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Adam R. Beach

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Behn's Oroonoko, the Gold Coast, and Slavery in the Early-Modern Atlantic World

ADAM R. BEACH

Critics of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave* (1688) have contended with the title character's role as both a slave owner and as an agent in the trans-Atlantic slave trade in a number of ways. Much of the scholarship focuses on the speech Oroonoko delivers to his fellow slaves in Surinam, which draws distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable forms of enslavement. Oroonoko proclaims that being enslaved to those who have "*Won us in Honourable Battel*" is unobjectionable and positively compares that experience of bondage with being "*Bought and Sold like Apes, or Monkeys, to be the Sport of Women, Fools and Cowards.*"¹ Critics have assigned various names to the first form of enslavement that Oroonoko identifies: Laura Rosenthal nominates it as "African"; Gary Gautier as "heroic"; and Oddvar Holmesland as "chivalric" and "courtly."² Each critic argues that Behn's text presents this form of heroic enslavement as superior to the grotesquely violent and purely mercantile bondage that predominates in Surinam.

Other scholars have noted some degree of irony in Oroonoko's speech and his situation—after all, they argue, Oroonoko himself sold many of these slaves, so how can he inveigh against a commercial slave trade? Srinivas Aravamudan has developed this reading of *Oroonoko* as an "ironic text" more than any other critic to date.³ He asks, for example, "what are we to make of the slaves' exaggerated veneration of Oroonoko . . .

especially when Oroonoko was personally responsible for having sold these individuals into slavery?"⁴ Aravamudan opens up the possibility that such episodes in the text "are invested with satirical potential if read imaginatively," and he opposes traditional post-colonial readings that venerate Oroonoko as a victim of European treachery and slavery.⁵

Aravamudan's work represents a significant leap forward in the development of a critical reading of Oroonoko's slaving practices. However, it leaves much work to be done in constructing a systematic analysis not only of the ways Behn depicts slavery in West Africa and Oroonoko's involvement in the slave trade, but also of the text's investment in drawing value-laden distinctions between slave systems. We need to read Behn's text from within a paradigm that is critical of the slave systems that existed in all zones of the early-modern Atlantic. A critique of global slave institutions shares many of the ethical impulses of post-colonial work but expands its vision by attending to human bondage both inside and outside of traditional imperial scenes. From this perspective, we can focus less on the "irony" of Oroonoko's situation and deliver a forceful critique of both his role in the slave institutions of Coramantien and Behn's attempts to represent some versions of slavery as more acceptable than others.

By working with contemporary historical and anthropological scholarship on early-modern West Africa, we can also advance our understanding of the complex ways that *Oroonoko* responds to the seventeenth-century Atlantic world. Rather than attend to the scholarship of those who study the history of Africa, Behn scholars have often worked primarily with published pamphlets about West Africa from the early-modern period.⁶ Additionally, some critics continue to perpetuate the idea that early-modern English traders exerted a colonial or imperial influence over their West African trading partners.⁷ In doing so, scholars have not considered, for example, John Thornton's important work on Africa and the early-modern Atlantic, which contests a host of Eurocentric assumptions, including the idea that "Africa . . . played a passive role in the development of the Atlantic."⁸ Rather, Thornton emphasizes the economic and military strength of West African nations, their reliance on slave institutions before contact with Europeans, and the control that West African elites exercised over the terms and conditions of the slave trade.

If we are to take up the demands of current historians like Thornton and others to acknowledge the sophistication and agency of early-modern West Africans, then we must also be willing to subject the slave owners and traders of the early-modern Gold Coast—and their fictional counterparts like Oroonoko—to a critical analysis that derives from general anti-slavery principles.⁹ This paradigm allows us to take seriously Behn's geographical

placement and attend to human bondage in the early-modern Gold Coast and the Fante region in which “Coramantien,” or the actual town of Kormantse, is located.¹⁰ Contextualizing *Oroonoko* in this manner opens the text up to a critique that scrutinizes Behn’s text for the ways it celebrates Oroonoko as a slave-owner, downplays his role as a slave trader, and mitigates the harsh realities of slavery in West Africa. In taking such steps, this essay contributes to an early-modern studies that is capacious in its vision and dogged in its attention to the situation of slaves in all parts of the early-modern Atlantic.

Yet, such contextualization also helps to demonstrate that *Oroonoko* often exhibits a surprising awareness of certain features of the slave trading contact zones in the Gold Coast, not least of which is the involvement in the slave trade of mulatto individuals born to unions between European slave traders and their West African wives and mistresses. In the last section of the essay, I examine recent historical work that describes these “Atlantic creoles” and the vital role they played in shaping both the Old and the New World in the early-modern period. Once we also consider Oroonoko as a type of Atlantic creole, we can see that Behn’s text is more cognizant of and engaged with the ambiguous realities of the early-modern Atlantic world than has previously been recognized. By reading the character of Oroonoko as a slave owner, a slave trader, and also potentially as an Atlantic creole, we can perform a more rigorous critique of the politics of slavery in *Oroonoko* and also follow Behn’s text as it points us to a fuller and ultimately less Eurocentric understanding of the early-modern Atlantic world.

Oroonoko as Slave Owner

To date, critics have generally stayed within the confines of Behn’s text, explicating the work it performs without subjecting to scrutiny its notion that one institution of human bondage can be more noble than another. In his influential work on slavery in West Africa, the anthropologist Claude Meillassoux provides a theoretical framework that allows critics of slavery to counter any such comparative claims. Meillassoux argues that analysts must not confuse the “state” of the slave with his or her “condition.” When human beings are reduced to the “state” of slavery, Meillassoux argues, it “is the outcome of a succession of metamorphoses which make them into individuals without links of kinship, affinity, or neighbourhood, and thus suitable for exploitation.”¹¹ He describes a series of processes by which slaves are wrenched from their original social context and are “*de-socialized*” as well as “*de-civilized* and even *de-personalized*.”¹² This

devastating and violent loss of status remains an inherent part of the slave's "state" no matter what "condition" he or she is given by the master:

Because of this original and indelible stigma, slaves, once in the hands of a master, could be assigned to any task, irrespective of their sex or age, and without being granted a status corresponding to the *condition* defined by their employment . . . The *state* and *condition* of the slave were distinct and did not affect each other.¹³

Meillassoux provides a vital distinction that needs to be accounted for in the analysis of any slave society. His findings are reinforced by Orlando Patterson's comprehensive study of comparative slavery, in which he defines slavery as "*the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons.*"¹⁴ Patterson argues throughout his book that this perpetual state of alienation and domination remains no matter how the slave is employed or treated by the master. Certainly, some forms of slavery offered conditions that were much harsher than others, and Patterson develops a four-point scale to describe "the overall treatment of slaves."¹⁵ However, he takes pains, much like Meillassoux, to avoid value judgments based on "treatment"—all slaveries are caught up in what he calls the "complex dialectics of human parasitism" in which "the slaveholder fed on the slave to gain the very direct satisfactions of power over another, honor enhancement, and authority."¹⁶ Such dynamics are operative regardless of the ultimate employment or "condition" that defined the slave's day-to-day existence.

Such analytical insights allow us to gain a critical perspective on Oroonoko's posited distinction between different forms of human bondage in his speech to his fellow slaves. He is right to critique the "condition" of the slaves in Surinam—their incessant labors, their being treated like animals, and their subjection to random brutality and torture, especially on "Black Friday," are all obviously horrible.¹⁷ What troubles is Oroonoko's theoretical insistence that slaves working under better conditions would have nothing to complain about and that other forms of slavery could have salutary effects on its victims: "they suffer'd not like Men who might find a Glory, and Fortitude in Oppression; but like Dogs that lov'd the Whip and Bell."¹⁸ Oroonoko implies that some slave systems offer those in bondage the opportunity to develop positive character traits like "Fortitude." Thus, Oroonoko sidesteps the reality that the "state" of the slave itself—no matter his or her "condition"—is in and of itself a position of abject dehumanization that is meant to strip away "the Divine Quality of Men."¹⁹ This is not to

challenge his assertions that slavery in English Surinam is terrible, but to suggest that slavery everywhere is terrible, even where slaves do not receive the physical brutality described by Oroonoko.

Such a critical stance forces into view the one-hundred and fifty captives in fetters that Oroonoko gives to Imoinda upon their first meeting. Little commentary has been directed towards the scene in which Oroonoko creates a fabulous spectacle by marching at the head of a small army to Imoinda's house with the large contingent of slaves in tow. Behn presents to us a grand military figure whose erotic and political appeal is enhanced by this demonstration of his power and control over other human beings. Initially, the captive slaves are represented as an offering to Imoinda because her father sacrificed his life to save Oroonoko's. However, once Oroonoko discovers Imoinda's beauty, the gift of the slaves transforms from a sorrowful act of restitution into a central element in a fabulous scene of seduction: "having made his first Complements, and presented her an hundred and fifty Slaves in Fetters, he told her with his Eyes, that he was not insensible of her Charms."²⁰ Strategically situating the gift of the slaves between his oral and ocular acts of wooing, Oroonoko's success at courtship is certainly enhanced by the spectacular offering of fettered human flesh.

Imoinda has rarely been discussed in the criticism on Oroonoko as a slave-owner, but, in this instance, the text rests on the assumption that she has the ability and wherewithal to receive, house, control, and exploit this large contingent of slaves.²¹ The addition of so many bondsmen to her household will, no doubt, substantially increase her status and material wherewithal. Thus, the "new-born Love" of Imoinda and Oroonoko is hatched in the midst of what is otherwise a fairly unpleasant scene, filled with a triumphant and brash conquering army parading around its abject captives.²² According to Oroonoko's previously discussed analysis, these men should bear no anger at their enslavement because they have been "Won . . . in Honourable Battel."²³ Yet, nothing is said about their emotional state or their eventual fate, as they are shuffled off the page, never to be heard from again. This has the effect of removing from view Oroonoko's participation in the further processes required for reducing human beings to the state of slavery.

A rigorous anti-slavery criticism must dismantle Behn's depiction of slavery in the Gold Coast as an honorable, unobjectionable institution that raises no ill-feeling among its victims. Behn's depictions can effectively be countered if we take recourse in the work of historians like Ray A. Kea and Akosua Adoma Perbi, who painstakingly reconstruct the slave institutions of the early-modern Gold Coast. Kea's study paints the picture of a complex

and sophisticated group of small polities with dynamic economic and political structures, cosmopolitan social features, and vibrant urban and commercial centers. Kea argues that the “Gold Coast social formation was defined by two modes of social production: a dominant tributary mode and a subordinate slaveowning mode.”²⁴ He notes that the slaveowning mode consisted of the “juridical ownership of persons,” and that these slaves were “involved in both commodity and noncommodity ‘circuits.’”²⁵ While Kea focuses mostly on the economic exploitation of slaves in the production of gold, salt, and agricultural products, he does indicate that they were also utilized in non-economic functions.

Perbi offers more information than Kea on these “noncommodity” uses of slaves, and her fourth chapter provides an extremely thorough overview of the ways slaves were exploited in the Gold Coast. She notes that slaves were sometimes deployed in administrative and military capacities, that male owners frequently bought female slaves to be concubines, and that slaves were occasionally used as sacrificial victims in various religious rites.²⁶ Kea and Perbi depict large-scale institutions whereby humans are violently reduced to the state of slavery even as they come to occupy a variety of conditions. This framework allows us to resist the temptation offered by Behn’s text, which invites us to critique the practices of slave owners in the English Caribbean and to ignore or downplay Oroonoko and Imoinda’s slaves in Coramantien.

We also need to be on guard against Behn’s fanciful depiction of Oroonoko’s enslavement of Jamoan, which directs attention away from any of Oroonoko’s other slaves. Generally, critics argue that Behn includes the Jamoan episode in order to demonstrate what, to use Gautier’s terms, a “wholesome master-slave relation” would look like.²⁷ Gautier demonstrates that Behn favorably contrasts this “wholesome” bond with the less palatable slave relations that she highlights in English Surinam. He also argues that: “Jamoan is Oroonoko’s slave but he is also a ‘Prince’ by blood and of Oroonoko’s own rank. Oroonoko’s sense of slavery takes this into account, and Jamoan becomes as much the companion and courtier as the slave.”²⁸ Behn’s formulations on this matter need to be complicated on several fronts.

To begin with, it is not clear that Jamoan has been a recipient of such favorable treatment after all. When Behn, in an earlier passage, describes the enslavement of male captives, she indicates that ransom was a regular cultural practice between Gold Coast nations: “for all they took in Battel; were sold as Slaves; at least, those common Men who cou’d not ransom themselves.”²⁹ This passage begs the question of why Jamoan, who is dubbed a “Prince,” was not allowed to buy his freedom. The practice of

ransom is all but ignored in the later passage describing Jamoan's enslavement:

This *Jamoan* afterwards became very dear to him, being a Man very gallant, and of excellent Graces, and fine Parts; so that he never put him amongst the Rank of Captives, as they us'd to do, without distinction, for the common Sale, or Market; but kept him in his own Court, where he retain'd nothing of the Prisoner, but the Name, and return'd no more into his own Country, so great an Affection he took for *Oroonoko*.³⁰

The text here asks us to credit Oroonoko for not selling Jamoan as a common slave, which effectively distracts the reader from questioning why Jamoan was not ransomed. In this case, Oroonoko seems little different from the English slave owners in Surinam who ultimately do not allow him to ransom himself despite his generous offers of gold and slaves.³¹ This is a similarity between slave owners on both sides of the Atlantic that Behn's text works very hard to deny.

The passage makes further efforts to shore up Oroonoko's credentials as a gentlemanly and benign slave-owner by implying that Jamoan somehow chose to be a slave to the man who had "wounded him almost to death," apparently because of the momentous "Affection he took for *Oroonoko*."³² Yet, the passage initially tells us that Jamoan is permanently "kept" in Oroonoko's court, which implies that the royal slave had little choice in the matter. This implication is craftily negated by the final dependent clause in the passage, which subsequently assigns agency to Jamoan in his own permanent enslavement. Such attractive depictions of "wholesome" master-slave relations completely distort the basic human degradation and abjection involved in the reduction of a human being into the state of slavery.³³

We should also militate against Behn's formulation that Jamoan "retain'd nothing of the Prisoner, but the Name." Behn invites us here to look favorably upon the slave-owner who does not make his slave drudge in exploitive situations. Viewed from another angle, however, Oroonoko is merely showing off his immense power by retaining a slave who is not forced to work. We should consider Meillassoux's economic analysis of slavery, which focuses on the initial costs associated with slave acquisition. He notes that masters often put their slaves to economically productive use in order to recoup those costs, to maintain the slave's basic material needs, and to produce surplus value. What of a situation where a slave performs no productive work? Meillassoux astutely argues that such a situation "implies . . . the exploitation of a different fraction of free men or

of other slaves, as well as institutions which can extract their surplus-product and transfer it.”³⁴ Thus, the pampered and unproductive slave is an index of the master’s appropriation of the labor of a number of other human individuals. Oroonoko’s supposedly benign treatment of Jamoan, then, is only possible because of his effective exploitation of others.

Patterson and Meillassoux’s work also allows us to see how the formulation “nothing of the Prisoner, but the Name” grossly confuses “state” with “condition,” as if being symbolically and socially assigned the “Name” and the effective non-status of the slave is not a violent and exploitative process. Indeed, Oroonoko’s own experiences in Surinam demonstrate quite effectively the tortures endured by those who bear the “name” of slavery. In a later passage, Behn repeats this formulation, but to a much different effect, when she writes of Oroonoko that “though he suffer’d only the Name of a Slave, and had nothing of the Toil and Labour of one, yet that was sufficient to render him uneasy.”³⁵ In this passage and others, Behn explores the psychological sufferings experienced by those reduced to the state of slavery, even if they are subject to relatively benign conditions. Oroonoko feels the sharp stings of human bondage, which include his geographic and social displacement and his lack of status and concomitant loss of liberty, along with his inability to provide status to his own wife and unborn child. Thus, the later part of Behn’s text should be employed to critique the earlier, as it provides an additional resource that we can utilize to read skeptically Behn’s depiction of slavery in Coramantien and of Oroonoko as a slave owner.

Oroonoko as Slave Trader

Behn’s development of Oroonoko’s biography presents a rather confused picture of his history in acquiring and selling slaves. Several critics point out, for example, that Behn implies in her initial depictions of the trade that all the slaves bought by European ship captains on the Gold Coast were male prisoners of war. Holmesland notes that Oroonoko’s slave trading is informed by a “code of honor . . . which creates a link with the chivalric warrior tradition of romance” and that Behn’s text favorably contrasts such chivalric involvement in the selling of war captives to “the ignominy of profit being made the sole principle of trade and conquest.”³⁶ Nevertheless, I contend that Behn’s construction of chivalric slave trading depends, in large part, on the lack of any details concerning the actual mechanics of exchange. Thus, neither Oroonoko, nor any Coramantien general, is depicted driving a hard bargain for European goods, offering wares to multiple buyers, haggling for prices, receiving or giving short

term loans, housing slaves, or overseeing their transfer onto waiting English ships. Such details would surely pressure and, perhaps, entirely compromise the notion of Oroonoko as a noble aristocrat who, as Holmesland argues, participates in commerce but remains safely insulated from mercantile values and imperatives.

The construction of this “heroic” slave trade rests on the notion that it is organized around the sale of male war captives, who are deemed appropriate for perpetual human bondage because of their conquered state. Behn’s text works hard to insulate Oroonoko from exchanges involving other categories of slaves. The king, for example, is the only man in Coramantien depicted selling women into slavery—specifically Onahal and Imoinda—and this transaction mirrors his larger penchant for sexually appropriating female bodies. Oroonoko presumably does not sell women, which complements the ways that he rejects his grandfather’s sexual politics, both by his professed monogamy and by his speaking against the indiscriminate rape of female slaves.³⁷

Upon closer inspection, however, the text is not nearly as coherent on this issue as it may seem at first glance. We know, for example, that the English captain has obtained slaves that are not male prisoners of war, since Oroonoko and his men are unloaded off his ship in Surinam and are put into lots “with Women and Children” to be sold.³⁸ Their entrance into the text is somewhat startling given the previous emphasis on the exclusive sale of male prisoners of war. They force us to reexamine Oroonoko’s involvement in the slave markets of Coramantien and to attend to details that suggest he was, in fact, a high-volume buyer and seller of all kinds of slaves.

For example, we receive a telling indication of the scale of Oroonoko’s slave trading activities when Behn later asserts that Oroonoko sold nearly every slave that he initially encounters upon his first visit to the “Houses of the Slaves” at Parham: “the *Negroes* all having left Work, but they all came forth to behold him, and found he was that Prince who had, at several times, sold most of ‘em to these Parts.”³⁹ The notion of Oroonoko as a fully commercial slave-trader is further underscored when Behn tells us that these slaves danced “before him all the time, according to the Manners of their several Nations.”⁴⁰ The text thus gestures at Oroonoko as a slave-trading middleman of long standing who is able to obtain a regional supply of male, female, and even child slaves from “several Nations” and then to convey them “at several times” to the English and other European traders at the coast.

For all of its investment in depictions of a chivalric slave trade, then, Behn’s text is much more compelling when it furtively acknowledges a

fully commercial and complex slave trading system in Coramantien that is also tied into intra-African markets and trade routes. Consider the following detail that emerges when Behn narrates the king's decision to sell Imoinda and Onahal: "he therefore removes her from the *Otan*, with *Onahal*; whom he put into safe Hands, with Order they shou'd be both sold off, as Slaves, to another Country, either *Christian*, or *Heathen*; 'twas no matter where."⁴¹ In one respect, this represents a rather sloppy moment—it is hard to imagine the King of Coramantien using the term "heathen" to refer to non-Christian peoples. At the same time, this passage is important in that it suggests that European overseas traders were not the only buyers in the slave markets of Coramantien, and points to regional African traders as potential purchasers for slaves.

By situating *Oroonoko* within current scholarship on West Africa, we can construct a position from which we can fill in the gaps in Behn's text and also reaffirm its references to the early-modern Gold Coast as a site of a number of interlocking and fully commercial slave trading systems. Kea's and Perbi's scholarship demonstrates that the various Gold Coast nations had long imported slaves from regional partners to the north and south before the advent of the Atlantic trade. In fact, when the Portuguese began to trade in this area of West Africa in the late fifteenth century, they routinely bought slaves from Benin and other areas further east and south and imported them into the Gold Coast in exchange for gold.⁴² Indeed, to refer to *the* slave trade in the Gold Coast is something of a misnomer—rather, we should say that there were many slave trades with regional, local, and European suppliers, buyers and sellers. Perbi lists sixty-three slave markets in the area that encompasses modern Ghana, only thirty of which were on the coast.⁴³ The thirty-three interior markets were populated solely with local and regional West African buyers and sellers. Kea notes that war captives did provide a significant source of slaves, but he takes pains to show the mostly commercial nature of the slave trade within the Gold Coast: "the acquisition of slaves and the reproduction of the system of slavery were not linked to militarized political formations engaged in territorial expansion. On the contrary, they were linked to commerce, merchants, and to the formation and growth of merchant capital."⁴⁴ Thus, many of the slave traders on the Gold Coast were, in essence, middlemen: they bought slaves from markets in the interior, some of which were then resold on the coast to European traders after local domestic needs were satisfied. Both scholars emphasize the sophistication needed to manage such large, overland slave trading enterprises.

In *Oroonoko*, we are only able to catch furtive glimpses of this highly developed intra-African trade and the regular commercial exchanges between

the English and the Gold Coast traders. Contextualizing *Oroonoko* within West African studies allows us to reactivate and bring to the surface what Behn's text mostly represses. Behn emphasizes, instead, a kidnapping episode where these routine market transactions breakdown in spectacular fashion. By turning to historians of the slave trade, we can resist Behn's simplification of a much larger and more complicated story. David Eltis, for example, argues that the Gold Coast was one of the safest places to trade in West Africa because, in contrast to other trading areas, a "much greater proportion of disputes were settled by negotiation."⁴⁵ Additionally, credit relationships on the Gold Coast were regular and well established, which minimized the need for the exchange of pawns and, thus, further reduced tensions. Eltis notes that there could be false dealing on both sides and that, occasionally, Europeans would illegally carry locals into slavery. However, he concludes, these incidents were "neither common nor enduring in their effect."⁴⁶

Taking recourse to such historical contexts also allows us to recognize the ways Behn's text denies sophistication to early-modern West Africans, either by repressing their complex commercial networks and their savvy negotiating skills, or by assigning a general naiveté or innocence to Oroonoko himself in his dealings with supposedly more refined European trading partners. By subjecting Behn's own language to a skeptical close reading and by contrasting her representations to those constructed by modern historiography, we can fully undermine Behn's construction of a "heroic" slave-trade in Coramantien.

Oroonoko as Atlantic Creole?

By grounding *Oroonoko* more firmly within West African history, we can also complicate the nearly unanimous scholarly consensus that Behn exhibits blatant racism when she assigns European facial features to Oroonoko.⁴⁷ Scholars have not accounted for the fact that the Gold Coast trading zones were occupied by a group of mulattos who often served as important intermediaries and agents in trade. Their presence has been noted at least since Kwame Yeboa Daaku's 1970 study of commercial exchange in the early-modern Gold Coast. Daaku notes that, after the rise of European commerce in the region, the coastal trading zones soon came to be occupied by "a new class of middlemen who acted as a liaison between African and European traders. Side by side with the new class was the emergence of a new group of people—the mulattoes, who were the direct progeny of European traders and African women."⁴⁸ Daaku explains that some despised the mulattoes, but that many of them rose to

prominent positions as employees or “gromettoes” of the European traders, as negotiators between Europeans and their African counterparts, and even as powerful factors and traders in their own right.

More recently, Ira Berlin’s work has expanded our understanding of the important role of these same groups, whom he dubs “Atlantic Creoles.” Berlin provides a fascinating overview of the advantages and disadvantages offered by their liminal place within the trading centers of coastal West Africa: “while their middling position made them valuable to African and European traders, it also made them vulnerable: they could be ostracized, scapegoated, and on occasion enslaved.”⁴⁹ Berlin notes that, “Debt, crime, immorality, or official disfavor could mean enslavement . . . at least for those on the fringes of the creole community.”⁵⁰ I quote at length his narration of the ultimate fate of these enslaved creoles as it provides an extremely interesting gloss on the trajectory of Oroonoko’s biography:

Enslaved Atlantic creoles might be shipped to Pernambuco, Barbados, or Martinique. Transporting them to the expanding centers of New World staple production posed dangers, however, which American planters well understood. The characteristics that distinguished Atlantic creoles—their linguistic dexterity, cultural plasticity, and social agility—were precisely those qualities that the great planters of the New World disdained and feared . . . Simply put, men and women who understood the operations of the Atlantic system were too dangerous to be trusted in the human tinderboxes created by the sugar revolution.⁵¹

Berlin notes that many creoles were, thus, shipped to the most peripheral European colonies, like those of “mainland North America,” because slave-owners in these markets were not as economically powerful as other Atlantic buyers and often had to purchase “refuse” or potentially disruptive slaves.⁵²

Such historical details should spark a renewed emphasis in what Aravamudan calls a strategy of “read[ing] imaginatively” or, more precisely, the “tropicalization” of the colonial text, which involves “renewed literary contextualization, speculative reconstruction, and critical elaboration.”⁵³ In this case, the deployment of a rigorous contextualization of *Oroonoko* within West African history heightens our sense of the text’s overdetermination and ultimate indeterminacy. Thus, by speculatively reconstructing Oroonoko as an Atlantic creole, I do not wish to claim to have solved some of the puzzles presented by Behn’s enigmatic and contradictory text. Behn may have, indeed, given Oroonoko European features because of her partial investment in emerging racist ideologies.

Yet, many of the text's details point to another, equally plausible, theory that Behn did encounter a mulatto Atlantic creole in Surinam and that she appropriated for her own political and narrative purposes his story of enslavement, reshaping and distorting it into the romantic narrative of the royal slave.⁵⁴

Oroonoko's mulatto features and facility with the French and English languages allow us to entertain the notion that he was an Atlantic creole who worked at or around the European trading forts in some capacity associated with the slave trade. Such an explanation of Oroonoko's linguistic skills certainly makes more sense than the one Behn provides: "he lov'd, when he came from War, to see all the *English* Gentlemen that traded thither; and did not only learn their Language, but that of the *Spaniards* also, with whom he traded afterwards for Slaves."⁵⁵ It is difficult to align such a detail with Behn's other assertions about Oroonoko's long deployments in the military field. For example, Behn tells us that the war in which Imoinda's father died "had continu'd for two Years" and that after it concluded, "the Prince came to Court; where he had hardly been a Month together, from the time of his fifth Year, to that of Seventeen."⁵⁶ Under such circumstances, it is hard to imagine when Oroonoko had the opportunity "to see" the English and French, not to mention the Spanish, traders enough to learn their languages. Behn's inability to keep her story straight reveals a certain strain in the text as it attempts to reconcile radically different ideas about Oroonoko's activities in Coramantien. This strain makes the text even more susceptible to our speculative reconstructions.

So too does the account of Oroonoko's activities on board the slave ship during the journey to Surinam. After much negotiation with the captain, Oroonoko is liberated and then employed essentially to keep the other slaves in line: "he [the captain] besought him to visit those obstinate People in Chains . . . and intreated him to oblige 'em to eat, and assure 'em of their Liberty the first Opportunity."⁵⁷ Behn makes every effort to represent Oroonoko's actions here in an honorable light—he only negotiates better conditions for himself because he is supposedly "too generous, not to give Credit to his Words" and is, thus, easily duped. As a result, Oroonoko proceeds to convince his fellow slaves "to bear their Chains" and not engage in a violent uprising on board the ship.⁵⁸

Behn's text essentially distorts what was a fairly common experience for African creoles who, as Berlin argues, rarely experienced the same indignities as the mass of non-creolized African slaves who suffered the middle passage or plantation slavery. Berlin notes that, because of their linguistic and cultural skills, "some found employment as interpreters, sailors, and *grumetes* on the very ships that transported them to the New

World.”⁵⁹ We should also note the frequency with which European ship captains deployed Gold Coast slaves as “guardians” in order to keep watch over the other slaves on board. In her detailed examination of this historical phenomenon, Stephanie E. Smallwood writes, “slave ship guardians probably benefited from material perquisites that accompanied their status, perhaps receiving more food and water rations than their charges and enjoying other advantages in the daily rhythms of life aboard ship.”⁶⁰ In this case, guardian slaves were offered better “conditions” in exchange for their own participation in upholding the larger system of power on board the ship.

Such details, once again, allow us to speculate that Behn’s text points to the complex and liminal position of enslaved Atlantic creoles and the complicated realities of the early-modern Atlantic world. Smallwood provides her own fascinating speculation that should also inform our overall reading of *Oroonoko*. Like Berlin’s Atlantic creoles, Smallwood sees in the guardians likely candidates for the creation of problems for the plantation lords of the Americas. Smallwood explains in the following manner:

As John Thornton has suggested, slaves who understood one of the Atlantic creole languages were likely to become leaders in the plantation setting. Perhaps the same was true of people who arrived having served as guardians in the slave ship. In this sense the particularly prominent role men from the Gold Coast played as rebel leaders in the English Caribbean may represent a more nuanced cultural continuity than some historians have assumed.⁶¹

If Berlin and Smallwood are correct, then creolized gromettoes and guardians regularly became agents of anti-slave rebellion in the Americas. By speculatively seeing in *Oroonoko* a member of one or both of these groups, instead of Behn’s clumsily constructed slave-trading prince, we can recuperate his own rebellion for an analysis that is no longer necessarily concerned with the “irony” of his anti-slavery activity. The “irony” is also considerably lessened even if *Oroonoko* was a slave-trading mulatto. Rather, we should see that his trajectory was all too common in the ambiguous world of the early-modern Atlantic.

Such speculative reconstructions are among the many payoffs that accrue from bringing *Oroonoko* into conversation with historical work on slavery in the Gold Coast. While Behn’s text, as I have argued, needs to be critiqued for the ways it represents slavery in West Africa and draws untenable distinctions between slave systems, we should also appreciate how it alludes to the experience of enslaved African creoles in the early-

modern Atlantic. In his manifest guise as slave-trading prince, Oroonoko needs to be submitted to the most rigorous anti-slavery critique possible. But, in his other possible roles as a mulatto, Atlantic creole, grometto, and guardian, the overdetermined character of Oroonoko forces us to recognize the complex history of slavery and slave trading. In that way, we can make Behn's text speak to an integrated and non-Eurocentric Atlantic history that it both captures and represses and use *Oroonoko* to stage our own critique of slavery in all zones of the early-modern Atlantic world.

NOTES

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1. Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave*, ed. Catherine Gallagher and Simon Stern (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 86. For a helpful essay that contextualizes this passage within early modern theories of slavery, see Warren Chernaik, "Captains and Slaves: Aphra Behn and the Rhetoric of Republicanism," *Seventeenth Century* 17 (2002): 97–107.

2. Laura Rosenthal, *Playwrights and Plagiarists in Early Modern England: Gender, Authorship, Literary Property* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 135–45; Gary Gautier, "Slavery and the Fashioning of Race in *Oroonoko*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Equiano's Life*," *The Eighteenth-Century: Theory and Interpretation* 42 (2001): 163–5; Oddvar Holmesland, "Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*: Cultural Dialectics and the Novel," *ELH* 68 (2001): 67–9. For an earlier article that also briefly explores tensions between military and commercial forms of slavery, see also Anita Pacheco, "Royalism and Honor in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 34 (1994): 491–506, especially 498–9.

3. Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 33.

4. Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans*, 60.

5. Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans*, 60.

6. See, for example, Katharine M. Rogers, "Fact and Fiction in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," *Studies in the Novel* 20 (1988): 1–15; and Joanna Lipking, "Confusing Matters: Searching the Backgrounds of *Oroonoko*," in *Aphra Behn Studies*, ed. Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 259–81.

7. See, for example, Albert J. Rivero, "Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and the 'Blank Spaces' of Colonial Fictions," *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 39 (1999): 443–62. Rivero claims that, "even before he leaves Africa, Oroonoko has become a colonial subject" (452). Such emphasis on English colonial power in early-modern West Africa is not shared by most historians. See, for example, P. E. H. Hair and Robin Law, "The English in Western Africa to 1700," in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 1, eds. Nicholas Canny and Alaine Low (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 241–63. Hair and Law assert of English trading forts in West Africa that "it is misleading to treat these establishments in their earlier phases as 'colonies'" (260). See also the introduction and editorial commentary that is dispersed throughout the Bedford/St. Martin's edition of *Oroonoko* (note 1). I chose to use this edition because its editors, Catherine Gallagher and Simon Stern, consult with current historiography concerning West Africa and the slave trade in constructing the context of *Oroonoko*. They also reject a "colonial" reading of the English presence in West Africa and note, for example, that "the trade in Africa forced Englishmen to observe status and national differences between Africans, pay court to rulers, display marks of respect for the great men of the region, their wives, families, and attendants, and maintain a reputation for trustworthiness" (Gallagher and Stern, introduction, *Oroonoko*, 9).

8. John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4. For another important work of Atlantic history, which focuses much of its attention on the Gold Coast, see Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). For a helpful work that synthesizes recent approaches to slavery on both sides of the Atlantic, see Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

9. The literature on slave trades and institutions in Africa is voluminous. I cite the following works because they present frameworks that are pertinent to my own critique of *Oroonoko*. For a study that arrives at many of the same conclusions as Thornton about the early modern Atlantic, see David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For an argument that insists that scholars explore the ethical dimensions of slave institutions and slave trades in Africa, see the introduction to Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). For an important ideological critique of the ways various African societies produced justifications for slavery, see Paul E. Lovejoy's introduction, "Slavery in the Context of Ideology," in *The Ideology of Slavery in Africa*, ed. Paul E. Lovejoy (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1981), 11–38. Lovejoy provides an excellent overview of strategies deployed in different parts of Africa to present slave institutions as natural, familial, and benign.

10. For a discussion of the importance of "Great Kormantse" in the Fante federation, see Ray A. Kea, "City-State Culture on the Gold Coast: The Fante

City-State Federation in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *A Comparative Study of Thirty City-State Cultures: An Investigation*, ed. Mogens Herman Hansen (Copenhagen: Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2000), 519–30. Kea notes that Kormantse (referred to as "Cormantine" in European documents) contained the main port on the Fante coast as well as a town of 5000 to 8000 people that, not surprisingly given its centrality as a place of trade, was "culturally and linguistically heterogeneous" (526).

11. Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold*, trans. Alide Dasnois (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 100.

12. Meillassoux, *Anthropology of Slavery*, 100.

13. Meillassoux, *Anthropology of Slavery*, 100–1.

14. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 13.

15. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 198.

16. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 335, 337.

17. Behn, *Oroonoko*, 86.

18. Behn, *Oroonoko*, 86.

19. Behn, *Oroonoko*, 86.

20. Behn, *Oroonoko*, 45.

21. Women were, indeed, sometimes slave-owners in the Gold Coast. See, for example, Adam Jones, "Female Slave-Owners on the Gold Coast: Just a Matter of Money?" in *Slave Cultures and the Cultures of Slavery*, ed. Stephan Palmié (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 100–11. For a more general discussion of the ways in which sub-Saharan African women could benefit from slave institutions, see Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein, "Women's Importance in African Slave Systems," in *Women and Slavery in Africa*, eds. Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 3–25.

22. Behn, *Oroonoko*, 45.

23. Behn, *Oroonoko*, 86.

24. Ray A. Kea, *Settlements, Trade, and Politics in the Seventeenth-Century Gold Coast* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 5.

25. Kea, *Settlements, Trade, and Politics*, 5.

26. Akosua Adoma Perbi, *A History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana From the 15th to the 19th Century* (Ligon, Ghana: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2004), 69–110. Because of more abundant documentary evidence, there has been more written about slavery in the nineteenth-century Gold Coast than in earlier periods. For recent studies, see Trevor R. Getz, *Slavery and Reform in West Africa: Toward Emancipation in Nineteenth-Century Senegal and the Gold Coast* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004); and Peter Haenger, *Slaves and Slave Holders on the Gold Coast: Towards an Understanding of Social Bondage in West Africa*, ed. J. J. Shaffer and Paul E. Lovejoy, trans. Christina Handford (Basel, Switzerland: P. Schlettwein, 2000).

27. Gautier, "Slavery and the Fashioning of Race," 165.

28. Gautier, "Slavery and the Fashioning of Race," 165.
29. Behn, *Oroonoko*, 41.
30. Behn, *Oroonoko*, 61.
31. For the details of Oroonoko's ransom proposals, see Behn, *Oroonoko*, 73.
32. Behn, *Oroonoko*, 61.
33. For a related critique of the ways Behn attempts to insulate some upper-class English slave owners in Surinam from the "atrocities of New World imperialism" (444), see Richard Frohock, "Violence and Awe: The Foundations of Government in Aphra Behn's New World Settings," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 8 (1996): 437–52.
34. Meillassoux, *Anthropology of Slavery*, 15.
35. Behn, *Oroonoko*, 75.
36. Holmesland, "Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*: Cultural Dialectics and the Novel," 68.
37. See Behn, *Oroonoko*, 46 for a discussion of Oroonoko's monogamy and his comments on the rape of female slaves (71).
38. Behn, *Oroonoko*, 66.
39. Behn, *Oroonoko*, 69–70.
40. Behn, *Oroonoko*, 70.
41. Behn, *Oroonoko*, 57–8.
42. For discussions of slave imports into the Gold Coast, see Kea, *Settlements, Trade, and Politics*, 197–201; and Perbi, *History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana*, 20–45. Also see Perbi, 44–8, for a discussion of the interior Salaga market, which brought together many regional African traders in what Perbi deems the "most famous slave market" in the lands that now encompass modern Ghana (44).
43. Perbi, *History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana*, 37–8.
44. Kea, *Settlements, Trade, and Politics*, 200.
45. Eltis, *Rise of African Slavery*, 180.
46. Eltis, *Rise of African Slavery*, 180.
47. The much-discussed passage can be found in Behn, *Oroonoko*, 43–4. For an early and influential example of this argument, see Moira Ferguson, "Oroonoko: Birth of a Paradigm," *New Literary History* 23 (1992): 339–59. Ferguson states that: "Oroonoko's appearance . . . conforms to Western standards of beauty and wholesale racist attitudes" (346). See also Laura Brown, *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993). She argues that Behn creates a "depiction of Oroonoko as a European aristocrat in blackface" (37). For a brief challenge to this interpretation, see Derek Hughes, "Race, Gender, and Scholarly Practice: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," *Essays in Criticism* 52 (2002): 8. Hughes also gestures towards the existence of Atlantic Creoles as a possible context for *Oroonoko* (17).

48. Kwame Yeboa Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast, 1660–1720: A Study of the African Reaction to European Trade* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 96.

49. Ira Berlin, "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 53 (1996): 263. The focus on Atlantic creoles and their impact on the slave trade and early American culture has become an important theme in studies of the Atlantic world. See, for example, Randy J. Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Odyssey* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

50. Berlin, "From Creole to African," 263.

51. Berlin, "From Creole to African," 263.

52. Berlin, "From Creole to African," 264.

53. Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans*, 60, 16.

54. Behn's exact political purposes in writing the text continue to be a source of debate. See Richard Kroll, "'Tales of Love and Gallantry': The Politics of *Oroonoko*," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 67 (2004): 573–605, for the most recent attempt to read *Oroonoko* as a "parallel" (574) that refers to events leading up to the Glorious Revolution.

55. Behn, *Oroonoko*, 43.

56. Behn, *Oroonoko*, 42.

57. Behn, *Oroonoko*, 65.

58. Behn, *Oroonoko*, 66.

59. Berlin, "From Creole to African," 283.

60. Stephanie E. Smallwood, "African Guardians, European Slave Ships, and the Changing Dynamics of Power in the Early Modern Atlantic," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 64 (2007): 685.

61. Smallwood, "African Guardians," 715.