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# Race, Slavery, and Polygenism: Edward Long's History of Jamaica

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## Abstract

"Session: Is Race Real? (Seth, Jackson, Morning, Kopec)." This paper explores the racial theories of Edward Long, the West-Indian planter and slave-owner who published his *History of Jamaica* in 1774. Long's polygenism, I argue, looks strikingly different from that we are more familiar with from nineteenth-century sources. The reason for the difference, I suggest, is two-fold. First, although Long was willing to buck Biblical orthodoxy, he balked at materialism, a position that gained traction in racial studies following the successes of the phrenological movement in the early nineteenth century. Second, Long presents us with a (rare) case of an eighteenth-century writer on 'race science' with political sympathies toward a part of the world that was both outside the bounds of the European metropole and which also contained a majority black population. As a result, one finds a fundamental ambivalence in his writings on race, an ambivalence that stemmed directly from his desire to manage social relations and political systems in a slave society. Metropolitan figures who believed in the fixity of race (regardless of the question of origin) made a cornerstone of their position the essential identity of newly arrived African slaves and their descendents. For Long, however, the difference between 'salt-water' and 'creole' Negroes was to be the solution to the most pressing social problem of the sugar islands: slave insurrection. This understanding of the (potential) political and social differences between generations of slaves, I argue, required a physical corollary: Long's polygenism presumed less fixity than the monogenism of a figure like Immanuel Kant.

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