

BOOK FORUM

## Experiencing Heathen and Its Publics

Michael Baysa

Washington University in St. Louis

In 1768, Mohegan minister Samson Occom made a case for why he was a heathen. Shortly before Occom departed for London to raise funds for Moors Indian Charity School, ministers and fellow missionaries spread rumors doubting whether Occom had truly converted from “heathenism” to Christianity. Occom responded by drafting an autobiography defending his conversion. He cast his Mohegan upbringing as heathenism from which he escaped into his newfound Christian identity: “I was born a Heathen and Brought up in Heathenism, till I was between 16 & 17 years of age. . . [My parents] strictly maintained and followed in their heathenish ways, customs & religion, though there were some preaching among them.” However, these three mentions of heathenism in the opening were the only times the term appeared. Throughout the manuscript, he subtly transitioned to the term “Indian.” Occom then spent the rest of the manuscript highlighting his unfair treatment in the hands of his peers: he was underpaid compared to White missionaries and he was labeled an ineffective educator of Mohegan children. He closed the account attributing his failures to the fact that he was “a poor Indian.” The final line read, “I can’t help that God has made me so; I did not make myself so.” It was hard for Occom disentangle his conversion from the possibility that he was always and already a heathen.

I begin with Occom because he illustrates one of the central arguments in Kathryn Gin Lum’s book *Heathen*: that even if we were to discard the term heathen, American discussions around race and religion could nevertheless retain its logics and power through other terms like “Indian.” The book charts the long durée of heathen’s logics in American thought from its European precedents to the ways it still shapes American paternalism toward the rest of the world today.

I also begin with Occom because it was one of the key texts that brought me to the field of early American religious history. His resignation “I can’t help that God has made me so; I did not make my self so” makes a point about race and religion that has been echoed by the writings of so many racialized Protestants who believed that conversion into Christianity should have secured their spiritual and material standing alongside Anglo-American Protestants. Instead, they all shared a general frustration and disappointment with Christianity and its failure to deliver on its promises. Gin Lum’s work *Heathen* invited me to consider these resonances across space and time. Making these connections across different figures and contexts was not altogether strange to the notion of heathen. In fact, that was precisely how it was designed to work: heathen lumped together cultural, linguistic, and geographical difference under an umbrella term borne out of colonizers’ anxieties about their own position in eternity.

It both constructed distance through linear, progressive time, while also attempting to collapse it altogether. For me, that allowed it work so powerfully and discreetly to underwrite our desire to escape heathen lands and pasts into progressive modernity.

There is a lot to commend about this magisterial work. Gin Lum demonstrates how heathen cuts through and across racial and religious difference throughout American history. Therefore, *Heathen* becomes a focused study on how American Protestants haphazardly imagined their superiority, as evidenced by a breadth of accounts: British records of Hinduism, missionary narratives of Native American practices, newspaper sensationalisms of African spiritualities, divinity school obsessions with Jewish texts, and published debates around the status of Chinese migrants. The book reins all of these sources into the same conversation about race and religion in America. Gin Lum models for us some of the ways the field should think more broadly about race beyond studies on White constructions of and understandings of Blackness. And in doing so, she illustrates how heathen needed to be a fluid and flexible term so that Protestants could categorize large populations to fashion their own Whiteness without actually having to truly know and be in conversation with the people they are writing about. Within this fluidity, I also see a productive intersection with scholars who say they don't explicitly engage with race, or still engage with race on the basis of studying people of color doing things. For example, the notion that heathen denotes "wasteful" reminds me of "excess" as a key religious studies term that has had strong Catholic valences and the importance of "ritual" helps identify the iterative process of asserting Whiteness to scaffold Americanness.

However, even though Gin Lum's analysis of the heathen serves as a window into the colonizer's gaze (and hence, their own constructions of time and space), this book is more than that. By focusing on how published discourse about the heathen fundamentally shaped how non-White, non-Protestant figures also talked publicly about the heathen, Gin Lum successfully identifies what makes heathen distinct through what the term does. Even if we grant the most benign reading that White Protestant missionaries were simply looking for a catch-all term for any and all peoples unsaved, it was never experienced by those very people as just that. Heathen's true function lies in the ways it foreshadows White missionaries making particular claims on lands and bodies. It presumes that non-White populations were so unfit for self-determination and governance that it behooves the state and various other actors to intervene. On this front, Gin Lum argues for the term heathen within the same vein as Sylvester Johnson in viewing race and religion as "governing formations. . . that has structured the political rule of Europeans over non-Europeans" that imagine non-Europeans as people who are perpetually in need of oversight and control (14).

With such a generative work, I have three questions. The first is the relationship between conversion and history. One of the key points Gin Lum makes implicates histories tethered to narratives of progress. She asks us to consider other renderings of time such as continuity and cycles. I really love this point, but I was wondering what this relation to time might also say about the genre of conversion narratives. Christian conversions deploy linear time as a way of narrating pasts and presents. "I was once a sinner lost, but now am found and saved." This script almost always requires the confessor or convert to imagine some past identity or state as deplorable and lost in time. To return to Occom, we see how heathen becomes a marker of some undesirable past that even racialized Christians rely on to narrate their conversion to Christianity and legitimate their sense of belonging within Anglo-Protestant spaces. The same holds true for Jewish and enslaved African converts who reiterated the backwardness of their respective Jewish and African pasts. So would

you say conversion, as a narrative tool or script, problematic in the same ways that progress-oriented history was also problematic? And to push this question further, what might a cyclical or continuity conversion narrative look like?

My second question relates to missionaries and unintended consequences. I was struck by your description of missionaries in Hawaii through Titus Coan's autobiography on p. 96: "Missionaries were caught between celebrating these rapid changes (agricultural developments) and realizing that agricultural upheaval could be more of a hinderance than a help to their project of converting the Hawaiian people." It stood out amidst all of the violence that missionaries enacted for the sake of conversion. I wondered if heathen made some room for missionaries to argue that their participation in settler colonialism and empire were largely unintended consequences of their ultimate mission: bringing people to Christ. It's certainly hard to argue this point given how much settler colonialism and empire defined, colored, and were furthered by missions. But I sensed from the Coen example, your exploration of contemporary thinkers about missions, and even wrestling with your students' desire to work for non-profit organizations that do overseas work, that there's some optimism that international outreach as a whole could simply be less problematic. Given your work which has trained us to see and critique this posture toward objects of conversion, acculturation, and aid, do you think missions and any development project could be less problematic? Is it sufficient to address how they simply talk about and relate to those they seek to help, or is there no escaping the problematics of these projects as a whole?

My last question is about language. Words are powerful things, and I think that's what made *Heathen* such a heavy read. But words' powers are mediated by many factors, and two I want to flag are print media and linguistic differences. When I read in Part II about Uchimura Kanzo's *Diary of a Japanese Convert*, I was struck by the ways he was "cognizant of sensationalist stories about heathen bodies that saturated Protestant print media" (126). You also recounted how David Walker's *Appeal* traveled and was read aloud and smuggled to reach literate African Americans who have only recently participated in the English public sphere. In many ways, there were many material considerations that shaped how heathen discourse traveled. So it made me wonder: how does heathen rhetoric travel and translate outside the Anglo-American discourse?

Heathen rhetoric justified the superiority and necessity for intervention of White American Protestantism, primarily to other Whites American Protestants. The counter-scripts you named that were written by non-White Protestants, addressed or spoke back primarily to White Protestants. So I wondered to what extent heathen works when it's not a self-justification for Whiteness among White Anglo-Protestants? With some quick research, it did not seem to me that there was a corollary term for heathen in other languages. In Tagalog, *pagano*, derivative of the term *pagan*, could signal those that do not believe, but was clearly an inheritance from Spanish colonization and might not signal the same things you have outlined with heathen. So I wonder if that's something you've thought about: was heathen designed to only keep pace with Anglo-American Protestant ambitions for the term and does it inevitably fall apart when deployed outside of English discourses; or does its design allow it to cut across cultural and linguistic differences to construct hierarchies and justify violence by non-Euro-Americans to other non-Euro-Americans in non-English contexts as well?

Those were my questions. Again, thank you so much for writing such a great book!