or accommodating whiteness as a form of social well-being or salvation. The phenomenon of passing as white, Bantum suggests, is a kind of soteriology.

In the second part of the book Bantum develops an interesting view of the person of Christ: Jesus is a tragic mulatto who refuses the claims of racial purity precisely by being mixed—fully God and fully human. Bantum is clear that neither a black Jesus nor the Jesus of tradition can save us because in both we project our own wishes and racial hopes onto Christian discipleship. The neither/nor formula is key to everything Bantum does in this book. A mulatto/a is neither black nor white, and Bantum initiates a disruptive neither/nor Christology. Christ creates a mulattic people, a people that has been transformed by Jesus' refusal to take for granted regular kinship structures: Who is my mother and who is my brother? Jesus displaces our racial identities both by redefining traditional familial bonds and by offering us a new way of being in his own life. In Christ the tragedy of racially based identities is vanquished. Bantum invites us into a new existence, an interstitial or in-between Christian life beyond race.

I conclude with a few critical remarks. Everything Bantum says about race can be said without assimilating race to the idea of religion or discipleship. The argument is forced and, as far as I can see, simply does not work. We have been down this path before. Marxism was once declared a religion; lately capitalism has been thought of

in similar terms. Some have even described forms of obsessive behavior as religious. It is not clear what is to be gained in making such claims. Racism is totally wrong whether or not it possesses something akin to a religious structure. Participation, formation, loyalty and so on are germane topics in discussions about race, but this does not require an appeal to religion because religion does not have a monopoly on the production and formation of human identities.

The book makes strong use of the idea of performance and drama. Race is performance; identity is performance; discipleship is performance. This is Bantum's way of saying that identities are not natural but are socially created and are lived out as choices. But the overemphasis on performance creates the impression that race is all a matter of playing and acting. This runs the danger of undermining another emphasis of Bantum's book: the tragic nature of mulatto/a existence. If everything is performance, what is there to stop one from concluding that the tragedy of mulatto/a life is merely staged, a matter of performance and not reality? What is the relationship between appearance and reality?

These criticisms aside, this is an important book that makes a genuine breakthrough in discussions of theology and race. Bantum succeeds in taking us beyond the binary impasses of black theology and the racial (if not racist) indifference of white Christianity.