

Mimicry, Imitation, and Double Consciousness: The Absence and Presence of Black  
Heroines in *The Woman of Colour* and William Earle's *Obi*

by

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## Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: From Behn to Edgeworth: A Survey of the Transformation of Black and Mixed Race Heroines	13
Chapter 3: A Woman of Many Colours: Double Consciousness & Mimicry in <i>The Woman of Colour: A Tale</i>	37
3.1 <i>The Black Atlantic</i> , “Of Mimicry and Man,” and the olive Olivia	39
3.2 The Body, Legitimacy, and Authority	42
3.3 Dido, Marriage, and Mimicry	46
3.4 Double Consciousness	52
3.5 Revisiting ‘Home’	57
Chapter 4: Makro’s Dying Wish: Amri, the Revengeful Mother Figure in William Earle’s <i>Obi; or, The History of Three-Fingered Jack</i>	62
4.1 The Implications of a Male Narrator and Protagonist in <i>Obi</i>	63
4.2 Amri and Eighteenth-Century Tropes of Black Womanhood	69
4.3 Literary Representations of Obeah and Amri’s Insistence on Jack’s <i>Obi</i>	81
Chapter 5: Conclusion	89
Works Cited	95

## Abstract

This thesis demonstrates how two early nineteenth century British novels, William Earle's *Obi, or The History of Three-Fingered Jack* (1800) and the anonymously-written *The Woman of Colour; A Tale* (1808), feature prominent women of colour that move beyond the silenced, enslaved, minor representations of black and mixed race women made popular in previously published texts throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The progression of Amri and Olivia's positions through the use of literary strategies, such as Homi K. Bhabha's mimicry, Paul Gilroy's double consciousness, and gender-reversals reveal the inherent ambivalence of the women's positions in each narrative and the importance of these representations against the hegemonic female position. Although I argue that neither author succeeds in overturning traditional limitations of representing women of colour in literature of the period, investigating these texts is crucial to understanding the autonomous, influential women of colour in later nineteenth century literary works.

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## Chapter 1:

### Introduction

Starting in the seventeenth century, numerous literary representations of women of colour have worked to resist and disrupt the enslaved and marginalized position conventionally assigned to black women. Aphra Behn's 1688 novella *Oroonoko; or The Royal Slave. A True History* created a starting point for many successive writers to establish an influential position for minor black female characters, such as Behn's heroine Imoinda. Since *Oroonoko* principally focuses on the male title character, critics have largely ignored the representations of his wife Imoinda, except in response to her 'textual absence.' However, Alan Richardson, Sonia Hofkosh, Kim Hall, Lynda E. Boose, "and other race critics from the early modern to the Romantic period believe that black female characters have a definite literary impact even when they are textually absent" (Dominique 12).<sup>1</sup> Thus, Imoinda's 'flickering' appearances are influential, as are the similar textual representations of women of colour that follow in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Although Behn's short prose fiction began the tradition of representing minor black female characters as significant in their own right, there is much research left to be completed on major and minor women of colour in texts published between Behn's *Oroonoko* and Claire de Duras's influential French novella-turned-play *Ourika* (1823).<sup>2</sup> My research demonstrates how the authors of two early nineteenth century British West Indian novels that fall into the later years of this gap use strategies

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<sup>1</sup> See Kim Hall's "Reading What Isn't There: 'Black' Studies in Early Modern England," Lynda E. Boose's "The Getting of a Lawful Race': A Racial discourse in early modern England and the unrepresentable black woman," and Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh's *Romanticism, Race, and Imperial Culture, 1780-1834*.

<sup>2</sup> As Lyndon Dominique also states in his introduction to *The Woman of Colour*.

to represent major women of colour overcoming the racial stereotypes in each narrative's white colonial society.

My thesis focuses on close readings of William Earle's *Obi, or The History of Three-Fingered Jack* and the anonymously-written *The Woman of Colour; A Tale*. Through close readings, I will explore how the textual strategies employed by each author either advance or hinder the position of the black heroine in each novel. By investigating the two authors' literary representations of women of colour, this thesis will uncover the extent to which each author resists and disrupts the passive and enslaved position of black women as well as traditional stereotypes regarding slavery and subjugation in their early nineteenth century novels. Drawing on the historical scholarly work of Moira Ferguson, Tara Elizabeth Czechowski, and Barbara Bush along with theoretical works of Homi K. Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, Tim Fulford, Peter J. Kitson, and bell hooks, I will explore how each author represents black female characters and the textual strategies each uses to resist traditional hegemonic portrayals of these women.

While the early nineteenth century boasts an astonishing number of texts relevant to the position of black female characters, *The Woman of Colour* and Earle's *Obi* each portrays a black or mixed race woman who has a direct connection to the West Indies: Olivia, the daughter of a West Indian slave plantation owner in *The Woman of Colour*, becomes the wife of an English man, while Amri, Jack's vengeful African mother in *Obi*, is the driving force behind Jack's rebellious attitudes to slavery in the West Indies. The two novels share similar plots since, in *The Woman of Colour*, Olivia, a Creole heiress, travels from Jamaica to England before she decides to return to Jamaica, while in *Obi*, Amri is taken from Africa and is enslaved in Jamaica with her son Jack. The historical

time frame of the novels is another reason I have chosen to consider these two texts in my thesis since, according to Dominique's "A Chronology of Women of Color in Drama and Long Prose Fiction," these are two of the first long prose narratives published in the nineteenth century that focus on a prominent woman of colour. However, neither of these novels explicitly names the main female characters – Olivia or Amri – in the title, although both are indirectly acknowledged, Olivia by being *the* woman of colour referred to in the title and Amri through her son Jack. These two novels share other similarities as well: each was published within the first eight years of the nineteenth century, shortly before and after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. Both narratives are also written in the mock epistolary tradition, foregrounding the authors' choice to use a seemingly non-official, subjective form of writing to narrate Olivia and Amri's stories. Even though both novels have West Indian connections, *The Woman of Colour* is set in Britain and only references Olivia's Jamaican origins and her final return to the island while *Obi* is largely set in Africa and Jamaica. The narrative modes of the novels, however, differ greatly: *The Woman of Colour* is written from a first-person female perspective while *Obi* is written from the perspective of a male character who is not present during the action.

*Obi*'s narrator presents the dominant slavery structures within the novel while maintaining a sympathetic approach to Amri's actions, as well as to her son's actions. Amri's son, Jack, rebels against the slaveholder who enslaved his parents, which in turn allows him to escape from slavery and revolt against his slave owner and his headhunters until his ultimate capture and death. Earle's narrator continually defends Jack's motives for revenge, aligning himself with Amri and Jack against pro-slavery Britons in order to argue for the abolishment of slavery and the right to defend family honour. Although it is

set in London, not Jamaica, *The Woman of Colour*'s narrator, Olivia, similarly focuses on her struggle to navigate the patriarchal restrictions imposed on her by her father's will while attempting to align herself with abolitionists.

Although the dates of publication and West Indian connections provide clear associations between the two texts I have chosen, my thesis primarily focuses on the strategies employed by each author in his or her representations of the absence and presence of black and mixed race female characters during their struggle against racial and sexual stereotypes in early nineteenth century literature. According to Richardson and Hofkosh, many "[r]omanticists have been slow to reconsider [literature published in the Romantic period] in specific relation ... to the development of modern racist ... ideologies" (2). Thus, if, as critics believe, the literary absence of black and mixed race women is often just as significant as their presence in early nineteenth century novels, then the overt transformation of black and mixed race women from submissive, subordinate characters to authoritative, influential protagonists can certainly be viewed as significant. In his introduction to *The Woman of Colour*, Dominique divides the roles of black and mixed race heroines<sup>3</sup> into minor and major categories: while he mentions characters "such as Savannah in Amelia Opie's *Adeline Mowbray*" as a "minor black heroine," he identifies women who are "explicitly acknowledged in a novel's title or plot as the major character supported by a white female cast" as fitting his definition of "major black heroine" (Dominique 11). As shown in Dominique's "A Chronology of Women of Colour in Drama and Long Prose Fiction" (43-7), Olivia clearly fits his definition of a major black heroine in *The Woman of Colour* since she is undoubtedly the

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<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this thesis, I will use Dominique's definition of 'black heroines' in my discussion of both black and mixed race heroines.



novel's protagonist. In *Obi*, however, Amri hovers between the position of a minor and major black heroine since the text revolves around her son's actions. As previously stated, however, neither title recognizes a specific female character. Nevertheless, there is room to argue that both Amri and Olivia are overtly present in the texts and act as major characters although they are not always encouraged to do so by the white colonial society that surrounds them in each novel. Instead, Amri is enslaved at the beginning of Earle's novel and is only used by the white slave owners to entice Jack out of hiding in order to secure his capture. In *The Woman of Colour*, Olivia is initially believed to be unfit to wed her cousin Augustus Merton by the white colonial society and struggles against racial and sexual prejudices. Both Earle and *The Woman of Colour's* anonymous author represent Amri and Olivia resisting this subordinate black woman's position, at least for part of each novel.

The strategies employed by each author differentiate the representations of Amri and Olivia and the effectiveness of each of their attempts to disrupt the unstable oppositional categories that enforce the racial stereotypes within the white colonial societies in these novels. Both titles, *Obi, or The History of Three-Fingered Jack* and *The Woman of Colour*, give a sense of each novel's plot: thus, Earle's narrative focuses on the legendary Jamaican outlaw Three-fingered Jack while the anonymous narrative centers on an unnamed woman of colour. Earle's narrator claims that his story is "based on a true historical incident" (Aravamudan 7) as he recollects an "account of a heroic individual's attempt to combat slavery while defending family honor" (7). Although this text's title directly reflects the narrative's focus on Jack and his rebellion against his slave owner and his enslavement, Earle's version of this legendary tale contains a narrative within a

narrative. The second letter “written by the Jamaican George Stanford to his English friend Charles” (Earle 8) includes a secondary title for the narrative: “Makro and Amri, an African Tale” (73), which George states will “commence ... the narrative of Amri[, Jack’s mother]” (73). Despite Amri’s textual absence after she is enslaved before the end of the third letter, she maintains control throughout both this inset and the larger narrative: most notably, she instills revenge in Jack’s mind and instigates his actions against the slave owners in West India.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, Amri reverses gender roles after Makro’s death and functions as a powerful African maternal figure, disrupting the slave position in this colonial society through her son’s rebellion. Amri’s identity and actions are also represented in contrast to European characters, which highlights her role and importance as the novel’s major black heroine. Similarly, Olivia is not explicitly acknowledged by name in the title of the anonymously-written *The Woman of Colour*. Yet, Olivia maintains an even more central position in the narrative than Amri does in *Obi* as she narrates her own journey from Jamaica to become the wife of her cousin, Augustus Merton, and attempts to positively influence many of the London characters’ perspectives on black and mixed race women. Since the narrative principally focuses on Olivia’s movements, emotions, and actions, it seems highly likely that she should ultimately be considered the titular ‘woman of colour’ even though there are other potential women of colour in the narrative.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Amri, Olivia is never textually absent and, instead, assertively attempts to make a place for herself within the white colonial society in the novel’s London setting by working against racial and gender stereotypes. In

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<sup>4</sup> *Obi* contains a total of fifteen letters exchanged between Charles and George Stanford.

<sup>5</sup> Although many critics recognize Olivia as *the* woman of colour, her maid Dido – a less-central black woman – is also a candidate for this position due to her anti-slavery arguments, which is something I will explore further in Chapter Two.

the first half of the novel, Olivia is represented as a powerful mixed-race figure like Amri while she champions racial equality and is portrayed as a major black heroine. In the second half of the novel, however, Olivia places emphasis on her role as a wife to Augustus and loses her focus on destabilizing racial assumptions. These strategic representations of Amri and Olivia, although different, are theoretically similar in their approach to disrupting conventional depictions of black and mixed race female characters.

The complexity of and the contradictions within the representations of black heroines like Amri and Olivia are the principal subjects I focus on in this thesis. As Fulford and Kitson acknowledge, considering race in Romantic-period literature “is especially challenging because of the very transitional nature of the colonial project in the period” (3). The contradictory aspects of each character can be carefully and usefully analyzed from multiple theoretical standpoints, including those of bell hooks, Homi K. Bhabha, and Paul Gilroy, all of whom examine representations of black women in literature. According to these theorists, representations of black women are always already inscribed with stereotypical assumptions in white colonial societies. In order to effectively deconstruct and critically analyze these representations, it is important first to understand “the way[] racism and sexism are interlocking systems of domination which uphold and sustain one another” (hooks 59). In *Obi*, Amri is almost immediately represented as pregnant, telling Jack that he was “then but two months old within [her] womb” (Aravamudan 74) during her tale of hers and Makro’s enslavement. Within two letters of George’s recollection of Amri’s tale, Captain Harrop enslaves Amri and she becomes, for a short time at least, an enslaved, pregnant African woman – the ultimate

convergence of racism and sexuality. Olivia, however, reveals a lesser combination of racism and sexuality in *The Woman of Colour*. When she arrives in London, she is deemed an unsuitable mate for Augustus because of the colour of her skin. Throughout the narrative, racial issues are foregrounded, especially when Mrs. George Merton disagrees so deeply with Olivia's presence that she plots against Olivia's marriage until its ultimate failure. Although there is no overt focus on Amri's and Olivia's sexual availability and both women are represented as married and/or widowed for the majority of these narratives, representations of these women's bodies are continually interpreted and interrogated in the two novels.<sup>6</sup> The validity of the depictions of these black and mixed race women is furthermore complicated by the convergence of a plethora of assumptions about how the portrayals of female characters should be represented in early nineteenth century novels.

One way to differentiate between the female representations of Olivia and Amri is to investigate more closely the strategies employed by each author to undermine stereotypical depictions of black female characters and the ways in which the strategies utilized in each text affect the female characters' actions. One important strategy is explained by Bhabha in "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse."<sup>7</sup> Mimicry is "the sign of double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power" (85). Thus, mimicry allows for an author to employ a character's actions to question a colonial subject's authority over a black or mixed race character, whether female or male.

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<sup>6</sup> See Frank Felsenstein's introduction to *English Trader, Indian Maid: Representing Gender, Race, and Slavery in the New World* for an important discussion of female domestication and self-sacrifice in a unmarried relationship such as in Richard Steele's version of *Inkle and Yarico* (11-12).

<sup>7</sup> from *The Location of Culture*.

According to Bhabha, the use of mimicry takes apart the power of the interpretations and interrogates stereotypical assumptions by blurring the boundaries between, in these cases, the black colonial women and the white colonial society within each narrative (85-92). Racial muting and “the late eighteenth-century British public’s fascination with complexion” (Coleman 169) can aid in the representations of mimicry in a narrative, such as in *The Woman of Colour*. Dominique believes the anonymous author uses both mimicry and racial muting when Olivia’s skin is described as “olive” instead of darker-skinned to “make Olivia more appealing and less threatening to white Britons” (Dominique 30), thereby blurring the boundaries between what the white Britons view as racially threatening and non-threatening.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, in the two novels I’ve chosen to examine, Amri – the only fully African heroine – is not shown mimicking the white colonial women, whereas Olivia – a mixed race heroine – overtly mimics them. This may suggest that there is no hope for an African woman to successfully and convincingly be portrayed as mimicking a white colonial woman in early nineteenth century literature, but I believe that aligning black female characters too closely with European female characters through mimicry may cause further racial disconnects to emerge in novels like *The Woman of Colour* that are not evident in novels like *Obi*.

Mimicry can easily become what Paul Gilroy theorizes as ‘double consciousness.’ Gilroy explains in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* how,

where racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that [European and black] identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between the[se unfinished identities]

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<sup>8</sup> See Deidre Coleman’s article “Janet Schaw and the Complexions of Empire” for a full exploration of what Coleman refers to as the “racialization of whiteness” and the “racialization of skin colour to gender” (169-70) in connection to skin whitening and interracial breeding.

or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination. (1)

The in-between space Gilroy describes and labels as a site of ‘double consciousness’ has been utilized by multiple European and black authors, playwrights, and poets to deconstruct the traditional binary opposition of white and black women’s positions in literature. Gilroy theorizes this representation to investigate the loss of a single, unified consciousness, or self-conception in favour of an intricate, interwoven, dual identity in the black diaspora. He further defines the privileged position of the diaspora by constructing the transatlantic space as a place of newly formed cultural identities, describing double consciousness as an inherently generative strategy. In Olivia’s case, however, I will argue that, once her mimicry becomes double consciousness in the novel’s English society, her mixed race identity works even more intricately within the terms of Gilroy’s theory since her character represents a merger of the two oppositional European and black ‘identities’ into one body.

Chapter One will survey some examples of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary works that illustrate the evolving representations of minor and major black heroines, including texts by Aphra Behn, Unca Eliza Winkfield, Lucy Peacock, Charlotte Turner Smith, Maria Edgeworth, and John Thelwall, as well as some anonymous texts such as the drama “The African” (1808).<sup>9</sup> Drawing on these and other works I will uncover the ways in which textual representations of black women evolved and explore the success of the strategies used by some authors to deconstruct the traditionally established narrative position of black women. I will also consider the unstable

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<sup>9</sup> See “Drama No. 9.” *The Emerald, or Miscellany of Literature* 1.11 (1808): 124-7. *American Periodicals Series Online*. 2 Jan. 1808. Web. 19 Jan. 2012.

oppositional categories that were reinforced or deconstructed in literature published before *Obi* and *The Woman of Colour*.

Chapter Two focuses on the anonymously-written *The Woman of Colour*, noting the lack of critical response to the novel. Interrogating Olivia's position as the wife of an English man in the second half of the novel is the emphasis of this chapter, along with the effects this relationship has on her actions against traditional stereotypes regarding slavery and subjugation. As mentioned above, Gilroy's theory is significant in this chapter while I investigate Olivia's mimicry as it becomes double consciousness. Finally, this chapter explores the success of Olivia's character in altering the prejudices of the white colonial characters in London and investigates Dominique's claim that Olivia is *the* woman of colour and looks to Dido as an alternate woman of colour.

Chapter Three concentrates on *Obi or, The History of Three-Fingered Jack's* Amri, the vengeful mother figure. Focusing on Amri's maternal position and relationship with her son, this chapter will assess the racial and gender stereotypes that attempt to define the actions of Amri and Jack throughout their struggle to defend their family honour. Unlike *The Woman of Colour*, the main protagonist of *Obi* is Amri's son, Jack. I will investigate the implications of having a male protagonist and a male narrator on Amri's position as a black female heroine in the text. Furthermore, I will discuss the influential female space Amri creates for herself without mimicry or double consciousness, unlike Olivia who succumbs to a subordinate position in *The Woman of Colour*, while I also consider the influence of obeah<sup>10</sup> and sentimental tropes on the text's plot line.

Looking closely at the descriptions of the black female characters in the context of their relationships within each text, I will reveal the ambivalence of the women's

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<sup>10</sup> Obeah, or obi, is a West Indian religious practice.

positions by analyzing the effectiveness and legitimacy of the authors' representations of each black female character in *Obi* and *The Woman of Colour* in the context of their respective white West Indian and English society. In the ending of Earle's text the black heroine Amri is "executed near Banana River" and is described as "prepared to die" (147). In contrast, *The Woman of Colour's* heroine, Olivia, plans to "revisit Jamaica" and "again zealously engage [her]self in ameliorating the situation, in instructing the minds – in mending the morals of our poor blacks" (188). The progression of each woman's position in these texts will aid my argument that the authors' use of multiple strategies, such as mimicry and double consciousness, directly affects the success of the female characters and the authors' arguments against racial stereotypes in each narrative's white colonial society. These early nineteenth century novels reveal an important shift away from hegemonic textual portrayals of black and mixed race women and, although they may not be successful in undermining all racist and sexual subjugation, they begin a new tradition of strong female protagonists moving beyond the conventional slave position.



## Chapter 2:

### From Behn to Edgeworth: A Survey of the Transformation of Black and Mixed Race Heroines

Textual representations of black and mixed race women rapidly evolved through the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries. In the colonial societies represented in multiple novels, traditionally established positions of women of colour reveal their overt exclusion from multiple privileges, including from main protagonist positions and positions of fully developed, independent characters. As Kitson explores in his introduction to *Romantic Literature, Race and Colonial Encounter*, the term “race” has evolved multiple times from a denotation that originally had no connection to biology (6-7). Many representations of women of colour in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries focus on their relationships with men, and their undeniable connections to slavery. bell hooks deconstructs this interdependence of racism and sexuality in the narratives of black women and foregrounds the union of these systems in the transformative representations of black and mixed race women (57-9). In early nineteenth-century literature the portrayals inflected by the systems hooks describes become more prominent as the number of black and mixed race women who are represented as authoritative, influential protagonists increases. Lyndon J. Dominique states that “[t]wo of the most unexplored lines of critical inquiry in contemporary studies of British literature have to be the roles that black heroines play, and the influence they collectively wield, in long prose fiction written during the long eighteenth century” (11). Dominique’s division of black heroines into minor and major categories helps to organize the gradual emergence of these heroines in literary works throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Focusing

on poems, dramas, and novels written from 1787 to 1808, in this chapter I will explore the transformation in representations of African and mixed race women in male- and female-authored texts as well as anonymously-authored texts.

Dominique extensively details the evolution of ‘women of color’ from 1605 until 1861 in his “A Chronology of Women of Colour in Drama and Long Prose Fiction” (43-7), showing that a pattern emerges during the mid-eighteenth century when women became established literary authors: the focus of the literature also begins to shift to female characters. Although Dominique’s list begins with texts like Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra’s *The History of the Renowned Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605) and with women of colour like the moor Lela Zoraida, as female authors became more widely published, more texts focused on major black and mixed race female characters such as Unca in Unca Eliza Winkfield’s *The Female American* (1767) and Miranda Vanderparcke in Mrs. Charles Matthew’s *Memoirs of a Scots Heiress* (1791) (Dominique 44-5). Interestingly, Aphra Behn’s texts precede Winkfield by almost a century and her novella, *The Adventure of the Black Lady* (1696), focuses on the movements of the black female character, Bellamora. Behn’s publications gained even more prominence in the twentieth-century, when her “literary reputation soared, and she has been championed by feminists for creating a place for women in the writing world” (Black 139). As the first female-authored text in Dominique’s chronology, Behn’s *Oroonoko: or, The Royal Slave* (1688) has been considered “[h]er most successful work ... [and] has come to be recognized as an important narrative of slavery” (Black 139). The text sheds light on the unethical actions of slaveholders and focuses on Oroonoko and Imoinda’s struggle to survive and escape slavery under their Christian names Caesar and Clemene. Although

Imoinda independently faces rape by her king, being sold into slavery, and becoming impregnated while enslaved, Dominique believes that Imoinda's "heroic impact is certainly diminished by the fact that she appears 'only flickeringly' in the novella" (11-2).

Behn, however, utilizes strategies that have allowed for multiple interpretations of the representations of the title character, Oroonoko, and his wife Imoinda. Given Behn's "politically ambivalent [authorial] views about royalty and colonial supremacy" (Ferguson 27), Imoinda's 'flickering' appearances may be more significant than most critics assume. As many race critics have stated, reading into the absence of minor black female characters can be crucial to understanding these characters' major influence. Since Imoinda is a minor character in *Oroonoko* and is far from absent, her narrative impact is not diminished. Behn initially distances her readers from Imoinda by limiting her voice in the narrative, and representing her through Oroonoko's and the white female narrator's eyes. The narrator describes how Oroonoko

was infinitely surprised at the beauty of this fair Queen of Night, whose face and person was so exceeding all he had ever beheld; that lovely modesty with which she received him, that softness in her look, and sighs, upon the melancholy occasion of this honour that was done by so great a man as Oroonoko. (147-8)

Imoinda's subordinate position is enforced almost immediately in the narrative, shortly after Oroonoko "vows she would be the only woman he would *possess* while he lived" (148, emphasis added). Even though "'twas past doubt whether [Imoinda] loved Oroonoko entirely" (Behn 149), it was not long until "[t]he old King ... sent the royal

veil to Imoinda ... with which she is covered and secured for the King's use" (149, emphasis added). These closely successive representations of Imoinda as subjected to various male authorities reveal how "[t]he complex perspectives on slavery become more discernible in relation to the question of female subjugation" (Ferguson 38-9). Moira Ferguson believes that "Behn pronounces female lives a form of slavery and introduces [Imoinda as] a virtuous West African female ... co-protagonist" (39), which highlights the representations of Imoinda as male property and problematizes her subordinate position. Nevertheless, critics easily ignore Imoinda's 'virtuous' position, since, as I have noted, Behn's illustrations of Imoinda are fully textually absent near the end of the narrative when Oroonoko kills her.<sup>11</sup>

Imoinda is present for the majority of the first half of *Oroonoko*, although in a subordinated position; she disappears from the narrative only after the King sends her into slavery. But her textual absence is confirmed once she becomes pregnant and Oroonoko attempts to lead a slave rebellion. Oroonoko decisively concludes that his only opportunity to spare Imoinda from harm is to take her life: he describes how "he found [his] heroic wife faster pleading for death than he was to propose it," so he "drew his knife to kill his treasure of his soul, this pleasure of his eyes" (Behn 175). Importantly, Imoinda's death seems to be represented as her choice as well as Oroonoko's, placing her in an authority position when it comes to her life. Her death, however, is also symbolic of European colonialist literary preoccupations: Oroonoko, "with a hand resolved, and a heart breaking within, gave the fatal stroke, first, cutting her throat, and then severing her, yet smiling, face from that delicate body, pregnant as it was with fruits of tenderest love"

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<sup>11</sup> Moira Ferguson gives insight into the scene of Oroonoko killing Imoinda as the point when "[t]he damaging view of African as 'uncivilized' reaches a high point of invention" (27).

(Behn 175).<sup>12</sup> Imoinda is a pregnant black woman and, as Dominique and other early modern race critics have concluded, she is an “‘unrepresentable’ [example] of black fertility ... [that] threat[ens] dominant systems of representation controlled by white men” (Dominique 12).<sup>13</sup> The narrator directly acknowledges Imoinda’s pregnancy while she partakes in Oronoko’s slave rebellion and confirms the power of the sexist and racist systems that are always already inscribed upon women’s bodies, especially since Imoinda is not given the choice to live – she agrees with Oroonoko and is willing to die by her husband’s hand since “wives have a respect for their husbands equal to what any other people pay a diety” (Behn 175). The direct reference to Imoinda’s pregnancy also reveals how, as Ferguson acknowledges, “[a]s an unmarried, sexually abused female, a disenfranchised slave or colonial object, a grieving, pregnant mother, a heroic rebel-warrior, and as a speaking individual within and despite a patriarchal colonial system, Imoinda cannot survive” (45).

Representations of Imoinda’s black fertility were then downplayed in Thomas Southerne’s tragic play version performed in the late seventeenth-century, placing more emphasis on racism rather than sexuality. According to Dominique, Southerne shifts Imoinda’s representations in his adaptation of *Oroonoko* by “blanching Behn’s heroine and de-emphasizing her pregnancy, ... [thereby] nullifying the threatening influence of a fertile black heroine” (13). Imoinda’s significance is, thus, hindered in Southerne’s play, which is similar to “Ourika’s deliberate transformation from a fertile African woman to a

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<sup>12</sup> In his introduction to *English Trader, Indian Maid: Representing Gender, Race, and Slavery in the New World*, Frank Felsenstein agrees with Hayden White’s conclusions regarding Oroonoko’s position in Behn’s narrative. The simultaneous representation of Oroonoko as the “Wild Man” and “Noble Savage,” especially in the passage I’ve quoted, is actually “contradictory impulses [that] can be found in many texts treating of European encounters with the native” (4).

<sup>13</sup> Dominique is drawing directly on the critical work of Lynda E. Boose and Kim Hall in this passage.

spiritual yet barren one” (Dominique 14) in Claire de Duras’s influential, French novella-turned-play *Ourika* (1823). Although Dominique believes that Southerne’s version of Imoinda maintains some of the “elements of the original black woman’s power to threaten the dominant white culture” (15), these bleached representations of African heroines are symptomatic of larger cultural and political ideologies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Deirdre Coleman explains how the late eighteenth century, specifically the 1760s and 1770s, was filled with preoccupations regarding “the racialization of whiteness ... both in the metropolis and in the colonies” (169-70). Coleman describes how, after the Somerset case of 1772, “[a] highly charged discourse about whiteness and whitening, circulating already in travel narratives and colonial histories, is given a new focus ... [and] gathers further momentum during the heyday of abolitionism” (170).<sup>14</sup> She gathers accounts of black and mulatto citizens of the West Indies ‘flaying’ layers of their skin off in order to achieve a white appearance through a process calling “skin whitening” (171).

Although “whitening [was] a practice principally associated with the aspirations of ‘colored’ rather than white people,” these practices became troubled by the “spectacle of white women flaying their skin” (Coleman 172). White women perpetuated the controversial trend of skin whitening, but their attempts to bleach their already white skin to an even lighter tone brings into question their end goal: how white is white enough? Coleman suggests this reversal can be “interpreted as proof not of [the colonialist women’s] difference from black slaves, and from black women in particular, but of their uncanny resemblance to them” (172). The textual representations of African and mixed race women in the late eighteenth century then begin to reflect “the profound instability

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<sup>14</sup> The Somerset Case of 1772 found that laws in place in England and Wales did not uphold slavery.

of the categories ‘black’ and ‘white’” caused by the fixation on skin whitening (Coleman 175). Occupying an in-between position as a West-Indian woman is especially problematic since, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, West Indian coloured colonial subjects with paler complexions were generally seen, according to Bryan Edwards, as “[s]ituated ... in an insulated and intermediate state between the black and the white, [where they are] despised by the one, and enviously hated by the other” (233). This fixation on skin whitening, then, connects to the preoccupation with racism and sexuality being read onto a black woman’s body and raises questions as to how it is possible to view an ‘authentic’ body with such practices being enforced on women’s skin. Imoinda, however, is not shown flaying her skin in Behn’s or Southerne’s version of *Oroonoko*. Instead, Southerne does not incorporate the spectacle of skin-whitening and also removes Imoinda’s important presence as a black woman in the original novella. In the original text, Behn does seem to subordinate Imoinda to Oroonoko, but she also describes Imoinda as an equal counterpart to Oroonoko, calling her the “female to the noble male; the beautiful black Venus to our young Mars” (Behn 147). Although there are contradictory representations, many critics ultimately describe Imoinda as textually absent. Her few appearances in many editions are undoubtedly plagued by rape, enslavement, suffering, and death, but Imoinda’s presence as a black woman in Behn’s novel speaks louder than her absence in Southerne’s play.

John Thelwall’s play *Incle and Yarico* (1786)<sup>15</sup> received less publicity and critical examination than Behn’s *Oroonoko* due to its disappearance from Thelwall’s possession

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<sup>15</sup> Frank Felsenstein and Michael Scrivener add a textual note after their introduction to John Thelwall’s *Incle and Yarico* in their 2006 publication of *Incle and Yarico and the Incas: Two Plays by John Thelwall* that explains this play was “probably composed in late 1786 or early 1787” (36). I will use the earlier date for the duration of this thesis.

from 1787 until 1814 (Felsenstein and Scrivener 36), but Thelwall's representations of Yarico rival Behn's of Imoinda in their progression beyond traditional depictions of female subordination and slavery. Frank Felsenstein and Michael Scrivener discuss the precarious origins of the tale of Inle and his relationship with the native Yarico in their introduction to the 2006 publication of *Inle and Yarico and the Incas*, noting that "a brief anecdote of a true-life incident[] concerning an Indian woman named Yarico... first appeared in Richard Ligon's *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (1657)," but it "achieved lasting fame ... by Richard Steele in *The Spectator* (1711)" (21).<sup>16</sup> Multiple editions and variations of Yarico and Inle's relationship were written, published and performed after Ligon's 1657 narrative, transforming over time from a story that focused on the burdens of gender (Felsenstein and Scrivener 13) to become "a moral fable that graphically exemplified the infamy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade" (22).<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the depictions of Yarico remain static throughout the centuries until Thelwall unconventionally exaggerates gender roles in his play, attempting to dissect what hooks believes is the interdependence of racism and sexism.

Thelwall resists literary conventions in his play by placing focus on Yarico, a female mixed-race protagonist, by over exaggerating the practice of "making it the custom among his Native Americans for its women to be the predatory sex in matters of

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<sup>16</sup> Felsenstein reiterates Steele's hand in popularizing *Inle and Yarico* in his introduction to *English Trader, Indian Maid: Representing Gender, Race, and Slavery in the New World*.

<sup>17</sup> Felsenstein also investigates the reasoning behind the loss of interest in the text throughout the nineteenth century and concludes that "a reconsideration of its very ability to translate itself into a variety of different forms and to blend disparate elements that derive eclectically from oral and literary sources" (27-8) may explain its eventual disappearance.



love” (Felsenstein and Scrivener 34).<sup>18</sup> This resistance creates a farcical view of gender stereotypes and magnifies the problematic literary tradition of representing women – especially native women – as subordinate to men.<sup>19</sup> Thelwall reverses gender stereotypes and depicts Inle as a bored, helplessly lost, English male counterpart to the indigenous, masculinized Yarico, who is initially described while she is hunting (Thelwall 45). Inle is indebted to Yarico, who saved his life two years prior to the beginning of the narrative, but he wishes to return home and is certain that “Yarico will never assist, or even consent to [his] departure” (45). Although Yarico adopts many of the traditional masculine responsibilities, she admits that she “will fly, wid my quiver at my back, and my bow in my hand, over de hills and trough de briars to kill for you de game, while my dear Inle sit at home ... Me will do any ting me can to make dear Inle happy” (47). Paired with Yarico’s stage directions of “[*Hanging fondly round [Inle’s] neck*]” (47) and her constant desire to have Inle confirm his love for her, Yarico’s gender-bending duties don’t completely overturn traditional gender hierarchies and she is sometimes even acknowledged as a “prototypical female Noble Savage of the Enlightenment” (Felsenstein 36).

Although Yarico is a titular character and remains a major presence in three of the four scenes of Thelwall’s play, her attendant Yahamona and the ‘predatory’ role she also

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<sup>18</sup> Since Thelwall’s play was intended to be a performance, the over exaggeration and reversal of gender stereotypes in *Inle and Yarico* would have been more prominent on stage. Both racial representations and the inclusion of female performers would have been problematic in the staging of his play, raising awareness of the way genre can also influence representations of black and mixed race heroines.

<sup>19</sup> Thelwall makes a farce of not only traditional gender roles, but also of many traditional societal and mercantilist conventions of the time. While depicting Inle’s family lost in the forest, he comically over exaggerates their insignificant individual indulgences: Traffic Inle, Inle’s father, laments that he will never see his “dear, dear money bags again” (Thelwall 50), Mrs. Inle worries that she will “never shine the envy of all the ladies at Tallow Chandler’s Hall again” (49), while Turtle, Inle’s uncle, wishes only to be “seated at a city feast tucking in the salmon and lobster sauce” (49).

adopts in her relationships with men parallel the masculine role Yarico plays in her relationship with Inle. When Yahamona finds Timothy, Traffic Inle's servant, while hunting in the forest, she immediately falls in love with him only to quickly avert her attention to Williams, a sailor traveling with the Incles, explaining to Timothy that "[m]e love dis white man better den you. He more fondle Yahamona" (Thelwall 60). Timothy, however, immediately acknowledges the prominent gender reversals during his first interaction with Yahamona, stating that "'tis the customer of the country" and that "every thing's reversed here" (52). This recognition of the norm, although it is opposite to what Timothy is accustomed to, upsets the traditional subordinate gender roles of women by "comically inverting the fetishistic role played by Steele's heroine as the traditional story's quintessential object of desire" (Felsenstein and Scrivener 34). Both Yarico and Yahamona are viewed as authoritative, major heroine figures, by Dominique's standards, through their dominating roles in relationships, but this inversion problematizes the inherent subordination of women in slavery.

After the Incles find their long-lost son, Traffic convinces Inle to enslave Yarico and Yahamona and ultimately disrupts Thelwall's powerful inversion of male and female literary stereotypes by placing Yarico in a vulnerable position. Initially in Traffic and Inle's conversation of enslavement, Inle plays the subordinate male role and attempts to protect Yarico from his father's plan by explaining that she "is with child by me" (Thelwall 63). Traffic and Turtle both express their lack of concern with Inle's mixed-race offspring with Yarico, noting that love is only for those who are detached from reality and are not "pampered with the substantial luxuries of city feasts" (64). After making a mockery of marriage, the elder Incles threaten to disown Inle and finally get

his consent to enslave Yarico and Yahamona (Thelwall 65). Luckily, Yahamona's second love interest speaks out against slavery: Williams claims that the women are "human beings" and that he thinks "it [is] bloody cruel not to do as we would wish to be done by" (60). Williams warns Yahamona of the enslavement planned for her and Yarico, but when Yahamona advises Yarico to flee with her (66) she refuses. Unlike Imoinda who submits to Oroonoko's violent choice to save her from being punished, Yarico confirms her authoritative role in the narrative and directly questions Traffic of his plan to enslave her (66). Yarico's questioning, however, is not enough. Williams appears with the Indian Cazieque<sup>20</sup> and "*a great rout of savages*" (67) to capture the Incles and save Yarico and Yahamona from slavery. The women are safe, but they owe their freedom to a man. Thelwall interferes with his initial shift away from the traditional literary paradigm of subordinate women and undermines the integrity of the gender role reversals in place throughout his play.

Although Thelwall may weaken his argument against female literary subordination when Williams saves Yarico and Yahamona, he introduces humane elements to the representations of Yarico that advance her influential position in the narrative. According to Felsenstein and Scrivener, "the figure of Yarico came increasingly to personify those noble instincts of the enslaved that even colonial oppression was unable to eradicate" (Felsenstein and Scrivener 24). Yarico refers to her lost family ties throughout the narrative, even reminding Inle that she left her family to be with him (Thelwall 48). Felsenstein also asserts "a large number of English tales ... blacks or deracinated slaves... are represented as being without or having lost family ties" (18). In many other editions that tell Inle and Yarico's story Inle is represented as having no family ties at

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<sup>20</sup> Yarico's father.

all. Thelwall's addition of her family allows Yarico to be more relatable to European readers and also gives Williams the ability to seek out her father to help save Yarico from slavery, which Yarico is not so lucky to escape in other editions.

The addition of Williams to the narrative confirms Thelwall's anti-slavery intentions, but Yarico's action of pardoning the Incles during the denouement seems to weaken her position against slavery that is prominent in the second Act. As Felsenstein and Scrivener explain, the conclusion of the play "is intended to assert both the oneness of humanity and the repugnance of the slave trade" (30). Similar to Imoinda's decision to agree with Oroonoko's choice to take her life, Yarico gives in to Incle's desire for her to "[e]ntreat your father to mitigate our sentence" (Thelwall 69). Thelwall also undercuts the intelligence of Yarico and her father, and by extension all of the indigenous people, by representing them speaking in "dumb show" (69), but it is ultimately the Cazieque's decision to pardon the Incles that confirms the humanity that Felsenstein and Scrivener believe is present. Incle even admits that he wished for his story to be told so that "astonish'd Europe hears, and blushing learns humanity from savages" (Thelwall 70). Yarico's compassion and her ability to convince her father to spare the Incles from slavery coupled with the highly self-conscious, over exaggerated, masculinized role in the representations of her relationship with Incle substantiates her influential position in Thelwall's play.

Over a century after Behn's *Oroonoko* but not more than two decades after Thelwall's *Incle and Yarico*, Maria Edgeworth's "The Grateful Negro" (1801) raised questions regarding the treatment of slaves and emancipation through oppositional representations of slaves and slave owners. Unlike the conclusions drawn by theorists

such as Wylie Sypher, who believes literature throughout the eighteenth century depicts “the West-Indian [as] upsetting the social order of England” (504), the opinions reinforced in Edgeworth’s text rely heavily on Bryan Edwards’ travel narratives to depict a sentimental view of the possibility of slavery reform during the slave revolts in the late eighteenth century. “The Grateful Negro,” one of the eleven stories found in Edgeworth’s *Popular Tales* (1804), describes a complex plot of two slave owners who operate their slave plantations with opposing mentalities: Mr. Jefferies “considered the negroes as an inferior species ... [and] he treated his slaves ... with the greatest severity” (Edgeworth 419) while Mr. Edwards “treated his slaves with all possible humanity and kindness” (420). Early in the narrative, Mr. Edwards is depicted as “wish[ing] that there was no such thing as slavery in the world” (420), and, thus, buys Caesar and Clara, two of Mr. Jefferies slaves, to save them from being collected by the sheriff officer for Jefferies’ debts (421-5). Edgeworth sets up this opposition between Mr. Jeffries and Mr. Edwards in order to foreground the possibility for two views of slavery: a brutal, dominating system that endangers everyone involved, or a humane, paternalistic relationship between slave holders and their slaves. George Boulukos describes Edgeworth’s strategic positioning of Jeffries against Edwards as her attempt to “striv[e] for a middle ground between ‘wishing’ for the immediate end of slavery and the total acceptance of plantations as they are, and remaining ambiguous about the slave trade” (13).

Both Boulukos and Elizabeth Kim agree that Edgeworth’s depiction of the sympathetic Edwards in opposition to the austere Jeffries creates a sentimental defense of slavery as a system that can be sustained through the slaves’ paternalistic respect for their humane slaveholders while they simultaneously fear the violence that would ensue if they

fight for emancipation (Boulukos 13; Kim 111). After Edwards saves Caesar and Clara from being separated by Jeffries' selling Caesar to cover his debts, Caesar's actions are increasingly motivated by his filial respect for Edwards. As Kim explains, Caesar "is made to face a series of increasingly vexing loyal tests" (122). Without persuasion, Caesar's loyalty to his fellow slaves immediately falters after Edwards calls him "my good friend" and provides him and Clara with provision-ground and promises to never give them reason to fear losing what they earn (Edgeworth 425). The first day Caesar works on Edwards' plantation, he wishes for it to be over as soon as possible so he can "have an interview with Hector[, one of Jeffries' slaves that is planning a slave revolt,] that he might communicate his new sentiments and dissuade him from [his] schemes of destruction" (427). Caesar is continually pulled in opposite directions "between love for his friend and gratitude to his master" (428), but ultimately chooses his master over Hector, his slave companions, and his wife, Clara (438; Kim 122). Caesar's undying gratitude to Mr. Edwards "make it impossible for Caesar to regard his master as an oppressor" (Boulukos 14) and positions Edwards in a paternalistic role. This hierarchy, however, concludes with little violence for anyone other than Durant, who "was the principal object of the [slave's] vengeance [and] die[s] in tortures" (Edgeworth 441). Edwards ultimately pardons Hector for his part in the slave revolt since, as Kim acknowledges, "in Edgeworth's colonial paradigm, all good things proceed from the good colonial father" (125). Edgeworth's depiction of Edwards' humane treatment of Caesar, Clara, and his other slaves reveals her belief that "slaves can develop attachments to their masters that will lead them to accept slavery" (Boulukos 19). This paternalistic paradigm found in Edgeworth's portrayals of slave and slaveholder relationship,

however, is undermined by its innate dependence on violence and, therefore, is not as desirable as a regular wage labour system (Boulukos 23; Kim 125). “The Grateful Negro” diminishes the violence during slave rebellions and exposes Edgeworth’s problematic position that “slaves, without being freed, can nonetheless become like wage laborers through kind treatment” (Boulukos 16).

Although Edgeworth attempts to alleviate cultural anxieties about slavery by aligning its minute similarities to wage labour, her strategic depictions of Caesar and, more importantly, Clara throughout the narrative reveal her sentimental attitudes toward slavery and black slave women in particular. Boulukos points out that, unlike Bryan Edwards’s original texts, Edgeworth, “through Caesar, gives flesh to her claims of Africans’ humanity” (19). But Edgeworth is also “frank in admitting the deficiencies in the character of the creole” (Sypher 506). Edgeworth’s narrator uses stereotypes to describe Clara and Caesar, explaining that “[she] was an Eboe, [he] a Koromantyn negro ;[sic] the Eboes are soft, languishing and timid ; the Koromantyns are frank, fearless, martial, and heroic” (Edgeworth 425). Edgeworth reinforces these oppositional categories of Koromantyn and Eboe negroes by continually describing Clara as weeping, begging, and helpless, while Caesar is depicted as sensible, gratuitous, and industrious.<sup>21</sup> From the beginning of the narrative, Caesar is represented as “the best negro in Mr. Jefferies’ possession” (421) and does nothing to disrupt this image while enslaved by Mr. Edwards. Unlike Caesar, Clara is introduced as “[a] young and beautiful female negro,” but she is also shown “kne[eling] at the feet of Durant” (421). Clara is found in similar classic sentimental positions throughout the narrative, begging for Caesar’s freedom (421) and

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<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, the text does not address that Koromantyn women would, then, act in opposition to the sexual stereotypes reinforced by the contrasting descriptions of Eboes and Koromantyns.

being “transient” with her emotions so that Caesar can easily “perceive[] an extraordinary change in [her] countenance and manner” (Edgeworth 430-1). Edgeworth’s persistent sentimental representations of Clara finally place her in a vulnerable position in order to influence Caesar’s loyalty for Hector and the slave rebellion: “Esther, an old Koromantyn negress, [who has] ... a high reputation amongst her countrymen” (430) uses her “supernatural powers” (430) to place Clara “into a trance by a preparation of deadly nightshade” (437). Edgeworth, however, is consistent in her depictions of Caesar as she portrays him agreeing to have his knife “be dipped in [the] magic poison” (438) and join the rebellion. Caesar only agrees, however, to trick Esther so he can escape to warn Mr. Edwards of the slave rebellion even while Clara remains incapacitated by Esther (430-40).

Edgeworth’s narrative perpetuates multiple sentimental traditions, such as refraining from representing violence in “The Grateful Negro,” focusing on a male hero, and depicting the main female character as helpless. But, even though she remains powerless throughout the second half of the narrative while disabled by Esther’s “deadly nightshade” (Edgeworth 437), Clara, similar to Imoinda, is not silenced. Initially, Clara is shown weeping at Durant’s feet, fully displaying the ‘languishing’ Eboe quality described early in the narrative. Clara, however, almost immediately acts out against the stereotypical ‘soft’ Eboe quality when she indignantly refuses to have Durant find her another husband after Caesar is sold, exclaiming ““Never! never!”” (421). Throughout the narrative, Clara has no direct influence on or part in the slave rebellion and is thought of only as a pawn by Hector to influence Caesar’s part in the rebellion. Hector asks Esther “to work upon [Caesar’s] mind by means of Clara” (435), and Clara falls into this role



when she speaks her thoughts to Caesar after he recognizes her despondency prior to the intended rebellion. Edgeworth depicts Clara as she “reluctantly reveal[s] to [Caesar] that secret of which she could not think without horror” (431). Although it is noted that Clara’s stereotypical Eboe timidity does not help her to keep anything hidden from Caesar and, by speaking out to Caesar, she is playing directly into Hector’s plot to influence him, she undermines this stereotype and asks Caesar to rethink his decision to not cooperate with Esther, Hector, and the rebellion (431). Although Clara does not realize that asking Caesar to “save [his] life, while yet it is in [his] power” (431) is what Hector expects from her, she moves beyond this passive, pawn position when she speaks out against Esther. Clara calls her “cruel” (432) and questions why she must “command [Clara and Caesar] to destroy such a generous master[, Edwards]” (432). Clara remains in a passive, incapacitated position for the remainder of the tale, but she is under the influence of a powerful female character – Esther. Esther commands Clara to take action upon Caesar’s judgments and is present throughout the narrative in a feared, but respected position amongst the slaves and slaveholders alike.

Clara and Esther, like Imoinda and Yarico, may initially appear to be minor black female characters in their respective narratives, but – upon closer inspection – their strategic ability to undermine, even partially, the stereotypical subordinate position of many black female characters through the eighteenth century foregrounds their presence rather than their silence. Various texts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that focus on major and minor heroines were written by males, but Felicity Nussbaum claims that the “seemingly insurmountable difficulty in analyzing women and race in eighteenth-century England is the scant testimony from the women themselves” (156). Nussbaum’s

assertions on the silence of female writers, especially black and mixed race female writers, coincide with the findings of critics like Dominique, Ramabai Espinet, and Evelyn O'Callaghan. Espinet concludes "that the characters who have become known to us and who have provided us with explorations of the lives lived as Indians in the West Indian context are almost all male" (116).

In the remainder of this survey, I plan to move beyond what O'Callaghan calls "limited reading[s] of what 'they' said about 'us'" (14) and consider various characters presented in texts written by women between 1787 and 1808. To use O'Callaghan's words, focusing on woman-authored texts allows me to participate in "recuperating lost and silenced voices and analyz[e] the role of these voices in the construction of West Indies from a woman-authored perspective" (14). The texts I have chosen, including those investigated above by Behn, Edgeworth, and Thelwall, range from representations of silenced, enslaved female figures to depictions of strong-willed, outspoken women. The unstable oppositional categories prescribed by Coleman in the representations of skin whitening are revealed in these texts through mixed race relationships, anti-slavery uprisings, and the moral actions of black and mixed race characters. Although not all of these narratives are directly preoccupied with depicting women in an authoritative, anti-slavery position, the positions of these Creole and West-Indian men and women echo Behn's Imoinda, Edgeworth's Clara, and Thelwall's Yarico and the emergence of similar black female heroines.

Various texts written in the late eighteenth century and at the turn of the century depict black female characters in minor narrative roles where they are traditionally silenced and viewed as subordinate in comparison to the narrative's male counterpart.

The anonymously-written *Babay. A True Story of a Good Negro Woman* (1795) focuses on the titular character, Babay – a negro woman – who adopts a sick orphan boy and nurses him back to health (*Babay* 3).<sup>22</sup> Although the text is introduced as one focusing on the story of a negro woman, the boy is almost immediately recognized as the son of the deceased Regiment’s Lieutenant, and the narrative becomes focused on the actions of the boy as he becomes a man (3). In return for Babay’s care, when the boy becomes successful, he “purchase[s] her freedom” (3) and “[then] took her home to his house, and as long as she lived afterwards . . . treat[s] her with the most respectful kindness” (4). When Babay dies, the boy “[gives] her a very expensive burial, and ha[s] a funeral sermon preached over her” (4). The narrator concludes this is “proof that noble and great actions are not, as many think, confined to advantages of birth and education” (5). Babay is acknowledged for her role as a mammy-nurse figure in the beginning of the narrative and becomes a loyal subaltern after the boy takes her in. The narrative, however, focuses almost exclusively on the noble and great actions of the boy rather than Babay’s, placing her second to the white male character in a text devoted to her actions. Although this anonymously-written text focuses on the morality and religious behaviour of an African woman, Babay is silenced by the narrative voice and is not given a voice to tell her own story.

Similarly, in Helena Whitford’s *Constantia Neville; or, The West Indian* (1800), “an Afric-Creolian” (Dominique 46) character named Felicia Carleton is overshadowed by the heroine in the novel, Constantia Neville, who “is embarrassed to find herself in

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<sup>22</sup> Felsenstein recognizes Richard Ligon as the main source for the Yarico figure in *Incle and Yarico* and her depiction as “an *Indian* woman, a slave in the house’ who . . . had saved an unnamed English youth from being intercepted and killed by the savages” (13, emphasis in original). The similarities between the origin of Yarico and Babay are striking and widespread throughout the eighteenth century.

[the company of mulattoes]” (Sypher 515). Neville’s insistence throughout the narrative on the proper oppositional social structures in the West Indies and how England should adopt this system is reinforced by Whitford as she “reassures her reader that her heroine is the recipient of a fine education despite her colonial upbringing because Mrs. Neville took pains ‘to keep Constantia away from the negroes’ and employed a white woman in the nursery” (Campbell 82).

Charlotte Smith’s *Letters of Solitary Wanderer* (1800) fails to even give a mixed race woman a defined role in her lengthy epistolary narrative. Smith’s text is in three volumes, focusing on the similarities between her “heroines – Edouarda, Henrietta, and Corisande” (Wordsworth n.pag.). Although Jonathan Wordsworth asserts that the text “deserves more attention than it has gotten” (n.pag.), Dominique argues that the narrative marginalizes “three unnamed young women of color (who are Henrietta’s ‘sisters by half blood’)” (Dominique 45). Leaving the three coloured women unnamed raises questions of identification and authentication. Alienating these coloured women by leaving them nameless undermines their already minute role in the narrative. Nevertheless, these black and mixed race women have a presence in the texts, however slight, which can be viewed as a rare occurrence until women writers became more widely published throughout the nineteenth century.

Multiple female writers during the late eighteenth century chose to focus their narratives on male characters, but a trend arises in some of these texts as they emphasize and analyze topics symptomatic of the impending abolition of slavery. Even though some female authors did not revolve their narratives around powerful black heroines, these authors did call into question issues such as the treatment of slaves, the ethics of slavery,

and even mixed race relationships. In Elizabeth Sophia Tomlins' "The Slave" (1787), the main slave character, Quashi, is described as a "loyal [slave] to his cruel master, Alvaro" (Basker "Elizabeth" 350). Tomlins' speaker recounts how Alvaro held

one Slave above the rest

He long had smil'd on, and had lov'd the best;

In youth, in childhood, he [Quashi] had known,

And from his infant hours had call'd his own. (Tomlins 350, lines 5-8)

As the protagonist of the narrative, Quashi is in an influential position, but his special treatment ends once he attempts to escape from slavery: when Alvaro attempts to retrieve Quashi from the forest, Quashi overpowers him. It is at this moment that "Quashi confesses his long-concealed love for Alvaro's sister" (Basker "Elizabeth" 350) and "[i]n *his own gen'rous breast* he plung'd the steel [knife]" (Tomlins 352, line 82, emphasis in original). Quashi's actions during his "confrontation with [his] owner who has been accommodat[ing] for decades illuminates daily atrocities, profiteering, sabotage, and double-edged conciliatory behavior" (Ferguson 242). Representing Quashi as the authority in this situation, Tomlins' poem also "romantically sanctifies its hero as an active martyr-rebel who undermines the principle of ownership by destroying Alvaro's property" (242). Although Tomlins' speaker dwells momentarily on the mixed race relationship and Quashi's powerful rebellion, both of which destabilize the oppositional categories of 'black' and 'white,' her primary focus becomes apparent in the closing lines of the poem, which read:

Blush, Europe, blush! And, prostrate at his grave,

Go learn that Conquest which adorns the brave.

To Quashi's mem'ry tears of Pity shed,  
A Slave when living, but a Hero dead! (85-8)

Tomlins' speaker shames the actions of a continent, revealing her overt opposition to slavery.

Similarly, Mary Birkett uses her poetry as a mode to convey her anti-slavery position. In "A Poem on the African Slave Trade. Addressed to Her Own Sex" (1792), Birkett includes a call-to-action for all European women. She states that

If in benev'lence *firm*, we this can dare,  
And in our brethrens suffering hold no share,  
In no small part their long-borne pangs will cease,  
And we to souls unborn may whisper peace. (444, lines 79-82, emphasis in original)

In these four lines, Birkett "urges consumer resistance to slave-produced goods" (Basker "Mary" 442), while simultaneously undermining the already unstable binary of 'black' and 'white' by aligning herself with the Africans and referring to them as her 'brethren'. These progressive representations foreground the narrative focus as it changes from silenced, barely present black female characters to active male characters and abolitionist female authors.

Black and mixed race women are depicted as major heroines in numerous texts in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Mary Robinson's "The Negro Girl" (1800) focuses exclusively on the major black heroine Zelma and her sufferings as a black woman. She laments how Nature has "let the suff'ring Negro's breast / Bow to his fellow, MAN, in brighter colours drest" (Robinson 304, lines 41-2, emphasis in original).

Robinson's speaker is adamant that "[w]hate'er their TINTS may be, their SOULS are still the same!" (304, emphasis in original), undermining the oppositional categories, and assuming an influential position in the narrative. Similarly, the anonymously produced play "Drama No. 9" (1808) focuses on "a negro slave Zulima" ("Drama" 124) and her influential actions within the Delville family.<sup>23</sup> Zulima saves an orphan Charlotte, bringing her into Mr. Delville's home where he expresses interest in the young girl, even though she wishes to marry Henry Warrington. According to an auditor's review of the play's production, "Zulima the negro slave is confined in prison, from which however, she is discharged by the slave-driver, in time to interest her to prevent a match between Mr. Delville and Charlotte" (124). Zulima also acts as a witness to the Warrington family's misunderstandings that Charlotte is "the daughter of Mrs. Warrington, and consequently ... married her brother" (124). Although the play was never published, the reviewer's "confused and imperfect outline of the most prominent features of the plot" (124) foregrounds Zulima's influential major black heroine position within the play and on the audience. Both Zelma and Zulima are represented as authoritative figures within each narrative: Zelma, however, is given her own narrative voice through Robinson's poem and, importantly, the authorial voice behind the narrative is female. Zulima's story is told from an alternate narrative point of view and she is given few lines of her own, especially while enslaved, but her actions speak louder than her words.

Imoinda, Yarico, Clara, Zulima, Zelma, and the numerous other minor and major black heroines depicted in narratives throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early

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<sup>23</sup> This play, "Drama No. 9" is listed in Lyndon Dominique's chronology as an anonymously-written play entitled "The African" (1808). A copy of the actual play cannot be found and Dominique's inclusion of "Drama No. 9" in his list is based on an 1808 spectator review. Therefore, I also only refer to this play through the review I have cited.

nineteenth centuries foreshadow the independent heroines that follow throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Olivia in *The Woman of Colour* and Amri in *Obi; or, The History of Three-Fingered Jack* are two female heroines in narratives that follow shortly after Zulima's and Zelma's. Although these early nineteenth century texts were published almost consecutively with the narratives investigated in this chapter, I will argue in the following chapters that the representations of Olivia and Amri attempt to move beyond the silenced, enslaved, minor representations of black and mixed race women in previously published texts.



### Chapter 3:

#### **A Woman of Many Colours: Double Consciousness & Mimicry in *The Woman of Colour: A Tale***

Racial and gender stereotypes are exceptionally evident in *The Woman of Colour*. Although the presence of these stereotypes should have produced problematic questionings of the text, there is a limited amount of published research on any aspect of this anonymously-authored epistolary narrative. Lyndon J. Dominique, whose valuable editorial work in recovering *The Woman of Colour* has led to its recent literary recuperation, believes that this “critically neglected” (Salih 448) and “rare black woman’s narrative deserves to be seen, not only because it is the first long prose fiction in British literature to prominently feature a racially-conscious mulatto heroine, but also because, conceivably, a woman of color could have written it” (Dominique 18).<sup>24</sup> Olivia Fairfield, the main character and the narrative voice in the letters that comprise the tale, is classified as ‘other’ in the white colonial English community depicted in the novel. Olivia, a Creole heiress born in Jamaica, narrates her journey to London to her governess Mrs. Milbanke in the personal letters that comprise *The Woman of Colour*. Dominique believes Olivia’s tale “provides a missing link in the narrative history of black heroines from [Aphra Behn’s] Imoinda to [Claire de Duras’s] Ourika” (18). He also explains that *The Woman of Colour* “allows us to gain some insight into the race and gender politics of the time as black women might have experienced them” (18).

In opposition to Dominique’s claims, however, the author’s representations of Olivia in the narrative make it evident that “Olivia is no heroine” (*The Woman* 61). I

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<sup>24</sup> Although Dominique speculates that a woman of color possibly could have written *The Woman of Colour*, there is no evidence given to support this claim and no investigation into a specific female or male author has been conducted.

argue that Olivia is eventually aligned with the white colonial society in the novel, registering a distinct shift in the narrative after she marries her white English cousin, Augustus Merton. Before the marriage Olivia disrupts the racial binaries in the dominantly white community by using her influence as a Creole woman to undermine racial assumptions of Africans being “wild and uncivilized” (*The Woman* 54) and possessing “dormant” minds (55). Yet, once the marriage ends, Olivia fails to upset these same racial stereotypes, destabilizing and compromising the autonomy and freedom that Dominique finds in the author’s portrayal of Olivia at the end of the narrative. Dominique believes that the anonymously-written narrative allows for the white colonial subjects in the novel to recognize that Olivia is not as different as they have assumed. In contrast, Helena Holgersson-Shorter asserts the trope of a black female’s tragedy, like Olivia’s, “is a perpetual displacement meant to reflect the inherent separateness and inequality of black and white” (1). The author’s attempt to use Olivia to champion racial equality, however, fails after Olivia marries Augustus and she is represented as aligned with the white colonial women in the novel, portraying her as an “unintentionally ironic figure who signifies the opposite of what she is meant to” (Holgersson-Shorter 1). Similar to Holgersson-Shorter, I argue that Olivia’s double consciousness,<sup>25</sup> mimicry,<sup>26</sup> and perpetuation of gender hierarchies conflict with her disputes against racial stereotypes in the narrative’s white colonial society, and cause the narrative to submit to a traditional, stereotypical ending for a black colonial woman.

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<sup>25</sup> As described in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, pp. 1, to represent the doubled national identification of black and/or mixed race immigrants.

<sup>26</sup> As described in “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” from *The Location of Culture*, pp. 2, to explain the strategic use of mimicry to question the authority of the colonizing subject’s identity.

### ***The Black Atlantic, “Of Mimicry and Man,” and the olive Olivia***

Paul Gilroy describes how, given that “racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that [European and black] identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination” (1). Olivia Fairfield automatically occupies the in-between space Gilroy defines through her ‘in-between’ appearance, since the anonymous author describes Olivia’s skin tone as “jet [that] has been faded to ... olive” (*The Woman* 53). Olivia does not initially align her racial, national, or ethnic identity with the colonial citizens in England but she is also in a position different from a West Indian slave because of her father’s will. Gilroy’s description of the “doubleness and cultural intermixture that distinguish[es] the experience of black Britons in contemporary Europe” (4) explains the shift in the author’s representation of Olivia from mimicking to identifying with white colonial women after she marries Augustus Merton. Homi K. Bhabha explains that “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (par. 2, emphasis in original)<sup>27</sup>. After Olivia’s marriage, she is described as “half” (*The Woman* 111), differentiating between the parts of her mind that echo her Jamaican roots while

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<sup>27</sup> Similar to Bhabha and described in Alan Richardson’s and Sonia Hofkosh’s introduction to *Romanticism, Race, and Imperial Culture 1780-1834* is John Barrell’s work on the ‘hybrid’ character. They too view this attempted amalgamation as “a relation of mutual interdependence ‘at best,’ which ‘can no longer be thought of in terms of a safe transaction between a self and an other’” (6). Olivia, here, is in this uneasy place where her position as colonizer and colonized is simultaneously being questioned and confirmed due to the instructions in her father’s will.

simultaneously referring to her present status as a wife in a white colonializing community. Olivia is required by her father's will to mimic the white colonial women's position by marrying a white colonial man. Ideally, one would expect the author's representations of Olivia's mimicry and double consciousness to work to upset the "mutually exclusive attributes" of "blackness and Englishness" (Gilroy 10) and "radically revalue the normative knowledges of the priority of race ... [to] rearticulate presence in terms of its 'otherness', that which it disavows" (Bhabha par. 14). However, the author's use of mimicry undermines Olivia's double consciousness after her marriage to Augustus. The author's attempt to represent Olivia's struggle for a space within the colonial community in the novel is undermined by Olivia's shift away from challenging racial stereotypes and her focus switching, instead, to her role as Augustus's wife. The first half of the novel, before Olivia and Augustus begin a relationship or are married, portrays Olivia as "championing racial equality," as Dominique contends (31). Yet, these efforts conflict with the author's use of gendered hierarchical language throughout the narrative and the representations of Olivia abandoning her attempt to challenge racial assumptions during her relationship with Augustus in the second half of the novel.

Olivia is initially represented in the narrative as the obedient daughter of her "departed father" (*The Woman* 53). Olivia describes in her first letter to Mrs. Milbanke that, as the "illegitimate offspring" of her father, she "could never be considered in the light of equality by the English planters" (53). The disparity of the white colonial subject and the black slave subject is acknowledged in this reference, even though Olivia does not fit within either category. Frank Felsenstein describes how, similar to Yarico in Richard Steele's version of *Inkle and Yarico*, "the cultural inferiority ascribed to the

native is supplanted by an intrinsic nobility” (Felsenstein 7). In *The Woman of Colour*, Olivia is socially hindered by her olive skin tone upon her arrival in England, but “[u]nlike many illegitimate offspring, ... [she] carries her father’s surname and a ‘nearly sixty thousand pound’ ... dowry, money presumably raised from the profits of Mr. Fairfield’s Jamaican estate” (Dominique 26). She understands that her dower will “become the property of [her] cousin Augustus Merton on his becoming [her] husband, and taking the name of Fairfield, within one month after [her] arrival in England” (*The Woman* 60). This dowry allows Olivia to partially overcome her ‘cultural inferiority’ and, due to her father’s name and legacy, her noble position is eventually acknowledged in England. Although Olivia occupies a position between colonial English subjects and West Indian slaves, she is undoubtedly under the power of the patriarchal, colonialist will left by her father. This will acts to elevate Olivia in her in-between position but she is still “not ashamed to acknowledge [her] affinity with the swarthiest negro that was ever brought from Guinea’s coast” (53) and understands “it is culture not capacity, which the negro wants” (55). The author represents Olivia as understanding the racial assumptions and stereotypes white colonial subjects have of black colonial subjects, even those of mixed-race. Olivia worries that her “*person* may disgust [Augustus Merton]” and “the man whom [she has] sworn to receive as [her] husband” will look at her with “abhorrence” (58, emphasis added). At the same time, the author represents Olivia with gendered hierarchical language, noting that Olivia is “not without [her] sex’s vanity” (67). The author’s recognition of stereotypical female gender aspects, such as vanity, begins when Olivia acknowledges how “[t]he eyes of Honeywood[, a fellow traveler from Jamaica to London,] sought [Olivia’s], for a moment, with an expression which [she

could not] define” (*The Woman* 63). Olivia’s inability to read Honeywood’s look foreshadows the gaze of colonial subjects that Olivia will attempt to understand and alter once she reaches England.<sup>28</sup>

Olivia and the Honeywoods are stuck in an in-between space while they are voyaging from Jamaica to England on a ship, or, as Gilroy describes it, “a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion” (4). It is while they occupy this “mobile [element] that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected” (16) that the Honeywoods, both white colonial subjects who join Olivia on board the boat, look beyond the colour of Olivia’s skin and acknowledge the strong characteristics the author instills in her. Along with Mrs. Milbanke, Olivia’s English governess to whom she addresses her letters, the Honeywoods are the first white colonial characters we know of in the novel who accept Olivia despite racial differences. Mrs. Honeywood recognizes that Olivia’s father knew “the strength of [Olivia’s] mind; he knew that it could bear itself up in circumstances which would overwhelm half the female world” (*The Woman* 59). Even Mrs. Honeywood’s son proclaims that Olivia “will shame [their] English ladies – or rather, [she is] going where [her] virtues will not be known or appreciated” (65). However, Olivia still anticipates the racial stereotypes and assumptions she will encounter when she describes how she is “journeying towards a land of strangers, who [will] despise and insult [her]” (61) and describes “the hopes and the fears of [her] beating heart” (67) only days before she lands in England.

### **The Body, Legitimacy, and Authority**

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<sup>28</sup> Although it is not the topic of my thesis, I believe it is important to acknowledge the male gaze in *The Woman of Colour*. On multiple occasions Olivia draws attention to the fact that Augustus “seemed to have been examining [her] with scrutinizing attention” (*The Woman* 72) and how “many a gentleman follows to repossess [her]” (83). Interestingly, Olivia takes note of the male gaze throughout her letters, diminishing its influence on her actions even if she fails to understand or interpret the gaze.

When Olivia and the Honeywoods arrive in England Olivia's body, as opposed to her mind or character, becomes the main focus of the British white colonialist subjects whom the narrative presents. Initially her body's racial markers cause her to be categorized within traditional colonialist definitions of mixed-race Britons, which associate her with the status of black slaves even though she identifies as West Indian. During "[t]he late-eighteenth-century ... [the] British public's fascination with complexion [could] be seen as symptomatic of the period's preoccupation with a new identity and status for Afro-Britons" (Coleman 169). In this historical context, depicting Olivia as olive-skinned works as a strategy and "[t]he author deliberately uses the tool of racial muting to make Olivia more appealing and less threatening to white Britons. Her complexion is as 'olive' ... as her name implies, a clear attempt to mute the stigmas surrounding her blackness by equating her color with Mediterranean whites" (Dominique 30). When Olivia first meets Augustus and his family, she notes "[her] uncle seemed to have no prejudices" (*The Woman* 72). In opposition to her uncle, however, is Mrs. Merton's reaction to Olivia joining the Mertons for dinner shortly after her arrival in Clifton. Mrs. Merton orders "a large plate of boiled rice ... [to be placed on] the part of the table where [Olivia] sat" (77) and states, "'Oh, I thought that Miss Fairfield – I understood that people of your – I thought that you almost *lived* upon rice'" (77). The author represents Mrs. Merton as articulating the racial assumptions white colonial subjects have of all black colonial subjects. Olivia, however, understands that "this was evidently meant to mortify [her] ... blending *her* with the poor negro slaves of the West Indies! It was meant to show her, that, in Mrs. Merton's idea, there was no distinction between [Olivia and negro slaves]" (77, emphasis in original).

Olivia reacts to Mrs. Merton's racially charged comment by replying that "[she] eats just as [Mrs. Merton does]" (*The Woman* 77). In this assertion, Olivia "actively performs both her own and slaves' combined desire for better treatment from whites with the loaded gesture of 'taking a piece of baked bread in [her] hand,'" as Dominique observes (29). Olivia's actions "connect her own appetite for equitable treatment as a victimized woman in England with that of Negro slaves in the colonies" (29). Similarly, Mrs. Merton attempts to use Olivia's origins as a reason for her prejudices, explaining that "[b]orn, as [Olivia was], in the West Indies, [her] father a planter, [Mrs. Merton] should have imagined that [Olivia] would have entertained quite the contrary side of the question [of slavery]" (*The Woman* 81). Olivia responds to this by explaining to Mrs. Merton that she does not condone slavery, even though her father was a slaveholder, and states that Mrs. Merton "did *not know* [her] father" (81, emphasis in original). The author allows Olivia to "fully inhabit the structures of exclusion, and the narrative questing reveals how the very foundations of these symbolic structures of legitimacy and authority may be shaken by the mixed-race subject's strategic deployment of her own illegitimacy" (Holgersson-Shorter xix). However, at this point in the narrative the author alters how Olivia interacts with the European citizens.

Significantly, the author creates a scene of acceptance immediately after Mrs. Merton tries to define Olivia within the racial stereotypes she holds of black and mixed-race colonial subjects by attempting to stage a scene of rejection. Olivia's actions reflect an attempt to interrogate and undermine this assumptive and hegemonic view. Before this point in the novel, Augustus confesses in his letter to Lionel Monkland "that the moment when my eyes were first cast on the person of my cousin, I started back with a



momentary feeling nearly allied to disgust; for I beheld a skin approaching to the hue of a negro's, in the woman whom my father introduced to me as my intended wife" (*The Woman* 102). In the moments after Olivia challenges Mrs. Merton's attempt to offend her at dinner, however, Olivia notices that "[t]he lady looked rather awkward ... while Augustus offered [her] the butter" (78). Olivia discerns "that at *this* moment [Augustus's] countenance expressed approbation of ... Olivia" (78). Augustus also provides evidence of Olivia's shifting position in the colonial society when he admits in his letter to Monkland that "[a] very few hours served to convince [him], that whatever might have been the transient impression made by the *colour* of Olivia, her mind and form were cast in no common mould" (102). In spite of her racial difference Olivia is accepted by most of the white colonial subjects who surround her at this point in the narrative, confirming the function of the author's use of racial muting and Olivia's ability to override racial stereotypes.

Immediately after Augustus's gesture of inclusion to Olivia, Mrs. Merton's son George interrupts the after-dinner gathering and explains that a black woman, "one much, *much* dirtier [than Olivia]," (*The Woman* 78) had kissed him. The child equates filth with Dido's black skin colour, which confirms the racial assumptions many of the white colonialist European characters hold. However, "Olivia uses her own body to teach Letitia's son ... to rethink the prejudice he expresses towards Dido" (Dominique 30-1). George recognizes the differences between Olivia and Dido, noting that "[Olivia's] lips are red, and ... [her] face is not so very, *very* dirty" (*The Woman* 78). Using her body as a tool to undermine the prejudices of the white colonial subjects, Olivia "*prove[s]* the truth" (79) to George that the pigment of Olivia and Dido's skin is not dirt by allowing the child

to attempt to rub off the blackness of her skin (*The Woman* 79). The author strategically places Olivia's racialized body at the center of her argument in order to undermine the power of racial stereotypes. It is evident that Olivia, here, "is clearly championing racial equality for *all* people of African descent, not just the appealing light-skinned ones" (Dominique 31). The author's strategic alignment of Olivia with Dido shows Olivia "speaking in pursuit of freedom, citizenship, and social and political autonomy" (Gilroy 2). At the same time, placing Olivia and Dido together in order to undermine racial assumptions juxtaposes the two characters and reveals the obvious differences between them in the narrative.

### **Dido, Marriage, and Mimicry**

Along with Olivia, Dido is also actively involved in questioning slavery and the racial assumptions and stereotypes in the first half of the novel. Dido critiques the treatment of black colonial subjects and slaves by interjecting her counter arguments on multiple occasions and advocating for a transformation in these problematic relationships. Dido explains to Olivia in her Creole dialect

although [in England, Dido] be 'blacky,' and 'wowsky,' and 'squabby,' and 'guashy' and all because she has a skin not *quite* so white, – God Almighty help them all – me don't mind that though, do we, my dear Misse? But Mrs. Merton's maid treats me, as if me was her slave (*The Woman* 99-100)

Although the author constructs Dido as a faithful, proud character – even describing her as "standing in her place of attendance" (57) – who is tied to her 'Misse' by their history on the plantation owned by Olivia's father, Dido evidently disagrees with forcing black subjects into slavery. It is this "simple objection [that] shows ... [Dido] is as active in

questioning the terms of freedom in England for people of African descent, albeit without the syntactical refinement that comes naturally to the educated Olivia” (Dominique 35). Dido, however, seems to endorse being a slave to certain kinds of masters or mistresses, such as Olivia and Olivia’s father, problematically condoning slavery in certain situations. Dido defends her slave position with Olivia’s family in Jamaica and willingly places herself in a similar position with Olivia and Augustus in London. Her contradictory standpoints assert her ability to differentiate between her loyalty to Olivia and her forced enslavement at the hands of white colonial women like Mrs. Merton’s maid. Although Dido is able to express her disgust for the treatment she receives in England, the author, nevertheless, does not give her the words to tell her own story. Instead, Olivia tells George and the Mertons about Dido’s history. The author chooses to have the mixed-race colonial subject tell the story of the black slave, presenting Olivia as a mediator between white and black colonial subjects. Olivia delivers a short reflection on Dido’s origins, noting that “[s]he was born upon my papa’s estate ... her father and her mother were slaves” (*The Woman* 80). Sharing Dido’s narrative places Olivia in an in-between position since her education and light-coloured skin allows her to directly interact with the white colonial subjects without experiencing the same extreme prejudices they have for black slaves like Dido. This in-between position is especially problematic since, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, West Indian colonial subjects with paler complexions were generally seen, according to Bryan Edwards, as “[s]ituated ... in an insulted and intermediate state between the black and the white, [where they are] despised by the one, and enviously hated by the other” (233).

Although the author does not portray Olivia as ‘enviously hated’ by Dido, who is in an inferior position, Olivia’s in-between position becomes more noticeably problematic when she concentrates on her forthcoming marriage to Augustus. The author shifts Olivia’s focus from the political rights of all black colonial subjects to her own acceptance in the colonial society when, like many free blacks who were advocating during the eighteenth and nineteenth century for political rights, she ends up “ignor[ing] ... the rights of Negro slaves. Thus, caught between the racial categories black and white, people of color also teetered between the categories enslaved yet free, oppressors yet oppressed” (Dominique 27). The in-between position Olivia occupies reveals “the special stress that grows with the effort involved in trying to face (at least) two ways at once” (Gilroy 3). While Olivia focuses her attention on Augustus and her role as his wife in the narrative, Dido is left out of Olivia’s letters. It is not until Augustus’s first wife Angelina re-enters the narrative that Dido regains her critical voice. The author allows Dido to mimic Olivia’s elevated language for a moment when Caroline is explaining that Augustus’s first wife has returned due to Letitia Merton’s plot against Olivia. Dido cries out, “Oh accursed, accursed wretches! ... they that contrived so black a plot! – Oh, my dear Missee, we will go back to teach you and me to forget that we was ever set foot on English land!” Dido’s language then begins to shift back into her regular Creole diction when she remembers how “My poor Missee was happy in our own dear Jamaica” (*The Woman* 141). After having called Augustus her ‘Massee’ since he married Olivia, Dido exclaims that she “*has no master*” while “turning pale from passionate emotion” (141). In Bhabha’s terms, the reversal of racial signifiers reveals Dido’s mimicry of the white colonial subjects and creates a “complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline,

which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (Bhabha par. 2). For a moment, Dido mimics the educated colonial language that Olivia uses, even accusing the white colonial subjects of being the ‘black’ that disgusts them while becoming ‘pale’ herself. Dido’s strategic mimicry, however, loses its subversive potential when she returns to her Creole diction and resorts to begging for Olivia to take her own action against the injustice of Mrs. Merton’s actions (*The Woman* 142). Olivia’s in-between position, along with her similar mimicry in the second half of the novel, problematizes her arguments against racial stereotypes and her alignment with Dido and all black colonial subjects in the first half of the narrative. Dido momentarily re-establishes Olivia’s initial arguments during the second half of the novel while Olivia is preoccupied with her marriage to Augustus, but then returns to her submissive, loyal slave position once Olivia decides to return to Jamaica.

Olivia’s in-between position in English colonial society does not prevent her from being considered a threat to the white colonial women in the narrative. As Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh explain in their introduction to *Romanticism, Race, and Imperial Culture, 1780-1834*, the relationship between the colonizer and colonized is a “two-way exchange” that is marked by “mutual vulnerability” of both parties (6). When Olivia’s focus in her letters moves from the political struggle of all black colonial subjects to her own acceptance in the colonial community during her courtship with Augustus, Olivia begins to undermine her own political standpoint and assumes a vulnerable position in the narrative. The author’s portrayal of Olivia as desiring to marry Augustus Merton, even though he holds a “likeness to [Olivia’s] dear father” (*The Woman* 73), initially works as a strategy that combats racial stereotypes that were

prevalent in the period. The author's placement of Olivia in this position directly addresses the racial assumptions exemplified by J.B. Moreton in his late eighteenth-century writings on West Indian Customs and Manners that "Mongrel women, though the daughters of rich men, and though possessed of slaves and estates they never think of marriage" (Moreton 249). As Moreton indicates, it was also considered "an undeniable stain in the character of a white man to enter into matrimonial bondage with [a Mongrel]; [the man] would be despised in the community, and excluded from all society on that account" (250). When Olivia approaches Augustus she explains that she "ventured beyond the limits usually prescribed to [her] sex" (*The Woman* 91). Through this statement the author makes it clear that Olivia desires to marry Augustus, which deviates from the conventional non-mixed race marriage trope in early nineteenth century literature. This deviation also underscores and accentuates Olivia's divergence from racist assumptions and allows the author to challenge the expectations of a black female during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century by exemplifying Olivia's desire for marriage and Augustus's acceptance in society after their marriage.

However, the author's representation of Olivia as acknowledging and acting against racial stereotypes during this time conflicts with the gender hierarchies that become more prevalent as Olivia and Augustus's relationship progresses. Olivia claims that "[s]ervitude, slavery, in its *worst* form, would be preferable ... to finding [her]self the wife of a man by whom [she] was not beloved!" (*The Woman* 89). This casual statement about marriage as slavery conflicts with the author's position against racial stereotypes and undermines Olivia's arguments against racial assumptions in the narrative. After the marriage, Olivia acknowledges that "my uncle's family are then the disposers to my

future fate; and, though, they can never teach my heart to forego its nature, or my mind its principles, yet in all irrelevant points, and in all local opinions, I must yield myself to their guidance” (*The Woman* 66). It is at this pivotal point in the novel that the author begins to reveal the colonial double consciousness as symptomatic of Olivia’s in-between position as a married colonial woman in the narrative’s English society.

After Olivia and Augustus are married there is a distinct shift in the author’s representations of not only Olivia’s interactions with her husband, but also her interactions with the white colonial women. Olivia is not accepted fully by the white colonial women, but is aligned with them when her body becomes subjected to a multitude of exterior definitions that attempt to solidify her racial and national identity after her marriage. When Miss Danby meets Olivia, she explains “[Olivia] is not near so *dark* as [she] expected to find her, and for one of *that* sort of people, she is really very well looking” (117). Miss Danby’s expectations for Olivia’s body reinforce the racial stereotypes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and present the black female body “in direct contrast to the idealized white female body” (Sutherland 67). Her response also highlights the shift in Olivia’s interactions with the white colonial women she interacts with since, in the passage cited, Lady Ingot has just finished commenting that Olivia “speak[s] like a *perfect* English woman” (*The Woman* 111). Where Olivia once was ‘Other’ because of her skin colour, she has now been aligned with the ideal white English woman. Olivia accepts Lady Ingot’s compliment and explains that she “consider[s] [herself] as more than *half* an English woman, and [that] is has always been [her] ardent wish to prove [herself] worthy of the *title!*” (111, emphasis in original).

This representation of Olivia's own 'wish' to show the English, or white, side of herself exemplifies her mimicry of English women. Her willingness to be aligned with English women during "a colonial encounter between the white presence and its black semblance ... [raises] the question of the ambivalence of mimicry as a problematic of colonial subjection" (Bhabha par. 13). Olivia's mimicry and the author's representation of her in an in-between space have come to be manifested in her mind and to be portrayed as double consciousness, as defined by Gilroy. The author continually represents Olivia as 'half' throughout the first half of the novel, confirming the "doubleness and cultural intermixture" (Gilroy 4) of her consciousness. However, the 'halves' of Olivia exaggerate the "slippage [and] difference" (Bhabha par.2) between Olivia's West Indian origins and her present position in colonial society. Olivia no longer calls the authority of colonial subjects and their racial stereotypes into question. It is at this point in the novel that the author becomes engrossed in conceptualizing Olivia as the ideal white English woman.

### **Double Consciousness**

Olivia's double consciousness is introduced at a pivotal point in the novel since marrying Augustus places her in a position where she could further undermine racial assumptions and stereotypes in England. Placing Olivia's "racialized body within the contexts of the white bourgeois family poses a threat since the black female functions as the love interest of the white male" (Sutherland 81). Olivia confirms this threat by occupying the position of a white European woman and marrying a white colonial male: Augustus. After her marriage, however, Olivia begins to conform to the white colonial racial stereotypes and is no longer championing racial equality. Olivia claims that she has



“nothing left to wish for” (*The Woman* 105) and that she has made herself “quite at home” (105 emphasis in original). After the clear efforts to undermine racial stereotypes in Olivia’s previous letters, the author’s representation of Olivia as content when she has not accomplished her initial task reveals the negative effects of representing Olivia as the wife of an English man and aligning her with the white colonial women. Olivia cannot simultaneously work to deconstruct racial assumptions while she is represented as mimicking those who hold such racial stereotypes. After “Olivia eventually marries and rents a house at New Park, ‘Dido is delighted’ because the new residence re-establishes both her and Olivia’s rank in England ... Both women are socially elevated by this move; they become the top females – wife and housekeeper – in an English upper-middle, merchant-class household” (Dominique 36). Olivia and Dido’s new position in the English society reaffirms Olivia’s double consciousness, since her new home in England echoes the home and societal position she had in Jamaica with her father. The resonance between her English ‘home’ and earlier Jamaican home reveals how Olivia simultaneously identifies as an English woman and a West Indian colonial mistress.

Similarly, Dido develops a parallel double consciousness by fully accepting her domestic, semi-enslaved position in Olivia’s new home while simultaneously maintaining that she is free in their new London home. She asserts that “Dido was never slave but to her dear own Misse, and she was *proud* of that” (*The Woman* 100). Dido, like Olivia, oscillates between being free and enslaved in her previous home in Jamaica and, now, in her new home in London. As Dominique argues, the double consciousness of both characters is symptomatic of their position since they are in-between the “racial categories black and white” and, therefore, viewed as “enslaved yet free” (Dominique

27). It is also at this point that doubt enters Olivia's letters regarding her marriage to Augustus in terms of her double consciousness. Until now, Olivia simultaneously dealt with her forthcoming marriage *and* her goal to champion racial equality. She notes in her letter to Mrs. Milbanke that she "feel[s] like [she is] not half his wife – [she is] the partner of his bed – but not of his heart!" (*The Woman* 120). This statement, along with Olivia's assertion that she "would throw off the weakness of [her] sex" (120) in order to comfort and be closer to Augustus, reveals how the author's representations of Olivia cause her to conform to gender hierarchies in her marriage. The author's continuing reference to Olivia as oscillating between more than and less than 'half' reveals the instability of her identity and foreshadows the disintegration of her marriage to Augustus.

Olivia's marriage to Augustus ends after the reappearance of his first wife Angelina when the scheming of Letitia Merton and Miss Danby is found to be the reason for Angelina's disappearance and assumed death. Dido reacts with the episode of elevated language I discussed earlier while Olivia locks herself inside her house for six weeks (*The Woman* 144). Her self-enforced isolation confirms Olivia's central desire to be the wife of an English man and also establishes the impossibility of Olivia ever occupying this space and claiming it as her own. Olivia writes to Mrs. Milbanke, wishing that her father had realized "[t]he prejudices of society which [*he*] feared for [Olivia in Jamaica since they] ... have here operated against her with tenfold vigour; for it appears to be considered as no crime to plot against the happiness, to ruin the peace and the character of a poor girl of colour" (137). The author attempts to navigate Olivia back into a vulnerable position where she can again work against the racial stereotypes and assumptions of white colonial English subjects. However, Olivia admits

I am not ambitious ... I never was. Retirement always suited my disposition, and the turn of my mind; - *now*, the obscurest nook, the most retired cot, would be my choice, where I might hide my head, and my sufferings together, and ponder over them unmolested. But yet in privacy, I pant for independence! (*The Woman* 144)

Her lack of ambition speaks to how easily Olivia's focus has shifted from destabilizing racial assumptions early in the novel to focusing on her marriage and aligning herself with the white colonial women. Once Olivia's marriage to Augustus ends, her double consciousness and mimicry persist in her plans to return to Jamaica through her attempt to find an autonomous position in the colonial society. Dominique claims that

Olive 'pant[s] for independence' (144) after her marriage ends, and *The Woman of Colour* allows her to achieve it as a self-proclaimed 'widow for life'. In this status, Olivia not only refuses to succumb to the dependence, protection or anonymity of marriage, she also gets to control her destiny, within a marriage market that, under Mr. Fairfield and the Mertons, has already shown itself to be governed by the wills of white Englishmen that are precarious, and flawed, and negligent. (41)

However, the author's use of mimicry and double consciousness undermines Olivia's attempt to disrupt racial stereotypes and assumptions and causes Olivia to be viewed as willingly enslaving herself to Augustus by insisting she is his widow, despite the prospect of independence that Dominique emphasizes.

After Olivia's marriage to Augustus fails, "another Caucasian heir courts Olivia; yet she rejects [Honeywood's] sincere marriage proposal, preferring instead to call

herself a ‘widow’” (Dominique 37). Olivia proclaims to Honeywood that she “now, and to the *last* moment of [her] existence, *shall* consider [her]self the widowed wife of Augustus Merton” (*The Woman* 165). Although a widow may have more independence in a patriarchal society like the one represented in *The Woman of Colour*, the author’s portrayal of Olivia dedicated to a man who has left her does not produce an autonomous space for Olivia in the novel’s colonial society. Instead, it denies Olivia direct ties to a Caucasian husband – Honeywood – and leaves her with an indirect, self-proclaimed tie to her previous Caucasian lover.<sup>29</sup> However, “[t]he fact that Olivia’s text does not end with *marriage* then needs to be offset by the certainty that it does end with *freedom* – from her father’s will, English society, financial constraint, marriage, and motherhood – *freedom to be active*.” (Dominique 39). Olivia’s self-proclaimed tie to Augustus may not prevent her from being free from the variety of elements Dominique lists, and the portrayal of Olivia at the end of the narrative is not of a woman “free to be active.” In the first half of the novel, the author portrays Olivia as continually undermining racial assumptions, even using her own body as evidence to deconstruct these stereotypes. Olivia was ‘free’ to confront the “strangers, who [would] despise and insult [her]” (*The Woman* 61) when she first landed in England. The ending of Olivia’s tale is void of the freedom she initially strived to obtain for black colonial subjects. Instead, Olivia’s ending reaffirms the racial stereotypes she fought against in the first half of the novel.

Dido’s actions after Olivia’s failed marriage, however, reveal her intention to continue Olivia’s initial work to create a space of racial acceptance for black and mixed race women in the London setting of *The Woman of Colour*. Olivia refers to Dido as her

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<sup>29</sup> There is no textual evidence that Olivia and Augustus’s marriage was annulled but, from the circumstantial evidence and the Marriage Act of 1753, I am assuming that their marriage was considered void after Augustus’s first wife returned.

“faithful, yet mistaken girl” (*The Woman* 160) when she realizes that Dido has sought out Honeywood to rekindle his relationship with Olivia. Unlike Olivia, Dido does not give up after Augustus returns to Angelina and, instead, works without Olivia toward Olivia’s initial goal: racial equality. Dido and Olivia reverse roles, as is particularly evident when Honeywood admits that he has “heard [Olivia’s] whole history from [her] faithful Dido” (161). Dido, here, not only regains her voice but also illustrates the power that Olivia has, up to this point, held over her in the novel. As discussed previously, Dido stood silently by while Olivia recounted her brief history to the Mertons while now it is Olivia who has remained almost entirely silent while locked away in her house. Importantly, Olivia is unaware of the implications of marrying Honeywood instead of Augustus: Dido, however, understands how creating a tie with an socially elevated European male who cares for Olivia outside of an obligation to Fairfield’s will could solidify Olivia’s and Dido’s position in London. Unlike Olivia, Dido also remains faithful throughout the novel, whether it is to Olivia, her previous master, or her new home in London. Rather than allow her double consciousness to turn her back to Jamaica, Dido’s double consciousness in this scene of the novel is constructive to her autonomous position in the white colonial society as she simultaneously challenges racial stereotypes and voices her own opinions.

### **Revisiting ‘Home’**

Olivia chooses to “revisit Jamaica” (*The Woman* 188) after her failed marriage and rejected marriage offer in England. Yet, this phrasing problematically implies that Olivia is only a visitor in Jamaica rather than confirming she has an indefinite connection to the space as she has previously argued. Instead, Olivia plans to go back to Jamaica only to

reconsider the problems that she initially came to England to reform. She writes to Mrs. Milbanke that she will return

back to the scenes of my infantine happiness – of my youthful tranquility. I shall again zealously engage myself in ameliorating the situation, in instructing the minds – in mending the morals of our poor blacks ... I shall forget the lapse of time which has occurred since I parted from [Mrs. Milbanke], and shall again be happy! (188)

Olivia echoes her previous statement regarding her lack of ambition when she tells Mrs. Milbanke that she wishes to forget the time she spent in England and, by extension, the progress she made in challenging racial assumptions. Olivia also problematically diminishes the situation currently plaguing her ‘poor blacks’ in Jamaica, leaving out all detail of the slavery that is occurring in the setting of Earle’s *Obi*. Returning to Jamaica and abandoning her place in the colonial society of England conflicts with Olivia’s attempts to create a space for black colonial subjects in the dominantly white colonial society. The author’s attempt to free Olivia from the patriarchal and colonialist burdens – such as her father’s will and her marriage to Augustus – saves Olivia from becoming “[a] married mulatto heiress, whose very complexion and father’s will both contain within them the taint of enslavement” (Dominique 36). Olivia’s position at the end of the novel becomes problematic, however, since Olivia would not have lost her financial stability or her “beloved [and] honoured” (*The Woman* 158) family name in her marriage to Augustus.<sup>30</sup> Taking marriage out of Olivia’s narrative, at least for the black colonial subjects, removes the “uncomfortable image of an interracial marriage” (Dominique 37).

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<sup>30</sup> Olivia’s financial stability is confirmed after her marriage to Augustus is dissolved since her fortune is returned to her through Mr. George Merton’s will (Dominique 170).

Olivia's ending could be read as "the author's refusal to provide a Caribbean woman of color with a white husband who resembles her slave-holding father," which Dominique suggests,

must be read alongside the history of enslavement and liberation within which the text obviously grounds itself ... [allowing] women and blacks [to have] the freedom to empower themselves outside the oppressive institutions of marriage and slavery. (37)

Contrary to Dominique's conclusion, avoiding a representation of an interracial marriage and, therefore, avoiding the attempt to challenge traditional endings of black colonial narratives, does not necessarily provide a representation of Olivia as 'free to be active'. The author fails to disrupt the power paradigms that prevent Olivia from having a legitimate marriage and bearing children with a white colonial man. It is evident that "if boundaries are breached through the representation of interracial relationships, they are firmly re-established in the end ... so that as before, [Olivia] owes her material comforts to the profits of plantation slavery" (Salih 450). Olivia is denied the traditional ending for a white colonial woman, who is typically represented as married with children.<sup>31</sup> Olivia, instead, returns to Jamaica to be with Mrs. Milbanke and to help the black people, while it must be admitted that she has not changed the racial assumptions of many, if any, white colonial subjects. Augustus returns to his previous marriage to Angelina and their son (*The Woman* 179), Letitia Merton and Miss Danby experience no repercussions for their actions against Olivia or Angelina, Honeywood is left wifeless, and Dido remains Olivia's faithful servant. But, most importantly, Olivia is left without a husband or a

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<sup>31</sup> An example of the traditional ending for a white colonial woman is exemplified in novels such as Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876).

place within the English colonial society, despite Dido's attempts to interrupt her final decision.

According to Dominique, the anonymous author of "*The Woman of Colour* plots a transatlantic marriage arranged by the will of an ostensibly benevolent white paternalist that disempowers the dark-skinned colonial woman, subjecting her to what seems to be a life of perpetual, legally-sanctioned, white male domination from the colony to the metropolis" (Dominique 26). However, the anonymous author initially represents Olivia as moving outside of this subjected life of domination by aligning her mixed-race body with the darker coloured slaves in order to rewrite the racial assumptions of white colonial subjects. Nevertheless, Olivia does not ultimately fulfill her goal to create a space in English society for black colonial subjects because, as she follows the will of her deceased father and focuses exclusively on her role as a wife to her cousin Augustus, she increasingly aligns herself with white English colonial women. The author's representations of Olivia after her marriage to Augustus, the pivotal point in the novel, are crowded with scenes of mimicry and double consciousness. The author attempts to use these powerful tools as a strategy to abolish the racial stereotypes that prevent black colonial subjects from having a colonial identity. However, Olivia's double consciousness does not advance her racial arguments because the author gives conflicting representations of Olivia before and after her marriage to Augustus. Once she is married, Olivia increasingly accepts gender hierarchies and mimics white colonial women. She disregards the position of black colonial subjects, undermining her position against racial assumptions in the first half of the novel, and allows the dominance of her role as a wife to counteract her anti-slavery focus. Dominique believes that *The Woman of Colour*



works as “a protest novel that does a skillful job of critiquing British prejudices without alienating British readers” (Dominique 38). I believe, however, that Dido is the true ‘woman of colour’ in this novel, intermittently working against the racial intolerance without mimicking the white colonial women in the narrative. Yet, Dido does not successfully maintain a position in the narrative’s British colonial society either since she accompanies Olivia back to Jamaica. Therefore, the author may succeed in “teach[ing] one *skeptical European* to look with a compassionate eye towards the *despised nature of Africa*” (*The Woman* 189; emphasis in original), but the author does not succeed in challenging the traditional narrative ending for black or mixed race colonial women.

## Chapter 4:

### **Makro's Dying Wish: Amri, the Revengeful Mother Figure in William Earle's *Obi; or, The History of Three-Fingered Jack***

Writing in the first year of the nineteenth century, at the close of the long eighteenth century, William Earle advertises on the second page of his novel *Obi; or, The History of Three-Fingered Jack. In a Series of Letters from a Resident in Jamaica to his Friend in England* that he wishes to “commemorate the name of Jack” (68). Jack, the rebellious protagonist, is none other than “Bristol, a.k.a., Jack Mansong, a.k.a., Three-Fingered Jack [who] is considered a folk hero in Jamaica. A runaway from plantation slavery, the historical Jack managed to elude Jamaican authorities for over a year in 1780-1781” (Czechowski 86).<sup>32</sup> Frances R. Botkin claims, however, “critical accounts of [Jack’s] life have been largely Eurocentric and pay scant attention to the Jamaican perspective” (494). Earle’s narrative, although it focuses directly on the actions of Jack Mansong during his slave rebellion, places emphasis on recalling the details of the life of Amri, Jack’s mother, in Africa prior to her enslavement, as well as in Jamaica after her enslavement. While Amri is ostensibly a secondary character to her son throughout the narrative, Earle’s representations of her influential and authoritative actions during Jack’s rebellion directly oppose Amri’s passive behaviour prior to her enslavement. Amri acts as a powerful figure in Earle’s mock-epistolary tale, transforming from a sentimental, romanticized woman to a heroine who transgresses hegemonic textual portrayals of black

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<sup>32</sup> Tara Elizabeth Czechowski explains that audiences during the late eighteenth-century would be familiar with Earle’s version of *Obi* through the British performances of John Fawcett’s *Obi; or, Three-Fingered Jack: A Serio-Pantomime, in Two Acts* (1800) (Czechowski 86-7). Earle’s *Obi* was also concurrently published with a novella by William Burdett and a fictional series by Charlotte Turner Smith regarding Jack’s exploits (87-8).

and mixed-race women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>33</sup> Looking closely at the sympathetic representations of Amri's betrayal and Earle's choice to place her as an influential background figure in her son's narrative in Jamaica, I will uncover the implications of inserting Amri into a powerful position despite her story being considered secondary in a narrative about the renowned Jack Mansong. Amri's connection to Barbara Bush's three constructions of black femininity – Drudge, Sable Venus, and She Devil – along with her insistence for Jack to seek out the Obeah man will confirm her potentially subversive and gender-bending maternal position in Earle's narrative as a complexly portrayed woman of colour.

### **The Implications of a Male Narrator and Protagonist in *Obi***

As Srinivas Aravamudan notes in his introduction to the Broadview edition of Earle's *Obi*, Earle's version of Jack's tale of rebellion differs in multiple ways from contemporary publications on the same subject: his fiction "attempts to match the novelty of its content with several innovations of form by combining romance elements, sentimental poetry, mock-epistolary structure, anthropological footnote, and colonial reportage" (Aravamudan 8).<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, as Aravamudan confirms, the amalgamation of these components into one piece of literary fiction creates a "rousing account of a heroic individual's attempt to combat slavery with defending family honor [and] suggests aspects of epic tale and revenge tragedy alongside the history, memory, and syncretic

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<sup>33</sup> These portrayals are especially connected to the dominant sentimental depictions of West Indian women in John Thelwall's edition of *Incle and Yarico* (1786), although various other depictions of West Indian women also echo Thelwall's in the multiple editions of the popular play.

<sup>34</sup> Srinivas Aravamudan also believes that Earle "mimics the many correspondences maintained between overseers of plantations and their absentee landlords, such as the extensive correspondence between Joseph Stewart, a plantation overseer, and Roger Hope Elletson, the Lt. Governor of Jamaica from 1766-78. The novel's letters, however, are much more informal than a business correspondence would have been" (8).

legacy of the New World African diaspora” (Aravamudan 7). Earle, a male author, introduces George Stanford, a male narrator, who writes letters to his British friend Charles that comprise the narrative. Seemingly, from the beginning of the narrative and the prevalence of the male characters, Earle’s text will echo the previous male-dominated editions of Jack Mansong’s tale. In the opening of the first letter, Stanford calls Jack a “noble fellow” (Earle 70) and defends that, rather than a slave, “Jack is a MAN” (70, emphasis in original). Having been acquainted with Jack himself, and having had the opportunity to have Jack’s stories “imparted to [him] by a negro, well acquainted with Amri” (73), Stanford is placed in a position of intellectual authority regarding the history of Jack and his family.<sup>35</sup>

Stanford also rejects a slave plantation owner’s idea that a slave is “[l]ike a wild beast” (Earle 70) and shares with Charles his view that a slaveholder is a “robber” (70). Sympathizing with Jack, Stanford places himself in a position that justifies Jack’s reactions toward Harrop and other slave owners before the narrative even begins. Stanford even intentionally removes himself from association with the slave-owning and pro-slavery Britons who inhabit his tale, claiming that he does not “mean to revile [his] countrymen; those are not [his] countrymen, whose inhumanity is the subject of [his] page. [Stanford claims that they] be Britons born, but are not Britons at heart,” (Earle 82). Stanford even goes so far as to tell Charles to read the recollections of the “heinous” (70) actions of the Britons “and [to] blush for [Charles’] countrymen” (103). Although, as Tara Elizabeth Czechowski points out, on the one hand Stanford makes an effort to

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<sup>35</sup> This authority is also legitimized by Stanford’s statement that he “ha[s] made it [his] business to collect every particular sentiment relative to [Jack]” (Earle 71).

[distinguish] between two classes of Britons, Englishmen of refinement and sensibility ... and 'European West-Indian[s],' known for their brutality and greed, on the other[,] Stanford obviously wants to position himself on the generous side of this divide, but as his address indicates, they are all Britons nonetheless. (97)

As Czechowski eventually acknowledges, Stanford does accuse all Britons for their hand in the slave trade.<sup>36</sup> It is important to note, however, that Earle's attempt to separate Stanford from the British majority and their pro-slavery position combined with his blatant indignation at Amri's enslavement, constructs Stanford as a "Man of Feeling" (Ward 443).

Candace Ward describes the introduction of the man of feeling into abolitionist literature such as in Earle's *Obi* as "[o]ne of the more provocative transatlanticisms in eighteenth-century literature" (443). Earle's narrator, Stanford, greatly corresponds to Ward's definition of 'the white man of feeling' since he is not only easily identified as overtly sympathetic to Amri, Makro, and Jack, but also aids in constructing "sentimental conventions" in the narrative that "are deployed to create an emergent literary type[:] ... the black man of feeling" (443-4). Unlike many narrators of contemporary transatlantic antislavery (or proslavery) fiction, Stanford does not recount Jack's actions as "unthreatening," but he does work to inspire "white compassion" (Ward 444) in his retellings of Jack's rebellion.<sup>37</sup> Jack is depicted as a man "with superior strength" who is

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<sup>36</sup> Stanford includes himself in these charges, even though he denounces his countrymen for their actions and works to change the minds of the slave owners he converses with on the street, since he only verbally opposes slavery and does nothing to rectify slavery in the West Indies.

<sup>37</sup> Stanford does, however, depict Makro as an unthreatening figure in the narrative, even while he rebels on Harrop's slave ship. Makro becomes, then, the "highly necessary object... of white compassion" (Ward 444).

“prepared to revenge his parents and oppose the destroyers of his country’s peace” (Earle 105). Earle reverses the representations of the violent, unsympathetic slave character against the temperate white character and presents Jack and his family as wrongly enslaved and deserving of redemption. As Sypher asserts, Jack represents the “dual nature of the creole – his genial and vicious moods – make him a pliable character, adaptable to both sentimental and reforming purposes” (509). Ward concludes that these sympathetic slave characters “who are ‘awake to feeling’ [are] comparable in many ways to white heroes whose suffering elicit delicious tears from sympathetic readers” (444). Differing greatly from his contemporaries, Earle attempts to construct his narrator as a similar figure to his protagonist. He accomplishes this connection by representing Stanford as a friend of Jack, who sympathizes, defends, and aligns himself with Jack’s cause for rebellion. Stanford, a Man of Feeling, is still capable of attracting readers to Jack’s story by also portraying Jack as a Man of Feeling. Earle’s version of Jack’s narrative is progressive in comparison to its contemporaries because it “is the only text to treat Jack sympathetically as a hero” (Czechowski 88).

Once Stanford begins Jack’s narrative in his letters to Charles, it is apparent that Jack is intentionally depicted as a strong-willed leader and a Man of Feeling. He initially controls himself in the presence of Harrop, his parents’ abductor, and states that all Europeans should “tremble at the name of Jack, for he will revenge his father, and banish humanity from his heart, to accomplish its fondest wish” (Earle 108). Differing from Ward’s definition of a Man of Feeling, Jack violently attacks Harrop shortly after his highly composed speech connecting Harrop’s African shipwreck story to Jack’s parents. Jack, however, redeems his character when he addresses his fellow slaves, pleading for

them to “[r]ise, and reassume [their] rights. Throw off the chains that incircle [them], and oppose the enemies of [their] country man to man” (109). Stanford’s attempts to align himself with Jack and against slave-trading Britons like Harrop, reinforce Jack’s anti-slavery statements: Jack’s actions are viewed as warranted by a previous injustice that could arouse understanding of Jack’s violence in Earle’s readers. The Europeans who oppose Jack are depicted as not only his enemies, but also enemies of anyone who believes that any man in Jack’s position deserves justice and freedom. Jack rightly states that he “defies [the Europeans] malice [and] he invites [their] tortures” (113). If it is not already clear enough that Jack acts for a noble cause, when Jack loses two of his fingers to gunshots fired by a party of Quashee’s men, Stanford states outright that Jack’s “cause was noble; he fought for the liberty of his countrymen; he fought to revenge his father, and this endowed him with a strength superior to the vaunting of his antagonists” (140). Stanford and Jack continually reinforce the noblest cause fuelling Jack’s actions: his devotion to his mother, Amri, and her mission to achieve revenge.

Stanford recounts how Jack continually gestures to his mother as the root of his actions, as a source of guidance during his rebellion, and as the one person whom he wishes to protect during his revenge. Amri, however, is an addition to Jack Mansong’s narrative that is original to Earle’s text. Czechowski asserts that the figure of Amri “identif[ies] a connection between slave violence, as exhibited by Jack, and the betrayal of the figure of the nurturing native as embodied by his mother” (Czechowski 88). Before his rebellion, Jack is imprisoned for attacking Harrop, but he is moved to tears when he considers how his actions will affect his mother (Earle 112-13). He tells his judge that

“... [t]hese drops ... are not the drops of weakness. I have a hapless wretched mother ... [and] the thoughts of my mother being open to your barbarities weigh heavy upon [my heart], and more bitter anguish than all the cruelties you can exercise on my body.” (113)

He even pleads with his countrymen to join his rebellion, asking them to “[s]uffer not [their] tender offsprings to labor beneath a foreign sun; suffer not [their] wives, [their] mothers, to sink under the load of unnatural and disgraceful slavery” (109).

Although Jack states that his revenge is for his father, it is his mother’s presence throughout his rebellion that is unwavering. Amri’s story even takes precedence over Jack’s in the letters addressed to Charles: Stanford does not even begin to explicitly tell Jack’s story until the sixth letter, more than a third of the way through his correspondence. Despite the fact that Amri’s narrative acts as a precursor to Jack’s rebellion, it is not only foregrounded in Stanford’s letters because it explains Jack’s reasons to take action, but also because Amri is the main focus of the text. As Czechowski explains, “Stanford only records one account of capture at any length, Amri’s. So even though Stanford consistently genders the captive as male, Amri’s is most likely the story of enslavement that haunts Stanford and causes his distress” (Earle 104-5). Moreover, Stanford’s alignment with Jack as a Man of Feeling who strives for abolition places Stanford in a narrative position that is as sympathetic to Amri as to Jack. Although Stanford cannot directly align himself with Amri, his preoccupation with her story in his letters reveals a deep-rooted anxiety about all that she endures as an enslaved African woman. As a Man of Feeling in the narrative, Stanford may not be in an authoritative position to directly comment on Amri’s part in Jack’s rebellion, but Earle



foregrounds her situation throughout the narrative. Her part in Earle's text, as Czechowski explains, "reveals the centrality of the figure of the slave woman to deciphering metropolitan anxieties about slavery and rebellion" (135-6).

### **Amri and Eighteenth-Century Tropes of Black Womanhood**

Although Earle's narrative indeed sets out to show respect to Jack Mansong's rebellious actions through the retelling of his heroic exploits in George Stanford's letters to his English friend Charles, the text in Letter II begins with a separate title for Stanford's tale: "Makro and Amri, An African Tale" (Earle 73). The title, while firmly grounding the text's anti-slavery position by introducing its focus on two African protagonists, also openly indicates Makro and Amri's original ties to Africa, of which they are stripped before the end of their narrative. This connection between Amri and the slavery movement, as Czechowski explains, "invoke[s] the original crime and locus of British metropolitan guilt: the betrayal of the nurturing native by her visitor" (97). Since Amri, pregnant with Jack, is the only survivor of this narrative, it is indeed "the narrative of Amri" (Earle 73). Earle invents the characters Amri and Makro in an attempt not only to elucidate Jack's motives for his infamous rebellion, but also to convey details of the untold accounts of the ramifications of slavery on black and mixed race men, women, and their families. As Aravamudan explains, Amri's fate echoes the original demise of Jack's wife in other versions of Jack's story, which foregrounds Earle's choice to "displace[] this aspect of female leadership onto Amri, even as romantic considerations are removed from Jack altogether" (Aravamudan 19-20). This intentional difference from the earlier versions of Jack's story shows Earle's overt intent to place his focus on a related, yet distinct chain of events that focus on a sympathetic mother figure. Furthermore,

separating Amri and Makro's story in this narrative within a narrative, Earle emphasizes its importance by giving it a title independent from Jack's story and further reinforces the predominance of the background narrative and its main character: Amri. Interestingly, Earle quotes Matthew 27:24 directly after introducing the title of Makro and Amri's narrative, stating "I am innocent of this blood, SEE YE to it" (73). This direct quotation from Pilate while he pleads to be pardoned for his hand in Jesus' trial can resonate in Earle's text in multiple ways. Firstly, Stanford could be appealing for Charles and his readers to acknowledge his innocence in his retelling of the cruel tortures inflicted on Makro and Amri. Secondly, and more likely, this passage can be seen as Earle's attempt to raise awareness of the Europeans' ability to administer these evils on Africans without a pang of conscience. But, more importantly, this passage indicates that all men involved in the deaths of Amri, Makro, Jack, and of multiple other slaves within this narrative and outside of it, cannot easily rid themselves of the culpability for these actions and claim innocence.

Amri is introduced even before Stanford gives any specifics regarding Jack's story to Charles or the reader, as he precedes the narrative he promises to his friend with details of Amri's identity, appearance, and struggle. Shortly after Stanford mentions Jack as his main topic of discussion in his letters to Charles, he literally begins his story with a description of how

Amri was a beautiful slave, the property of Mr. Mornton, of Maroons Town. She was sanguinary in her temper; for, misfortune, or rather cruelty, had perverted a heart naturally inclined to virtue. She was torn from the arms of her husband, her family and friends, while in the may-day of her life, from

her native Africa. She had vowed to curse the European race for ever; and had a son, in whose breast she never failed to nurture the baneful passion of revenge. (Earle 71)

In four succinct sentences, Stanford summarizes Amri's history and lays the foundation for her placement "at the heart of Earle's epistolary novel" (Czechowski 89). Earle also constructs a significant dichotomy in his representations of Amri: Stanford's initial description reveals the conflict between Amri's history and her present life as a slave. In the above quotation, Stanford first mentions Amri and he labels her a 'slave,' but then he is quick to add details that contradict, or, rather, attempt to explain, her hatred for Europeans and that allude to her previous circumstances in Africa. According to Felicity A. Nussbaum, a racialized woman in fiction can be "represented as a beautiful primitive ... a compelling and marvelous spectacle in spite of her complexion" (156).

While Stanford does not draw attention to Amri's complexion in the narrative or present her as a primitive, he does include a slightly more detailed description of Jack that speaks to his construction of him as an idealized primitive like Aphra Behn's Oroonoko in her 1688 short prose fiction *Oroonoko: or, The Royal Slave. A True History*. Unlike the racial muting found in *The Woman of Colour*, Stanford recounts how Jack's "face was rather long; his eyes black and fierce, [but] his nose was not like the generality of blacks, squat and flat, but rather aquiline, and his skin remarkably clear" (Earle 72). Aravamudan explains the possible connection between this description of Jack and Behn's characterization of the 'royal' prince Oroonoko. Amri, however, is depicted as nothing other than African since Earle does not include descriptions that racialize her

otherwise. This consistency in her background prevents Amri's intentions of inciting rebellion in her son from being complicated by mixed-race issues.

Stanford also dwells on the African origin of Amri and Makro's abduction in order to provide a context for Jack's revenge. Amri begins her narrative by recounting to Jack the day of the European shipwreck off of the Gambian coast that stranded William Sebald and his guardian Captain Harrop, marking this as a pivotal moment in her narrative. As Nussbaum asserts, the trouble with investigating literary representations of women of colour "is the scant testimony from the women themselves" (156). Although Amri's narrative is told through Stanford's narrative voice in multiple letters, it is important to note that her voice is the dominant one during the recollection of how Harrop deceived her and her husband and forced them into slavery. She recalls how she "stood at [her] cabin door and saw one great swelling wave devour [Harrop's] ship, and they were forever hurried from [her] sight. At that moment, with agonizing pity, [she] clasped [her] hands together, and wept their fate" (Earle 74-5).

Several critics, including Czechowski and Aravamudan, believe that Earle's narrative "resembles the plot of the famous sentimental tale of 'Yarico and Inkle' that saw so many versions in the eighteenth century" (Aravamudan 16); Czechowski notes of Amri in particular that the depictions of her before her enslavement resemble "portrayals of the beloved figure of Yarico" (Czechowski 98).<sup>38</sup> Earle may have drawn on the traditional sentimental representations of Yarico since, "[a]s with Yarico, Amri's generosity and affection for the European[s] suggests the possibility that her friendship

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<sup>38</sup> The similarities, as Aravamudan points out, lie in "[t]he description of the betrayal of Jack's parents, Amri and Makro, into slavery by Captain Harrop after they saved his life and nurtured him" (16; Czechowski 89). Although I do not deal with many of these parallels here, there is evidence to make an argument that Earle's text is directly indebted to both *Oroonoko* and *Inkle and Yarico*.

with Harrop could produce a narrative of cultural harmony” (Czechowski 98). Amri’s narrative differs from this ideal portrait and, as Czechowski agrees, becomes a harrowing tale of inhumane enslavement. Amri recalls with regret the compassion she showed for Harrop after she came to his aid since her “reward,” as Amri states, for the pity she showed to her “country’s foes” were chains and slavery (Earle 75-6). Amri’s unquestioning sentimental response to the European men contrasts with the representations of her even as she retells the story to Jack and even more so with her actions after Harrop enslaves her. Amri explains to Jack, while she recounts her time with Harrop after the shipwreck, that “the hated remembrance of what [she] did for these vile white men rends [her] heart in twain” (76). Amri admits to Harrop when she learns of his and William’s departure, “while [a] tear glistened in [her] eye: ‘I expected you would have resided with us for ever’” (81). Similar to Inle’s betrayal of Yarico’s trust, Amri’s sentimental emotions are met with conflicting actions from Harrop, who appears grateful and humble for Amri and Makro’s hospitality throughout Amri’s narrative. As Czechowski explains, “[t]he treachery committed against Amri, as well as Jack [and Makro], locates Earle’s novel generically in a literary tradition that explicitly addresses the problems of empire” (91). Amri’s recounting of this pivotal moment of treachery establishes sympathetic grounds for the representations of her influential place in Jack’s rebellion.

The narrator recalls Williams’ actions during Amri and Makro’s capture, repeating the narrative from his viewpoint as a bystander to Harrop’s hostilities, and establishes a divide early in the narrative between the two European countrymen’s standpoints on slavery and emancipation. While Amri expresses her shock at Harrop’s

deception, questioning how he could “have a scheme in his head to blast our prospect of future peace, we who stood forward as his *saviours*” (Earle 79, emphasis added), William questions Harrop’s plans. Similar to the Williams character in Thelwall’s *Incle and Yarico*, William expresses his disagreement with Harrop’s plan from the outset. As the narrator, Stanford clearly aligns himself with William, describing him as a “young man of great sensibility and tender feelings” (127). He also disassociates William from Harrop by noting that William “had been bred up in affectionate manner, and was not fit for the occupation he was intended for” (127). William is the lone sympathetic character present during Amri and Makro’s capture: William even asks Harrop if he has a heart when he claims that he has “enlightened [Amri and Makro], fertilized their minds, told them of the duties of this life, and how to enjoy society” (80). William, however, does not influence Harrop’s plan and, instead, is a passive bystander during Amri and Makro’s enslavement. In fact, he is not mentioned during the remainder of Amri’s recollection of being “sold like cattle” (84) and does not appear in the text again until Stanford retells Amri’s narrative from Stanford’s point of view. William is then described in sentimental terms as he faints after he “flew to the arms of Harrop, with the idea of death before him” (127). William is depicted as “grateful to the saviours of his life” (127) but is more directly contrasted with Harrop, who is described as “conceiv[ing] a hellish plot in his heart, which he waited an opportunity to put in execution” (127). William’s sentimental, sympathetic position is, again, represented as a passive one in this second recollection. Stanford explains how William

saw the saviours of his life cruelly forced from their own shores, from those shores where they exercised humanity to the remorseless being, whose

ungrateful heart could think of no return for their hospitality, but chains and slavery. (Earle 128)

Stanford attempts to align William with himself, other sympathetic Europeans, and, by extension, with Amri and Jack. But, unlike the Williams in Thelwall's play who takes action against Yarico and Yahamona's enslavement, William's passiveness during Harrop's treacherous enslavement of Amri and Makro undermines William's disassociated position from the slaveholders.

After Amri and Makro are enslaved and separated on Harrop's slave ship, the representations of Amri as a sentimental, passive African woman transform into depictions of a revengeful female character who actively transgresses the physical boundaries set by slavery. Nussbaum theorizes that the "African woman represents the primitive past and the lost mother country in her most sentimental representation" (Nussbaum 194), and Amri embodies these depictions while she struggles to survive the first days on Harrop's ship after being separated from Makro. After three days, Amri sees Makro's emaciated being and understands that "it was Makro's resolve to die" (Earle 87). After witnessing Makro's defiance for his treatment by Harrop's men, Amri quickly becomes rebellious on the slave ship. Amri joins Makro's insurgence after she sees him obstinately refuse to eat by refusing to eat her own food until she sees Makro again (87). However, Amri's alliance is a personal one to Makro, and cannot initially be viewed as politically motivated rebellion: Makro easily sways her to eat the next time they are together. At this point in Amri's narrative, she recalls how Harrop begins to show "gratitude ... [and] remorse" (Earle 87) and to allow her and Makro to meet unbound on the ship's deck. Importantly, it is during these few hours of freedom that Makro asks for

Amri to continue his revolt after his death, telling her to “Live Amri; as you love me, live for my sake” (90). His last request is for Amri to

‘[i]nspire [their son’s] young bosom with revenge; tutor his early mind how to hate the European race; teach him, in his childhood, to lisp curses on their name, and blast their progeny for ever.’ (90)

Soon after this, Harrop asks for Makro and Amri’s forgiveness and promises their freedom when they arrive in Morant Bay (91-2). Makro, however, takes his last chance to fully rebel against Harrop by turning Harrop’s own weapon on him. For this action, Makro is severely beaten until he dies, leaving Amri to fulfill Makro’s request. Amri quickly demonstrates her will to create an active female role for herself, even as a slave in Jamaica, such as when she accepts her branding on the shores of Morant Bay with “fortitude ... [while] [t]he other poor wretches, who accompanied [her], shrunk and writhed in the anguish of the moment” (95). She also proves her devotion to Makro’s revenge, giving birth to Jack three months after she arrives in Jamaica, describing him as the “avenger of Makro’s wrongs[,] ... the saviour of our country[, and] the abolisher of the slave trade” (95) before he can even walk or talk.

Amri assumes a dominant role in instilling in Jack the revengeful desires that Makro wished for their son, and, although she never assumes a combative role in the rebellion, the transformation of her actions foreground her active part in Jack’s revenge. In opposition to the colonial mimicry in *The Woman of Colour*, Amri is represented as instigating rebellion against slaveholders in Jamaica through the powerful influence she has over her son, creating a potentially gender-bending position for herself after Makro’s death. Her focus on Jack is obvious from the beginning of her story: even the first words



she speaks in Earle's text are "[m]y son" (Earle 73). During her retelling of her capture and enslavement, Jack's reactions to her story are revealing of his mother's power over him. When Amri recalls how Makro wished for Jack to avenge his parents' enslavement, Jack "rise[s] hastily from his seat, [and brings] down a sabre ... sw[earing] with exulting fury, to merit his Creator's curse if he revenged not the cause of his parents" (91). Czechowski points out that "Stanford repeatedly notes the process of change [in Amri], indicating that if it were not for Harrop's depravity [Amri's] behavior would be different" (Czechowski 99). The evolution of Amri's behaviour is most evident in the sharp juxtaposition of her sentimental treatment of William and Harrop and her "hated remembrance" (Earle 76) of them *and* her own actions during their time in Africa. In connection to my previous assertion that Earle strategically makes use of narrator like Stanford – a Man of Feeling – in order to better support Amri's revengeful position in the narrative, Czechowski goes on to state that "Stanford presents Amri's change of heart as understandable considering the extent to which she suffers at Harrop's orders (Czechowski 98). However, in opposition to Czechowski's opinion that Amri cannot maintain her kind disposition after Harrop victimizes her and Makro, Amri's behaviours, especially her focus on instilling in Jack revenge, actively transgress the passive boundaries set out for her as an enslaved woman.

As a mother, a widow, and a slave, Amri assumes multiple roles in Earle's narrative, making her a multi-dimensional character who can be productively analysed in relation to Bush's categorization of three principal types or 'fictions' of black femininity. Bush theorizes that there are three constructions of black femininity in literary fiction: the 'Drudge,' the 'Sable Venus,' and the 'She Devil'. While a 'Drudge' is considered to be a

“white construct[] of the compliant asexual worker” (Bush 764) – and Amri is neither compliant nor asexual – the ‘Sable Venus’ focuses on the overt sexuality of black women in literature that “led [white] men into wickedness” (773). Although Amri is described as a sentimental ‘Sable Venus’ before her enslavement, she is consistently represented as a ‘She Devil’ in the majority of Jack’s narrative. As a mother, the “maternal passion” (Felsenstein 35) Amri possesses for her son is present in all of her actions,<sup>39</sup> but she is also inherently sexualized and becomes the object of anxiety for black female’s sexual reproduction even though she is married to Makro. Czechowski argues that

Amri is never quite sexually available ... since she is already Makro’s wife and her father’s ‘sole delight’ ... [but] her prior attachments to the African men in addition to her welcoming attitude towards the Europeans indicate her submissiveness to men in general, which is consistent with the image of the Sable Venus. (100)

Yet, Amri is no longer submissive to men when she arrives in Jamaica and is, instead, continually focused on guiding Jack through his rebellion while attempting to protect herself from retaliation by remaining in the background of the action. Amri’s gender transgressive behaviour and rebellious attitude towards the Europeans in Jamaica allows for her to support Jack’s position in his retaliation on Harrop for enslaving his parents, but it starkly contrasts with her sentimental generosity towards the Europeans after their shipwreck and her desire to help them recover. Czechowski argues that Amri’s oppositional attitudes towards Harrop “gives the impression that her vengeance is undesirable because it corrupts her natural inclinations to compassion” (101). Bush also states that, in opposition to the ‘Sable Venus,’ the ‘She Devil’ is viewed as “the defiant

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<sup>39</sup> See William Wordsworth’s 1798 poem “The Mad Mother” for further examples of ‘maternal passion.’

and resistant slave symbolic of the ever-present threat of slave revolt... [and] reflect[s] white men's fears of women's concrete resistance to 'real' labour" (778). Amri is represented as a continually oppositional character to Harrop as well as to slavery as an institution, "dr[awing] on her everyday experiences as a basis for reclaiming self and identity" (778). Rather than represent Amri as the "familiar endangered heroine" (Czechowski 101), after Makro's death Earle places Amri in a progressive, influential position that allows her to become intricately involved not only in Jack's slave revolution, but also in the resulting violence. Without Makro's death, Amri's gender-subversive actions and involvement in Jack's rebellion would not be possible, making Makro's death a "defining moment[ in] her transformation into a rebellious figure" (100). Earle purposefully includes this event in order to motivate her loyalty to Makro's last wish, but also to provide Amri with autonomy even within her enslaved position.

Amri's role as a 'She Devil' disrupts any merely sentimental views of her maternal narrative and consequently places her in more danger at the hands of the Europeans even though she is instigating Jack to "contend for [her] rights ... [and] revenge [her] injuries" (Earle 73). Unlike the representations of romanticized women like Yarico and Olivia, the lack of romance and the amount of violence that accompanies her narrative position undermines any possibility of viewing Amri as a sentimental heroine or regarding Earle's text from a purely sentimental viewpoint.<sup>40</sup> Although Amri is actively involved in her son's initial actions against Harrop and multiple other slaveholders, she becomes enveloped by the violence that plagues Jack once there is a bounty on his head. Amri also

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<sup>40</sup> My conclusions here are aligned with Czechowski's, who believes Amri's "vengeance against whites... removes her entirely from the potentialities of romance, which the figure of Yarico inhabited thirteen years earlier" and who states that "Amri has already implicitly rejected Stanford's sympathetic gaze" (92).

escapes the traditional ‘mad mother’ role of the Romantic period, which was popularized by William Wordsworth’s 1798 poem “The Mad Mother.” The Native American mother portrayed in the poem is insane and abandoned by her husband only to find herself in early motherhood with a desire to help her newborn son escape their suffering. Although Amri is in a similar position and too makes it her priority to “always be [her son’s] guide” (Felsenstein 299) during his quest to escape slavery and revenge Makro’s death, it is important to note that Amri is never depicted as insane. Instead, Amri’s representation as a ‘She Devil’ becomes the dominant one after Makro’s death, again confirming that this is a “defining moment[] of her transformation into a rebellious figure” (Czechowski 100). According to Czechowski, the deaths of both Makro and Amri’s father, the Obi Man Feruarue, are the most important factors in the transition of Amri’s representations from Sable Venus to She Devil.<sup>41</sup> She asserts that, “[t]hough the men fail to protect [Amri] from enslavement, her love for them defends her from ever becoming embroiled in further seductions with Europeans” (100). Yet, I believe it is Amri’s loyalty to her son and maternal position rather than her love for both Makro and Feruarue that provides ammunition for her rebellious actions.

Amri’s undying loyalty to her son and Makro’s dying wish is foregrounded, even withstanding the violence that she endures throughout the narrative, and allows her to aid Jack expertly in his rebellion. In her influential investigation into black Men of Feeling in eighteenth century colonial literature, Candace Ward observes that

[the] emphasis on physical violence in these texts serves as a sharp reminder of the central contradiction of the literature of sensibility: the irresolvable

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<sup>41</sup> Czechowski also makes use of Bush’s three constructions of black femininity in literature.

tension between its idealization of abstract qualities like virtue and honor, and its simultaneous dependence on physical signs to mark those qualities. (Ward 445)

The description of the execution of Amri's father exemplifies Ward's theory since Amri recounts Feruarue's "venerable face" and his "forced serenity" (Earle 100) while he was burned to death for his acts as a "wretched criminal" (100). Unlike *The Woman of Colour*, which is almost completely devoid of violence, the action during the slave rebellion in *Obi* is "explicit in [its] violence" (Ward 454). Importantly, as Ward points out, Jack becomes enclosed in the inherent violence of his position and he is viewed as "not simply an *object* of violence and therefore of compassion. Rather, he perpetuates violence against Europeans and thus becomes an object of terror" (454). But, more importantly for my own argument, Amri as a She Devil character directly influences Jack's violent actions and his "reputation of invincibility because of the powerful obi given him by Bashra" (456). Yet, Amri even has an authoritative position in how Jack is perceived as 'invincible' since she insists Jack visit Bashra and become practiced in obeah.

### **Literary Representations of Obeah and Amri's Insistence on Jack's Obi**

The multiple opposing representations of obeah<sup>42</sup> in literature during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be used as an approach to reading *Obi*, especially since its title directly references the controversial practice. Unlike Olivia in *The Woman of Colour* with her reliance on Christianity to guide her decisions in England, Amri and Jack rely heavily on obeah in *Obi*: it becomes exceedingly prominent in influencing Jack's actions

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<sup>42</sup> Obeah, as Alan Richardson describes, "is a 'hybrid' or 'Creolised' Caribbean religion with indigenous West African roots, which includes such practices as ritual incantation and use of fetishes or charms" (5).

as Earle's narrative progresses. Aravamudan explains that multiple other versions of Jack Mansong's rebellious actions emphasize Earle's participation in the "shift[] from law and order to obeah" (14), referring in particular to Benjamin Moseley's rendition of Jack Mansong's rebellion in *A Treatise on Sugar* and the ways in which Moseley

exoticizes the existence of secret knowledge and its esoteric practitioners, even as he dismisses the practice as a failed primitive belief in the efficacy of magic. Often dismissed as a fraudulent practice, obeah is nonetheless the cause of great anxiety in colonial writing because of the deleterious psychological effects (including disease and death) that it produces on its credulous victims. (Aravamudan 15)

James O'Rourke points out the important similarities between Moseley's and Earle's texts, noting that both "tell the story of Mansong's career as a bandit, and of his capture and decapitation in 1780 by black slaves who had been promised a three hundred pound reward and their freedom for bringing Mansong within the control of British law" (285-6). Earle's narrative, in comparison to Moseley's, however, diminishes the traditionally-represented effects of obeah on the opposition to Jack's rebellion and, instead, focuses on the violence that ensues after Jack escapes his confinement and takes Harrop into hiding in a cave on Mount Lebanon (Earle 114-17). Although many critics agree that the portrayals of obeah in Earle's *Obi* add to its contemporary "frustration with the conservatism of the literature on obeah" (Czechowski 94), Earle depicts obeah as "an alternative authority to which slaves turned in the face of the incomprehensible cruelty of British slaveholders" (95-6).

Many literary authors during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Maria Edgeworth, used depictions of obeah to educate readers on the possible consequences of slave revolt (Aravamudan 44). Earle adopts this strategy in his representation of the Obeah Man Feruarue's execution, revealing Earle's acute knowledge of how "[t]he danger posed by obeah resulted in various attempts to control it through criminal and civil legislation" (Aravamudan 9). But, as Richardson explains, "[t]he association of obeah and slave revolts was well known to the English writers who helped popularize obeah (however briefly) in the romantic period; in fact it was this association which made 'obi' a matter of interest, rather than an obscure slave custom to be mocked and dismissed" (6-7). Earle capitalizes on this association and describes how, after escaping multiple attacks, Jack is viewed as possessing a "malefic Obi" (Earle 155). After one particularly quick escape from Amri's hovel where Jack loses two of his fingers due to Quashee's shots, it is described how

the whole Island rung with Jack's last exploit. Some asserted that the shots passed through his body and left no trace behind; nay, all unanimously declared that it was as idle to attempt to shoot Jack as to wound a shadow. Not one of the negroes but trembled at the name of Three-fingered Jack, and many of the Europeans believed in the fancied virtues of his Obi.  
(Earle 140)

Even though Jack is wounded in this altercation, the widespread belief in his Obi maintains his reputation as invincible: Stanford even shares with Charles that "Jack's depredations became now so great and so atrocious, that Government was in a manner compelled to publish ... [a] Proclamation" (153). After this call-to-action, Stanford

recounts how “the reward of three hundred pounds, and liberty, was a great inducement, and worked upon the hearts of many; but Jack’s malefic Obi in the opposite scale, was a tremendous evil, and their courage failed them” (155). Stanford’s recollection of how Jack’s obi is treated in Earle’s text, along with the anxiety and fear it evoked in slave and slaveholders alike, does not address the importance of Amri and her influence in Jack becoming educated on obeah early in the narrative.

Although Amri is not overtly present for many parts of Stanford’s narrative after she recounts her history to Jack, she is extremely present in Jack’s decision to seek out the Obeah man. Described as “sanguinary” (Earle 104) after she completes her historical tale to her son, Amri tells Jack that “[in] a cell, near Mount Lebanon, dwells the sequestered Bashra; to him you must apply for Obi, my son” (104). After she leads Jack to Bashra’s dwelling, Amri personally places “the Obi horn around his neck” and Jack is described as “his mother’s pride” (105). Amri then aids Jack in “devising how they should set the slaves in open rebellion, and extirpate the European race” (105), but Jack must contend with the rebellion alone and Amri is forgotten during the action except in times when Jack needs assistance, guidance, or a place to hide. Yet, her position as *the* influential black female character is solidified by her unwavering and continued involvement throughout Earle’s text. Aravamudan notes that “strong female figures in the resistance to slavery suggest an analog for the important role played by ... Amri” (19-20). Indeed, Amri remains a loyal supporter of her son’s actions: she consults Bashra when Jack is first apprehended for his attack on Harrop (Earle 112), concealing Jack during his escape (115), and leading Jack to Harrop’s house to abduct him despite her fearing for his safety (116). In fact, the sentimentality that characterized Amri before her



enslavement remains operative in her depictions as a She-Devil, but is not the most overwhelming emotional response: for example, when Amri learns that Jack was sentenced to death, she is described as “stretched upon her pallet, in an agony of grief and bathed in tears” (115). Amri’s private struggle between her desire to protect her son and her determination to fulfill Makro’s dying wish and execute revenge on Harrop is apparent in these sentimental moments throughout the narrative, but her determination to aid in her son’s rebellion always overcomes her emotional desires.

Amri’s powerful character in Earle’s narrative cannot be undermined even in the face of torture and death. Stanford describes how Amri is summoned to divulge the location of Jack and Harrop to The Court of Assembly, but Amri – playing on the traditional sentimental position of a mother – challenges the Court, asking how they could “summon a poor weak mother before [their] mighty council, to betray her son” if they were convinced they would capture Jack (Earle 120). Amri holds firm to her rebellious position as Stanford describes her as a “heroic woman” and she is discharged from the council (120). Yet, her resilience is tried when she is “again summoned before the House of Assembly, and still refusing to give information, received sentence of death” (140-1). Until the day of her execution, which is postponed for three days, Amri works to protect her son and believes in his ability to continue the rebellion. She remains fixed in her devoted mother and She Devil position and understands that, in order for Jack to be successful in his rebellion, she must be sacrificed. Amri’s powerful influence on Jack is confirmed by his return and attempt, although unsuccessful, to save her. Although Jack and his companion Mahali are able to save Amri from the stake, she soon breathes her last breath as “she opened her eyes, beheld her son ... and [] expired” (Earle

148). Soon after Amri's death, Mahali also loses his life. Without the aid of either Amri or Mahali, Quashee – a christened slave – is able to overcome Jack's reputation of invincibility and his Obi (156). With the help of his friend Sam and a little boy, Quashee "cut[s] off Jack's head and three-fingered hand, and carrie[s] them to Morant Bay" (157).

Amri's execution near the end of Earle's narrative ultimately excludes her from the conclusion of Jack's rebellion, marking the end to her reign as a She Devil in *Obi* and as a powerful black female influence on Jack. Stanford's assertion that Jack is more affected by the death of his companion and accomplice Mahali than his mother's death (Earle 149) speaks to the dangers in how Earle represents Amri as a secondary, yet imperative figure in his narrative. Without doubt, after Amri's and Mahali's deaths, Jack loses his faith in his invincibility and, more importantly, in his Obi: when Quashee, or Reeder as he was christened, confronts Jack for the final time, Jack "started back in dismay; he was cowed; for he had prophesied that White Obi would overcome him, and he knew the charm, in Reeder's hands, would lose none of its virtue or power" (156). Losing his influential mother as well as his dependable accomplice causes Jack to doubt his rebellion and, although he fights valiantly until the end, he loses his life as well.

As Aravamudan notes, Earle inserts Amri (and, less importantly to my argument, Makro) into his narrative of Jack Mansong to replace Jack's love interest. Echoing the sentimental representation of Jack's wife while succeeding in substituting the romantic notions in Jack's narrative allow for Amri's influential maternal character to take root in her She Devil position. Multiple critics, however, still question why Earle adds Amri, "the unprecedented character[,] to his account of Jack Mansong" (Czechowski 97). As I've argued, Amri's character is an intentional and integral part of Earle's narrative that

overcomes the narrative focus on a male protagonist and a titular focus on obi. Her insertion allows Earle to explore the representations of a powerful female figure who resists a passive female enslaved position in a tale that was traditionally portrayed as strictly sentimental. Rather than reproduce the romantic relationship from other editions of Jack Mansong's rebellion, Earle successfully integrates Amri into his narrative to represent a figure more conducive to anti-slavery viewpoints than a love-interest could be as she transitions from a compassionate, sentimentalized woman in Jamaica to a rebellious, fiercely maternal She Devil after Harrop's betrayal and her enslavement. Importantly, Stanford's frame narrative focuses on Amri and her history for more than half of his letter. This anxiety over Amri's transformative story and aligning Stanford with anti-slavery movements confirm Earle's focus on the violent outcomes of slavery. Czechowski concludes that "Stanford reports Amri's story no less than four times in the course of his letters ... [which] suggest[s] that this betrayal really is the core of Earle's novel" (97). Although critics such as Diane Paton and Tara Czechowski doubt the validity of categorizing Earle's text as anti-slavery, pointing to "Jack's private motives for revenge as well as his death at the hands of a government-hired slave-catcher as [the reason for doubting] any emancipation argument" (Czechowski 94), it is still apparent that Earle attempts to represent an influential, powerful black female figure who is resistant to the cruelty and oppression of slavery in the character of Amri in a text that, throughout its multiple editions, is otherwise male-dominated. Although Earle does not completely transgress the limitations of representations of women in literary texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth century and include Amri as a major heroine in his text, he

does undermine the hegemonic portrayals of the infamous tale of Jack Mansong and includes a powerful black female character at the heart of his text.

## Chapter 5:

### Conclusion

The varying representations of black and mixed race women from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century move increasingly against the subordinate hegemonic portrayals toward an autonomous and influential tradition. This thesis has focused primarily on close readings of two early nineteenth century texts: William Earle's *Obi, or The History of Three-Fingered Jack* (1800) and the anonymously-written *The Woman of Colour; A Tale* (1808). These two West Indian texts, along with Behn's *Oroonoko*, Thelwall's *Incle and Yarico*, and Edgeworth's "The Grateful Negro," provide explicit examples of non-titular<sup>43</sup> women of colour that move beyond the subordinate, enslaved position traditionally reserved for black and mixed race women in literature throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century. By interrogating the unique strategies employed by each author, I've uncovered the inherent ambivalence of the women's positions in each narrative and the importance of these representations against the marginalized, enslaved female position.

Dominique's definition of a major heroine confirms how a female can have a major influence even when she is not a titular character or even the main protagonist, similar to the minor or secondary role that Dido occupies in *The Woman of Colour*. As hooks explains, the portrayals of women's bodies are continually interpreted and interrogated – especially in relation to gender and sex (57-9). The convergence of the varying assumptions of how female characters should be portrayed in literature is apparent in texts that represent black or mixed race women as subordinate, marginalized, enslaved,

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<sup>43</sup> *Incle and Yarico* does explicitly reference Yarico in the title, but she is a co-protagonist listed secondary to her European, male counterpart.

silenced, and even absent. Chapter One provided an overview of a collection of prominent and obscure seventeenth and eighteenth century texts that exemplify the evolving representations of women into major heroines as female writers became more established and conversations of emancipation began to heavily influence literature. Black female heroines began to be depicted saving lives (like Neville's Babay), in mixed race relationships (like Olivia in *The Woman of Colour*), and even as authoritative individuals (such as Earle's Amri).

As the representations of black and mixed race women underwent the overt transformation from submissive, subordinate characters to authoritative, influential protagonists, Earle and the anonymous author of *The Woman of Colour* used literary strategies to portray Amri, Olivia, and even Dido as resisting traditional subjugated stereotypes. While some women were viewed as progressive when they were given a voice or a feared position in literature, such as Clara and Esther in Edgeworth's "The Grateful Negro," the male and anonymous authors I focused on move beyond these basic resistances to utilize strategies that more intricately undermine the systems that uphold sexual and racial binary oppositions.

In Chapter Two, I investigated how the author of *The Woman of Colour* uses multiple strategies in the representations of Olivia to attempt to upset the traditional, stereotypical ending for a black colonial woman. Olivia occupies what Gilroy terms a space of 'double consciousness' due to her in-between olive skin tone and the position her father's will grants her in the white colonial society. Although Olivia claims that "[a]n unportioned girl of my colour[] can never be a dangerous object" (*The Woman* 56), this position allows her to deconstruct racial binary oppositions by becoming the wife of

a white colonial man and to depict an intricate, interwoven dual self-conception that blurs the boundaries between black colonial women and white colonial society. This powerful strategy, however, quickly turns into what Bhabha defines as ‘colonial mimicry’ as Olivia attempts to align herself too closely with the white colonial women, causing her failure to continue to champion for racial equality as she focuses on maintaining her marriage to her cousin, Augustus. Her focus on her role as Augustus’s wife overshadows her original intention of championing for racial equality and counteracts the anti-slavery structure that was prominent in the first half of the narrative. Despite Olivia’s wavering focus, Olivia’s maid, Dido, remains consistent in her anti-slavery stance throughout the text.

Although Olivia predominantly speaks for Dido, Dido does actively question slavery in moments throughout the narrative and even places herself in an influential position at the end of the text. When Olivia fails in her initial mission, Dido’s own episode of colonial mimicry reverses the traditional subversions of black women in literature by challenging the actions of Mrs. Merton and her scheme against Olivia’s marriage to Augustus. While Olivia is represented as submitting to the authority of a white colonial woman, Dido’s momentary elevated language and pale complexion reinforces the narrative position on racial equality and confirms her as an alternate ‘woman of colour.’ Olivia also importantly defies the traditional marriage plot of sentimental texts of the eighteenth century, and the tale ends with Olivia and Dido returning to Jamaica – the setting of Earle’s *Obi*.

In Chapter Three, the violence and slavery plaguing the West Indies that is exempt from Olivia’s recollections of her home is represented in Jack, Amri, and Makro’s narrative. The text supposedly focuses on the history of Amri and Makro’s son Jack, but

the influential and foregrounded representations of Amri and her history confirm the importance of her addition to Earle's version of Three-fingered Jack's history. In a male-authored and male-narrated text, Amri overcomes her secondary position in the narrative to transgress the hegemonic textual portrayals of sentimentalized slave women.

Importantly, Stanford narrates Amri's history and the retelling of her own history to her son before he shifts his focus to Jack's rebellion. Although Jack is the titular character of the text, the narrative emphasis remains on Amri's transformation from a passive and romanticized character prior to her enslavement to an independent, resistant maternal figure after Makro's death.

Earle utilizes gender-reversal and anti-authoritative strategies rather than double consciousness and colonial mimicry to represent Amri as an influential, She-Devil character. Amri takes an active maternal role throughout the narrative, instilling revenge in her son after his father's death and leading Jack to the obeah man. While operating in the background of the narrative, Amri maintains a powerful influence over Jack's actions in his rebellion. Similar to the way Thelwall makes a mockery out of traditional racial dichotomies, Earle undermines the subordinate position of women of colour by representing Amri as a vengeful mother who continually defies her enslaved position by fostering her son's slave revolt and perpetuating the fear he invokes in the colonialists. Unlike Olivia, who is confined by her role as Augustus's wife, Amri's maternal role is more conducive to her anti-slavery position. Although, as I've argued, Earle's text is far from sentimental, Amri's role as an active, protective mother simultaneously creates a powerful space within the narrative while also gaining sympathy for her lost innocence after her enslavement. Similar to how "the figure of Yarico came increasingly to



personify those noble instincts of the enslaved that even colonial oppression was unable to eradicate” (Felsenstein and Scrivener 24), Amri is able to maintain her fiercely maternal position throughout the narrative, despite her enslavement. Even though Amri is never represented as transgressing her enslavement while Olivia is shown returning to Jamaica, Amri is an integral addition to Earle’s text and represents a powerful black female character who overcomes her subjugated position.

The anonymous author of *The Woman of Colour*, Earle, and even Behn, Thelwall, and Edgeworth employ literary strategies such as double consciousness, mimicry, and gender-reversals that are successful in these individual texts in demonstrating that absent, or less present, women of colour can be the most significant. Dominique’s claim that Olivia is *the* woman of colour is challenged by Dido’s influential revisiting of Olivia’s initial championing of racial equality. Similarly, Amri overcomes her secondary role in the male-focused *Obi* and forges an influential, yet enslaved, maternal space for a powerful woman of colour. Investigating these texts is crucial to understanding the autonomous, influential woman of colour in later nineteenth century literary works and even reflecting on the less anthologized representations of subordinate, marginalized, women.<sup>44</sup>

This thesis has shown the importance of uncovering the reversal of prominent literary conventions in the representations of black and mixed race women in the seventeenth century until the early nineteenth century. As Botkin recognizes, figures such as Imoinda, Yarico, Olivia, Dido, and Amri “challenge traditional Western oppositions of good and evil, victim and villain, even colonizer and colonized, at once resisting and

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<sup>44</sup> Such as the less well-known texts from Dominique’s “A Chronology of Women of Colour in Drama and Long Prose Fiction.”

provoking representation” (Botkin 504). Recognizing the successful strategies used by both male and female authors to undermine the subordinate representations of women of colour in well-known texts as well as lesser-studied and anthologized works will aid in the investigation of women of colour after emancipation in literature of the nineteenth century. The continued shift from hegemonic textual portrayals of women to a tradition of powerful, unmarginalized black female protagonists foregrounds the authoritative and influential representations of women, such as Olivia, Dido, and Amri, during this transformational literary time period.

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