Looking Down on Africa:
Eurocentrism, “Racism,” and Paternalism in the Early Modern Era

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INTRODUCTION

This project will explore the foundations from which Europeans have tried, and failed, to understand Africa and Africans. This failure, couched in historical texts that describe the continent and her people, has contributed to racism, marginalization, and the economic under development and exploitation of Africa. In surveying geographical observations and travel literature from *The Histories* of Herodotus, Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis*, "Mandeville's" *Travels of Sir John Mandeville* and Ibn Battuta's *Rihla*, it will finally focus analysis upon Aphra Behn's novella *Oroonoko, or The Royal Slave.* Though ostensibly different in genesis and genre, with few exceptions these texts share a commonality in that they are all claiming the truth of their assertions, yet what they convey are only half-truths at best. The willful misinterpretations within these writings, as well cartographic sources, demonstrate different ways in which Europeans foisted their misunderstandings of Africa upon the western world. Eventually, these impositions would contribute to the belief in a hierarchy of races, the denial of African cultural heritage, and the insidious nature of paternalism which led to colonization, all aspects of life beginning to flourish as the printing press in London created its first edition copies of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko.*

A major portion of analysis in this project is derived from Behn's novella. Written at the start of the long eighteenth century, Behn's work demonstrates the beginning of rigidity in the understanding of race, especially when compared with class distinctions. Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* demonstrates that the emergence of understanding race in the sense of

classification of peoples did not begin in print until the sixteenth century.[1] These texts will illuminate how, through globalization in the Transatlantic slave trade, misunderstandings continued, and the insidious idea of "race" began to emerge. Furthermore, it will establish how the Transatlantic slave trade led to the exclusion of one major potential commercial entity, the Africans themselves, and how that marginalization led to the erosion of both extra-African power and intra-African autonomy.

By researching the basis from which she may have drawn her depiction of an African kingdom, as well as her depiction of the *Royal Slave* himself, this project may deduce the challenges, literary and metaphorical, she posited to the general understanding of Africans that had begun to congeal into European society. Thorough analysis of *Oroonoko* will help round out the course material that touched on early racial biases and mutual cultural deafness, both implicit and explicit. Furthermore, the trajectory of readings and assignments in this class this project is written for have focused on the broader contexts in which peoples of other continents, Europeans and later "westerners," or the "Global North," have reached into the heart of Africa and taken its greatest resources for their own purposes. Through scrutiny of some of the misperceptions of Africans that were reinforced leading up to the eighteenth century, this research will show how that deep basis of marginalization and belief in the inferiority of the culture and society of Africans denied the people in the diaspora their voice, and the nations of Africa their power. Lastly, it will show how these factors set up a future where Africans themselves could be disenfranchised on their own continent.[2]

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[1] "Race." In *Oxford English Dictionary*. However, see as a mass noun 4c for definition as a racial division or group in the modern context, 1769 CE. Paradoxically, reference to "race" in categorization of Egyptians' belief in their being the first peoples, see Herodotus, Book II, 15, e.g. Herodotus and Dewald, *The Histories,* 100-01.

[2] For perhaps the first instance of this, see Herodotus and Dewald, *The Histories,* 101.

ON GEOGRAPHY: THE SETTING[3]

Arguably, boundaries are important.[4] Trade routes and mercantile networks through Africa were well established between the eighth and the fifteenth centuries within the Muslim world, the Arabic language seeping down into sub-Saharan Africa such that the *bilad al-sudan* or, the "land of black people,"[5] is a moniker that endures until today.[6] Although Europeans have been interacting with North Africans for centuries, natural geographic obstructions kept full contact between the peoples of the two continents to a minimum. Traversing the Sahara, finding the headwaters of the Nile, and sailing past contrary trade winds and currents to circumnavigate the Guinea coast were all impossible until shipborne innovations could meet these technological challenges.[7] That said, in no way were these natural obstructions an impermeable boundary; sub-Saharan Africa might have been obscured from the European view, but it was not completely isolated from the rest of the world.[8]

Until navigational technology met their need to explore places new, Europeans drew on classical knowledge, such as was written by the Greek, Herodotus, and Romans, like Pliny the Elder. Unfortunately, much of the understanding about Africans was speculative. Herodotus, living in the Persian empire of the fifth century BCE, is considered the father of history. His travels and inquiry into the relation of the peoples, cultures, and customs of other societies—e.g.

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[3] For a deeper understanding of the genesis of the Orientalist construction of Behn's "Coromantien-African" world in *Oroonoko*, see Mitsein, Rebekah, "Trans-Saharan Worlds and World Views in Aphra Behn's Oroonoko."

[4] Especially as they relate to notional European framework atop an extant, yet marginalized Africa. For further discourse upon the metaphorical space of Behn's "Coramantien," see e.g. Kowaleski-Wallace, *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory*, 190.

[5] Levtzion and Spaulding, *Medieval West Africa,* ix.

[6] See "Sudan" and "South Sudan" here: United States. Central Intelligence Agency. *Africa*. [Political edition]. [Washington, D.C.]: [Central Intelligence Agency].

[7] Herodotus and Dewald, *The Histories,* 105-7.

[8] Shillington, *History of Africa,* see esp. chapters 5, 7, and 9.

Scythian, “Libyan”, and Indian—influenced the European understanding of the wider world for centuries. As he collected and collated the vast amount of information for his descriptions, Herodotus accepted both first-hand eyewitness accounts as well as hearsay. The mixture of these two forms of testimony resulted in a sometimes logical, sometimes fantastical relation of his subjects. For example, regarding Africa[9] he says:

> On the subject of Libya I can also say that there are four (and, as far as anyone knows, no more than four) nations living in it, two of whom—the Libyans and the Ethiopians, respectively in the north and the south of the continent—are indigenous, whereas the other two, the Phoenicians and the Greeks, are immigrants.[10]

The claims made in this excerpt took root. Over time the assertion that Greeks and Phoenicians were not actually African in origin eroded the true genesis of their identity. Though he concedes that Egypt was indeed the stock from which sprang Greek culture, he does not recognize the land beyond “Libya,” his name for Africa. It is as if the lands south of the desert were easier to ignore—though he most likely would have heard or known there were people in those places further afield, and that those people were black.[11]

The size and scope of Africa also became a matter of contention for him. Although he is given evidence of the vastness of the continent, he obstinately refuses to lend credence to the claim. When reporting on a journey of African circumnavigation by the Phoenicians, he states, “They made a claim which I personally do not believe, although someone else might—that as they were sailing around Libya they had the sun on their right.”[12] By curating a fiction where the size of the continent is minimized, he further wore away at the European perception of Africa’s

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[9] “Africa” as a name for the continent is a Roman invention. Throughout this research, I will highlight the different names for the continent as imposed by non-Africans. For brevity’s sake throughout I will revert to calling it Africa in lieu of other examples.

[10] Herodotus and Dewald, *The Histories,* 301.

[11] *Idem,* 103.

[12] *Idem,* 248.

legitimacy and cultural past. This sidelining of Africa south of the Sahara by Herodotus is perhaps one cause of their continued demotion into the early modern period. His "*Histories*" written in the fifth century BCE undoubtedly influenced philosophers and historians over the ensuing two millennia, possibly leading to the divestment of sub-Saharan Africans in their influence upon Egyptian civilization. Over time this white-washing of Egyptians into a quasi- or fully-fledged European role would have detrimental effect.[13]

Drawing upon Herodotus' and others' accounts in addition to his own extensive research, Pliny the Elder wrote the *Historia Naturalis* in the first century CE. It was a comprehensive, encyclopedic work that set out to explain everything Romans knew about the natural world. Here, at least, Pliny gives some credit where it is due. A famous quote reads, "Africa always brings something new,"[14] and though it is in his description of some of the continent's wildlife, his depiction of Africans themselves is equally novel. In an excerpt from a sixteenth century translation of his work, he claims that the people of "Libie"[15] have no names and curse the sun for the heat. Furthermore, he believes it is the heat that causes African blackness.[16]

That said, some of what was known about the world was still notional, as the people depicted living on the fringes of civilization were shown as monstrous, or sub-human. Examples of these include pygmies, but also anomalous, humanoid creatures like the *cynocephali*, dog-

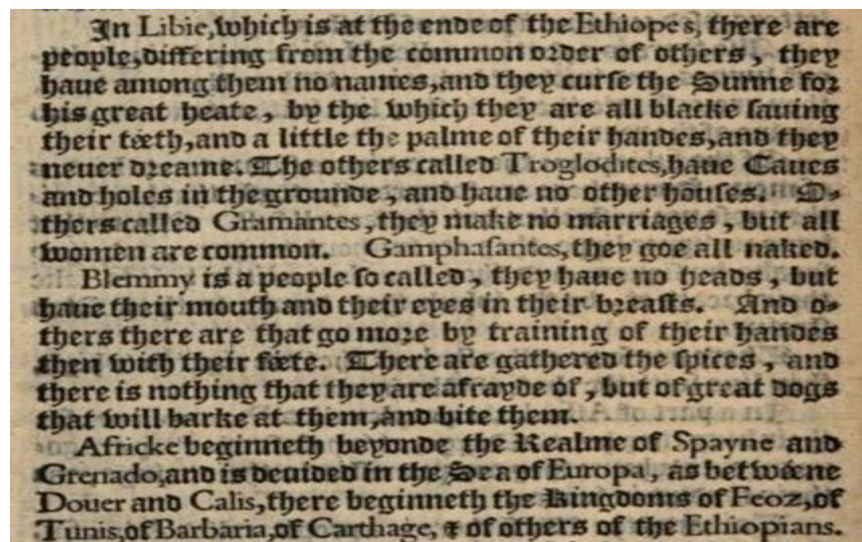
[13] See e.g. Bernal, Martin. *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, 1-2, and also the literary and scholarly commentary of Chinua Achebe such as at "Bill Moyers with Chinua Achebe - YouTube." Bill Moyers with Chinua Achebe. YouTube, October 17, 2019.

[14] See "Semper aliquid novi Africam adferre." In *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable*, edited by Dent, Susie. : Chambers Harrap Publishers, 2012.

[15] Within this text Africa is referred to both as "Libie," as the Herodotean nomenclature, as well as Africke. Pliny and Hackit, *A Summarie of the Antiquities and Wonders of the Worlde, Abstracted Out of the Sixtene First Bookes of ... Plinie*.

[16] As opposed to the relative European "whiteness." An investigation into the genetic mutations which caused humans' skin to lighten as the moved to northern climes in order to better absorb vitamin D would be interesting and informative, yet it lies outside the context of this research paper.

headed humans, and the *Blemmye*—a being with no head, yet whose face resides in their chest.[17] Sometimes these monstrosities were located in the marginalia of manuscripts, and sometimes they took center stage.[18] Understanding the mystical, fantastical, and great unknown of the vast landscapes outside of European horizons was at stake, and so long as the people were wholly different from Europeans, the better they might be categorized and understood, or misunderstood, as will be demonstrated.



In Libie, which is at the ende of the Ethiopes, there are people, differing from the common order of others, they haue among them no names, and they curſe the Sunne for his great heate, by the which they are all blacke ſauing their téeth, and a little the palme of their handes, and they neuer dreame. The others called Troglodites, haue Caues and holes in the grounde, and haue no other houſes. Others called Gramantes, they make no marriages, but all women are common. Gamphaſantes, they goe all naked.
Blemmy is a people ſo called, they haue no heads, but haue their mouth and their eyes in their breaſts. And others there are that go more by training of their handes then with their féete. There are gathered the ſpices, and there is nothing that they are afrayde of, but of great dogs that will barke at them, and bite them.
Africke beginneth beyonde the Realme of Spayne and Grenado, and is deuided in the Sea of Europa, as betwéene Douer and Calis, there beginneth the Kingdoms of Feoz, of Tunis, of Barbaria, of Carthage, & of others of the Ethiopians.

Figure 1: Excerpt from the early modern reprint of Pliny's Historia Naturalis *as published in Hackit's sixteenth century abstraction concerning the various types of people inhabiting Africa. Here there be monsters?*

It is in this space *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* made their appearance. Mandeville, like Behn, inserts himself into the function of narrator of his tome, which is less novella and more travel literature. However, its role within the greater sphere of information dissemination about the wider world which cannot be ignored. Although there is even less evidence of his existence than Behn's appearance in Suriname, they both claim the truth of their texts. For instance, Mandeville claims that, "In Ethiopia, when the children be young and little, they be all

[17] Pliny and Hackit, *A Summarie of the Antiquities and Wonders of the Worlde, Abstracted Out of the Sixtene First Bookes of ... Plinie*.
[18] For example, the painted panels on the ceiling of the cloister in Fréjus. See Mancall, *Nature and Culture in the Early Modern Atlantic*, 6-7.

yellow; and, when that they wax of age, that yellowness turneth to be all black."[19] Despite its incredulity, Mandeville's work was so popular throughout the later medieval period and renaissance that both Christopher Columbus and Leonardo da Vinci kept copies for reference.[20]

As the advent of the printing press left its indelible mark upon the fifteenth and sixteenth century European world, and texts like Herodotus' and Pliny's which had not been widely seen for centuries began recirculation, the limited understanding of Africans in antiquity was thus also part of that distribution. Where ideas were changing and growing, and knowledge became more extensive—both ancient and contemporary—these misunderstandings of Africa from antiquity were also disseminated.[21] There, the slave trade was beginning to take shape, people were of a different color, and mutual cultural deafness continued unabated, well into the early modern period. Again, instead of ethnographic and cultural study and awareness, such as what was beginning within the context of emergent natural philosophy,[22] the reliance upon understanding Africa as the "other"[23] or devoid of a cultural past was probably much easier on the conscience, especially when paired with the reality of vast enslavement of the African people. The commoditization of human chattel was well underway, and evidence suggests that African rulers were indeed complicit in the trade, though whether or not they understood the brutal and inhumane nature at the heart of the European enslavement of their people is unknown.[24]

At this time, skin-tone-based variance, especially in the Mediterranean world, was a matter of fact, though not necessarily a matter of "race." Traditionally, historians have been loath to discount notions of race as a segregating agent through antiquity and the middle ages.

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[19] Mandeville, "The Travels of Sir John Mandeville," 105.

[20] Mancall, *Nature and Culture in the Early Modern Atlantic,* 12-13.

[21] Grafton et al, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts*, 38. With specific examples such as in *Figure 1* above.

[22] Anstey, "Francis Bacon and the Classification of Natural History," 11.

[23] For one historian's interpretation of how Herodotus defines the "other," see e.g. Hartog and Lloyd, *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History*, 212-23, 225, 237.

[24] Views of Osei Bonsu, 1820 in "African Opponents of Abolition," 175-76.

Certainly, Africans were aware of “white” folks in their midst. In Ibn Battuta’s *Rihla*, he relates that “[the Sudanese] do not interfere with the wealth of any white man who dies among them…They simply leave it in the hands of a trustworthy white man to the one to whom it is due takes it.”[25] This suggests a level of autonomy of minority races in Africa during the Middle Ages, an independence that might not be extended to minority blacks in Medieval Europe. Importantly, however, the “whites” Ibn Battuta speaks of are not racial whites in the modern sense, but North Africans—people who were “white” like him. Whether “whiteness” in the Islamic sense was associated with relative skin tone or as a means of categorizing people in terms of “us” and “them” would be interesting to research, however it lies outside the scope of this project.

Nevertheless, by the sixteenth century in early modern England there is some evidence of racist attitudes taking shape. Although interlaced with the enduring English political strife with Spain throughout that period, economic instability, and religious uncertainty, Queen Elizabeth I’s own policy toward “blackamoors” at the turn of the seventeenth century is telling. The queen proclaims, “there are of late divers blackmoores brought into this realme, of which kinde of people there are already here to manie.” The deportation of “blackmoors” that followed sheds light on racism for political expediency in its justification for removal of a possible problematic political entity from the country.[26] Whether this is an expulsion based solely on “race,” still an emerging concept as explained above, or due to suspicion of clandestine activity is uncertain, yet the queen might indeed have had reason to suspect the resident Africans in her country. During the reign of King Afonso of Kongo (1503-1543), elite children were sent to the Iberian Peninsula as well as other Catholic countries for education, enabling their ability to move between

[25] Levtzion and Spaulding. *Medieval West Africa,* 82 and Battuta, *Rihla*.
[26] Bartels, “Too Many Blackamoors: Deportation, Discrimination, and Elizabeth I,” 305.

European boundaries and assimilate into northern cultures with greater ease.[27] Perhaps she was right to be suspicious.

In the ensuing century England would see the regicide of their king, Charles I, the English Civil War, an Interregnum, and the eventual Restoration of the monarchy. Aphra Behn, a fervent supporter of absolute kingship in this era of unique political turmoil, published her novella *Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave* in 1688, at the edge of yet another political coup. Though since set for the stage, revised, and rewritten depending upon popular views, the original book is part travelogue, part critique of slavery, and part tragic love story. Set against the backdrop of Transatlantic power struggles and wars over hegemonic interests, it provides fodder for the deconstruction of ideas of race and class, just as they were beginning to coalesce on both sides of the Atlantic.

Hardening boundaries were not only metaphorical, they were literal as well. In the mid-seventeenth century, the map of modern Africa was just beginning to be drawn. However, names of cities, towns, regions, mountains, and rivers did not necessarily reflect those seen on the African map of the present.[28] After centuries of colonialism, postcolonialism, and neocolonialism, the many permutations of African maps reflect more a palimpsest of western understanding forged overtop of the extant continent such as it existed prior to the sixteenth century. This is a continuous misunderstanding and imposition of "northern" bias. Had this framework never been forced upon the continent, it is possible that a notional pan-African identity may have emerged organically as trade continued through the early modern era.[29]

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[27] Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*, 6.
[28] United States. CIA. *Africa*.
[29] For one example of Pan-Africanist agenda see Kwame Nkruma.

Contemporary depictions of the continent demonstrate the beginning of the projection of European ideas of territorial demarcations onto Africa. In this Dutch map of 1644 (below), these distinctions begin to take shape. With broad, colorful strokes, this cartographic interpretation shows a prejudiced view of lands more intricate and uniquely populated than the European mind could conceive.[30] The dangers of defining an entire continent based upon relatively narrow parameters of early modern "Western" understanding is beginning to be demonstrated in these early geographic and demographic images of Africa.

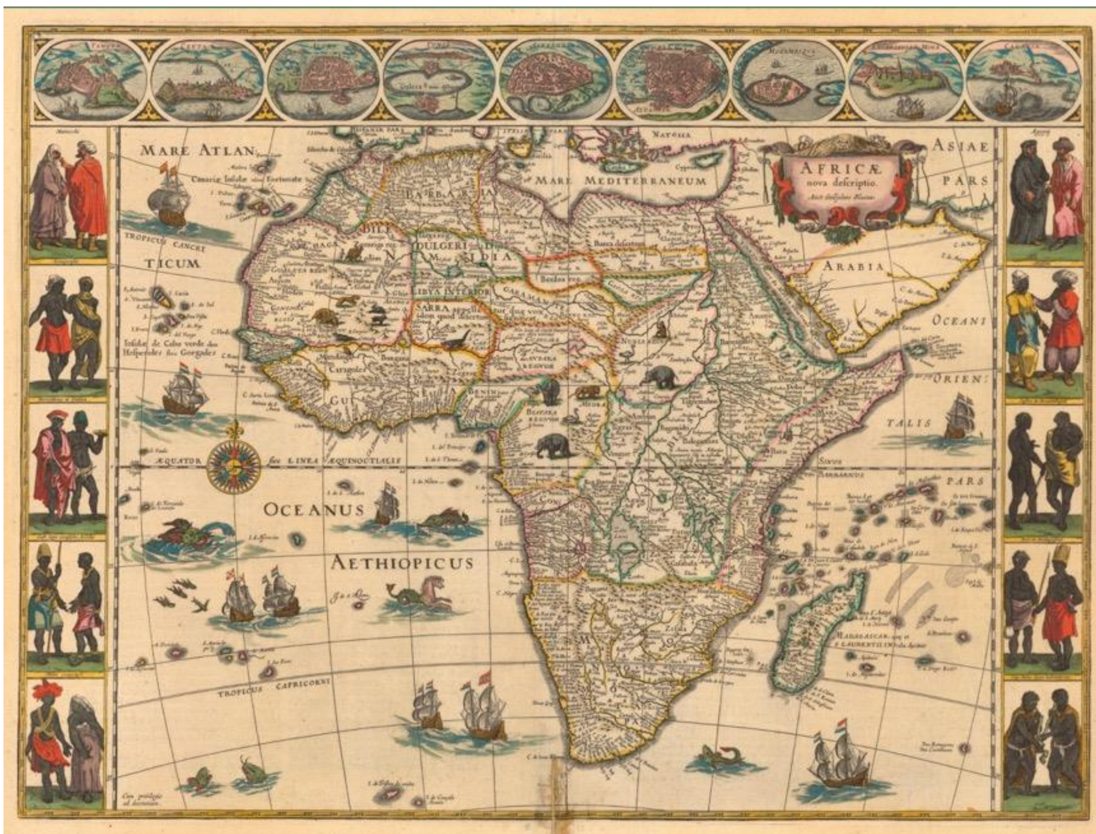

*Figure 2, 1644 MAP OF AFRICA[31]: Blaeu, Willem Janszoon, 1571-1638. "*Africae nova descriptio." *Copperplace* carte à figures *map, with added color, 35 x 45 cm. From the second volume of Blaeu's* Le theatre dv monde; ov Novvel atlas contenant les chartes et descriptions de tous les païs de la terre *(Amsterdam, 1644).*

[30] Based upon the earlier reference to Herodotus' assertions of the diminutive nature of "Libya."
[31] Blaeu, 1644, "*Africae nova descriptio*."

Closer inspection of the cities, towns, regions and countries in the map above—contemporaneous with *Oroonoko*—bear further research. In addition to shedding light on other ways in which European merchants and cartographers propagated Eurocentrism onto Africa, study of the demographic pictorials along the margins may also inform further racialization in this era.

For example, in Behn's book, the titular character is from a nation called "Coramantien," a country traditionally associated with the Akan/Fante people of the Gold Coast, located within present day Ghana.[32] Behn identifies it as among "one of those places in which they found most advantageous trading for these slaves," most likely due to the slave trading post that had recently been built by the English, Fort Courmantyne.[33] She claims that it is so extraordinary in providing slaves due to the Coromantees' warlike nature, as "all they took in battle were sold as slaves; at least those common men who could not ransom themselves." These two distinctions, the first apprising upon their pugilistic state and the second as to their higher caste among other Africans, will rise to importance in contextualizing the book and the characters within.

The author's concept of these people being more belligerent than others did not come out of a vacuum. In an article dealing with the notional Coromantine group, Thornton highlights their reputation as a "violent and rebellious people," and even points out that the contemporary governor of Barbados described them in 1675 as being "'very robust and warlike.'"[34] However, the people with whom they would most likely be trading in slaves, were perhaps not fellow "Coromantees," but rather the peoples further inland with whom they might have fought for the

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[32] Thornton, "The Coromantees: An African Cultural Group in Colonial North America and the Caribbean," 162.

[33] Behn, *Oroonoko,* 9.

[34] Thornton, "The Coromantees: An African Cultural Group in Colonial North America and the Caribbean," 162.

express purpose of taking prisoners to feed into the increasingly emergent, dread trade.[35] This suggests that though the hero Oroonoko may himself be a prince among the fictitious "Coromantien," his fellow captured slaves might have originated elsewhere. As it functioned, generally the enslaved peoples were trekked across trade routes from further inland, only to ship from the coastal trading forts, like Fort Courmantyne.[36]

Extrapolated further, the identification of the Coromantee slaves in the wider Atlantic world begins to make more sense. Like the Dutch map above, which colorfully separates Africa regionally and locally, (and perhaps the better to enforce their own European notions of understanding on a practical document) so too is the label "Coromantee" utilized as a blanket "brand" for enslaved Africans who hailed from that particular trading fort. The Coromantees were not alone in this distinction. Perhaps reflective of Pliny the Elder's fixation upon classification, Europeans branded Igbos timid and Congos docile.[37] The ramifications of these categorizations of the enslaved in the marketplace would be of great interest in further understanding some specific bases upon which Europeans understood the general temperament of the slaves, however that project lies outside the realm of this study. But building upon that trajectory, it is clear that as Europeans imposed their own classifications upon separate ethnic groups, the true ethnocultural nuances of each society would vanish through displacement, dispersal, and brutal suppression. It is impossible to know how many disparate and unique African cultures were buried within the overworked plantation fields across the Americans. Therefore, over time, enslaved Africans, having lost their true cultural identity, were more easily

[35] For an informative video regarding the change of inland trading routes from the west African coast focus on gold and salt to enslaved, see e.g. Gates, "Wonders of the African World Episode 5 & 6 The Road to Timbuktu & Lost Cities of the South."

[36] Gates, "Wonders of the African World Episode 5 & 6 The Road to Timbuktu & Lost Cities of the South."

[37] Thornton, "The Coromantees: An African Cultural Group in Colonial North America and the Caribbean," 161.

labelled and understood by European masters. Considering the vehicle for their categorization was a Eurocentric one, in a cynical sense, Africans here were “black-washed”—the opposite of the “white-washing” of Africans and their “Libyan,” “Ægyptian,” and “Æthiopian” brethren in antiquity.

The blanket “Africanizing” of all enslaved peoples went a little deeper than at first glance. Perhaps due to a fear of the disparate human cargoes banding together in unison to violently overthrow their masters, some slavers kept their chattel isolated linguistically and culturally. Creating mini “Babels” on plantations furthered the erosion of social and cultural uniqueness. However, this was not always the case.[38] In addition to many of the African religious beliefs in crossing water and matriarchal culture and spirituality, the later imposition of Christian strictures on the dispersed enslaved accelerated the degradation of their identity. And in many instances, countrymen or regionally similar Africans were allowed to coexist locally in the New World.[39]

Within the context of slavery, Behn’s own misunderstandings of the institution within the African sphere are not only geographic and ethnic in nature. Seventeenth century African-based slavery was wholly different in scope and understanding than the European perception, which had derived from an older plantation complex engaging in small-scale chattel slavery as it emerged from the medieval Crusades.[40] At that time, the people being enslaved were not simply black, sub-Saharan Africans. Indeed, the word “slave” itself is derived from “Slav,” harkening to the earliest trade which originated among the Slavic people of the Black sea.[41] Chattel slavery, or

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[38] Coincidentally, Suriname is a colony in which many Gold Coast ethnolinguistically alike people disembarked to enslavement. See also Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 29-30.

[39] *Ibidem.*

[40] Curtin, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History*, 5-10.

[41] *Idem*, 9.

the idea that children of slaves inherit their parents' status, was not the widespread view of the institution among Africans at the time. Furthermore, intra-African enslavement differed in the range of roles offered to the laborers. Far from being solely fodder for field work as in the Americas, African slaves were able to work in various employments, from artisanal role to courtly appointments. Slaves might travel, slaves might marry, and most importantly, slaves might have children that did not inherit their parent's status.[42] This delinking of the two understandings of what it meant to be a slave, the fluid African versus the more rigid European, is of utmost importance to the analysis of *Oroonoko*.

Therefore, the setting into which Behn interpreted her novel is delineated. *Oroonoko* was a story that both drew from and played with the truth. Even the protagonist's name is a phonetic interpretation of the vast South American river, Orinoco. That Oroonoko, an African, might be given an indigenous American name in this period is in and of itself a European misrepresentation of the novel's hero. There, too, the subjugation of African princes, though tragic, is simply a matter of cultural indifference.

ON MYTHOLOGY: THE STORY

Astraea, goddess of justice, daughter of Astraeus and Eos, left the earth for an otherworldly plane at the close of the Golden Age, or so says Ovid, in his *Metamorphoses*.[43] Ovid's epic poem relates that as the "Ages of Man" corroded from Gold, Silver, and Bronze to Iron in a form of reverse alchemy, man's motivation changed when shunned from shared communion with the

[42] Perbi, *A History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana: From the 15th to the 19th Century*, 110.

[43] Tarrant, *Ovid Metamorphoses*: *Liber I.144-150*. "Fratrum quoque gratia rara est. imminent exitio uir conuigis, illa mariti; lurida terribiles miscent aconita nouercae; filius ante diem patrios inquirit in annos; uicta iacet pietas, et uirgo caede madentes ultima caelestrum terras Astraea reliquit."

gods, and were left to toil and fend for themselves. Through the ensuing brutality in competition for resources, the shining light of justice in the sky glimmered, sputtered, and dimmed, only to be extinguished due to insatiable human avarice. When Astraea departed during the Iron Age, she left with the assurance of return someday, eventually to bring back her light of justice and balance to mankind on the Earth. Yet despite that promise, her reason for departure was clear: man was not ready for celestial ascendancy. To reach the higher plane, through the divine female, men simply needed to behave better, and until such point as that was possible, the gift of heavenly justice would be unreachable, and balance impossible to attain. In her glimmering role as the symbolic form of virginal justice, Astraea is, therefore, one major example of the mythos of "white" savior.[44] Through her novel *Oroonoko*, Behn, as the author and narrator, casts herself in this elevated role. However, her linkage with the mythological goddess and all she represented did not end there.

Historically, associations with Astraea have been diverse and eclectic. Elizabeth I took the moniker on occasion, perhaps the *Gloriana* in her finding the connection with a virginal, femme savior in a world of fractious males a little too hard to resist.[45] Another famous English female who stepped into the weighty mantle of the goddess was indeed Aphra Behn, though interestingly, it was attributed to her as a code name in her role as an English spy. Born around 1640, Aphra Behn likely came from a lower status household. Records are nebulous at best, and on her part as an author all manner of fictions about her life were circulated and refuted, leaving little substantial evidence to go on by way of her origin story. Yet she most likely did travel to the colony Suriname for a time, and followed up her royalist agenda as a spy, working as "Astraea" in the Low Countries. Disavowed financially by her superiors, she made her way back

[44] Cole, "The White-Savior Industrial Complex."
[45] Yates, "Queen Elizabeth as Astraea," 27-28.

home after spectacularly failing her mission and sinking into debt, only rising out of it by the force of her pen. She became a prolific writer for the stage, began fruitful associations with the libertine set amongst the nobility, and eventually honed her craft as a propagandist for the royalist cause leading up the political crises in the 1680s.[46]

However, it is her opus—the proto-novel *Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave* which has left the most indelible impression of her life and work in prose. In her role as writer and narrator of the tome, she is frustratingly unreliable. But in her depictions of Africa and Africans, she is abundantly clear—racism, sexism, and paternalism are real; the changing notions of what it meant to be enslaved were threateningly jarring. Before Oroonoko was a slave, he was a prince, and if a prince can be enslaved, then perhaps no one is safe from the dreaded institution. In Aphra Behn's world, racial lines had not fully solidified, and class meant more than race. However, although she was an outsider to the circles of highest classes, she was yet working for and within them, and perhaps as a woman she could see how slavery threatened to blur the boundaries of class distinctions. In Restoration England, when the re-establishment of the monarchy meant so much to her beliefs, and it was once again threatened through a crisis of succession, this was arguably the impetus for a novel dealing with the threat to destabilize royal power. Behn lived on the front lines of an era of extreme political upheaval – civil war, war with the Dutch, succession crises, etc. As a dramatist, propagandist, former spy, and staunch proponent of the monarchy, Aphra Behn was uniquely qualified to write this novel. It is both a foray into political discourse during the period when the ruling dynasty she supported was losing confidence and power, and enlightened commentary on the injustice of slavery and insidiousness of mercantilism. As an English woman who both sets herself in the story and pens it, she

[46] Todd, "Behn, Aphra [Aphara] (1640?-1689), writer." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.*

straddles the line between supporting imperialism and the colonial project, and sympathy for the exploitation of the work force whose labor drives that machine.

Another of her works, a propagandist poem which is a translation from a French-language original, Behn blames the state of the country on the dark side of commerce, or "Trade." In "The Golden Age," she idealizes the absolutist rule of the past, and vilifies what the Transatlantic Trade has brought to her doorstep. An excerpt reads thus:

> Right and property were words since made,
> When Pow'r taught mankind to invade:
> When Pride and Avarice became a trade;
> Carried on by discord, noise and wars,
> For which they bartered wounds and scars;
> And to enhance the merchandise, miscalled it Fame,
> And rapes, invasions, tyrannies
> Was gaining of a glorious name:
> Styling their savage slaughters, Victories.[47]

In her guise as a reincarnation of the mythical Astraea, the white savior not only of those dispossessed by the "Pow'r" of where "merchandise [is] miscalled […] Fame," upon her interpretation of honor may lead to the salvation through her pen. This is reflected in *Oroonoko* where, "But his misfortune was to fall in an obscure world, that afforded only a female pen to celebrate his fame."[48] There is little wonder that the title for the preceeding poem is "The Golden Age," where the tacit association with Astraea is present. Overall, the poem critiques the acquisitiveness of mercantilism; there was a definite dark side to commerce, a business that links property, rights, and trade and leads directly to greed, war, and rape, all themes in her eponymous novel.

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[47] Behn, "The Golden Age."
[48] Behn, *Oroonoko*, 60.

As a dramatist, Behn colorfully sets the stage. After her initial strong reassurance that what follows is a true tale, she goes into a long description of the native people of Suriname. Her careful iteration of being an "eye-witness" to the climax of this tale comes shortly after the assertion that there is no need of "invention" within the tale, as "there being enough of reality to support it, and to render it diverting."[49] In reality, there is little evidence to support her assertion that she was present in Suriname at all; the evidence previous being within this text as she describes her father's appointment as Lieutenant-General. In the spirit of the linkage as asserted above—the Herodotean-Plinean-post-Gutenberg understanding of "truth"—earlier biographers utilized this assertion and accepted as fact. However, her descriptions are vivid and picturesque, evocative of an eye-witness account, so her presence in South American may not be completely discounted—the absence of proof does not signify falsehood.

After making an argument for slavery in the colony, she describes the friendly relationship of white settlers to the natives. "…For those we live with in perfect amity, without daring to command 'em; but, on the contrary, caress 'em with all the brotherly and friendly affection in the world…"[50] Their trade items and adornment are of particular interest to Behn, but also their state of perpetual undress is equally fascinating, "…if one lives forever among 'em there is not to be seen an undecent action, or glance: and being continually used to see one another so unadorned…where there is no novelty, there can be no curiosity."[51] This line in particular harkens to the earlier observation of Pliny the Elder, "*Semper aliquid noui Africam*

[49] Behn, *Oroonoko*, 3.
[50] *Idem,* 4.
[51] *Idem,* 6.

adferre,” or “Africa always brings something new.” In both contexts, neither author is referring directly to Africans, though they are given in relation to the overall juxtapositions of Africa against other locales.

What may be curious, however, is the cultural misunderstanding and disconnection between truth and lies that divided the white Europeans and natives of Suriname. “They have a native justice, which knows no fraud; and they understand no vice, or cunning, but when they are taught by the white men.”[52] In exchange, the white men find them useful and also realize that it is, “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.”[53] Behn makes clear, therefore, that but for their usefulness in trading exotic items and overwhelming population, enslavement of the natives of Suriname would be a reality on equal with the importation of enslaved Africans. Not to mention the language which indicates a condescending relationship. How else to describe an interaction whereby one group of people is gently stroking another like domesticated animals, rather than treating them on par as fellow humans? Additionally, the entire section portraying the indigenous peoples of the colony reads as comparative, perhaps as a method of “othering” the third race present in this story. This allows a racial release valve within the plot which begs further research—surely there is something to be said about the comparative complacency of the natives as opposed to the warring nature of Europeans and Africans. Drawing back to Behn as Astraea and her fixation upon the “Golden Age,” when linked with the title, Oroonoko—a bastardization of the name of the great South American river Orinoco—there is an undercurrent of meaning within the relatively understudied third race in the story, and their placement within her tale alike the peaceful people living in the paradise of that previous halcyon era.

[52] Behn, *Oroonoko*, 7.
[53] *Idem*, 8-9.

Following the introduction of the story setting within the colony, Behn jumps back to Oroonoko's "Coromantien" origins. As the only heir to his elderly grandfather, he is trained from a tender age to a soldier's life. When he is seventeen his tutor, a noble general, sacrifices himself in battle for his prince, and Oroonoko steps into his role as the new general. Given this elevated position, the prince returns to his grandfather's court. It is here as well that the reader learns the prince's talents are not limited to the "field of Mars."[54] In addition to embodying the pinnacle of what may be considered a Eurocentric ideal of physical manhood, despite his blackness, Oroonoko is also the intellectual equal of any high-status European. His discourse is elevated, and he is able to speak Spanish, French, and English, in addition to his native tongue.[55] This native tongue might have been Akan, as not only were the Akan peoples overwhelmingly referred to as Coromantee,[56] there is evidence that along the Gold Coast, where several ethnolinguistically diverse peoples lived, traded, and circulated through different kin- and loyalty-groups, the Akan language emerged as a *lingua franca*.[57]

It is at this point that romance brews between the prince and "the beautiful black Venus," to his Mars: Imoinda. As the daughter of his slain tutor-general, Behn relates that Oroonoko visited the young, beautiful, noble African woman to pay his respects, though true love among the pair quickly ensues. She is his equal in feminine traits to his masculinity, and Behn relates her beauty in no uncertain terms, however, her attributes are conveyed not so much on their own accord, but rather through their effect upon the men around her. Despite being the cause of "a hundred white sighing after her, and making a thousand vows at her feet," she is continuously

[54] Behn, *Oroonoko*, 10.
[55] *Idem*, 11-12.
[56] Thornton, "The Coromantees: An African Cultural Group in Colonial North America and the Caribbean," 161.
[57] *Idem*, 166.

little more than a responsive character, given action only as reaction to male impetus with few exceptions. However, before he is able to publicly announce their betrothal, the king, his own grandfather, forces her to become a member of his *otan.*[58]

It is not simply a matter of mistaken identity. Behn makes clear that the king is fully aware of the young lovers, but in spite of that he coerces Imoinda into taking the "royal veil." Oroonoko may be his grandson, but the king in his avarice will not stop to take what he wants, in this case, his heir's betrothed wife. This positions the prince as the wronged party, putting him in a sympathetic plight and highlighting his noble status. Here is a "rape" of a virgin in one sense. Though the king is in his "second childhood,"[59] Imoinda's coercion into giving over her naked body into a symbolic bath with the king is further indicative of her loss of autonomy. Through this ceremony, Imoinda becomes enslaved to a patriarchal custom, which simultaneously robs her of personal, sexual liberty, and yokes her to a future without children, since the king is impotent. Positioned against the reality of chattel slavery, children born to black women were not theirs legally, but bound to their masters. Ergo, Imoinda is abandoned into the institution before ever meeting a white European or stepping foot on a slave vessel.

As the story unfolds, the lovers cannot help but betray their feelings, and Imoinda is eventually sold into actual Transatlantic slavery by the vengeful king. Oroonoko, heartbroken at the loss of his love and unaware of her enslaved and transported status is naïve of the scope of his grandfather's duplicity. Eventually, he is tricked into enslavement himself. Over time, Oroonoko begins to see the treachery of men, for example the British slave ship captain who captured him while pretending to be his friend. When the prince's honor is questioned due to his being a "heathen," he retorts that, "he was very sorry to hear that the captain pretended to the

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[58] Behn describes this as a type of seraglio, or harem on *Oroonoko*, 25.
[59] *Idem*, 18.

knowledge and worship of any gods, who had taught him no better principles than not to credit as he would be credited."[60]

Here Behn demonstrates one major theme running thought the novel. There are many aspects of this story to highlight including the real personality and unreliable authenticity of its author/narrator, the juxtaposition of a slave who is also a prince, the loss of empowerment and sexualization of black female bodies, the impotence of the black king, the imperial project and mercantilism, the surrealistic nature of Christians proclaiming their righteousness while happily continuing as masters of other humans within the slave trade, and of course, at its heart: the tragic love story. But more than anything, *Oroonoko* is a tale of betrayal, and perhaps that was Behn's purpose all along.[61]

Following his enslavement, Oroonoko is called upon to compromise his conscience. As a true leader of men, when he refuses to eat so do the other enslaved. It is only through his temporary release aboard the ship that the others are convinced to attempt to thrive while crossing the middle passage.[62] Once purchased and released to his new master in Suriname, his royal status is impossible to suppress, as all of his elevated traits shine through. What follows is a social promotion of Oroonoko somewhere above the other slaves, but below the Europeans. However, although he is risen higher in status, yet he loses his name. Changing from Oroonoko to Caesar, Behn satirizes the ultimate impotence of kingship, "Mr. Trefry [his owner] gave Oroonoko that of Caesar; which name will live in that country as long as that (scarce more) glorious one of the great Roman."[63] Oritz has noticed the competitive nature of the parenthetical

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[60] Behn, *Oroonoko*, 52.
[61] The argument being that since she was disavowed by her own country while working as a spy, and at the time of this book's publication her favored political ideology is being betrayed by an incompetent King James II, this makes it a possibility.
[62] Behn, *Oroonoko*, 53-55.
[63] *Idem,* 60.

comments in the lines above, but this passage in particular also demonstrates that while Oroonoko remains a royal in name, neither it is chosen one, nor does it derive from an empire on equal ascendency from that of Behn's own.[64]

Given her critique of empire, and apology for colonization, other than maintain sympathy for the enslaved she does little to assist the newly minted Caesar in his plight. At this stage, he has found himself in as good a position as could be expected: although enslaved, he performs little labor as the fellow slaves recognize him as a king,[65] he lives with Imoinda as man and wife (now also renamed Clymene),[66] and together they are expecting a child.[67] However, as time waxes on, Oroonoko begins to feel fear—why has he not yet been returned to his natal country as promised? Will he once again fall prey to the perfidy of men and the treachery of English? At the same time, fears abound among the Europeans, now that the slaves have a leader—a Coromantee leader and all that connotes of bravery, courage, and strength—could they perhaps mutiny?[68] These twin flames of trepidation add to mistrust on both sides of the increasingly inelastic race line between whites and blacks in the tale. Furthermore, the complication of Imoinda's advancing pregnancy brings Oroonoko's derogatory position of complicity within the colonial scheme, and slavery within it, into sharp relief.[69] Perhaps it is now that he realizes his child will belong to his master, and not himself and Imoinda—it is his blackness, or race, just beginning to be referenced, which will ultimately betray his royal line and superior social status.

The word "race" appears six times in the novel. The first in the context of describing Oroonoko's beauty, such that it is "transcending all those of his gloomy race."[70] In the second

[64] Oritz, Joseph. "Arms and the Woman: Narrative, Imperialism," 120.
[65] Behn, *Oroonoko,* 61.
[66] *Idem,* 63.
[67] *Idem,* 68.
[68] *Ibidem.*
[69] *Idem*, 88.
[70] *Idem*, 10.

instance, it is used in the more general description of an hereditary race—Imoinda the final link in her father, the dead general's "race" of paternal line.[71] On the third occasion of its appearance, race denotes the extreme old age of the king in his "race of years," and on the fourth, again in the vein of describing the king's interests—"having no sons of all his race remaining alive."[72] With the penultimate occurrence there is an equally benign reference to the word.[73] The connotation turns in the final use of "race." Like in its first appearance, the word is used to denote a negative tone in the context of animus of one "race" for another. Oroonoko rallies his fellow slaves into action, "And shall we render obedience to such a degenerate race, who have no one human virtue left, to distinguish them from the vilest creatures?"[74] It is interesting that far from using the reality of his blackness into the expected racial critique, it is instead deployed against the white audience which Behn has him utilize the word; an instance of othering.

Predictably, Oroonoko is able to convince his fellow racially-aligned enslaved to band together and abandon the colony. The plan is to trek through the jungle, "travel towards the sea, plant a new colony, and defend it by their valor; and when they could find a ship, either driven by stress of weather, or guided by Providence in that way, they would seize it, and make it a prize, till it had transported them to their own countries."[75] Once again, his adolescent naïveté takes center stage.

Though they left together, the runaways are found and met with an overwhelming force. In order to make their way through the country, the slaves had needed "to fire and cut the woods before 'em: so that night or day they pursued 'em by the light they made, and by the path they

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[71] Behn, *Oroonoko,* 14.
[72] *Idem,* 40.
[73] *Idem*, 68.
[74] *Idem,* 90.
[75] *Idem*, 92.

cleared."[76] Interestingly, just as Oroonoko's force meets the natives' land with violent indifference to meet their ends of escape, so do the Deputy-Governor's men overwhelm the slaves with subversive, condescending oppression. Although "comical,"[77] their guns are for show and they are armed with little more than rusty spears and whips, they claim victory through to promise of pardon to what slaves will yield. Confused and terrorized, Oroonoko's force abandons him, except for Imoida and his general, Tuscan.[78] Cornered, the Deputy-General, already described more than once as a slick liar, offers Oroonoko, his wife, and his unborn child freedom—the ability to depart from the colony if only they surrender. But Oroonoko is past believing anything he has to say. Intriguingly, it is not the European, or "white" racial aspect that he rails against, but the inability to trust Christians as a rule.[79] Oroonoko flatly refuses to believe in the honor of a Christian oath.

Pacheco says that "in denying Christianity's capacity to guarantee oaths and offering in its stead a social and secular principle like honor, Behn does more than undermine the claims for Christianity's indispensable social function."[80] Perhaps this is reflective of the political situation in England during this period. As established, Behn, an avid monarchist, loathed the religious, Puritanical suppression of the Cromwellian regime during the Interregnum.[81] Furthermore, it could be a critique of religion supplanting power—the regime she did support and actively work to maintain was the Stuart dynasty, gasping its last breath in no small part due to the king's Catholic faith.

[76] Behn, *Oroonoko,* 94.
[77] *Idem*, 93.
[78] *Idem*, 95.
[79] *Idem*, 97.
[80] Pacheco, "'Little Religion' but 'Admirable Morals': Christianity and Honor in Aphra Behn's Oroonoko," 259.
[81] Todd, "Behn, Aphra [Aphara] (1640?-1689), writer." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.*

Succumbing once more to duplicitous Christians, Oroonoko is seized upon his return to the settlement, and he and Tuscan are cruelly whipped, their flesh flayed to the bone.[82] The punishment for rebellion reaches even further in Oroonoko's case. Once he is cut down, they rub his wounds with pepper, significantly torturing a valuable commodity (slave) with another valuable commodity (pepper). This underscores Behn's critiques: the avarice of Christian, colonizing, imperial men who will disregard equally the humanity of his fellow man, and stop at nothing to respect the sovereignty of slaves' bodies. Even Imoinda, hid away to be shielded from this torture, is only given this reprieve so that she and her child, present and potential commodities, will not be lost through shock.[83]

Over some time, he heals upon his home plantation, and Behn assists him with ordering "a healing bath, to rid him of his pepper," and "a chirurgeon to anoint him with healing balm."[84] But no sooner will he heal than the governing powers of the colony plan to make an example of him. Therefore, he hatches the ultimate revenge scheme. First, he plans to slay Imoinda (as well as his unborn, unfree child—the true last of his race), next he devises a means of murdering the governor of the colony, and lastly to kill himself. By depriving the white masters of his, Imoinda's, and their child's future labors he is meeting the gross betrayals he has experienced up to this point with an action equally violent and subversive.[85] Unfortunately, after completing the first part of his plan and killing his love, he finds he is unable to muster the will to carry out anything else.[86] Imoinda, therefore, may amplify Oroonoko's masculinity, but it is Behn in her role as narrator and writer who inherits his power.[87]

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[82] Behn, *Oroonoko*, 98.
[83] *Idem*, 99.
[84] *Idem*, 102.
[85] *Idem,* 105-06.
[86] *Idem*, 106-08.
[87] See e.g. Pearson, "Gender and Narrative in the Fiction of Aphra Behn."

After his wife's death in the secluded jungle, Oroonoko loses all ability to move forward. Instead, he covers her with a blanket of flowers and lies down next to her rotting corpse, unable to move at all. The slow rotting decay of Imoinda's body is juxtaposed with the relative wilting death of the previously incomparable body of Oroonoko's. Had his white "friends" not gone searching for him he may have simply been swallowed by the ravaging wild jungle of the colony, but he is found and extracted. It could be argued this is a further betrayal by whites who had called themselves his friends—immediately when his killing of Imoinda is revealed his reprieve from persecution is reinstated, and he is slated for execution. What follows is a jarring description of the true nature of colonization and the imperial project as imagined by Behn. He is clandestinely abducted once more, tied to the same post at which he'd been whipped, and for his own word to allow the execution to go forward unhindered, stoic until death, he asks only for a pipe with tobacco.[88] This can be seen as a further symbolic commodification of his black body, though again as a means of oppression, highlighting the iniquity of the colonial project.

When the executioner arrives, he "first cut off his members, and threw them on the fire; after that, with an ill-favored knife, they cut off his ears and his nose and burned them."[89] These acts are symbolic in that he is not only emasculated, but also scarred in shocking fashion, similar to the Indians with whom he'd had interaction earlier in the story. After that, he is quartered before finally finding reprieve in death. Mallipeddi points out that, "In Oroonoko, however, Behn first elevates the black body to an admirable spectacle via the conventions of Restoration drama, then shows how it is reduced to an exchangeable commodity, and finally documents its violent dismemberment at the scaffold."[90] Thus the prince, a person of the highest class and the

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[88] Behn, *Oroonoko*, 112-13.
[89] *Idem*, 113.
[90] Mallipeddi, "Spectacle, Spectatorship, and Sympathy in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," 476.

greatest specimen of both body and mind, though an African, is gradually deposed, losing all sovereignty of person and identity.

CONCLUSION

This project has summarized different methods in which Europe has (perhaps) unknowingly disenfranchised and dispossessed Africa through textual marginalization and manipulation of the truth. Looking through the lens of the Greeks, the Romans, and their influence upon medieval and renaissance western Europeans, the concepts of place and race were up for continuous invention and reinterpretation, though they took at least as long as into the eighteenth century to solidify. As each text was written and disseminated, those misinterpretations, generally built one atop the other, emerged from the slush pile of European history as a fusion of erroneous data regarding Africa and her people.

Following from Herodotus, Pliny the Elder, and Mandeville, Aphra Behn's Oroonoko both builds upon travel literature from these sources (and doubtless others) as well as her own mastery of storytelling to dissect class, race, gender, slavery, and the imperial project. Earlier European descriptions of Africa and her people listed toward complete invention. *Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave*, is an incredible gateway source to begin analysis of different themes of understanding the solidifying English views on these subjects. A cosmopolitan figure if nothing else, Behn draws upon her experience as a propagandist and dramatist to illuminate the different characteristics and temperaments of races, places, and people as she understood them. However, she is an unreliable narrator. Writing herself into this story, she clouds her fictional self with her true self, such that even now her exact origins are subject to debate and misunderstanding. This lasting confusion highlights the lasting and great power of the written word, something Behn

understood keenly. Painting herself as a “savior” figure both literally and professionally, she clearly understood the lasting power of resonant imagery.

Although he is an enslaved African, the importance of Oroonoko was that he was a prince: among the highest of classes. In the author’s mind and within the context of that era, class was more important than race. That said, the assessment of Africans on their own terms was not achieved through any of these texts, least of all *Oroonoko*. Though she pens a sympathetic tale of love, betrayal and revenge against the colorful backdrop of the Transatlantic world of the seventeenth century, she still invents the aspects of place in “Coromantien” and race, whether that be in the disappearance of a paternal line or the grouping together of one people with similar characteristics. These are fictitious facts, but with the grain enough of truth to lend credence. This imposition is another iteration of the earlier authors’ fallacies; although the difference between African, Indian, and European may not be so black and white, it yet exists to be highlighted and exploited. Through positionality, the “Global North” and Eurocentrism, through the ideological framework of paternalism, and by their own misunderstanding of a culture so different than their own, so did these writers look down onto Africa. It is Behn, however, who has claimed full divine ascendency. In her façade as Astraea, only she, and not the subject of her “true” tale Oroonoko, who can offer redemption through understanding the differences.

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