



Oroonoko's Gendered Economies of Honor/Horror: Reframing Colonial Discourse Studies in the Americas

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Like the colonized country itself, the women, both African and European, become representative objects of desire, and their conditions are to some extent parallel. Nonetheless, it is the singular and significant exception of their continued access to language in these works which clearly distinguishes the European from the African woman, no matter what the similarities.—Abena P. A. Busia

Any critique of strategic exclusions should bring analytical presuppositions to crisis.—Gayatri Spivak

Since Octave Mannoni's 1948 delineation of the "Prospero Complex" and poet George Lamming's 1960 equation of Caliban and Caribbean identity, *The Tempest*—and the Caliban-Prospero relationship in particular—have assumed an increasingly important position in anticolonialist writings.¹ In fact, studies of colonial discourse over the last decade have established *The Tempest* as an important analytical paradigm. Yet by the end of the decade both Abena P. A. Busia and Ania Loomba had countered the masculinist implications of the paradigm by focusing attention on *The Tempest*'s female figures, Miranda and Sycorax, and by critiquing the play's representation of black male and female sexuality.² In bringing the complicity of race and gender to bear on a familiar text, Busia and Loomba, among many others, have (in Spivak's terms) brought "analytical presuppositions to crisis." These critics suggest that the "deliberate *unvoicing*" of the African female in colonial literature has been seconded by the strategic exclusion of gender analysis from colonial discourse studies. Their work insists that in order to study the operation

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of gender and sexuality under colonization we must first *see* the white and black women who mediate the exchange between male antagonists. Busia and Loomba demonstrate the importance of deciphering the symbolic function women play in colonist texts, although both critics operate from the assumption that these same female characters lack practical power in a patriarchal and colonial landscape.

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave* (1688) throws even this emerging feminist paradigm into crisis. Set in the seventeenth-century British colony of Surinam, *Oroonoko* examines the intersection of three cultures (South American, African, and English) involved in the building of empire and the practice of slavery. Behn's novel not only intervenes in the colonizing discourse of her day but also raises a pointed challenge to contemporary feminist and colonial discourse studies in the Americas. The text questions the presupposition that women mediate between male antagonists, and it raises troubling questions about the lack of power attributed to white and black females in the colonial setting. With few exceptions, the academic study of colonial discourse has given virtually no attention either to the ways in which different sexual, economic, and literary discourses work together to construct women as "white" or "black," or to how women operate relative to each other in the colonial economy.

Interpreters of the *Oroonoko* story have been most likely to hesitate when confronted with two specific plot elements that bear directly on constructions of power and sexuality in Behn's text: the different concepts of honor circulating throughout the narrative and the character of Imoinda—a black African female who embodies the ideal of white European womanhood. For example, at a crucial moment in Thomas Southerne's 1695 stage adaptation of *Oroonoko*, the black slave hero for whom the play is named is surprised by the entrance of his good friend Aboan, who has just been mortally wounded. Seeing that Aboan is dying, Oroonoko responds:

My eyes are turned against me and combine
 With my sworn enemies to represent
 This spectacle of honor. Aboan!
 My ever faithful friend!³

The editors of the authoritative edition of Southerne's play, Maximillian E. Novak and David Stuart Rodes, offer a footnote to this speech which tells the reader: "Many later editions and versions of the play accept the [1736 sexto] reading of 'horror' for 'honor,' among them are the following:

Dublin, 1731; Hawkesworth revision, 1759; anonymous revision, 1760; Gentleman revision, 1760. . . . Inchbald omits the entire sentence.”⁴ While we might be amused at Inchbald’s solution to the frustrating problem (erase it altogether), there is something very revealing in her action. This textual dilemma underscores a central truth about the genre of heroic tragedy: there is no easy distinction between honor and horror. Behn’s original text presents the same problem in a different form. Despite the careful mirroring created by the novel’s structure, most critics are likely to divide the story into two mismatched parts: the first half driven by the generic dictates of romance and its code of honor; the second, by a graphic realism and the colonial horror of slavery.

As for Imoinda, in rendering the *Oroonoko* story as heroic tragedy, Southerne converts the black African female into a white European. We view this gesture and other elements of Southerne’s adaptation in the same light as Inchbald’s editorial decision—an attempt to smooth the fractures in the original text by erasing the site of textual contradictions, Imoinda herself. This erasure persists in contemporary feminist readings of Behn’s novel that specifically address race and gender. Imoinda’s character is either omitted from discussion, made into an allegory for the plight of white womanhood, or saved for the last and thereby positioned as a final enigma.⁵

Whether delineating codes of honor/horror or the construction of black/white female sexuality, the desire to make an opposition out of a paradox is emblematic of the long-standing debate over whether Behn’s novel is an antislavery tract or a slavery apology.⁶ Though *Oroonoko* clearly endorses English colonization, it nonetheless fractures at key points in the narrative, revealing not only the horror of the slave system but also the links between codes of male and female honor and the institution of slavery itself.⁷

This essay, then, brings *Oroonoko* into the context of American literature and colonial discourse study in order to examine the relationship between colonial codes of honor/horror and the black female body. We review the critical paradigms that *Oroonoko* unsettles and read the text in such a way as to promote consideration of at least three neglected areas of analysis in colonial discourse studies: the (at least) three-way mediation of racial exploitation in the Americas as European peoples negotiate domination via both African and American populations; the ways in which white, black, and indigenous females are deployed and deploy themselves in relation to each other as well as in support of slavery and other colo-

nial institutions; and the threat and practice of rape as a form of political, discursive control over entire populations—not simply individuals.



In one of two strains within the history of anticolonial *Tempest* appropriations, the play is recreated through the literature of resistance and political activism. Anticolonial intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon, George Lamming, Roberto Fernández Retamar, and Houston Baker Jr. focus on Caliban, lifting him out of the play and retaining only those aspects of the Shakespearean context which are analogous to their own historically specific situations. Caliban's cursed relationship to the oppressor's language, his perceived deformity, and his revolt against domination receive particular emphasis. Caliban becomes an archetype for resistance, a name uniting a group around a common status and history. For instance, Fernández Retamar extends Caliban's identity to all "mestizo America." Houston Baker compares him to "a maroon in the Jamaican hills or Nat Turner preparing his phaneric exit from the Great Dismal Swamp or the American South"; Caliban eventually represents Baker's own sphere, that of African American male academics.⁸ The symbolic and political use of the Caliban archetype in this arena is clear, as is the importance of Caliban's masculinity. In his survey "Caribbean and African Appropriations of *The Tempest*," Rob Nixon notes that the waning force of the *Tempest* story for political struggle in the late eighties is due precisely to "the difficulty of wresting from it any role for female defiance or leadership in a period when protest is coming increasingly from that quarter."⁹

The work of Stephen Greenblatt, Peter Hulme, and Paul Brown has been influential in shaping a second, explicitly Western and academic, strain of colonial discourse studies, and *The Tempest* has been central to their work. This scholarship employs detailed textual explication to reveal Prospero and Caliban as archetypal combatants in the colonial struggle; Shakespeare's master/slave duo captures, for whatever reasons, the dynamics of colonial relationships and discourse in a way that is in effect "characteristic" and "paradigmatic."

Such analysis, like much analysis of colonial discourse, elevates two specifically male terms from a larger system of actors and positions. The representative interplay between figures is most carefully treated in its psychological aspect, with special emphasis granted to the psychology of the colonizer, in this case "Prospero." Yet, archetypes that pit colonizer against colonized in this way can too easily become static models

for misreading. When complex operations of power are exemplified in a psychologized exchange between individuals, the resulting paradigm—however psychologically nuanced—both prematurely simplifies broader forces which work on populations and assumes certain historical transformations are already complete. For instance, the paradigm does not encourage investigation of the role of colonialism in the rise of the “individual,” in the creation of “psychology,” or in the construction of masculinity in the early modern world.

Similarly, though all of the critics in this tradition insist on historicizing Shakespeare by reading the play together with other contemporaneous texts, all eventually privilege the explanatory power of *The Tempest*. When the author has successfully presented a rereading of *The Tempest* for its colonial meanings, the work of the essay is done, a habit illustrated by the fact that, although the points of departure in these articles are various, their conclusions are synonymous and simultaneous with the conclusion of their explication of Shakespeare. The result is that, despite the call to historicize, the archetypal relationship between colonizer and colonized emerges as rather ahistorical, and the terms “characteristic” and “paradigmatic” take on shades of timelessness.

Thus Peter Hulme situates *The Tempest* at the core of his research on “colonial encounters” between Europe and the native Caribbean from 1492 to 1797: he calls the play “a crucible in which the essentials of the colonial paradigm are laid bare,” and deems it “a paradigmatic text for the writing of this book. Not only—as has often been pointed out—can Prospero and Caliban be seen as archetypes of the colonizer and the colonized, but Prospero is also the colonial historian, and such a convincing and ample historian that other histories have to fight their way into the crevices of his official monument.”¹⁰ These lines hint at the essay’s investment in what Hulme refers to as “Prospero’s private psychodrama.”¹¹ They also suggest the extent to which the dual combatant paradigm of colonial antagonism exerts a control over Hulme’s own method and structures his analysis of other colonial encounters.

This is not to say that paradigms are in themselves nefarious; nor is it to suggest that such interpretations of *The Tempest* are inevitable; they are, nonetheless, persistent.¹² This being the case, we need to beware our uncanny ability to produce academic studies of colonial discourse which enable us to locate texts against a particular historical background but allow us to maintain the disconnection between one moment in colonialist discourse and another.

Paul Brown, who delivers the most sophisticated argument in this school, would seem directly to oppose the use of *The Tempest* as a paradigm that assimilates diverse colonial histories into itself. According to Brown, colonial discourse criticism has too readily espoused *The Tempest*: “sustained historical and theoretical analysis of the play’s involvement in the colonialist project has yet to be undertaken.” He thereby separates his work from earlier studies, declaring the play “a radically ambivalent text which exemplifies not some *timeless* contradiction internal to the discourse . . . [but] a struggle to produce a coherent discourse adequate to the complex requirements of British colonialism in its initial phase.”¹³ Yet Brown also fails to sustain the effort; his conclusion reasserts the importance and paradigmatic status of the play, and thus again makes its meaning for colonial discourse effectively “timeless”: *The Tempest* “serves as a limit-text in which the characteristic operations of colonialist discourse may be discerned.” In similarly sweeping language, Brown locates within the play a radical ambivalence which is “at once the apotheosis, mystification and potential erosion of the colonialist discourse.”¹⁴ Most notable here is how Brown himself performs the “characteristic operations” of academic appropriations of *The Tempest*: although he is resolute about locating the play historically, the text ultimately represents the contradictions of its historical moment in terms characteristic of *all* phases of colonialism and colonial discourse. So too, Brown’s preoccupation with ambivalence/doubleness and his later references to the “dreamwork” and “political unconscious” of the play reveal a familiar fascination with the psychology of some generalized and trans-historical colonizer.

Abena Busia and Ania Loomba extend their analyses beyond the confines of the text, situating the play within an African and an Indian context, respectively. Each traces the parallel constructions of gender in Shakespeare, colonialist fiction, and anticolonial discourse theories. In so doing, both scholars retool the *Tempest* paradigm for the examination of gender and race in the play and in contemporary critical theory. Moreover, the work of each corrects the myopic preoccupation with Miranda in Western feminist readings of *The Tempest* and carefully investigates the construction of black female and black male sexuality.¹⁵ Yet while Busia and Loomba revise the Prospero-Caliban paradigm to accommodate an investigation of gender and race, their revisions promote a focus on white and black women in their subordination to patriarchy and discourage an exploration of the power women exercise vis-à-vis each other.

For example, Busia's "Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female" notes that "*The Tempest* establishes the paradigm" and, like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, has become a seminal text in which "the authors' treatment of their female subjects makes manifest the 'problem' of female representation and subjectivity within colonial discourse."¹⁶ Busia concentrates on the African female and the "construction of her inactive silence" that distinguishes the black from the white female in colonial literature, a focus significant for any reading of *Oroonoko*. However, *Oroonoko* challenges feminist readings of colonial literature which, like Busia's, observe that the white woman possesses little practical authority despite the fact that she is aligned with the colonizing male and invested with great symbolic power. For Busia, the female colonizer's symbolic power is somehow undercut by the fact that she too is a "representative object of [male] desire."

Ania Loomba, like Busia, expands the male colonizer/colonized duo into a quartet of players. Loomba notes that the female positions "prope[re] the narrative even when posited as an absence."¹⁷ Yet for Loomba these females seem to function merely as alibis for the males. She pays particular attention to Miranda in this respect. Miranda is the obedient, chaste participant in colonization and therefore the perfect contrast to "the witch" Sycorax. Sycorax, Caliban's absent mother, exemplifies the "construction of the promiscuity of non-European women [which] served to legitimise their sexual abuse and to demarcate them from white women."¹⁸ But according to Loomba, Miranda's chastity and obedience represent her father's power, not her own; under Prospero's careful tutelage, she is *taught* to pity and despise Caliban and to submit herself to the demands of white patriarchal institutions. Loomba concludes, "Miranda thus conforms to the dual requirements of femininity within the master-culture: by taking on aspects of the white man's burden the white woman only confirmed her own subordination."¹⁹ As the shadow of her father, Miranda serves as the "ideological legitimation of each of Prospero's actions."²⁰ However, because Loomba offers no prolonged consideration of what Miranda may stand to gain by "confirming her own subordination," she appears as a secondhand colonizer, not an actor in her own right.

Busia and Loomba represent a larger body of feminist colonial discourse scholarship which demonstrates that females in colonial texts symbolize a profound nexus of sexual and racial tension. Yet this scholarship also maintains that these females play out minor variations on the dominant male positions, emerging only as they advance the archetypal

struggle between colonizing and colonized males. The females complicate the mechanism of oppression and resistance, but they do not alter the fundamental antagonism, which is retained as male against male.²¹ Such readings carry the assumption that gender differences are well established by the early modern period, promoting the further assumption that gender—over and above racial or economic classifications—functions as the primary mode of social organization and personal identification at this moment in colonial expansion. To read in this way, it would seem, is to avoid looking at the impact of racial constructions and colonization on the very formation of gender.

This is precisely where *Oroonoko* complicates matters. The novel is told in the first person by a white female narrator, a member of the colonial gentry, who becomes close friends with Oroonoko, the royal slave. Her account is as much about the attempt to create her own narrative authority and to manage her shifting allegiances as it is about Oroonoko himself. Behn's text engages emergent discourses of race, gender, and mercantile capitalism, representing the role of females as both consumers and commodities in the colonial enterprise.²² The novel's constellation of African royalty, white colonial male gentry, white female narrator, royal slave male, royal slave female, slave masses, Amerindian villagers, and a single Indian mistress demands a fluid notion of colonial power. "Gender identity" is a nascent or submerged identity at best in a text that reveals many ways to calculate interest or alliances in a New World colonial setting, calculations which must take account of geographic and cultural origins, varying roles in the economic process, and relative relationships between enslaved, free, maroon, male, and female.

Behn's novel turns on two overlapping and carefully mirrored plots. The first takes place in Oroonoko's West African nation, Coramantien. The narrator relates information she has gathered from "the Hero himself, who gave us the whole Transactions of his Youth."²³ "Transactions" is an appropriate pun; throughout the Coramantien section Behn emphasizes that Oroonoko's aristocratic lifestyle is supported by constant warfare and his trade in slaves. Behn focuses on the power struggle between Oroonoko and his grandfather the king as they fight for sexual control of Imoinda. Although Oroonoko "ravishes" Imoinda before the king does and is therefore the victor in this contest, the king proves his ultimate control over Imoinda's body by selling her into slavery. Oroonoko, on the other hand, is duped into slavery. In his eagerness to observe the operations of a slaveship firsthand, the prince is kidnapped and taken as a slave

to Surinam. There, in keeping with the conventions of heroic romance, he is reunited with Imoinda.

While the other slaves are confined to shantytowns on the English plantations, Oroonoko's rank as African prince and his European manners and education secure him a life of relative ease. Promised his freedom when the absent Lord Governor returns, Oroonoko spends his time hunting, fishing, and making short expeditions in the company of the white female narrator. The dishonest colonial government, fearing Oroonoko will eventually rebel, enlists the narrator as diplomat and spy. Though Oroonoko vows never to harm her or the colonists, the narrator remains convinced of the need for her close surveillance, and she occupies Oroonoko and Imoinda with stories and excursions.

The major event of the novel's second half is Imoinda's pregnancy and Oroonoko's subsequent decision to lead a slave rebellion. Oroonoko's mutiny takes the slaveholders by surprise, and the English women, fearing Oroonoko will cut their throats, choose to "fly down the River to be secured." Meanwhile, the English men hasten to intercept Oroonoko and his band of fugitives. In the ensuing battle, Imoinda fights at Oroonoko's side, while other slave wives urge their men to surrender.

After the rebellion fails and Oroonoko is brutally tortured, he decides to kill the colonists in revenge, though he knows it will cost him his life. He determines that he must murder Imoinda before he takes vengeance in order to spare her a worse fate: "Perhaps (said he) she may be first ravished by every Brute; expos'd first to their nasty Lusts, and then a shameful Death" (71). As soon as he kills her, however, Oroonoko cannot bring himself to take any action whatsoever. Too weak even to kill himself properly, Oroonoko is captured and dismembered by the colonists.

While it may be entirely possible to read *Oroonoko* as a paradigmatic conflict between male colonizer and male colonized, to do so one must accept the narrator's construction of events without questioning her role as informant and participant. The contest between the English and Oroonoko in colonial Surinam is not simply a struggle between men in which the black female is victim or the white female a minor accomplice and subordinate. Rather, the events in Surinam produce an antagonism which the white female narrator organizes; she withdraws from open conflict in order to occupy a position of reflection and moral judgment. Imoinda is killed, Oroonoko can achieve no honor, the colonial government is exposed as corrupt. Only the narrator retains honorable status as the teller of the tale.

By creating a self-conscious white female narrator to mediate events, and by depicting the African female Imoinda as well as indigenous Americans, the text uses slavery, rape, and dismemberment to foreground an economic competition for the black female body and to outline an implicit competition between black, white, and indigenous females. In examining the multiple identifications of *Oroonoko's* narrator, one sees that this white female colonizer's command of language can structure oppositions and relations among African, Amerindian, English, male, and female. The way in which this narrator's discourse inflects relations of power between white and black females reveals Imoinda's central role in the text's economy of colonial honor and horror.



As in the early travel literature Behn mines, the narrator depicts the New World as an exotic realm of human and animal variation. Amidst this profusion of species, the narrator works to draw meaningful distinctions—ones that will constitute and defend the allegiances among groups, peoples, and individuals. Her account of the English alliance with the Surinamese Indians opens the novel and indicates that the primary lines of distinction are those between commodities and consumers: “With these People, as I said, we live in perfect Tranquility, and good Understanding, as it behoves us to do; they knowing all the places where to seek the best Food . . . and for very small and unvaluable Trifles, supply us with that 'tis impossible for us to get. . . . they being on all occasions very useful to us, we find it absolutely necessary to caress 'em as Friends, and not to treat 'em as Slaves, nor dare we do other, their numbers so far surpassing ours in that Continent” (4–5). By revealing the economic interests underlying the colonists' goodwill toward the Indians, the narrator implicitly invokes and justifies the English-African slave trade. Thus, from the start, the novel establishes an economic and cultural triangle. Food, slaves, and “unvaluable Trifles” circulate throughout this passage, but the racial distinctions that arise in this trade are not inscribed as a self-other antagonism between colonizer and colonized. Here and throughout the text, race is written instead as a three-way negotiation; English supremacy in this region depends upon varied forms of domination and on crucial distinctions between Amerindian and African.

The narrator reveals that all three cultures—English, African, and Amerindian—trade in slaves. For the English alone, slaves are capital and the means of production, not trophies taken in war. The English

dare not enslave the Surinamese Indians, the reader is told—"their numbers so far surpassing ours in that Continent." As Behn distinguishes between English, Indian, and African, the focus is not on the physiological or cultural characteristics of single bodies. Nor does Behn emphasize a psychological encounter between individuals. Instead, the distinctions that regulate the circulation of bodies emerge as economic ones, transactions between large groups or populations. The passage emphasizes the size of the Amerindian population, their skill in trade, and the importance of secure Amerindian-English trading patterns.

Behn has inscribed this three-way exchange among populations in the character of Oroonoko himself. Although in this novel he is the most likely candidate for the role of the archetypal colonized male, Oroonoko is not easily read as a psychological portrait, single individual, or even the product of a single culture or continent. Commenting on the title character's unusual name, Peter Hulme says that "in some ways the oddest detail, never explained in the novel, is Oroonoko's [*sic*] name. It is not clear what kind of irony or parallel is implied by the arrival just down the coast from the mouth of the Orinoco (spelt 'Oroonoko' in English until the nineteenth century) of an African bearing such an evocatively American name."²⁴ Hulme's puzzle becomes even more intriguing when one notes that the word "orinoco" also designates a type of tobacco. The title character is a black African possessing the best European schooling and manners, and named not only for a South American river but also for a prime American export good.²⁵ The triangular trade in mercantile goods is written into Oroonoko's name; he is both producer and commodity—slave trader, slave labor, and cash crop. The novel plays on these meanings when describing Oroonoko's execution. Oroonoko is tied to a post "and a great Fire made before him." The narrator notes, "he had learn'd to take Tobacco . . . he desir'd they would give him a Pipe in his Mouth, ready lighted." He is slowly dismembered with "an ill-favoured Knife," his severed parts tossed into the fire. While parted from his "members," ears, nose, and arms, he "still smoak'd on, as if nothing had touch'd him." Finally, "his Head sunk, and his Pipe dropt and he gave up the Ghost, without a Groan, or a Reproach" (77).

William C. Spengemann refers to this moment in the text as one example of Oroonoko's accommodation to his savage surroundings; he has "gone native," adopting the Indian-associated practice of pipe-smoking.²⁶ But the arresting image of Oroonoko taking tobacco while his own body burns makes literal the analogy between enslaved slave trader and the

commodity for which he is named; he signifies a transatlantic conjunction of consumer, producer, and commodity, and—more profoundly—he represents the human beings who are themselves consumed by slavery.²⁷

Alongside these complicated trade alliances and overlapping relations of production and consumption, the narrator's protean "we" shows her consolidating her own various identities—gendered, racial, political, and economic. As a royalist, the narrator shares a common sensibility with Oroonoko, the prince who traded slaves before he himself was captured. Both she and Oroonoko are critical of the dishonorable conduct of the bourgeois colonial government. The conflict between aristocratic and bourgeois values here is extremely important. While the narrator is in favor of colonization and regrets the eventual loss of the colony to the Dutch, she finds the mode of government under Lieutenant Governor Byam and his men to be dishonorable and therefore reprehensible. This is no condemnation of the imperial venture itself, however; both Oroonoko and the white female narrator believe that the "noble" are the rightful rulers of "brutes and slaves"; both she and Oroonoko openly admire a more "honorable" and ancient white slaveholding empire—Rome.²⁸ It is no coincidence that Behn gives Oroonoko the slave name Caesar; nor is it by chance that the narrator entertains Oroonoko and Imoinda "with the Loves of the Romans, and great Men, which charmed him to my Company" (46). Both she and Oroonoko become the emblems of good imperial government in this text. Yet as one who self-consciously offers her "history" to the English market and who is a member of the plantation-owning, slaveholding class in this colony, the narrator's interests are tied to those of the crass British mercantilists she disdains.²⁹

In the face of an overt conflict in the narrator's allegiances—that is, conflict between Oroonoko and the English slaveholders—the narrator merges with yet another group, a rather nebulous collection of white females who remove themselves from scenes of mutiny or slave torture. The narrator deftly attributes these departures to threats or sentiments that seem to affect white females exclusively. Thus the crucial moments when gender arises as a mechanism for social organization or individual identity are moments in which the white female is gendered distinctly from the black or native female. At these moments, the role of each woman in the colonial economy is defined by casting each in relationship to the other women, as well as to the men.

An example points this out nicely. In the midst of the climactic slave rebellion and ensuing battle, the narrator describes the Lieutenant Gov-

enor's rescue from certain death by the native art of his Indian mistress. The moment is remarkable in that the body of the white colonial governor becomes the focus of an exchange between the pregnant Imoinda and the nameless native female: "Heroick Imoinda, who grown big as she was, did nevertheless press near her Lord, having a Bow and a Quiver full of poisoned Arrows, which she managed with such dexterity, that she wounded several, and shot the Governour into the Shoulder; of which Wound he had like to have died, but that an Indian Woman, his Mistress, sucked the Wound, and cleans'd it from the Venom" (64–65). Both Imoinda and the Amerindian female engage in acts of survival. In Imoinda's attack on the Lieutenant Governor and the Indian mistress's attempt to sustain him, we see a version of a broader economic exchange across African, English, and indigenous populations. But inasmuch as the women's actions are at odds—one shoots to kill, the other provides the cure—their survival would also seem to be at odds. This is the only capacity in which we see the "Indian Woman." In this passage, she alone is sexualized, both by the nature of her cure and her description as "Mistress." Her sexual relationship with the governor is the only interracial sexual liaison which the novel permits.

In the battle scene between Imoinda and the Indian mistress, Behn not only re-presents the Amerindian-English-African trade as an exchange among individuals but also rewrites English economic exploitation and dependence in gendered terms. Furthermore, the gender distinctions separate women from each other as well as from men. While the "Mistress" and Imoinda are opposed, they are both present as active and material bodies with the capacity to reproduce or sabotage colonial relationships. The pregnant Imoinda will either breed new slaves or kill the masters; the Indian mistress can provide or withhold medicinal skill. The white female body alone has fled the scene, effectively removing itself from the scene of colonial struggle and leaving the white male to personify colonial power.

Motivated by the "extreme Fear" that Oroonoko would "cut all our Throats," the narrator has left the site of armed conflict. This fear makes "all the Females of us fly down the River, to be secured" (68). The "Females" she speaks of are, of course, the white females. The vague "Apprehension" she names in and of itself creates a body which is distinct from other female bodies. In the midst of this battle, only the white female body must be "secured"; this body alone is worthy of protection. The same "Apprehension" which distinguishes the white female body

allows that body to disappear “down the River,” thereby enabling her to acquire an even more powerful presence; she reappears as narrative consciousness and moral judge, the voice that structures the entire scene.³⁰

Both Spengemann and Margaret W. Ferguson have commented on the narrator’s peculiar absences and her multiple political allegiances within the text. Spengemann notes that “the narrator shifts her position repeatedly,” but he attributes the vacillations to a clash between romance and realism: “These rapid shifts in narrative attitude create an ambiguity of tone that enhances the novelistic effects already produced by the collision of Behn’s romantic theme with her historical narrative form. Neither romance nor *Brief True Relation*, her narrative has become a rhetorical blending of heroic ideals and brute reality into a symbolic expression of the narrator’s conflicting allegiances to her civilized audience and her savage art.”³¹

For Spengemann, the narrator’s ambiguity is explained by the incompatible requirements of conflicting genres. Ferguson, on the other hand, suggests that an analogy between gender and race oppression provokes the narrator’s realignments: “an opposition drawn along lines of gender within the British community allows—in the peculiar circumstances of colonialism—for an unusual alliance to flourish between white females . . . and the black slave Oroonoko: a community of the unjustly oppressed is thus formed.” Ferguson thereby argues that the narrator and Oroonoko are intermittently “allied in a multifaceted league of potential subversion.”³² But rather than read the narrator’s ambiguity as a by-product of conflicting genres—where the horror of colonization disrupts a would-be romance—and rather than read some potentially subversive affinity between the white female and the black male, one might focus on the exchange between females and suggest that those moments when the narrator genders herself as white woman are the very moments which elaborate, not subvert, colonial authority. Abdul JanMohamed has suggested that “evident ‘ambivalence’” in colonialist discourse can be read as “a product of deliberate, if at times subconscious, imperialist duplicity.”³³ To read *Oroonoko* as just such a case of imperialist duplicity forces an examination of the role of colonial discourse in producing modern gender itself. Although the novel calls frequent, seemingly apologetic attention to the “female pen” transmitting the material, the text makes it clear that the narrator’s position as female colonizer with leisure ensures both a particularly effective control over Oroonoko and Imoinda and, eventually, an equally effective control over their narrative. While seeming to

document the antagonism between the English men and Oroonoko, male colonizer and colonized, this white female narrator creates and recreates colonial identities and antagonisms as she sees fit and in doing so exhibits her own brand of colonial mastery.



Writing in the late seventeenth century, Behn draws on a large body of discourse attempting to produce the white female. Captivity narratives, travel accounts, British political documents, and conduct books are all defining and promoting certain qualities of gender, race, and nation by displaying these qualities in the figure of a single white English woman. Behn scholars have consistently pointed out that the body of her work contributes to the growing seventeenth-century dialogue on British womanhood, but few have noted that this dialogue must construct the modern British woman within the immediate context of British colonialism and its discourse on native female others. *Oroonoko* is of particular interest because the novel manipulates the contemporary rhetorics both of English womanhood and of colonization in order to create a white and female voice of authority, but in so doing it reveals the English lady at work creating herself. That self-production not only requires the “lady” to distinguish herself from indigenous and black females as well as males, but it also requires the “lady” to engage with a discourse of rape that can set value on her bodily integrity—that is, endow her with “honor” and therefore make her worthy of protection.

Elaine Hobby discusses the increase in civil petitions written by women between the 1640s and the 1680s, petitions that attempt to justify a female presence in politics as well as in print. Over the same period a growing body of conduct books begins to define and redefine the qualities most desirable in English women. Moira Ferguson notes that these conduct books—written by both men and women—elaborate “a certain profile in print” that connected and promoted “a matrix of values”: piety, duty, honesty, modesty, chastity, honor.³⁴

While students of these conduct books agree that this “profile in print” somehow helped forge a link between women and a newly emerging “private sphere,” scholars disagree as to whether the transformation of gender roles then underway was ultimately empowering or disempowering for English women. Nancy Armstrong has argued that, beginning in the late seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth, these conduct books and the domestic fiction they spawned were in effect empowering

an entirely new economic “class.” According to Armstrong, nonaristocratic people with otherwise divergent economic and political allegiances increasingly found themselves bound together within a “community of common domestic values” that the conduct books so ably invented.³⁵

Conduct book representations of an ideal domestic woman were predicated on a larger vision that enabled a reorganization of the social world into marketplace and household. Where formerly the major lines of distinction separated highborn aristocrats from the rest of the population, a new social map proposed a world divided into gendered spheres of activity. The British middle class could displace the aristocracy in a world that reorganized production into masculine enterprise and feminine duty: the marketplace (firmly located in the world of power and politics) and the household (seemingly outside that economic and political world). Armstrong argues that, as members of this rising class, British women were gaining power over cultural institutions—power which was cloaked because it seemed increasingly detached from the world of economics and politics. This power that seemed not to be power at all took the form of efficient management, surveillance, and speech.

Thus the new desirable domestic woman assembled in the conduct books and domestic fictions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries efficiently and inconspicuously managed people and households, and did so by means of frugality, vigilance, and—most importantly—the power of discourse: “the rhetoric of the conduct books produced a subject who in fact had no material body at all. This rhetoric replaced the material body with a metaphysical body made largely of words, albeit words constituting a material form of power in their own right.”³⁶ This argument offers a near perfect description of *Oroonoko*’s vigilant, voluble narrator. Yet Behn’s text qualifies Armstrong by relocating the historical moment and complicating the political conditions under which this sort of female subject would seem to emerge.

While Armstrong’s work is essential to our reading of *Oroonoko*, it is important to read her argument in light of the fact that both the ideal of the domestic woman and the class interests she promotes arise during the same period in which nationalist discourse and mercantile wealth are being consolidated through colonial expansion. For instance, Behn’s narrator anticipates the emergence of the domestic woman and the seemingly apolitical feminine sphere she governs, but this particular narrator claims moral and verbal authority in order to remove herself from political culpability and simultaneously to claim the power of political speech.

She passes terse judgment on the poorly run British colony and then positions herself as likable ambassador to African and Amerindian, the exemplar of good imperial government. Likewise, Behn's Imoinda is of particular interest for the way the character joins the dialogue about the desirable female while simultaneously forcing us to consider the role of imperialism and race in the construction of that ideal. Put more bluntly, definitions of aristocratic or domestic womanhood do not contend in an already white and English space; that is, race and nation enter as variables in the equation that produces the domestic woman and the British middle class.

Imoinda's skin is black and bears the raised scars that decorate elite female bodies in her West African nation. Her dancing surpasses that of all other captives in the king's seraglio. Yet this markedly exotic body has not prevented her complete acquisition of white European culture; in many ways, Imoinda represents the height of virtuous white maidenhood. Despite the alien trappings, Imoinda embodies precisely those traits which, by the late seventeenth century, English women are being encouraged to cultivate. She is identified not only by her aristocratic bearing but also by her domestic virtues: her honor, modesty, and reticence—qualities which enrapture Oroonoko when she first receives him in her Coramantien home.

Imoinda's blend of aristocratic and domestic qualities is easily maintained in the first half of the novel. Yet as the story moves her from one continent to the next, one economy to another, her character becomes the site of competing definitions of femininity and race. Behn eventually marks certain feminine qualities as white and English and transfers them to the female narrator, while other feminine qualities are marked as alien and African and come to dominate Imoinda's character. By casting Imoinda in relationship to another female, Behn creates a filter through which this mix of femininity is separated and clarified until, finally, Imoinda is associated only with her material body. Yet if it is against the material body that Behn must establish the metaphysical female subject, Behn's attempt to distinguish the narrator from Imoinda shows that her move to consolidate a modern female subject is a move to consolidate womanhood, whiteness, and Englishness simultaneously. Thus the womanhood particular to each female is defined by an exchange between women that simultaneously inscribes "womanhood" as either "black" or "white."

It is no coincidence that attributes of gender and race are worked out

and assigned within a colonial setting. The moment Imoinda arrives in a colonial slave economy is the very moment when the white female narrator materializes as a character as well as a narrating voice. Only at this juncture and in this economy does the novel begin to insist upon the contradiction between an African female body and white female sensibilities. Once enslaved, Imoinda comes to be valued entirely for the (re)productive capacity of her body, and our narrator comes to be valued for her *metaphysical* qualities, her discourse and her moral sense.

Furthermore, the changing values ascribed to female bodies in this text are registered in part through a colonial discourse of rape. While in the first half of the novel rape appears as a practice that makes the female an object in a struggle between men, in the context of colonial Surinam Behn presents a discourse of rape which actually establishes one female as subject and one as object. Inasmuch as that discourse of rape is marshaled and manipulated by the white female narrator herself, one must view the discourse of rape in this text as part of a textual transaction between women. A closer look at Imoinda—both Coramantien princess and pregnant slave—is essential to understanding the connections Behn forges between rape, honor, and protection; this discourse of rape, in turn, is essential to a reading of the interdependence of the colonial economy on the relative values of female bodies.



In both Coramantien and Surinam, Oroonoko takes significant action when he comes to fear that Imoinda may be raped by rivals. In each case, Oroonoko protects his honor by protecting Imoinda. Ironically, Oroonoko's "defense" against these threats of rape means that he must violate Imoinda's body before others do so. Clearly, to define a particular act of violence as an act of duty, defense, or rape, Oroonoko must invoke a set of socially and historically specific sanctions and prohibitions. Again and again Oroonoko calls on his code of honor to distinguish acceptable violence from what is unacceptable.

Let us contextualize and clarify the argument here. In her discussion of the so-called Indian Mutiny or Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, Jenny Sharpe addresses "the historical production of rape within a system of *colonial* relations." She argues, as we would concerning *Oroonoko*, that "what it means to be rapable" itself has a history.³⁷ Sharpe here pinpoints the aspect of meaning and interpretation that is crucial to the concept and practice of rape. Some acts of violence that resemble rape are not always

defined as rape; “rape” in this seventeenth-century text is implicitly a struggle over social definitions of violation, a struggle which inherently depends on social codes of honor and protection.³⁸ To pursue this thinking then, the discourse of rape actually structures and reinforces relations of power among bodies—which bodies can be violated and with what social impact, by whom and with what level of impunity; these particulars are fought out in the social arena as well as on a proto-individual or psychic level. In Behn, the discourse of rape and “what it means to be rapable” become one mechanism which distinguishes the black female body from the white female body, organizing social power simultaneously in terms of gender and race.

Behn’s description of Coramantien society grants honor a pivotal role in all economic, political, and sexual transactions. In his comparative study of slave societies, Orlando Patterson has argued that honor, power, and slavery are intimately linked: “wherever slavery became structurally very important, the whole tone of the slaveholders’ culture tended to be highly honorific.”³⁹ Patterson’s data reveal the “strong sense of honor the experience of mastership generated, and conversely, the dishonoring of the slave condition.”⁴⁰ Significantly, Oroonoko experiences the interdependence of honor and dishonor as both master and slave. As a prince in Coramantien society, his power and prosperity—and, therefore, honor—are directly related to his participation in the slave trade. Yet even as Behn outlines an economy of honor that relies on the trade in bodies, she sketches the difference between male and female bodies in that economy. Her plot turns on the contrast between masculine and feminine forms of honor: in Coramantien, the prince’s honor demands success in the competition for slave bodies in general and Imoinda’s body in particular. Because Imoinda’s hymen marks both female honor and male honor, it registers their impossible coexistence; the woman’s honor must give place to the man’s.⁴¹

In Coramantien, king and prince have each laid public claim to Imoinda, but neither has managed to write that claim on her body. Oroonoko has married Imoinda but not consummated the marriage. His impotent grandfather has claimed her for his harem but can assail her only with limp embraces. Social custom and political rank typically govern the sexual exchange, but in this case the king’s rights are at odds with the husband’s; both the king and Oroonoko suspect that the other’s claim to Imoinda takes priority over his own.

As each man attempts to rape Imoinda before the other does, Behn is

clearly not concerned with Imoinda's safety or bodily integrity. Her rape is culturally sanctioned and eminently social in its ramifications. Since the sexual rivalry threatens to redistribute political power, Behn's focus is on the role the woman's virginal body plays in securing each man's political position.⁴² In this scenario the hymen is a form of currency and a token of honor, valuable only in its potential for exchange. Whoever "possesses" the hymen—Imoinda, Oroonoko, or the king—possesses honor but leaves the other two dishonored. To retain her virtue—that is, to avoid permanent dishonor in the exchange—the female must receive something in return—either the sanction of honorable marriage or the honor of being mistress to the king.⁴³

Losing the "prize" to his hyperpotent grandson, the king still exercises ultimate control over Imoinda's body; he sells her into slavery, even though "death would be more honorable for a maid of that quality." The statement concludes Imoinda's role in the Coramantien plot sequence even as it points ahead to the events in Surinam. The assertion that "death would be more honorable" indicates the romance formula for female honor and anticipates two lessons about honor that Oroonoko will learn in Surinam. As Orlando Patterson has argued, the generalized dishonor of slavery is akin to social death: "Those who do not compete for honor, or are not expected to do so, are in a real sense outside the social order."⁴⁴ First, Oroonoko and Imoinda discover that romance notions of female honor (virginity or sanctioned marriage) are impossible under slavery; and second, as a slave, Oroonoko, who can "do nothing that honor does not dictate," finds himself trapped in the economy of dishonor that Patterson describes.⁴⁵

In both Coramantien and Surinam, Imoinda is a unit of exchange, yet the value assigned to her body changes. When finally both Oroonoko and Imoinda are relocated in colonial Surinam, the aristocratic contest over Imoinda's hymen becomes an interracial struggle over the African female body. For Oroonoko, this change in meaning begins to register when Imoinda becomes pregnant: "This new Accident made him more impatient of Liberty . . . he began to suspect them of Falshood, and that they would delay him till the time of his Wife's Delivery, and make a Slave of that too: for all the Breed is theirs to whom the Parents belong" (45). Once pregnant, Imoinda has increased her worth and that of Oroonoko in the slave economy. While in the Coramantien romance plot Imoinda's value resides only in her hymen and its one time rupture, in the slave economy her greater value resides in her womb and in the poten-

tial for multiple, repeatable reproduction of the labor force.⁴⁶ In a system that shifts the value of the African female body from hymen to womb, Oroonoko's sexual use of Imoinda's body can only reproduce dishonor by increasing their value to the system. When Imoinda "began to shew she was with Child," she "sighs and weeps," believing "if it were so hard to gain the liberty of two, 'twould be more difficult to get that for three" (59). This fact compels Oroonoko to lead a rebellion.

When the rebellion fails, Oroonoko suffers the brutal indignity of torture for the first time. He is whipped ferociously and "to compleat his Rage, he saw every one of those Slaves, who but a few days before ador'd him . . . now had a Whip to give him some Lashes." Oroonoko is then put in irons and "Indian pepper" is rubbed into his open wounds; finally, he is left tied "so fast to the Ground, that he could not stir, if his Pains and Wounds would have given him leave" (67).

In this extremity, Oroonoko's honor would seem to demand two contradictory feats. He must avenge his torture and, therefore, resolves "not only to kill [Lieutenant Governor] Byam, but all those he thought had enraged him"; yet he must also protect Imoinda from the "nasty Lusts" of "the enraged Multitude" (71). The understanding that he cannot accomplish both comes upon him all at once. Regardless of whether he succeeds or fails in his plot of revenge, Imoinda may be subject to repeated rape. Oroonoko's choices are mutually exclusive; in either case—whether he avenges himself or protects Imoinda—his action will result in dishonor.

For Oroonoko, the threat of rape in this instance is an "Apprehension too insupportable to be borne" because the meaning of rape itself is transformed. In the colonial setting rape does not simply mean that he will lose Imoinda's body to a superior rival but also that she will be subject to the widest possible sexual circulation. Imoinda will be available to multiple violation by "every Brute" on the plantation (71). This thought eventually overwhelms Oroonoko and brings about his murder of Imoinda.

In Surinam, as in Coramantien, the discourse of rape, honor, and protection is written on the black female body; it affirms her physical value with violent results. However, when the configuration of rape, honor, and protection established in Coramantien recurs in Surinam, it is altered by the intrusion of white and Amerindian players and a colonial economy. For instance, in Surinam Oroonoko is at times called upon to "protect" white women, especially in the excursion to an "Indian Town." At other times he himself is deemed the threat. In either case, the discourse affirms the white female's metaphysical value. Thus, in the colonial setting

concepts such as rape, protection, and honor work to draw and redraw alliances, especially those among the white female narrator, the black male, and the black female.

In its account of Imoinda's murder, the novel carefully echoes her earlier "ravishment" in Coramantien. Imoinda's pregnant body becomes the site of a critical linkage between the aristocratic code of honor and the codes of honor and dishonor that govern colonization: "the lovely, young and ador'd Victim lays her self down before the Sacrificer; while he, with a hand resolved and a heart-breaking within, gave the fatal Stroke, first cutting her Throat, and then severing her yet smiling Face from that delicate Body, pregnant as it was with the Fruits of tenderest Love" (72). This "sacrifice" parallels the Coramantien conflict over Imoinda, the taking of female "virgen-honour" for male. Yet while the scene symbolically re-enacts the taking of Imoinda's hymen, the action renders it gruesome, even macabre. Where the threat of rape in the early part of the novel leads to the taking of Imoinda's maidenhead, by the end of the novel Oroonoko severs her "face" in a gory decapitation. Behn dwells on the details: Oroonoko covers the body, keeping the "severed face" to look on. He lies next to the decaying corpse for eight days, until the slaveowners track him by the "loathsome" smell: "for Stinks must be very noisom, that can be distinguished among such a quantity of natural Sweets, as every Inch of that Land produces" (74).

As the "Fruits of tenderest Love" rot in this otherwise fertile setting, and the "noisom" stench of Imoinda's spoiling flesh rises over the New World landscape, the language of the travel narrative reasserts itself. The narrative consciousness intrudes on the scene to remind us that the ruined productivity of the enslaved female body points directly back to the transcendent productivity of the land, every inch yielding "natural Sweets." In so doing, the passage highlights the exchange between the black female's body and the white female's voice. Not only does this bizarre dismemberment replay the earlier conjunction of rape, honor, and protection, but the act also invokes the discourse of rape in its necessary relation to the colonial economy and the trade in goods and bodies, a trade in which all three cultures—African, Amerindian, and English—are implicated and over which the narrator presides.



This essay has argued that Behn places her narrator and Imoinda in a relationship of exchange; they take part in a textual transaction in which

both are feminized, but in which the white female gathers metaphysical traits unto herself and inscribes the black female with physical value only. Behn thus endows her narrator with moral, political, and narrative authority; and she does so by fashioning a distinctly white female subjectivity, a “gendered identity,” if you will. But in Behn we also see multiple contemporaneous discourses at odds; economic, racial, and gender divisions all vie for the power to organize populations and describe individual bodies. Gender does not stand apart from or prior to these conflicting modes of social classification.

In Behn’s late-seventeenth-century strategy, we see that through the narrative itself the narrator—a woman without husband or father—is able to take her own body out of economic and sexual circulation and to substitute instead the value of her words and watchfulness. In representing the circulation of bodies and body parts among British, Amerindian, and African, the narrator appears to control that circulation and to profit from it by removing herself from it. Throughout the novel she wields a subtle rhetoric of allegiance that enables her to be against mutiny but for Oroonoko; against the corrupt colonists and the Lieutenant Governor but for colonization; against having her own throat cut but for the “honorable” decapitation of Imoinda. Behn’s depiction of colonial slavery constitutes the narrator as simultaneously white and metaphysically feminine; the narrator claims the power of political speech and the protections of citizenship for her person.

The legacy of *Oroonoko* can be read in the discourse on race in the Americas, its impact traced in primitivist fiction and the slave narrative, as well as in sentimental abolitionist fiction in the United States and Britain. *Oroonoko* raises provocative and politically charged questions with which to examine the American lines of descent. For instance, Behn’s seventeenth-century narrator employs a discourse of rape to distinguish herself from indigenous and black females and thereby achieves political immunity while justifying her own political speech. How, then, might the discourse of rape codify race and gender at different historical moments, and what is the investment of “white” females in manipulating that discourse? What is the investment of white females in various systems of colonial power? How are females gendered vis-à-vis other females, and males vis-à-vis other males through colonizing discourse? How do texts encode and support domination via multiply “raced” and gendered “others”? Such questions seem pressing if our object is to investigate the sexual and racial ideologies supporting colonial interests and, most im-

portantly, if we would, as Benita Parry urges, trace the permutation of those ideologies at different points in time down to present day imperialist conflicts.⁴⁷

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Notes

The epigraphs to this essay are taken from Abena P. A. Busia, "Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female," *Cultural Critique* 14 (Winter 1989–90): 94; and Gayatri Spivak, "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World," in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1987), 249. An earlier version of this article was presented at the first Congreso Internacional de Conflictos Culturales en la Literatura Contemporánea, held at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez, in February 1991. We would like to thank Marty Roth and Christy Brown for their comments on early drafts of this essay.

- 1 See Octave Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, trans. Pamela Powesland (New York: Praeger, 1956); George Lamming, "A Monster, a Child, a Slave," in *The Pleasures of Exile* (London: Allison & Busby, 1984), 95–117.
- 2 Busia, 81–104; Ania Loomba, "Seizing the Book," in *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (New York: Manchester Univ. Press, 1989), 142–58.
- 3 Thomas Southerne, *Oroonoko*, ed. Maximillian E. Novak and David Stuart Rodes (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1976), 113.
- 4 See note in Southerne, 113.
- 5 We refer here to three texts to which this essay is indebted: Laura Brown's "The Romance of Empire: *Oroonoko* and the Trade in Slaves," in *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature*, ed. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (New York: Methuen, 1987), 41–61; Moira Ferguson's chapter, "*Oroonoko*: Birth of a Paradigm," in her *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670–1834* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Margaret W. Ferguson's "Juggling the Categories of Race, Class and Gender: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," *Women's Studies* 19 (1991): 159–81. In fact, Margaret W. Ferguson speculates provocatively on Southerne's conversion of black female into white and discusses the cover of the Norton edition of Behn's text, which depicts a white Imoinda and her black husband, who gestures at her with a knife. Rather than taking their scholarship to task, we mean to point to the tendency that excludes black females from analysis or pushes them to the background of studies in race and gender, as if the nexus of the two were better or more interestingly realized in the intersection of black male and white female. Nancy Stepan's work

prompts our speculation that antiracist cultural studies have been too quick to borrow the analogy between black male and white female as a metaphor for disempowerment. The analogy may only serve to distract from investigations of white women's power or from examinations of race-and-gender as a different conjunction for black women than it is for white women. See Nancy Leys Stepan's "Race and Gender: The Role of Analogy in Science," in *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1990), 38–57.

- 6 The move to sanction slavery condemns it at the same time, and the ease with which Behn's novel was converted in the eighteenth century into popular abolitionist dramas illustrates this phenomenon. Anthony Gerard Barthelemy comments: "The stage history of *Oroonoko* and of its various adaptations clearly demonstrates this point, for as each generation of audiences required a stronger abolitionist statement, the play was altered to meet that need" (*Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1987], 181). Wylie Sypher discusses the *Oroonoko* history in detail in his *Guinea's Captive Kings: British Anti-Slavery Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Octagon, 1969), 108–21.
- 7 For a study of honor and dishonor in slave societies, see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982). What *Oroonoko* adds to his discussion is a notion of honor as necessarily gendered and economic. This gendered economy of honor/dishonor not only supports and unites the two halves of Behn's novel but also makes monarchy, rape, empire, and slavery consistent practices.
- 8 Roberto Fernández Retamar, *Caliban and Other Essays*, trans. Edward Baker (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4; Houston Baker Jr., "Caliban's Triple Play," in "*Race, Writing, and Difference*," ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985), 391.
- 9 Rob Nixon, "Caribbean and African Appropriations of *The Tempest*," *Critical Inquiry* 13 (Spring 1987): 577.
- 10 Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1797* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 123, 125.
- 11 Hulme, 123.
- 12 The Shakespearean canon has long been the testing ground for any new critical approach to literary interpretation, particularly any that would gain ascendancy within humanist disciplines. The history of Shakespeare studies as an academic proving ground may indicate that the real contest here is not between Prospero and Caliban, but rather "old" and "new" textual approaches. In the broader context of postcolonial studies, this criticism raises a more curious question: to what extent does anticolonial criticism perform an ironic reinstitution of Shakespeare—and through it British culture—as a primary (paradigmatic) lens through which to understand colonial culture? Only Loomba, writing from within the Indian education system, is acutely

conscious of Shakespeare's continuing role as interpreter of the experience of both imperialists and colonial subjects, as was exactly the case in the initial phases of English literature as a colonial discipline. Her introductory chapter is particularly good at connecting the use of Shakespeare and English literature in a colonial and postcolonial context, demonstrating how English literature continues to jointly serve the needs of imperialism as well as the indigenous elite.

- 13 Paul Brown, "'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine': *The Tempest* and the discourse of colonialism," in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), 131–32.
- 14 Paul Brown, 151.
- 15 Laura Donaldson's work on "The Miranda Complex" is perhaps the most recent example of feminist reading that, while contributing to a critique of white women and colonization, accepts at face value the reading of Caliban as attempted rapist and fails to consider Sycorax altogether (*Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender, and Empire-Building* [Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1992]).
- 16 Busia, 84.
- 17 Loomba, 153.
- 18 Loomba, 152.
- 19 Loomba, 156.
- 20 Loomba, 153.
- 21 Hazel Carby's formulation of this is emblematic: "The white woman's body within colonial discourse was the preserve of a white patriarchal order. . . . At the nexus of imperial relations the white woman's body became symbolic of colonial oppression and is thus often represented in colonial fiction as a central figure in the struggle between colonizing and colonized males" ("Proletarian or Revolutionary Literature: C. L. R. James and the Politics of the Trinidadian Renaissance," *New Formations* 10 [1990]: 105).
- 22 For a discussion of white women as consumers in the text, see Laura Brown, 41–61.
- 23 Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave* (New York: Norton, 1973), 1. Subsequent citations from Behn will appear parenthetically in the text.
- 24 Hulme, 241.
- 25 The *OED* defines "oroonoko" (a variant of oronooko) as a type of tobacco and speculates that the term of "uncertain origin" is apparently "a proper name connected with the river Oronoco in South America" (2nd ed., vol. X [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989]).
- 26 Spengemann also points to an earlier moment of "going native," Oroonoko's desperate and confused actions at the novel's climax: after killing Imoinda, Oroonoko, uncertain whether to attempt to destroy his oppressors or to destroy himself, finally attempts both and succeeds at neither. In Oroonoko's final moments, Behn has him borrow a tactic from the Surinamese Indians—

self-mutilation—to defy the English colonists. He lops off pieces of his throat and throws them at the colonists, then disembowels himself (75). Of this native practice the narrator says, “It’s by a passive Valour they shew and prove their Activity, a sort of courage too brutal to be applauded by our Black Hero; nevertheless, he express’d his Esteem of ’em” (58). In adopting this practice—which he previously thought too full of rage and malice, too horrible—Oroonoko is engaging a native, non-European code of honor and aligning himself with the only people he has seen who have successfully resisted the treacherous colonists. See William C. Spengemann, “The Earliest American Novel: Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 38 (1984): 384–414.

- 27 His smoking also reinforces Behn’s portrait of the New World as a region of extremities. Just as the “Indian pepper” was ground into his wounds to heighten his suffering, so too the smoking induces Oroonoko’s impossible calm in the midst of his own dismemberment. Also noteworthy is the fact that the economic conjunction discussed here is further emphasized in Oroonoko’s transformation from trophy taker to trophy: in Coramantien he presents Imoinda with captured slaves and, later in Surinam, presents the narrator with a “tyger cub” after killing its mother. After his own execution, Oroonoko’s severed limbs are distributed as trophies amongst the plantation owners in order to display before their slaves, presumably in the hopes of frightening them into submission. Even in death, Oroonoko cannot escape furthering the slave economy.
- 28 That Oroonoko shares this attitude is made clear in his rebellion speech, in which he states that had he and the other slaves been “vanquished . . . nobly in Fight” they would have no cause to rebel (61).
- 29 Behn thus creates what will become a standard structure for primitivist narrative. Her narrator, like Conrad’s Marlowe, apparently stands apart from the “civilized” colonial rulers in order to judge them corrupt. The narrator retains the economic benefits and protections of imperialism, while proving herself more civil, more moral than either the colonial government or the enslaved or indigenous populations. This cunning stance of ambivalent observation creates a moral hierarchy within her own culture: by displaying moral sensitivity, the narrator can distinguish herself from the barbaric capitalists. The imperialist’s critique of imperialism itself becomes testimony to the moral superiority available through “civilization.”
- 30 The relationships between females established in this battle episode are replayed in Oroonoko’s torture scene. As Oroonoko is whipped, Imoinda is carried away from the spectacle, “not in kindness to her, but for fear she should die with the sight, or miscarry, and then they should lose a young Slave, and perhaps the Mother” (67). While Imoinda’s absence draws attention to the reproductive value of her material body, the narrator’s absence draws attention to her emotional sensitivity; she has removed herself yet again, this time due to a fit of melancholia. The narrator chooses precisely

this moment to repeat her account of the governor's wound and the mistress's cure. Thus the Indian mistress also reappears and performs the same function she had before. The repetition of the Indian mistress incident itself is curious. The first time it appears, it is told as part of the account of the slave rebellion, so the rescue seems to occur at the very moment the governor is shot. Yet the second time the narrator refers to the timely rescue, we learn that the cure is worked long after the governor is wounded. It isn't until Oroonoko has been captured and is being whipped that the governor grows faint and the poison is discovered. In both cases, the narrator has fled the scene.

- 31 Spengemann, 402–03.
- 32 Margaret W. Ferguson, 165–66.
- 33 Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, 80.
- 34 Hobby claims that this matrix constituted a "web of words" so closely associated that one such quality, for instance honor, would consistently bring all the others to mind. See her *Virtue of Necessity: English Women's Writing, 1649–1688* (London: Virago, 1988), 9; and Moira Ferguson, 21.
- 35 Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987).
- 36 Armstrong, 95.
- 37 Jenny Sharpe also implicates the discourse of rape in the production of race and gender categories: "The demand on contemporary feminism, then, is to disrupt the taken-for-grantedness of such categories through an excavation of the histories that produce racial and sexual difference" ("The Unspeakable Limits of Rape: Colonial Violence and Counter-Insurgency," *Genders* 10 [Spring 1991]: 26).
- 38 Susan Jeffords uses the phrase "scenario of protection." She traces a "rhetoric of rape" which has been crucial to the development of American nationalism, and she links the contemporary rhetoric surrounding the 1991 Persian Gulf War and the "rape of Kuwait" to early nationalist fantasies promoted by captivity narratives and the literature of the American Revolution. We borrow her emphasis on protection but work toward a different end. Where she sees the scenario of protection inventing a villain and a protector, we emphasize the creation of the victim, a body (national or individual) worthy of protection. We are also attempting to argue that the discourse of rape in Behn's text, and in the captivity narratives from which she borrows, works to codify race, gender, and nation simultaneously; hence rape is pre-eminently a social act. Jeffords writes, "The rhetoric of rape and the scenario of protection have little room for discussion of rapes except as they can be metaphorized to stand for a threat to a community at large." We argue that rape is quite literally—not simply metaphorically—a threat to a community at large as well as an act that constitutes a particular body as violable. See

- Susan Jeffords, "Rape and the New World Order," *Cultural Critique* 19 (Fall 1991): 203–15.
- 39 Patterson, 79.
- 40 Patterson, 11.
- 41 Behn's depiction seems to fit with Patterson's data on slavery and honor in West African society: "In the struggle for prestige, what was critical in *all* African societies was the number of dependents an ambitious man could acquire. Kinship and the affinal alliances were the two major techniques for accumulating dependents, but a third important means was the institution of slavery. Among many African tribes this was often the sole reason for the acquisition of slaves, there being little or no economic difference between the condition of slaves and their masters and no such thing as a slave class" (Patterson, 83).
- 42 Beverle Houston notes that "the threatened rape is narrativized in its significance for Oroonoko, the man, not for the woman herself; the woman functions as a token of power exchange among the men" ("Usurpation and Dismemberment: Oedipal Tyranny in *Oroonoko*," *Literature and Psychology* 32 [1986]: 32).
- 43 The exchange that generates honor here is necessarily an exchange between male and female, each with a specific role to play. Ultimately, however, one's place in the aristocratic hierarchy, not one's gender, defines the transaction. The manifest signs of rank—king, prince, general's daughter—and not the manifest signs of masculinity or femininity determine one's amount of power in the exchange. The Royal Veil is a ceremonial substitute for the hymen; the king "sends the Lady he has a mind to honour with his Bed, a Veil, with which she is cover'd, and secur'd for the King's use" (12). For the female, the veil replaces the honor of virginity with the "honor" of service to the crown.
- 44 Patterson, 79.
- 45 He literally "can do nothing" at the end of the novel. Nearly paralyzed beside the dismembered body of Imoinda, he neither fights nor runs. Movement is only possible when he alters his very definition of honor and adopts the "passive valour" of self-mutilation that he has learned from the Surinamese Indians.
- 46 Imoinda's pregnancy is the first literary characterization of the pregnant female slave, a figure of increasing significance throughout the history of African American women's writing. In this literature, the pregnant female slave is a potent sign of the reproducibility of slave economics. In one moment the figure conveys the nexus of white desire/exploitation/reproduction which is rewritten onto her body.
- 47 Benita Parry, "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse," *Oxford Literary Review* 9 (1987): 27–58.