



## Bloodwork: The Politics of the Body, 1500-1900

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## Bloodwork: The Politics of the Body, 1500-1900

University of Maryland, College Park, May 6-7, 2011

This conference will explore how conceptions of the blood -- one of the four bodily fluids known as humors in the early modern period -- permeate discourses of human difference from 1500 to 1900. "Bloodwork" begins with the assumption that the concept of "race" is still under construction and that our understanding of the term would profit through an engagement with its long, evolving, history. Specifically, it asks how fluid transactions of the body have been used in different eras and different cultures to justify existing social arrangements.

Recent scholarship has opened up the question of the continuities and discontinuities between early modern and modern rationalizations of human difference. In early modern England, "race" commonly referred to family lineage, or bloodline, and relied upon pervasive notions of what were believed to constitute the properties of blood. The anxieties anatomized in Thomas Elyot's *Boke named the Governour* (1537) about the degradation of "race," or the corruption of noble blood, describe the physical technologies by which virtue -- both physical and moral -- was thought to be conveyed through bloodlines. Daniel Defoe's later satire *A True-Born Englishman* (1708) echoes this rationale for difference. The language of his poem not only insinuates the crossover of the term "race" from family lines to national groups, but also supplies evidence that both kinds of racial ideology -- whether affirming social hierarchy or national superiority -- rest upon the invisible qualities of the blood. In late eighteenth-century Anglo-America, Thomas Jefferson invokes such notions as "White," "Indian," and "Negro" blood in order to suggest an essential difference between what he calls "the races," a difference that he sees as "fixed in nature," thereby anticipating modern racialism.

A comparative conference such as ours, that is trans-historical and transnational and draws literary critics and historians of cultures on both sides of the Atlantic world, will make a significant contribution to this ongoing debate about the "invention" of race. Questions to be addressed include: How does blood rationalize bodily difference in the period in which you work? How is blood used as a metaphor in your period? How is it contested? How and why is the idea of blood transforming? How does it operate in the body? What are the physical technologies of the body and how are these pressed into the service of difference? Conversely, how is the rationalization of bodily difference embedded in "scientific" discourse? Is religious difference figured in cultural or somatic

**terms? Does the body have a moral constitution? Plenary Speakers: Colin Dayan, Department of English, Vanderbilt University; Michael Hanchard, Department of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University; Ruth Hill, Department of Spanish, Italian & Portuguese, University of Virginia; Mary Floyd-Wilson, Department of English, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Conference Organizers: Kimberly Coles, Ralph Bauer, Zita Nunes, and Carla L. Peterson. Please submit abstracts of 500 words for complete panels (abstracts plus panel descriptions), incomplete panels, or individual papers by October 15, 2010 to: [bloodwork@umd.edu](mailto:bloodwork@umd.edu).**