



*Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion*

## Review

**Joanna Brooks**

*American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of  
African-American and Native American Literatures*  
(Oxford University Press, 2003)

Reviewer: Jason Craige Harris

[jason.harris@yale.edu](mailto:jason.harris@yale.edu)

With the theoretical precision of a literary critic and the narrative sophistication of an historian, Joanna Brooks ably analyzes previously understudied “textualized” literatures – as opposed to oral traditions *as* literatures – that generated distinctive racial-religious identities and that worked to create and were simultaneously created by transatlantic Native and African American communities. Focusing on the era of the American Revolution and the First Great Awakening, *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American*

*Literatures* is an impressive act of historical recovery with its sustained attention to historical nuance and its dexterous juggling of a variety of contexts, communities, and literary strategies. Among them are the construction of hymnbooks among Connecticut Mohegan, John Marrant's revolutionary journal writing in Nova Scotia, the development of Prince Hall Freemasonry in Boston, and the subversive history writing of Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. Brooks ambitiously seeks to upend conventional historiographic narratives that locate the "origins" of American nationhood, evangelical religion, and literature squarely outside the auspices of communities of color. The discursive erasure initiated by such dominant narratives mirror the genocidal impulse that undergirded Native and African American experiences of white settler colonialism in eighteenth-century America. Resisting such effacing through politically informed rigorous scholarship, Brooks engages in what Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd term a "form of counter-memory" in her unearthing of "forgotten or neglected works by minority authors" (p. 11). Like the communities she studies who sought to regenerate and revive themselves in the face of physical bondage (or extermination) and what Orlando Patterson has termed "social death," Brooks recuperates and rehabilitates literatures consigned to the margins of history, which doubly infuses with meaning her usage of the organizing metaphor Lazarus, who, according to New Testament passages, was raised from the dead by Jesus. No less significant, though certainly less glamorous, in reviving memories forgotten, Brooks too metaphorically raises the dead (pp. 14, 18). Although raising the dead drew thousands to Jesus in his day, it is a wonder that Brooks' analogically comparable modern feat has not drawn more scholarly attention, which it undoubtedly deserves.

*American Lazarus* inserts itself in and thereby critically contributes to ongoing debates in religious, ethnic, literary, and postcolonial studies. A few of those contributions are particularly noteworthy. Brooks engages the question of agency so central to religious, ethnic, and postcolonial studies, as it relates to the (in)ability of colonized and negatively racialized subjects

– Native and African Americans – to resist their physical, psychic, and cultural annihilation by Euro-Americans and to form alternative communities of empowerment. This question of agency is the useful prism through which Brooks discusses race and religion as categories of identity (and difference) and as potent tools of social organization operative throughout American social and literary history.

On the one hand, she works against assumptions that would undermine the role of race and/or religion in the formation of the American nation, its cultural productions and political orientations, and its communities of color and by extension its Euro-American settlers/citizens. Both misappropriations of “hybridity” that render race politically obsolete in the early nation and a dominant secularization narrative that treats religion as a figment of a primitive past are subsequently called into question (pp.16-17). On the other hand, Brooks revises dominant conceptions of *how* race and religion were operative in the early nation and in its communities of color. For example, she resists classic interpretations that construe Christianity as “the white man’s religion,” which solely imagine it as a tool of social control and colonial domination and thereby construct – either in critical or celebratory terms – Native and African American Christians as passive and powerless recipients of Christianization and colonization (p. 14). While these accounts acknowledge Christianity’s implication in programs of domination, they untenably take for granted the total realization of those programs’ aims. Similarly to Rafia Zafar in *We Wear the Mask: African Americans Write American Literature, 1760-1870*, Brooks attends to the agencies of Native and African Americans, who appropriated and indigenized Christianity and put it in service of interests for which it was not intended, namely their emancipation from the chains of white proscription. Native and African Americans were not just objects in the Euro-American imaginary; rather they were agents who sought to determine their own destinies, however circumscribed their efforts may have been. Conversion, then, becomes an act of individual and collective self-determination, a point with which Eddie Glaude, one of Brooks’

early Americanist interlocutors, is in absolute agreement, as demonstrated in his *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (p. 18). As Brooks argues, the racialist and ethnological impulses of early racial pseudo-science and the highly prejudicial currents that ran through the American Enlightenment (a la Thomas Jefferson) and the First Great Awakening (a la Jonathan Edwards) paradoxically catalyzed Native and African-American community developments and alternative racial narratives.

Appealing to the theory of racial formation put forward by Michael Omi and Howard Winant in their landmark *Racial Formation in the United States*, Brooks unsettles readings that imply that “race is a transhistorical and natural essence” and replaces them with the notion of “race as a historically contingent and ideologically invested construction” (p. 14). This careful move enables Brooks to liberate her historical subjects from twenty-first-century racial debates, their normativities, and preoccupations with racial authenticity and “essence.” She is much more interested in the racial meanings and identities that early Native and African American communities defiantly created for themselves in the face of white-imposed racial constructs, what Anthony Marx calls “race making from below” in *Making Race and Nation* and Winant and Omi term a “rearticulation of racial identities” (p. 14). Summarily, neither race nor religion has been a static category; rather they have been ongoing constructions that undermine their perceived categorical delineations as they co-articulate to form unique communities.

Brooks’ main point here is that early Native and African American communities mobilized and transformed religious ideas and languages to create for themselves collective racial identities and “insider discourse communities” that affirmed their dignity and resourcefulness and inaugurated their distinctive political and intellectual histories, which, as Brooks shows, begin earlier than has been often argued (pp. 15, 17-18). Each of these communities differently employed religious writings and subversive theologies to establish separatist and autonomous communities that whites could not control. To be sure, these religious

writings were not solely preoccupied with resistance to white individuals, as they were also “positive” and culturally generative, that is, concerned primarily with the life of the communities for which they were made, what Jace Weaver calls “communitism” (p. 15). For example, Brooks even stretches beyond the typical denominational boundaries within Protestant Christianity to examine the vibrant community of Prince Hall Freemasonry, showing that Masonic understandings circulated throughout many early African American communities and proved themselves useful in the struggle for African American liberation. And she gleans from Michael McNally’s brilliant work on Ojibwa hymn singing to explicate Mohegan Samuel Occom’s skillful deployment of ritualized hymn singing and hymnal creation to create inter-tribal, pan-Indian affirmative identity and community in Brotherton.

For all of its accomplishments, Brooks’ text has a few limitations. Firstly, somewhat ironically, in her laudable and yet dubious search for literary origins, Brooks overlooks the vibrant history of Native American oral traditions that predates Western-style textualization. Such an ellipsis threatens to recapitulate the very Eurocentric understanding of literature that Brooks seeks to – and to some extent does – destabilize. It is also worth mentioning that Brooks’ near exclusive focus on Protestant Christianity among Native Americans, while according legitimacy to that religious formation and marking its distinctiveness, occludes the persistence of non-Christian indigenous religions. In so doing, it treats those religions as fading vestiges of a pre-modern, pre-Christian past, a notion not devoid of colonial sensibilities. This, of course, may be partially linked to the fact that Brooks only examines one Native American community in comparison to three African American ones. Secondly, although Phyllis Wheatley notably occupies space in Brooks’ narrative, *American Lazarus* could have stood more critical engagement with her work and that of other women of color, whose work may or may not be lost to the “politics of documentation.” However, since her narrative did not foreclose this possibility entirely, it serves as a useful springboard for other scholarly installations. Indeed, Cedrick May’s

*Evangelism and Resistance in the Black Atlantic, 1760 – 1835* exploits this intellectual aperture in such a way as to make it a sequel to *American Lazarus*. Lastly, while her treatment of Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity and Paul Gilroy's understanding of the black Atlantic and diasporic identity deserve some interrogation, Brooks manages to speak cross-disciplinarily and even anti-disciplinarily (against particular disciplinary foreclosures of epistemic possibilities) with a rare degree of felicity and robustness. She rightfully and effectively restores the American histories of race, religion, literature, and (trans)nation to each other.