Transatlantic Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century

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Edited by

Kamille Stone Stanton and Julie A. Chappell

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING

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This book first published 2011

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-3288-X, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3288-5

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INTRODUCTION

KAMILLE STONE STANTON

Given the longstanding, Anglo-centered approach to understanding literature of the Enlightenment period, the sole representation of Africans offered in the standard sophomore survey is still too often William Blake's very English poem "The Little Black Boy." There are reasons for this. Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (1789) offers student and teacher surveyors of early literature a moment to reflect upon the cultural reality of what has come to be known as Blake's London, a grimly commercialized urban landscape set in an exploitative century. The inclusion of the concise poem is often the first and last opportunity in the General Education literary survey to discuss the transatlantic abolitionist movement, which relied on print culture for its perpetuation and Enlightenment literary tastes for its fashionability. But no matter how many times one approaches the poem and no matter what level of scholar the reader may be, the crisis of racial identity expressed by the poem's speaker hangs awkwardly in the air:

> My mother bore me in the southern wild,
> And I am black, but O! my soul is white;
> White as an angel is the English child:
> But I am black as if bereav'd of light.

The Black Boy's conflation of race and virtue is compounded by his presupposition that white is right while black is "bereav'd of light." The Black Boy's confusion creates a psychic tension in the reader and, therewith, a desire to resolve the poem's many disjunctions. Myriad colliding cultural assumptions in need of disentanglement include the implications that, if his "soul is white," it is more worthy of consideration, that white English children are closer to God, and that his racial complexion is a sign of his light deprivation, whether it be the light of knowledge or of God or of the sun. But the Black Boy's lack of light, as in his unjust exclusion from the cultural flourishing of the Enlightenment period during which he was living, is, in fact, the prime assertion of the poem, and Blake's vision of a more soulful and inclusive future for

humanity is its reason for being. Placing the poem within the print culture of transatlantic abolitionism reveals that the poem's disjunctions, those psychic tensions experienced by Blake's imagined reader, are the author's call to action. As a cultural artifact, the words of the Little Black Boy stand unalterable, and he is forever fixed as an outsider to the Enlightenment. However, the social circumstances that produced his alienation could be subject to revision, if, and only if, Blake's readers would affect the change necessary to bring the Black Boy into the light.

While the most widely fêted British Enlightenment political philosophy is the promotion of representative government by John Locke in *Two Treatises on Government* (1689), the political and literary texts at the center of the struggle to end the institutionalized trafficking of human beings are far less studied today, despite hindsight's awareness of their direct influence on political events. Through a burgeoning canon of poetry, plays and prose, the eighteenth-century reading public on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean became deeply engaged in the controversy over the enslavement of Africans; however, the academy's understanding of the political trajectory of the Age of Enlightenment rarely gives nuanced consideration to the print phenomenon of this movement.[1] One would expect Locke's standing as the champion for freedom from state enslavement to be undermined by his deep investment in, and ultimate profit from, the Royal African Company, which traded slaves for England, and the Bahama Adventurers, which traded slaves for the Bahaman Islands. Despite Locke's inadequacies as a freedom advocate, it was only in the late twentieth century that literary scholars really began to examine the broader cultural relevance of those other champions for freedom, the writers of the abolitionist movement, and the ways in which the reoccurrence of Africans in literary fashions influenced the broader intellectual history of the period.

The first people on either side of the Atlantic Ocean to attempt to launch an organized protest over the legality, authority and legitimacy of the institution of slavery were Quakers. Although some people among the early generations of Quakers in the seventeenth century owned slaves, their religion eventually took a stand against the institution, beginning in 1688 in Germantown, Pennsylvania, where a community of Dutch settlers, under the leadership of Francis Daniel Pastorius, petitioned the broader Religious Society of Friends to denounce slavery. Although no further group action was taken at that time, it was the beginning of the Quakers' continuously revived efforts in defense of human rights. Later, individual Quakers published tracts denouncing slavery as immoral, such as Ralph Sandiford's work *A Brief Examination of the Practice of the Times, by the*

Foregoing and Present Dispensation (1730), Benjamin Lay's *All Slave-keepers that Keep the Innocent in Bondage* (1737), and the many published writings of Anthony Benezet in the 1760s.[2] In London in 1783, Quakers formed the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, who petitioned parliament to end the trafficking of human beings. This growing Quaker interest soon attracted supporters among Anglicans, leaders in the political community, lawyers, women's groups, artists and writers, until anti-slavery sentiment and activism became a transatlantic movement.

Despite the widespread grassroots attention given to ending the slave trade, the intellectual, artistic and moral phenomenon of abolitionism did not enjoy unimpeded progress. After 1789, when the French Revolution led to the execution of King Louis XVI, war between France and Britain and what many in both countries feared was a contagious culture of mob violence, calls for social reform in Britain were ignored and dismissed for fear of social upheaval and inciting revolution. And even after Denmark legally abolished its international slave trade in 1792, as did the US and Great Britain in 1807, there is significant evidence that some traders enjoyed a profitable time of decreased competition enabled by those who abided by the new laws.[3] Africans and people of African descent across the British Empire finally received emancipation from slavery in 1833, with the Emancipation Act, while slavery remained legal in the United States of America until the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1865.

Transatlantic Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century examines literature about race from the eighteenth-century transatlantic abolitionist movement beginning with the work of two women on opposite sides of the Atlantic, who, despite both writing about the plight of African slaves at nearly the same time, were worlds apart in sympathies and lifestyle. They are the professional London playwright Aphra Behn (1640-1689) and a letter-writing Quaker traveling in Barbados named Alice Curwen (c. 1619-1679). Aphra Behn was a very successful Restoration writer whose plays enjoyed more public performances than any other Restoration playwright, except the poet laureate, John Dryden. In 1688, the year when Quakers in Germantown, Pennsylvania were petitioning their organization in protest of slavery, Aphra Behn penned and published *Oroonooko: Or, The Royal Slave* (1688), one of the earliest known examples of the English novel genre and the first English novel to represent Africans in a sympathetic manner or feature an African hero. However, as Janet Todd's biography of Aphra Behn notes, classifying Behn's texts as abolitionist would be an assertion rife with contradiction because of Behn's own sympathies for those people born into the higher parts of the class hierarchy.[4] In Marisa

Huerta's essay, "British Liberty and Colonial Slavery: The Racialized Subtext of National Discourse in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688)," she looks at Behn's work within the context of early modern racial rhetoric. Behn's text is crucial to understanding what Huerta calls a developing "ideology of whiteness," and by analyzing the language of *Oroonoko* within the context of the history of racialized language, Huerta finds evidence of a "semiotics of whiteness" at work in Behn's text.

If, despite Aphra Behn's creation of an African tragic-hero, she cannot be categorized as a proto-abolitionist writer, there can be no doubt that the Quaker Alice Curwen should be termed as such. Curwen remains under-acknowledged as the author of one of the earliest published records to document white resistance to the practice of slavery and the business of the slave trade. Curwen and her husband traveled to Barbados in 1676 when there was widespread fear of slave revolt. Slaves accused of conspiracy were burned alive, beheaded and then paraded through the streets in a morbid spectacle intended to immobilize slaves who dared consider the possibility of their own eventual freedom.[5] The atmosphere of fear and rage in Barbados appears to have had a deep impact on Curwen.

Judith Rose's essay, "'Great Exercise with the Nations and Islands beyond the Seas': Alice Curwen's Transatlantic Anti-Slavery Testimony," gives a highly nuanced examination of the language in Curwen's letters from Barbados to England during this time, which were published in London a few years later. Rose uncovers that while the content of Curwen's letters documents resistance, there also is opposition inherent in the author's linguistic continuities within the texts that serve to disrupt the use of language beyond the text. Curwen's letters and their publication can be understood as an intervention into the public discourse that was arguing in favor of slavery and the harsh treatment of slaves.

As Alice Curwen dedicated her life to bettering the souls of others and dedicated her pen to persuading people of the immorality of slavery, William Hogarth (1697-1764) used the graphic arts to hold up a mirror to society in hope of encouraging their moral improvement through satire. Africans are depicted in many of his most popular series, sometimes as part of the setting and other times as movers of the action, but always with significance to the moral of his story. Sara Schotland's essay, "Africans as Objects: Hogarth's Complex Portrayal of Exploitation," analyzes Hogarth's use of Africans in his etchings and contextualizes his concerns with high society's excesses. Schotland's examination finds Hogarth criticizing society's dehumanizing of Africans, and her essay further reveals the dangers the artist navigated when his successful, yet widely misunderstood, depictions of social excess fell within the realm of his own censure.

Further into the eighteenth century, a more cohesive abolitionist movement had gained momentum in the British Empire, and for Phyllis Wheatley (1753-1784), an African-born woman brought to America who worked as a domestic slave in Boston, the abolitionist movement also provided hope of liberation, as well as a subject for her versifying pen. Ayanna Jackson-Fowler's essay, "Phyllis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, and Ottobah Cugoano: The Legacy of the Noble Negro" looks at the way that Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797), and Ottobah Cugoano (1757-?) tap into a variety of ordinarily incompatible literary traditions, such as that of the learned and sophisticated African established by the African princes Job Ben Solomon, William Ansah Sessarakoo, and James Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, as well as popular race theories based on the religion, philosophy, and pseudo-science of slavery apologists. While Olaudah Equiano's life writing personalized slavery by putting a human face on an inhuman institution, Ottobah Cugoano wrote a direct and relentless attack on slavery by which he eloquently undermined, argument by argument, the prevailing lines of logic used by slavery advocates. Jackson-Fowler argues that by appropriating the language used by the major movers of these debates and traditions, Wheatley, Equiano, and Cugoano took control of the public discourse and defined for the reading public what it means to be an enlightened thinker inside the African diaspora.

A highly literary writer, Olaudah Euquiano's blend of popular genres in his *Interesting Narrative* (1787) is set within the overarching narrative of his autobiography. Recently, the details in that autobiography were traced to the archives and pieced back together by Vincent Carretta in *Olaudah Equiano: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (2007). Potential discrepancies between Equiano's depiction of his early life and the documentary evidence of church and naval records discussed by Carretta have challenged scholars' understanding of the choices Equiano made in the construction of his public persona as an active opponent of the slave trade. Debbie Burdick's essay, "Anglo-African Noble Death versus African-Anglo Freedom: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) and Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789)," examines Equiano's formation of himself as a literary figure within his own text in light of that creation's similarities to and differences from the popular fictional character of Aphra Behn's Oroonoko from 100 years earlier. Burdick looks at their depictions of home, their passage into the world of slavery, their relationships with the people around them, and their Christianity to determine the extent to which the men in these texts are Europeanized into a new identity.

The focus of our final essay, Ignatius Sancho (c. 1729-1780), was born on a slave ship but lived and worked as a free man in Britain. He lived and

worked in London at the same time as some of our other authors discussed here. A butler turned actor turned valet turned business owner, Sancho was also the first person of African descent to vote in Britain, due to his being a financially independent male head of household. In addition to this rich professional life, Sancho was a widely-read letter writer, whose correspondence appeared in the published letters of Lawrence Sterne as well as in an independent volume after Sancho's death. In Candace McCall's essay, "Counsellor" Among Many: Ignatius Sancho's 'Africanus' Persona and the Construction of a Public Voice," she focuses on his three printed letters to the newspaper, *General Advertiser*, locating his perspectives on slavery, black people in London, as well as on contemporary debates about conscription, decadent fashion, and financing the war against the North American colonies. McCall finds in Sancho a well-respected voice of public opinion on matters of consequence to London dwellers, people of African descent, and the Empire at large.

In 1789, when William Blake created his isolated seeker of enlightenment in "The Little Black Boy," the poet and his literary creation were participating in a phenomenon much more culturally and politically ambitious than his "innocent" songs might first appear capable of. For decades, bringing the effects of the African slave trade into light required that rhetorically savvy participants from the broader culture appropriate and revise literary devices of a variety of genres, while appealing directly to an audience of competing and contrary investors. In the same year that Blake published his volume of poetry, Olaudah Equiano's autobiography brought him international fame as a sympathetic face for the abolitionist movement. He became an internationally sought after public speaker and enjoyed the remarkable success of nine editions of his book within the five year span between 1789 and 1794, making him the wealthiest black man in the English-Speaking world.

Transatlantic Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century contributes to that growing body of nuanced textual criticism seeking to prove that the progress of the anti-slavery movement was no single-authored sensation but rather part of a broader transatlantic discourse spanning the entirety of the long eighteenth century.

Notes

[1] Important recent studies that have begun expanding this area of previous scholarly neglect include Brycchan Carey, Markman Ellis, and Sara Salih, eds., *Discourses of Slavery and Abolition: Britain and its Colonies, 1760-1838* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment and Slavery,1760-1807* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[2] See Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderland, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and its Aftermath* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[3] See Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988) and Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of William Wilberforce* (Cambridge University Press: London, 1961).

[4] See Janet Todd, *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn* (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 1997).

[5] Anon. *Great newes from the Barbadoes, or A True and faithful account of the grand conspiracy of the Negroes against the English and the happy discovery of the same* (London: Printed for L. Curtis in Goat-Court upon Ludgate-Hill, 1676).

CHAPTER ONE

BRITISH LIBERTY AND COLONIAL SLAVERY: THE RACIALIZED SUBTEXT OF NATIONAL DISCOURSE IN APHRA BEHN'S *OROONOKO* (1688)

MARISA HUERTA

Aphra Behn's novella, *Oroonoko; or, the Royal Slave*, often has been read in terms of Oroonoko's blackness, its treatment of the institution of New World slavery, or its role as political allegory—with Oroonoko as a stand-in for the Stuart monarchs.[1] Certainly, in the novella, slavery is a metaphor for base servitude, if only to unworthy leaders (in keeping with Behn's royalist sympathies). Yet the complex dynamic of the novella highlights the fact that the development of English national character takes place in a global—or more precisely imperial—context, and that colonialism and "race" are crucial factors in the construction of national identity. Given that for Behn, as well as many writers of the period, the old geohumoral notion of Northern "barbarism" still lurked in the English people, a strong English national character could only be defined oppositionally to the condition of slavery, as "British" liberty vs. others' bondage. Such anxiety about the nature of Englishness is also evident in domestic "racial" rhetoric, or the expression of intra-national racial ideologies, those between noble and common "races."

This chapter argues that Behn's *Oroonoko* is a key text in the intertwined traditions of domestic racial rhetoric, which intensified during the periods of the English Civil War and Glorious Revolution, alongside emerging colonial hierarchies of race. In particular, the changing definition of "quality" in *Oroonoko* dramatizes the shift in the meaning of race from lineage or genealogy (a noble "race and stock") to a proto-typical discourse of racism and racial difference. In the novella, these two

competing meanings of race are juxtaposed and in conflict with each other. The early modern definition of "race" refers to members of a noble race and stock; and the definition of "race" is more closely linked to modern notions of racism and "racial" difference that attribute an essential difference to culturally distinct groups of people. The subtitle "the royal slave," which is meant to describe Oroonoko, captures this contradiction. While Behn's work reveals a deep distrust of the character of the English people, it nonetheless participates in Britain's transformation of its own barbaric past into an ideology of white racial superiority.

It is important to remember that the term "race" was used in the early modern period with relation to the aristocracy and, thus, may be closer to what we would call class, with an early-modern focus on bloodlines. In other words, "race" was used to distinguish between social divisions or social standing, often defined by birth. Between 1770 and 1840, when "class" gradually came to replace older terms for social distinctions (such as race, status, rank), the definition of the term "race" developed along the lines now familiar to modern readers.[2] "Race" meant something very different in the period of first discovery, imperial conquest, and the subjugation of indigenous populations from what it came to mean in the nineteenth century or for "modernity." The Spanish *raza* and the French and English term "race" at the beginning of this period designated the idea of lineage, or genealogy, a noble "race and stock," before its application in Spain to Jews and Moors and its eventual extension to physical and phenotypical difference that would become the basis for later discourses of racism and racial difference.[3]

According to this definition, the English Civil War was characterized by rhetoric that can only be called racialist because of its emphasis on the foreign bloodlines of the Norman kings. Laura Doyle argues that in the aristocracies of Europe and England, the noble were defined by their "blood or kin difference from those they ruled, for originally these aristocracies were made up of the descendants of foreign warriors who had invaded and taken power."[4] She suggests that this is highlighted as a blood difference distinguishing the middling class from their early modern monarchs (such as the Franks who conquered the Gauls in France, and later the French Normans who conquered the Germanic Anglo-Saxons in England).[5] Like Doyle, I argue that in the post-revolutionary period, the idea of the origin of the English people was romanticized and served to "glorify the middle classes in what was hailed as the return to power of the Anglo-Saxon race."[6] Furthermore, I would contend that the example of the English Civil War—which is often cited as one of the first instances of national sentiment asserting itself against oppression—suggests that racialist sentiment is bound up with the "nationalist ethos" as much as is

"individual liberty."[7] By the middle of the seventeenth century, the cohesiveness of a community in the New World is largely determined by race, not class. Here I will trace a genealogy of nation not as only a product of internal British politics, but rather as engendered by colonialist territorial aims, racialist sentiment, and fear of cultural difference.[8]

Oroonoko asks:

> And why (said he) my dear Friends and fellow Sufferers, should we be Slaves to an unknown People? Have they vanquished us nobly in Fight? Have they won us in Honourable Battle? And are we by the Chance of War become their Slaves? This wou'd not anger a noble Heart: this would not animate a Soldier's Soul: no, but we are bought and sold like Apes or Monkeys, to be the sport of Women, Fools and Cowards; and the Support of Rogues and Renegades, that have abandoned their own Countries for Rapine, Murders, Theft and Villanies. . . . And shall we render Obedience to such a degenerate Race, who have no one human Vertue left, to distinguish them from the Vilest Creatures?[9]

Early modern critics often focus on the way Aphra Behn builds on and rewrites contemporary negative ideas of the female Renaissance playwright, re-evaluating the idea of female "nothingness" or the woman writer's self-fashioning as "cipher."[10] Laura Brown finds that the figure of woman in *Oroonoko* crucially conjoins the competing discourses of the text, "aristocratic romance" and "bourgeois colonial history," and allows a critical sympathy.[11] Laura Doyle also argues that Behn's text presents an intermingling of domestic and colonial racial distinctions; emergent colonial distinctions of African and English are used as an allegory for older domestic, or aristocratic, racial distinctions, specifically in the context of the "murder" of King Charles I, whom Doyle, like Laura Brown, reads in the character of Oroonoko. Although Doyle echoes Brown's claims about the centrality of the woman narrator, Caesar's "Great Mistress," who presides over the racial disorder in the text caused by competing domestic and colonial mythologies, she argues that the narrator becomes "noble" by associating with the slaves, aligning herself with Oroonoko in terms of sympathy: "[Oroonoko was obliged] to love us very well" **(**46**)**, where "us" meant the women but perhaps comes to mean the white community in general. What Doyle calls "the double racial agenda" is realized by a feminine "sentimental" subject, which she finds characteristic of the self-described role of women in the colonial project. Situating the work of Behn, who still is often referred to as the first professional woman writer, in and around masculinist accounts of the "rise" of the novel is crucial to these feminist readings of *Oroonoko*. Its critical work in the framing of the racial romance is itself the subject of contestation, as the work is variously claimed as anti-slavery literature, novel and sentimental novel. Given that

in the seventeenth-century prose tradition, women became both central to the romantic action and strategically absent from it and that the status of women and the domestic sphere was changing in the emergent capitalist culture, their role in the romance of colonialism and imperialist ideology is far from simple.

I argue that Behn's text was a seminal moment in the development of an ideology of whiteness, almost a semiotics of whiteness.[12] Though the colonial plot, as opposed to the romance tale, of Behn's novella revolves around Oroonoko's capture, enslavement, subsequent attempt at escape, and execution, the bulk of the narrative works to define Oroonoko in ways that both link him to the proper English gentleman—in terms of feeling or political sympathy—and mark him as irredeemably, racially other at the same time. After all, Oroonoko is initially defined positively by romance conventions: He is of noble birth; has no peer and is fearless in battle; his feelings for Imoinda are expressed in terms of honor and love. His passion is described in terms of European codes of honor, as when "his Flame aim'd at nothing but Honour" (10). The narrator states her surprise that Oroonoko learned such ideals in Coramantien: "'twas amazing to imagine where it was he learn'd so much Humanity: or, to give his Accomplishments a juster Name, where 'twas he got that real Greatness of Soul, those refined Notions of true Honour, that absolute Generosity, and that Softness that was capable of the highest Passions of Love and Gallantry" (7). This is surprising, she claims, given that he was always among "fighting men," or the "mangled" and "dead," continually surrounded by "War and Groans."[13] Thus, Oroonoko's "greatness of soul" is constructed as not African in origin. She claims that, "[s]ome part of it we may attribute to a Frenchman of Wit and Learning, who . . . took a great pleasure to teach him [Oroonoko] Morals, Language, and Science" and also that Oroonoko was happy "to see all the English Gentlemen who traded thither; and did not only learn their Language, but also that of the Spaniard also, with whom he traded afterwards for Slaves."[14]

Yet these aristocratic love and honor codes break down in the novella's colonial setting. Oroonoko's Europeanization and aristocratic honor link him to sympathetic British colonists like Trefry and Colonel Martin. They share a code of sensitive masculinity that theoretically transcends racial lines. Yet a unified English national identity is ultimately constructed through Oroonoko's difference. Though Oroonoko manages to mediate between the natives and the English when hostilities break out (58), thus enabling the peace between them and the English, he is unable to sustain leadership when he leads a group of fellow African slaves in revolt against their masters. His one "kingly" battle fails because his men turn against him. Certainly, he is not the only king to be turned on by his subjects. In

fact, Oroonoko's heroic courage and Europeanized sensibility are the cause of his entrapment and betrayal into slavery at the hands of the English captain of a slave ship, with whom Oroonoko previously had traded slaves many times. In fact, Oroonoko admires the "White Nations," which brings about his own downfall. The English captain who sells him into slavery was "always better receiv'd at Court, than most of the Traders to those Countries were; and especially by Oroonoko, who was more civiliz'd, according to the European mode, than any other had been, and took more delight in the White Nations; and, above all, Men of Parts and Wit" (32). Based upon his sense of shared codes of honor, he is like the English [gentlemen] in character and expects to be treated as one of them.

While at this point Oroonoko has yet to come to appreciate the "degenerate race" that has stolen his liberty, it is clear that Oroonoko's European sense of honor only necessitates the very racial ideology that makes obvious his legal and social status as slave. From the moment that he sets foot in the colonial space of Surinam, his "greatness" is reinterpreted as use-value, or his worth as a commodity. The narrator relates that "Oroonoko was first seiz'd on, and sold to our Overseer, who had the first Lot, with seventeen more of all sorts and sizes, but not one of *Quality* with him" (37, italics mine). Here "quality" no longer means solely high birth or greatness of action, but also his value or worth as a slave for his master.

Although both meanings of "race" co-exist in this novella, the gap between Oroonoko's racialized slave status and his elevated status as seen by others begins to break down under the system of plantation slavery. Immediately following the description of the awe Oroonoko commanded in all who saw him, the narrator begins referring to Oroonoko as Caesar, his slave name. She says, "I ought to tell you, that the Christians never buy any Slaves but they give 'em some Name of their own, their native ones being likely very barbarous, and hard to pronounce" (40). In doing so, she lumps Oroonoko into the category of "them," but one with a "glorious" name (40). Although the competing definition of "quality" is commingled with the sense of valuable commodity, it is clear that the latter definition is becoming the dominant one. When the narrator announces she must start calling Oroonoko Caesar and describes his arrival at the plantation, she places him in the social and economic structure of the plantation system. Yet his legal status is mystified by the description of Oroonoko's reception as befitting one worthy of the English king.[15] Oroonoko's arrival is likened to that of a "Governour" rather than a "slave," and he even receives visits at the big house, like a visiting dignitary. Moreover, at the beginning, he does not set foot in the slave quarters but stays at the house. His initial placement away from the slave quarters is significant since those quarters

are characterized in racial terms: “that part of the Plantation where the Negroes were.” In terms of status, Oroonoko is perceived as royal. Even his labor and living assignments have been made “more for Form, than any Design to put him to his Task.” Even when he must “needs view his Land, his House, and the Business assign’d him” (40), he is recognized by the other slaves as “that Prince who had, at several times, sold most of ’em to Men.” His fellow slaves pay him the “Veneration they pay to great Men,” and fall at his feet crying, “Live, O King! Long live, O King!” (40, 41). Almost all who see Oroonoko on his arrival in Surinam see “the Royal Youth” instead of “the Slave."

Oroonoko’s arrival in Surinam so troubles these racialized categories that the narrator is at pains to both welcome and undercut Oroonoko’s exceptionalism: “But before I give you the Story of this Gallant Slave [Oroonoko], ’tis fit I tell you the manner of bringing them to these new Colonies; those they make use of there, not being Natives of the place: for those we live with in perfect Amity, without daring to command ’em” (1-2). Lumping Oroonoko in with “them” even while calling him a “gallant slave,” the narrator asserts both his ultimate cultural difference and his exceptionalism. He alone is called “gallant,” yet his presence in Surinam is a story like the one belonging to “them.” Because the narrator says she must describe the racial hierarchy in Surinam before really beginning Oroonoko’s story, she signals that the romance plot—Oroonoko’s aristocratic birth, his prowess in battle, his love and honor for Imoinda—is the real tale. In many ways it is, though the fact that the narrator must prove to us that Oroonoko is both exceptional and one of “them,” the Africans that “they make use of there,” before she begins his story, suggests the foregrounding of questions of racial identity.

Cultural differences are presented in a hierarchy of whiteness—in skin color, ranging from the white colonists, those of the better sort and the “rabble”; the “reddish yellow” or “brick” colored natives; the “brown rusty black,” or muddied, slaves. Purity, of both white and black, such as that of Oroonoko, is privileged. In addition, with the exception of Oroonoko and, to a lesser extent, Imoinda, the lighter-skinned natives are considered more like Europeans and, thus, are privileged over the African slaves.[16] The narrator says the British colonists “caress” the natives with “all the brotherly and friendly affection in the world” in order to trade with them (2). The term “brotherly” suggests that the natives and the English share kinship ties, marking the natives as members of the same moral community as the Europeans.[17] However, while the language of moral communities is extended to the natives who trade with the British, the trade to the natives only underscores their difference from the English. The natives provide useful items to the English colonists, such as fish, venison, buffalo’s skins,

and also exotic "little rarities," such as marmosets, parrots, macaws, snakeskin, and feathers. In exchange, the English give the natives various trinkets and tools, such as beads, knives, axes, pins, and needles. Although the knives and pins may seem practical, the narrator is careful to note that the natives use these "tools" only to further mark themselves as other: these "they us'd only as Tools to drill Holes with in their Ears, Noses, and Lips, where they hang a great many little things" (2).

Similarly, in the beginning of the novella the natives of Surinam are attributed aristocratic codes of honor while they are useful to the English and do not threaten the colonists' safety, as were the Indian King and Queen in Behn's *The Widdow Ranter*. The narrator also notes their "virtuous" behavior and likeness to Adam and Eve in the physical description of the natives:

> [T]hey have all that is called Beauty, except the Colour, which is a reddish Yellow; or after a new Oiling, which they often use to themselves, they are of the colour of a new Brick, but smooth, soft, and sleek. They are extreme modest and bashful, very shy, and nice of being touched. And though they are all thus naked, if one lives for ever among 'em, there is not to be seen an undecent Action, or Glance: and being continually us'd to see one another so unadorn'd, so like our first Parents before the Fall, it seems they had no Wishes, there being nothing to heighten Curiosity. (3)

Although there is no native royalty in Oroonoko, the narrator relates a tale of courtship that serves the same purpose. She describes the story of a "handsome young Indian" in love with a "beautiful young Indian maid," who, like a courtly lover, "all his Courtship was, to fold his Arms, pursue her with his eyes, and Sighs were all his Language" (3).

In Behn's *The Widdow Ranter*, the discourse of love is employed to mask the danger posed to the natives by the English colonists. Here, the love described is between two Caribbean natives, the language creates a virtue of their inaction. While the racial hierarchy in Oroonoko suggests a shared community between the natives and the English, the natives are only allowed this status in the realm of the ideal:

> [T]hese people represented to me an absolute Idea of the first State of Innocence, before Man knew how to sin: And 'tis most evident and plain, that simple Nature is the most harmless, inoffensive, and vertuous Mistress. 'Tis she alone, if she were permitted, that better instructs the World, than all the Inventions of Man: Religion wou'd here but destroy that Tranquillity they possess by Ignorance, and Laws would teach 'em to know Offence, of which now they have no Notion. (3-4)

Note that emphasis is placed in this description on the innocence, harmlessness, inoffensiveness of nature as instructor of the natives. "Nature" teaches them "Tranquility," but "Laws" would only teach them to know offense. In addition to positing that the natives have no laws, this passage depicts the natives' virtue as a simple lack of action, "Tranquility," and by extension harmlessness, inoffensiveness. Given the depiction of the later hostility between the natives and the English colonists, the positive characterization of the natives, paradoxically as non-agents, expresses a fear and desire to contain the threat they pose more than an acknowledgment of similarity.

Yet the natives' otherness is still marked, literally, on and through the appearance of their skin. When Oroonoko desires to see the native "War-Captains," the narrator describes the encounter as more "frightful" than "Fancy can create," and "so dreadful a Spectacle" (57). She refers to their appearance as like "hobgoblins" or "fiends," not men, though she allows that they have "humane and noble" souls. The cultural practice of self-mutilating—cutting off limbs and facial parts or slashing the skin—in order to earn the title of General or "Great War-Captain" is described as being "too brutal to be applauded by our *Black* Hero," in a pointed notation of his skin color, yet "nevertheless, he express'd his Esteem of 'em" (58). The narrator prefaces Oroonoko's visit with the native warriors by chronologically situating it during one of the "disputes the *English* had with the *Indians*," which caused "mortal Fears" that the natives "would fall on" the English colonists. When she tells the reader of previous "fallings on," she specifically mentions the dismemberment of a non-aristocratic English body: "[T]hey [the natives] cut in pieces all they could take, getting into Houses, and hanging up the Mother, and all her Children about her; and cut a Footman, I left behind me, all in Joints, and nailed him to Trees" (54). In this instance, their own barbarous practices are visited upon innocent victims, and Behn attributes this violence to past colonizers' practice, noting that "the *Dutch*... [who] us'd them not so civilly as the *English*" were the ultimate cause of the violence (54).

Where skin mutilation and appearance serve as a marker of cultural differences, Imoinda is linked with the natives of Surinam. The narrator points out her difference the first time that she "sees" her, related in a passage that occurs immediately before Oroonoko's and Imoinda's "wedding" in Surinam:

> I hasted presently to the Place where these Lovers were, and was infinitely glad to find this beautiful young Slave (who had already gain'd all our Esteems, for her Modesty and her extraordinary Prettiness) to be the same I had heard *Caesar* speak so much of. One may imagine then we paid her a treble Respect; and tho from her being carved in fine Flowers and Birds all

> over her Body, we took her to be of Quality before, yet when we knew *Clemene* was *Imoinda*, we could not enough to admire her.

Although the narrator refers to Imonida's skin-markings as a sign of her aristocratic "quality," she is careful to relate what she "forgot to tell" her reader in her previous physical description of Oroonoko, that while "those who are nobly born of that Country [Coramantien], are so delicately cut and raised all over the Fore-part of the Trunk of their Bodies, that it looks as if it were japan'd, the Works being rais'd like high Point round the edges of the Flowers," Oroonoko is only "carved at the sides of the Temples" (45).[18] Those Africans who are, like Imoinda, "carv'd over the Body" are said to "resemble our ancient *Picts* that are figur'd in the Chronicles" (45). The term Pict derives from the Greek or Latin term meaning "to paint" and was first used in print in 297 A.D. to refer to the "painted," or tattooed, peoples of what was to become central and northern Scotland. Suggesting a link between the natives and the barbaric forebears of "our" ancestors emphasizes a deep-rooted sameness between the natives of Surinam and the peoples of what was to become Great Britain.

The status of the African slaves, on the other hand, dramatizes the changing nature of literary and cultural treatments of blackness. The narrator differentiates the African slaves from the natives in terms of the purpose they serve as well as their skin color. "Those then whom we make use of to work in our Plantations of Sugar, are Negroes, Black-Slaves all together, who are transported thither in this manner" (5). Slaves are those whom "we [British colonists] make use of to work in our Plantations of Sugar," but they are also marked as "Black-Slaves all together." The meaning of these "Black-Slaves" is defined by the fact that they can be bought. The narrator explains that when someone "wants slaves," he makes "a bargain with a Master, or a Captain of a Ship, and contract[s] to pay him so much a-piece," for as many slaves as desired, "and to pay for 'em when they shall be delivered on such a Plantation" (5). The narrator's definition of slavery in Surinam conflates black color and low status. Upon describing how the lots of Africans to be purchased as slaves are divvied up when the ships arrive from Africa, with so many male slaves and so many women and children in each lot, the narrator explains that the place of origin for many of these slaves, and Oroonoko, is Coramantien, a "very warlike and brave" nation that sells its many captives into slavery, or "at least those common Men who cou'd not ransom themselves" (5). Slavery in Surinam, then, is described as made up of "Black-Slaves" only, but also of "common" ones.

From the beginning Oroonoko is described as an exception to the lowly status of slaves; however, his high or noble quality, necessary for his racialization, is described as pure black while the other slaves are infamously

referred to as "rusty brown."[19] His physical beauty, his prowess in battle, his honor, and other qualities mark him as above the others of his race: "[H]e was adorn'd with a native Beauty, so transcending all those of his gloomy Race, that he struck an Awe and Reverence, even into those who knew not his Quality" (6). And yet, Oroonoko is an exceptional African because he seems European on the inside—as well in the degree of his blackness as on the outside. The narrator explains:

> But though I had heard so much of him, I was as greatly surpriz'd when I saw him, as if I had heard nothing of him; so beyond all Report I found him. He came into the Room and addressed himself to me, and some other women, with the best Grace in the World. He was pretty tall, but of a Shape the most exact that can be fancy'd: The most famous Statuary cou'd not form the Figure of a Man more admirably turn'd from head to foot. His Face was not of that brown rusty Black which most of that Nation are, but of perfect Ebony, or polished Jett. His Eyes were the most awful that cou'd be seen, and very piercing; the white of 'em being like Snow, as were his Teeth. His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat. His Mouth the finest shaped that cou'd be seen, far from those great turn'd Lips, which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes. The whole Proportion and Air of his Face was so nobly and exactly form'd, that bating his Colour, there could be nothing in Nature so beautiful, agreeable, and handsome. There was no one Grace wanting, that bears the Standard of true Beauty. His Hair came down to his Shoulders, by the Aids of Art, which was by pulling it out with a Quill, and keeping it comb'd; of which he took particular Care. (8)

The markers of African difference in racialist accounts—nose, lips, even hair—are reiterated so that Oroonoko can be defined against them, sometimes through is own "art." Although his blackness cannot be erased ("bating his Colour"), he is physically attractive, and all that can be Europeanized about his physical appearance, is.

The competing versions of Oroonoko's worth require a violent conflict to mark him as irredeemably other. It is when Oroonoko rebels against his status as an object that he is described as barbarous. In the colonial context, it is impossible for him to reclaim his self-definition as a soldier and a man of quality and honor. Once his true love Imoinda, whom he wooed and lost in Coramantien, then rediscovered and "wed" in Surinam becomes pregnant with his child, Oroonoko leads a slave rebellion, is deserted by all the other male slaves except one, and is re-captured and brutally punished by the slave-owning colonists, including the other slaves, who join in, thus completing his humiliation. After chronologically narrating the account of the failed rebellion and its cruel consequences, the

narrator returns to the early moments of the rebellion to note the fears that arose when word of the slave rebellion reached her.

> You must know, that when the News was brought on Monday Morning, that Caesar had betaken himself to the Woods, and carry'd with him all the Negroes, we were possess'd with extreme Fear, which no Persuasions could dissipate, that he would secure himself till night, and then, that he would come down and cut all our Throats. This Apprehension made all the Females of us fly down the River, to be secured; and while we were away, they acted this Cruelty; for I suppose I had Authority and Interest enough there, had I suspected any such thing, to have prevented it: but we had not gone many Leagues, but the News overtook us, that Caesar was taken and whipped like a common Slave. (68)

As in the outbreak of war between the Indians and the British in Behn's play *The Widdow Ranter*, this moment in *Oroonoko* is likewise portrayed as a threat to white English femininity. Margaret Ferguson has noted the contradictory subject positions of the narrator in *Oroonoko*.[20] According to her reading, "the [authorial] 'I' sometimes allies itself with a 'we' composed of women: in these cases the 'I' is definitely a 'she.' At other times, however, the 'I' aligns—or in political terms, allies—itself with a 'we' composed of property-owning English colonists defending themselves against an 'other' (a 'them') composed of African slaves or of native Indians, and sometimes of both" (Ferguson 214). Frightened women, including the narrator, flee from Oroonoko's monstrous tendencies, suggesting that the slave-owners are simply protecting their mothers, sisters, and daughters from a barbaric destroyer.

Until his rebellion, Oroonoko, of course, is the exception to how a slave is usually "treated," physically and literarily. When he finally becomes a mere slave, his new identity is written on his body with the whip, in a classic act of white domination of the black body that is directly marked—and in this case, also castrated and thus emasculated—by physical violence. Even though he arguably chooses to self-mutilate when he disembowels himself, which might suggest almost a voluntary linking of himself with the natives of Surinam, the first mutilation of Oroonoko's body occurs due to his whipping, at the hands of the slave-owners not his own self-mutilation during his attempted suicide. Given that the othering of his body is completed by the other slaves, who rub black "Indian pepper" in his wounds in a ritualistic, collective act of debasement, it is evident that Oroonoko's bodily demarcation is decidedly not voluntary (67).

Oroonoko's new identity is also created textually by the female narrator's pen, as Margaret Ferguson has pointed out.[21] In the first paragraph of the novella, the narrator reassures her readers about her good intentions: "I do not pretend, in giving you the History of this Royal Slave,

to entertain my Reader with Adventures of a feign'd Hero, whose Life and Fortunes Fancy may be manag'd at the Poet's pleasure; nor in relating the Truth, design to adorn it with any Accidents, but such as arrived in earnest to him" (1). She asserts that the character Oroonoko is real, and thus, so is his story. Yet his value is not stable. He is not naturally noble, like the native Caribbeans, who are described as innocent like "our first parents." His "quality" can and will be re-interpreted by the colonists as they see fit, suggesting that Oroonoko's cultural similarity or difference from the better sort of Englishman varies with the needs of English national community. After all, Oroonoko is displaced from the discourse of civility by the mere suspicion that he would want to physically harm the female colonists during the slave rebellion.

When his brutal execution reduces him from noble warrior to mere criminal, aristocratic honor and civility become linked to whiteness. This is complicated by the fact that the executioner is a "wild Irishman," a category of people who were racially marked in the early-modern period, along with Africans, Celts, and Jews. The fact that the executioner is Irish both distances the English from their own barbarity and racialized violence and constructs white supremacy at the same time.[22] This distancing is further emphasized in the narrator's description of his appearance, after his murder of the willing victim, Imoinda: "We ran all to see him; and, if before we thought him so beautiful a sight, he was now so alter'd, that his Face was like a Death's-Head black'd over, nothing but Teeth and eyeholes," a description that evokes the Black Death in its deconstruction of "pure" blackness as a kind of whiteness (76-77).[23] His "black Designs" of revenge—specifically, violent revenge against the English Governor—have overcome his former feelings of kinship, troped as "purity" of color.

Tragically—or perhaps ironically—until the end, Oroonoko still aspires to be like the sympathetic English colonists, not realizing that he must accept his own status as an object in order to do so. Ultimately, Oroonoko's slave status is encoded through violence, and only through this racial violence are the colonists united in what was to Behn, a fragile national sympathy. Elliott Visconsi argues that *Oroonoko* uses a "perceived national anxiety over a barbaric past that has only recently been civilized to make a critique of a putatively Whig ideology favoring both popular sovereignty and a self-interested ideology of commerce which entitles the rabble, erodes class distinction, and undoes the social discipline of the state," and correctly notes that this is a corrupt ideology to Behn because it threatens the traditional, appropriate "verticality of class" and also "denaturalizes the qualities of authority such as moral virtue, mercy, equity and gentility."[24] For Behn, an absolutist government keeps the nation's barbaric tendencies in check, in contrast to the anti-Stuart political