

## Discussion Forum Assignment

**Context:** The goal of this assignment is to spark a conversation about slavery and colonialism, and intersectionality in the Age of Enlightenment. The discussion activity is for a 2000-level, asynchronous, online Eighteenth-Century British literature course. I have used the assignment with much success in generating effective student-to-student, online engagement. It can be adapted for use in both online (synchronous/asynchronous) and face-to-face courses. Participation in this activity follows a close reading of assigned texts for the unit. Students compose and submit their responses to the discussion questions and then respond to as many classmates as possible. At a minimum, each student responds to two classmates. They end each response with a question about something they can relate to or something that piques their imagination and about which they would like to learn more.

## Discussion Prompt

A son of the Enlightenment who promoted the principles of liberty enshrined in the Constitution of the United States, Thomas Jefferson also promulgated a perception of blackness in Western imagination that labeled African Americans as an inferior race. As an example, Jefferson said the following about Phillis Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho:

“Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar œstrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. The heroes of the Dunciad are to her, as Hercules to the author of that poem. Ignatius Sancho has approached nearer to merit in composition; yet his letters do more honour to the heart than the head. They breathe the purest effusions of friendship and general philanthropy, and shew how great a degree of the latter may be compounded with strong religious zeal. He is often happy in the turn of his compliments, and his style is easy and familiar, except when he affects a Shandean fabrication of words. But his imagination is wild and extravagant, escapes incessantly from every restraint of reason and taste, and, in the course of its vagaries, leaves a tract of thought as incoherent and eccentric, as is the course of a meteor through the sky. His subjects should often have led him to a process of sober reasoning: yet we find him always substituting sentiment for demonstration. Upon the whole, though we admit him to the first place among those of his own colour who have presented themselves to the public judgment, yet when we compare him with the writers of the race among whom he lived, and particularly with the epistolary class, in which he has taken his own stand, we are compelled to enroll him at the bottom of the column. This criticism supposes the letters published under his name to be genuine, and to have received amendment from no other hand; points which would not be of easy investigation. The improvement of the blacks in body and mind, in the first instance of their mixture with the whites, has been observed by everyone, and proves that their inferiority is not the effect merely of their condition of life.” (*Notes on the State of Virginia*)

## Discussion Questions

- a. Explain how Jefferson's notion of blackness is consistent with portrayals of people of African descent during this period. What should we learn from the fact that Jefferson simultaneously promoted constitutional democracy consistent with the spirit of Enlightenment, as well as engendered racism towards people of African descent?
- b. With illustrative examples from Sancho's *Letters*, explain how Sancho challenges and/or corrects establishment views of blackness in eighteenth-century Britain and America. How differently (or similarly) does our modern society imagine race?

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