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Book Review Essay

Black Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century

by
Rhett S. Jones

To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865 by William L. Andrews (Urbana: IL: Illinois Books, 1988; first published, 1986)

Measuring the Moment: Strategies of Protest in Eighteenth-Century Afro-English Writing by Keith A. Sandiford (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1988)

The eighteenth century, a growing consensus among historians suggests, was a crucial period in the evolution of racism. Most Europeans entered the century with few fixed ideas on the nature of race and instead thought of themselves and others primarily in ethnic and religious terms. The English who invaded Jamaica (then colonized and occupied by the Spaniards) in 1655, for example, saw themselves as English Christians and the defenders of the island as Spanish “Papists.” Papists for the English of the time were not Christians at all but instead persons enlisted in the army of the anti-Christ. Nearly a century later nationality and religion continued to be important, but Europeans in the New World and the Old were coming also to think of themselves as white. Racial categories became increasingly important. Race emerged as an important way of organizing, explaining, and predicting the behavior of mankind at different times in various parts of the globe, but by the nineteenth century racism was firmly entrenched. In the early years of the 1800s, Europeans primarily employed racist doctrines to legitimate slavery, while near the end of the century racialist thought was used to justify imperialism, economic exploitation, and discrimination.

While racism continued to evolve over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, its essential form was clearly established by 1800. To understand its development, it is necessary to examine the actions not just of eighteenth-century whites, but of eighteenth-century blacks as well. As I argued in an article published in *Black World* in February, 1972:

Apologists for Blacks cannot have it both ways. Either Blacks were completely passive ciphers to whom things only happened, and hence shared no responsibility in their fate, or Blacks were actors, and at least some of them shared responsibility for what was to happen to Blacks during and after the colonial period. This does not mean that whites were not basically responsible for the outline and operation of the system. But to say that all colonial Blacks were pawns, or that all were rebels against slavery is simply to say that all blacks were the same, a familiar tenet of [racism].

Each of these two books provides considerable insight into the complex interplay between blacks and whites over the course of the 1700s and hence into both the evolution of racist thought and to the black response.

There is much of interest in both works for eighteenth-century historians and for other scholars interested in racism and race relations. Although neither author is a historian — Andrews is Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin and Sandiford is Assistant Professor of English at Louisiana State University — both understand that knowledge of history is essential for insight into literature. Although neither might relish the compliment, history having replaced sociology as the favorite whipping boy of literary scholars in recent years, both are fine historians.

They have set different almost complementary tasks for themselves. Andrews set out to trace the history of Afro-American autobiography from its beginnings with the publication of Brinton Hammon’s *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Brinton Hammon*, published in 1760, through the many slave narratives — including those of Frederick Douglas — published prior to the Civil War. Andrews also provides, at the end of the book, two useful annotated bibliographies that will be the delight of the historian, one on Afro-American autobiography, the other on Afro-American biography. The bulk of the book is devoted to the nineteenth century, when most black autobiographies were published, but in the early chapters Andrews examines eighteenth-century writers and refers back to the eighteenth century as he examines nineteenth-century African-American issues.

If much of Andrew’s work centers on black people in the nineteenth-century United States, Sandiford is almost exclusively concerned with eighteenth-century England, as he traces the impact of three African writers living and writing there on English attitudes toward slavery and race. While the book devotes a chapter each to Ignatius Sancho (1729-1780), Ottobah Cugoano (1757—?), and Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797), Sandiford makes a

considerable effort to place the work of these writers in historical perspective by comparing their writings to those of other Africans living and writing in Europe. He provides details on the nature of black life in England in the eighteenth century and places special emphasis on the ways in which the strategies adopted by black folk changed to cope with what was essentially a worsening racial climate in England over the course of the 1700s. While Andrews is concerned with the nineteenth-century United States and Sandiford with eighteenth-century England, each has brought to his work an appreciation for the changes in the attitudes and behavior of black and white people through time. There are no static models in either book.

Sandiford writes, "As the western mind searched for a myth to provide a moral and philosophical basis for slavery, it contrived the artifact of the 'Negro,' a creature of pure animal spirits, insensible and unimaginative. But that myth came gradually to be undermined and eventually refuted by some of the very persons whom it was intended to victimize." As England was heavily involved in the slave trade and English settlers were greatly profiting from slavery in such New World colonies as Barbados, Jamaica, South Carolina, and even Rhode Island, men on both sides of the Atlantic sought to justify their use of slave labor. While their self-serving rationalizations inevitably had an impact on England, their arguments exercised even greater influence in the colonies of North America where, according to Andrews, "As the Indian captivity narrative proved, the settlement was a realm of order and security, an outpost of moral values in a land of savagery. Outside the whiteman's sunny clearings lay darkness, chaos, and destruction, to be warded off only by the merciful hand of Providence." Whites who lived in the colonies, particularly in the early 1700s, lacked the sense of tradition and of order that characterized Great Britain. Their response to the presence of black peoples was therefore savage and cruel, a brutality which reflected their own fear and uncertainty. In British colonial North America, observes Andrews, white belief that blacks needed to be controlled and dominated was widespread for they were viewed as alien to and not a part of the orderly lives the colonists were working so hard to create. In England, on the other hand, "Blacks in general seemed to have continued popular both with the masters they served and with the English lower classes among whom they lived," Sandiford observes. He continues, "Bands of sympathetic whites regularly wrested blacks from their captors or kept them at bay with threats of mass violence."

The writings of blacks in the eighteenth-century embodied not only the attitudes and actions of

whites but the result of their own reflections and decisions as well. Andrews emphasizes the role of white publishers, editors, clergymen, and others in shaping the form, content, and the narrative itself in African American autobiographies. But, "The history of Afro-American autobiography is one of increasingly free storytelling, signaled in the ways black narratives address their readers and reconstruct personal history, ways often at variance with literary conventions and social properties of discourse." Similarly, the three African writers living in England became increasingly bold in their condemnations of racist thought and slavery. According to Sandiford, Sancho employed an indirect approach, using humor, self-mockery, and a depreciating attitude toward himself so that whites would not be threatened by his observations on slavery. Cugoano, writing later, was less indirect and more confrontational as he met proponents of slavery and racism on their own grounds and demonstrated how they failed to prove their case.

Equiano went beyond Sancho and Cugoano, in challenging the racist paradigm itself. As such he was a transcultural figure who deliberately placed himself above and outside the European and Euro-American racist worldview. While Andrews has not discussed Equiano in detail, pointing out that as a person who was neither born in North America, nor spent much time there Equiano falls beyond the scope of his study, he is in essential agreement with Sandiford in concluding that Equiano had sufficient confidence in himself, his Ibo heritage, and sufficient knowledge of the emergent worldwide racist system to transcend, challenge, and condemn it. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Esquiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* was written by a man who was knowledgeable of many lands in which slavery prevailed. Equiano, who was a shrewd businessman and a Christian convert, continued to find much of value in his African heritage. He wrote from the vantage point of one who had seen much of the emergent Atlantic system of slavery and racism and was prepared and willing to attack it.

As I lack both training in and knowledge of literary theory I have made no effort to place either Andrews or Sandiford in the literary scholarship of the African diaspora. But as a historian interested in eighteenth-century black folk I strongly recommend both books for the insight provided into an important and crucial era.

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