

Colonial Complexions: Race and Bodies in Eighteenth-Century America. By Sharon Block (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018). Pp. 232. Cloth, \$45.00.

In *Colonial Complexions*, Sharon Block aims to examine the symbolic meaning of words used to describe runaways, and to analyze the differences in word choice for various categories of runaways. She reviews advertisements placed in colonial newspapers for runaway slaves and servants alike. Using a linguistic lens, she criticizes “social historians [*who*] treat listing of physical features as objective representations rather than symbolically powerful choices” (146). Block shows that many of these words meant something entirely different to the 18th century colonists as compared to the modern reader—words that contemporary readers would assume are racial descriptors may not have had any racial connotations at all to the colonial readers.

Reading these advertisements in line with their linguistic context, Block compiled a database of over four thousand advertisements spanning two dozen newspapers, eight original colonies, and twenty five years (1770-1775). Her methodological appendix does not indicate whether she read through physical newspapers to find the ads, conducted keyword searches in newspaper databases, mined publications by previous scholars, or some combination of the three approaches. Block coded various descriptors found in the ads, and conducted “descriptive statistical analysis” (147). However, she presents no statistical tables. Appendix 2 contains seven pie charts offering a visual representation of the distribution of categorical variables, but the diagrams offer no numeric percentages. Block alludes to her quantitative analyses throughout the book, but does not present any of the tables she must have constructed in order to make her quantitative arguments. Since her arguments are founded in quantitative analysis, it would have been useful to see the data behind her assertions.

Chapter One presents various colonial-era meanings of the word “complexion” as it pertains to health, temperament, political groupings, religious status, and social class status—as well as how understandings of complexion reveal early notions of race. Chapter Two considers representations of age, height, and health in the ads. Block is especially interested in comparing the representation of slaves of African descent to that of indentured servants of European descent, and what the differences tell us about how these class categories were perceived in light of racial differences. For example, Block considers the use of common descriptive words such as “lusty” and “likely” to describe runaways. Block argues that “lusty” bore sexual connotations when applied to slave women, but the anecdotal evidence she offers does not support this hypothesis.

Chapter Three returns to complexion, assessing descriptions of skin tone, as well as hair and eye color. Block observes that in the late colonial era, “black” was applied to some runaways of European descent, and that “Negro” more often denoted slave status than it did skin color. “White”, meanwhile, was applied most often to light-skinned slaves. She posits that other words that modern readers may assume as racial markers—words such as black, brown, red, yellow, and tawny—were applied more widely by the colonists, and should not be taken as racial categorizations. The words “fresh” and “pale”, on the other hand, nearly always applied to people of European descent. Pale, however, did not denote skin tone, but rather instead unhealthiness.

Chapter Four addresses the particularities of geographic and national descriptors, as well as runaways’ names and sex descriptions. Block observes that runaways of European descent

were more likely to be described in terms of their geographic or national origins, while runaways of African descent were typically lumped into the “Negro” category. When slave origins were given they were more likely to simply distinguish between African-born and American-born. When specific African tribal or geographic origins were given, they were applied to male slaves more often than female slaves.

In Chapter Four, Block also argues that the word mulatto “allowed colonists to side-step the violence of sexual intermingling”, and that its use “meant that colonists could avoid explicitly mentioning European heritage” (103). Both allegations are dubious. Research by Paul Heinegg and others has revealed many eighteenth-century people of color—both free and enslaved—were born of white mother/black father unions, or of unions with indigenous people—and thus not always of slave rape.¹ Moreover, the word mulatto does not hide European heritage—it implies it.

Block makes a number of bizarre arguments about Native Americans which, taken together, indicate that she may have a disproportionate number in her sample. While it is likely that some small number of runaways had some degree of Native American descent, most of Block’s attempts to locate Native Americans in the ads are wildly speculative, based on essentialist assumptions about racial identity (106-108).

Chapter Five analyzes words used to describe language, behavior, and other physical manifestations of perceived psychological states, as well as clothing, hairstyle, teeth, and scars. Here, as in other chapters, Block lumps “taken up” advertisements—usually written by a law enforcement official—in with ads placed by slave-owners and overseers. Presumably the jailers had less knowledge of their wards than the owners and overseers did. Because this differential knowledge could explain some of the variation in the sample, previous scholars have either excluded taken up ads, or analyzed them separately. Block does not give a justification for aggregating the two types. Her decision to lump distinctive two categories of ad-writers together gives her a larger sample to work with, but could lead to biased inferences.

Colonial Complexions is most useful as a linguistic analysis of words used to describe human beings in the late colonial era. Block’s analyses of the differences between how the colonists described people of African descent versus European descent are apt and well worth reading. However, Block already laid out her major arguments in a 2014 journal article, and this book adds little that to her previous work.² Block does raise the important question of how and why the multivalent descriptors of skin color in the late colonial era solidified into narrow designations of racial status by the mid-nineteenth century. Hopefully scholars will set out to answer this question in the near future.

While Block’s analysis of the symbolic meanings of runaway descriptors is useful, the book is far weaker as a quantitative study. Block neglects to compare her quantitative findings to those of previous scholars who have already extensively mined the same territory with statistical

¹ Paul Heinegg, *Free African Americans of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Maryland and Delaware*, <http://www.freeafricanamericans.com/>

² Sharon Block, “Making Meaningful Bodies: Physical Appearance in Colonial Writings,” *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 12, no. 3 (2014): 524-547.

analyses.³ Lacking such comparisons, it is difficult to tell how this book supplements or challenges existing quantitative studies. Furthermore, while Block repeatedly makes quantitative assertions, none are backed by tables or (useable) charts. This inhibits future scholars from comparing her quantitative findings to those of other scholars. It also makes it impossible for readers to assess the significance of Block's quantitative arguments about differences between categories. *Colonial Complexions* would be strengthened immensely by a subsequent journal article documenting statistical methodology, or by an accompanying digital history database that would allow researchers to validate or challenge its conclusions.

Thomas Brown

Virginia Wesleyan University

³ Freddie L. Parker, *Running for Freedom: Slave Runaways in North Carolina, 1775-1840* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993); John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Lathan A. Windley, *A Profile of Runaway Slaves in Virginia and South Carolina from 1730 through 1787* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995).