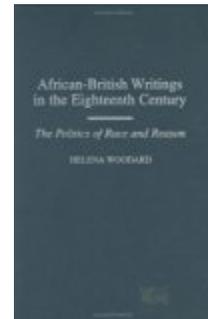


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Helena Woodard. *African-British Writings in the Eighteenth Century: The Politics of Race and Reason*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999. xxiii + 171 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-30680-8.

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In her introduction to the text, Helena Woodard announces *African-British Writings in the Eighteenth Century* as an exploration of “how the Enlightenment reasons race” and as an examination of “eighteenth-century African-British writings that uniquely underscore the mediative function of race between literature’s historical role as a tool for instruction and certain social conditions that profoundly complicate that role” (xiii). This dual goal of exploring the discourse on race of an entire century and of exploring how selected texts participate in that discourse on race is an ambitious one, but it is one that Woodard, in general, meets admirably.

The more general exploration of the role of race in Enlightenment thought is treated in chapter one of the text. Here, Woodard uses the Great Chain of Being and Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man* as a springboard into her analysis of the eighteenth-century conception of the world, and the function of race in that world. Woodard argues that the Chain’s inherently hierarchical presentation of reality, and Pope’s commentary on that hierarchy as logical, justifiable and divinely ordained created an intellectual and philosophical environment in which, without much of a leap, the enslavement of Africans based on the color of their skin could be seen as part of a divine plan.

Although, as Woodard is careful to point out, there is no explicit endorsement of race-based slavery in Pope or in the conception of the Chain of Being, there is sufficient discussion of natural hierarchies and divine order to allow for and sustain such an interpretation.

From her exploration of the Great Chain of Being in general, and Pope’s treatment of it in particular, Woodard goes on to trace the same hierarchical

world-view in other eighteenth-century works, including Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” and other works of Pope’s. Furthermore, she links the development of the Great Chain and the hierarchical theory of humanity to specific historical and economic developments in England, to formulate a theory of how the discourse of race evolved at precisely the moment when England’s financial ‘needs’ encouraged the development of African slavery. While Woodard’s analyses are sound, and the points she makes valid, there is so much material covered in this chapter that much of the force of her argument is lost. Specific details of how the texts she examines support either the hierarchical vision of humanity, or how they participate in the development of a discourse on race are not given, nor is a close analysis of the social and economic realities of the development of the British slave trade. The result is that this chapter is perhaps the weakest in the book. In fact, for any reader who does not possess a detailed knowledge of the texts treated or of the political and economic situation in eighteenth-century England, Woodard’s exploration of the development of the discourse on race could be confusing or even unconvincing.

After dealing with the concept of race during the Enlightenment in general, Woodard devotes the remainder of her book to an exploration of the discourse on race in specific works by African-British writers. In general, the texts she treats are autobiographical slave-narratives by emancipated Africans, but she does, in addition, make comparisons between these texts and those written by more canonical British writers. These chapters, certainly because of their more narrowed focus, are much more clear and persuasive, and carry the force of Woodard’s

study of race in eighteenth-century England.

The second chapter is an exploration of the autobiographies of Ukawsaw Gronniosaw and Ottobah Cugoano, both emancipated African slaves. Through readings these works, Woodard shows the differing ways in which these two African writers reconcile their experiences in England and their conversion to Christianity with the practice of slavery and their own status as former slaves. She argues that Gronniosaw, although aware of the inconsistencies of Christian dogma and the practice of slavery, internalizes the racial prejudices of his time to such an extent (in much the same way that Frantz Fanon describes in *Black Skin, White Masks*) that he blames himself and other Africans for their mistreatment and enslavement at the hands of the Europeans. Cugoano, by contrast, recognizes the conflict between Christian theories of universal brotherhood and the practice of slavery, and denounces the use of religious and humanitarian discourses used to justify such slavery as merely masking a practice rooted in human greed.

The third and fourth chapters of Woodard's book both deal with the contrasts and similarities between the writings of Africans and those of Europeans on the subjects of race and slavery. Chapter three analyzes the letters of Ignatius Sancho, an emancipated African slave who was openly critical of slavery, and of Sancho's friend, Laurence Sterne. In this chapter, Woodard presents Sancho's letters as embracing the concept of sentimentality as an Enlightenment discourse that countered the racialized view of the world set-up by the Great Chain of Being. She argues that Sancho, and to a lesser degree Sterne, present sentimentality as the legitimate discourse of Christianity, and the Chain and its implicit racial categorization as a false discourse perpetuated by ruthless merchants for their own profit. Chapter four is an analysis of the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, which Woodard offers as a counter-discourse to the travel-writings of authors such as Jonathon Swift, Daniel Defoe and William Dampier. In her analysis, Equiano's utopian descriptions of his life in Africa before becoming enslaved are a deliberate attempt to undermine and correct visions of Africans as uncivilized, undisciplined savages-the visions presented in the

travelogues of European writers. Furthermore, Woodard argues, by writing a travelogue that begins in Africa and ends in Britain, Equiano manages to turn the genre on its head, making the European the objectified other of the travel narrative.

The fifth and final chapter of the book is devoted to an analysis of the autobiography of Mary Prince. Here, again, Woodard sets a rather large task for herself, as she deals, not only, with the discourse on race and the genre of the slave-narrative, but also with questions of gender and the impact of gender on the discourse of race. However, because this chapter deals exclusively with Prince's narrative, the problems and ambiguities of the first chapter do not find themselves repeated. Instead, Woodard is able to present a forceful argument for the specificity of the experience of enslaved African women. She reads Mary Prince's autobiography, less candid, in many ways, and more defensive than the texts of her male contemporaries, as a presentation of the effects of the combined discourses of racism and sexism-both justified by the hierarchical logic of the Chain of Being.

On balance, *African-British Writings in the Eighteenth Century* is a compelling and convincing examination of the writings of emancipated Africans, their attempts to communicate the injustices of racism and slavery, and the impact of racist discourse on their lives and their writings. While the overall analysis of the discourse on race in Enlightenment England presented by Woodard assumes too much knowledge on the part of the reader, the treatment of the literary texts is thorough and compelling. There is a great deal of interest in this book, whether for those interested in development of race as a discourse, for those interested in the early writings of Africans living in Europe, for those interested in slave-narratives, or those interested in readings of canonical English texts in light of the realities of racism and slavery.

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