“An unportioned girl of my complexion can . . . be a dangerous object.”

Abolition and the Mulatto Heiress in England

Oroonoko: No, let the Guilty blush,
The white man that betrayed me. Honest Black
Disdains to change its Colour.

—Thomas Southerne, Oroonoko (1696), I.ii.242–44

Lord Ogleby: You are right, Brush.—There is no washing the Blackamoor white.

—George Colman and David Garrick, The Clandestine Marriage
(1766), II.i.138–39

“I rejoice to hear it. We’ll make her blush for herself. Her fine olive complexion, you know, is changeable enough.”


But after all, since there will be some womaniz’d Fools of our own Sex, that can’t be kept from running mad for the outside of a Skin, and doating on a fine Complexion, I shall prove this Paradox to mortify their Pride and yours, that a despis’d Moorress is really a greater Beauty than all your finical chalky-fac’d European Ladies: The Sun has but half-bak’d you, you are not arriv’d to the perfection of Mulattos . . .

“That a Black-a-moor Woman is the greatest Beauty; in a Letter to a Lady exceeding Fair”

—John Dunton, Athenian Sport (1707), 103

For most certainly, there are Beauties that can charm of that Colour.

—Aphra Behn, Oroonoko (1688/1997), ed. Joanna Lipking, 11
On October 30, 2005, in a Washington Post op-ed titled “Guess Who? You Can Ask Me, but Don’t Expect an Answer,” Monica Bhide, an Indian critic who writes about “food, culture and their influence on our lives,” narrates several scenes of racial misreading—some disturbing, others amusing—in which she is mistaken for an Arab, a Brazilian, a Mexican, and a Pakistani. One of these misreadings stands out more than the rest, however, because it is more than just a case of national misrecognition:

When I was living in Lynchburg, Va., many years ago, I was babysitting for a 4-year-old. His parents were Caucasians, well educated and very kind. (Why do I bother mentioning their skin color? Because it’s important to understanding the scene I’m about to describe.) When the boy first saw me he asked, “How come she is not brown?” Apparently the only two colors he knew were white and brown, and I did not match either. His parents explained that people come in many colors and then sheepishly left to go to dinner.

We played outside for a bit. I then turned to him and said, “Honey, you are so dirty playing in this mud, you need a bath.” He came up to me and began furiously rubbing the back of my hand. “You need a bath more than I do.” When my skin color did not change, he said, “Oh, it does not come off. I just thought you looked like that because you need a bath.”

Though she never intended to have her body used in this way, the little “Lynchburg” boy’s furious attempts to wash Bhide as white as he sees himself and his parents ends up being a useful exercise. His experiment on Bhide’s body proves to his satisfaction that her complexion “does not come off”—that people of colors other than brown and white really do exist—and it does so in a far more concrete way than his sheepish parents attempted to do with their brief and embarrassed precept.

This use of a racialized female body as a didactic tool has roots in a literary incident that occurred two hundred years ago and over three thousand miles away. Early in the plot of the intriguing anonymous novel The Woman of Colour (1808), a young white English boy runs to an assembled group of adults gathered in a London drawing room with a complaint about Dido, a Negro maid recently arrived from Jamaica. “Oh, mamma! Mamma,” he

exclaims, “that nasty black woman has been kissing me and dirt­ying my face all over!” (I, 91). Dido’s mistress, Olivia Fairfield, a Jamaican mulatto heiress with “a dower of nearly sixty thousand pounds” (I, 25), witnesses the boy’s outburst. But seeing “something bewitchingly charming in [his] infantine simplicity” (I, 92), she decides to correct his prejudice using her body as the example.

I took him on my lap, and holding his hand in mine, I said,—“You see the difference in our hands.”

“Yes, I do, indeed,” said he, shaking his head. “Mine looks clean, and yours looks not so very dirty.”

“I am glad it does not look so very dirty,” said I; “but you will be surprised when I tell you that mine is quite as clean as your own, and that the black woman’s below, is as clean as either of them. . . . God chose it should be so, and we cannot make our skins white any more than you can make yours black.”

“Oh! But I can make mine black if I choose it,” said he, “by rubbing myself with coals.”

“And so can I make mine white by rubbing myself with chalk,” said I; “but both the coal and the chalk would be soon rubbed off again.”

“And won’t yours and hers rub off?” said he.

“Try,” said I, giving him the corner of my handkerchief; and to work the little fellow went with all his might. (I, 93–96)

When he equates mulatto and black pigmentation with filth and his own whiteness with purity, the little English boy exhibits the same sign of racial naiveté as the “Lynchburg” boy. In this case, however, he assumes that rubbing himself with “coals” will make his white skin “black” like Olivia’s and Dido’s. This kind of thinking makes us realize that both boys are simply ignorant about the way race is produced. To disabuse the little English boy, Olivia takes charge of the situation in a way that Bhide doesn’t with the Lynchburg boy. She allows him to “try” to “rub” her “clean”—to attempt to wash her white—with her handkerchief.

Srinivas Aravamudan begins Tropicopolitans considering the historicized racism imbedded in the trope of “washing a black-moor white.” In literal

3. For other literary depictions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century heiresses of color, see Appendix C in The Woman of Colour (2007). As, at once, the first mulatto heroine ever to appear as a major character in a British long prose fiction, and the first black heroine in a novel set in Europe, predating Claire de Duras’s Ourika by fifteen years, Olivia Fairfield is, arguably, the most significant black female character to appear in a British novel after Aphra Behn’s Imoinda.

terms, he explains that “experimental observation has led to experiential truth” (2): a “tropological blackamoor [is a] sign of failed whitening,” and, in turn, a “stereotype of unchangeable uselessness.” This understanding of the trope has literally worked in the self-interest of the eighteenth-century white men who codified it since it articulates the impossibility of transforming blacks into whites, thereby creating ample space to justify arguments that blacks are stubbornly inferior, and their enslavement, acceptable. But Robert Young’s *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (1995) has explored how failed acts of whitening marked an important reevaluation of the British colonial enterprise when Anthony Trollope and others from the Victorian era advocated race-mixing, or what they called “amalgamation,” as a “means of achieving an honourable withdrawal from an uneconomic colony.”

“When sufficient of our blood shall have been infused into the veins of those children of the sun,” Trollope writes, “then, I think, we may be ready, without stain to our patriotism, to take off our hats and bid farewell to the West Indies.” Young interprets Trollope’s “argument for the breeding of a new strain of mixed-raced colonial” as “a proposal for a more efficient form of colonialism” where the nation’s ideals are carried out by individuals who may physically resemble the native colonials yet identify ideologically with British ideals. For these kinds of individuals, amalgamation was seen as a success. “The lighter the shade,” Patricia Mohammed writes in her essay “The Emergence in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Jamaica of the Mulatto Woman as the Desired,” “the higher was the person’s rank on the social ladder.”

So amalgamation or race-mixing gives birth to the idea of a superior race of mulattos who understand that their superiority is in the service of upholding a racial hierarchy that white British men have been actively involved in establishing.

However, when she encourages the boy’s “experimental observation” with the hope that the “little fellow” might learn a lesson about blackness, Olivia refutes the terms to which amalgamation is being put to use. Her experiment involves a specific symbol of “failed whitening”—a free, literate, mulatto heiress—using her own body to do the work of not confirming the little boy’s racial superiority but improving his attitude toward a formerly enslaved illiterate Negress—equalizing work that directly goes against the ambitions of the white men who support the idea of amalgamation. Olivia’s

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5. Ibid., 4.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 143.
fervent advocacy for Dido is also quite a unique position for a woman of color in literature to take at this particular time. Alicia Seldon and Miranda Vanderparke are other contemporary examples of superior women of color from the Caribbean. But they are not depicted as actively involved in using their bodies to advocate for Africans. I have come to read Olivia’s use of this whitewashing trope as dangerous in a useful rather than malevolent sense because, in applying it to herself, Olivia takes on the threatening role of subtly critiquing, challenging, deconstructing, and influencing the ignorant yet impressionable mind of a potential Englishman in a way that also offers a radical rebuttal to the racist actions of self-interested white men at one of the most important times in British abolitionist history.

**THESE CHAPTER** places Olivia’s relationship to the English boy in a larger context by exploring how the trope of ‘washing a black-moor white’ was used literally and metaphorically in a wide variety of eighteenth-century English texts and iconography. I am specifically concerned with one contradiction that these multivarious deployments of the trope unearth: the fact that it was employed as a way of articulating the liberation of white British men from the stigmas of the slave trade and slavery at the same time that it signified the inability to liberate blacks from these very same stigmas. British women writers such as Fanny Burney and Jane Austen complicate this contradiction with yet another. Although they employ the trope allegorically to signify the liberation of blackened women in *The Wanderer* and *Mansfield Park*, each author’s use of a marriage plot prevents their allegory from articulating more than a very limited form of social liberation, and one that exclusively addresses white women’s rights and ignores those of black people. *The Woman of Colour*, however, exposes these gendered contradictions, first, by allowing Olivia to appropriate the trope as a way of exonerating Dido’s blackness, and then in the author’s use of symbolic names and characterizations which undermine the traditional ways white writers have used the trope. In other words, the pivotal whitewashing scene and others from *The Woman of Colour* that relate to her bigamous marriage to Augustus Merton must be read as a series of strategic deployments that forcefully resist, and hence radically attack, the trope’s racist sentiments and racially biased supporters. *The Woman of Colour’s* greatest triumph of resistance, however, appears when we examine the ways it is actively involved in undermining the nefarious intentions behind a self-interested abolitionist marriage plot.

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10. Mulatto heiresses from the novels *Edmund and Eleonora* (1797) and *Memoirs of a Scots Heiress* (1791).
carefully orchestrated by the will of Olivia’s father. The clauses in Mr. Fairfield’s ironclad will seek not merely to continue his paternalist ascendancy over Olivia beyond the grave; his will also seeks to involve her in an arranged marriage that attempts to obliterate blackness from his hereditary line. By marrying white, Olivia ensures that her children (should she bear them) will be lightened. However, Olivia’s reinvention of herself as a widow, and the novel’s final conception of its heroine as a vibrant, living educator-activist, are both subject positions that undermine Mr. Fairfield’s conception of his daughter as an object designed to whitewash his hereditary line.

In these ways, *The Woman of Colour* establishes a mulatto heiress as a resistant abolitionist figure—a “tropicopolitan” in the fullest sense of the word—that is, “the colonized subject who exists both as fictive construct of colonial tropology and actual resident of tropical space, object of representation and agent of resistance.” While the image of an English boy setting “to work” on Olivia—rubbing her black hand “with all his might”—gives the impression that abolition is a voracious process of racial obliteration, a woman of color from the West Indies resists this work and reinstates abolition in a larger sense that involves gender as well as racial liberation. If working on Olivia can produce useful resistant work of this magnitude, she is being deceptively unthreatening when she remarks, “an unportioned girl of my complexion can never be a dangerous object” (I, 13). On the contrary, *The Woman of Colour* makes clear that the mulatto heiress in England is a real threat to the ascendancy of paternalism. For this reason, Olivia, like no other fictional heroine of African descent before her, represents the realization of the threat to paternalism that Imoinda first embodied as she brandished her bow and arrow against the Deputy Governor during the rebellion against slavery in Surinam. In short, *The Woman of Colour* marks the fictional African woman’s boldest charge against the institution of slavery by her deft ability to attack paternalism not merely on its own terra firma as Cubba and Savanna have done, but within the paternalist’s own bloodline.

THE ‘WASHING A blackamoor white’ trope has appeared in biblical texts, Greek literature, and anecdotes too numerous to mention. However, it is, probably, the multitude of Latin, French, and English translations of Aesop’s *Fables* that are largely responsible for the dispersal and reinforcement of the

12. This idea of abolition as a total obliteration of blackness from English culture dates back to Queen Elizabeth’s two proclamations abolishing blackamoors from England in 1596 and 1601. See Fryer’s *Staying Power*, 8–12.
morals that the trope has come to represent: “to labor in vain,” “a fruitless undertaking,” “a useless endeavor,” and “to attempt the impossible.” As Aravamudan has pointed out, each of these morals relies on the reiteration of the black object’s permanent complexion in order to illustrate the message of futility at the heart of the moral. Yet, with all the critical attention focused on the trope’s racial dynamics, far less notice has been paid to the gender dynamics that the trope’s deployments have also raised. The majority of the trope’s deployments involve white men washing black men. But since Toni Morrison has made a point of stressing “how avoided and unanalyzed is the effect of racist inflection on the subject,” one must also ask if any difference appears when white women do the washing?

Published in 1805 under the pseudonym Edward Baldwin and written expressly for children, William Godwin’s interpretation of the Aesop fable feminizes the white washer and identifies her with a surname: Miss Moggridge. Despite being washed for three hours by a fleet of the washerwomen whom Moggridge has hired, the black man, Nango, does not racially transform (figure 18). In fact, he disappears from the end of the text altogether in favor of this explicit critique of the white female washer:

The washerwomen had agreed to do Miss Moggridge’s work, because they wanted Miss Moggridge’s money for themselves and their families. But secretly they laughed at her ignorance and folly. They told their neighbours what had happened. And when Miss Moggridge’s one-horse chaise was brought to the door for the young lady to take an airing, people pointed and said, That chaise and horse belong to the young lady who undertook to wash a blackamoor white. What a pity that her uncle, who could leave her such a pretty fortune, and who was otherwise so good a man, never thought of sparing a farthing to send her to school! She would then certainly have learned that there were negroes as well as white people in the world; and would not have been silly enough to try at impossibilities.

Godwin’s decision to allow Nango to disappear suggests that his didacticism is less focused on teaching children about racial difference and more focused


15. For a typical example, see E. Stacy’s verse “Fable CLIX: The Washing of a Blackmoor” in *Aesop. Sir Roger L’Estrange’s Fables, with Morals and Reflections in English Verse* (London, 1717), 253–54.


Figure 18.
“Washing the Blackamoor White,” 1807, William Mulready (1786–1863) (illustrated in William Godwin’s Fables, Ancient and Modern)
on exposing Moggridge as provincial, uneducated, and “silly enough to try at impossibilities.” Material wealth, at once, provides Moggridge with the means to distinguish herself from other white people in her society although not in the way that she or her rich uncle intended. Rather than consolidating her rank and reputation, the money that Moggridge expends on attempting to whiten Nango succeeds in exposing her “Dark Brains,” the character trait that leads to financial exploitation by her social inferiors as well as the derision and ridicule of her entire neighborhood.

But the lack of reason displayed by this white female washer actually does some constructive work. Godwin’s belief that “school” would have been the remedy for Moggridge’s ignorance underscores that his particular deployment of the trope intervenes in a contemporary debate about the need for educating independent women of rank. Such a proposal would not have been made at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when women’s fortunes were expected to be managed by their fathers and husbands, never themselves—Mary Astell being the unique exception to this rule since she had her own bank account. Yet it makes perfect sense at the end of the century, when Godwin’s recently deceased wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, had made contemporary ideas about female education and independence causes célèbres for ordinary women. Godwin retains the moral behind the trope, but by changing the gender of the washer he also develops its social deployment.

Jean Michel Massing’s extensive work on the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European iconography about the trope raises two further assumptions about the effects the trope had on the white female washer, neither of which he pursues in his excellent essay. First, within the wide array of portraits and prints that he reproduces and analyzes, there is a noticeable emphasis on deployments of the trope that involve white women washing black men or boys. These visual depictions of beautiful white women seen applying water and rags to black boys and men show the power of the ideal white woman to objectify her white beauty and consolidate its permanence through contrast, just as ladies used to employ young black boys as foot servants not only to display their wealth but also to conspicuously draw attention to their whiteness. This gendered reading of the trope shows that it has the ability to underscore the superiority of white complexions within Nature even as it ridicules white women for their inability to reason correctly about race in accordance with Mother Nature and their own white peer-group. The trope’s ability to oscillate in this manner demonstrates its

18. “Who against Nature, Reason, Wit and Sense, / T’impossible Attempts would make pretence; / Might try th’Experiment with as much Hope, / To wash his own Dark Brains, as Blanch the Ethiope.” Joseph Jackson’s “Moral” from his translation of Aesop’s Fables (London: Tebb, 1708), 258.
ability to generate unstable, even contradictory, meanings when the gender
dynamics involved in the trope’s deployment are analyzed.

But what about black women? How are they involved with the white-
washing trope? Massing does not reproduce any iconographic representa-
tions of African women being whitewashed with soap, water, rags, and
brushes in the manner of the black males, which suggests either that such
portraits do not exist, or if they do, they are not anywhere near as popular
and widely dispersed as those that involve black males. He does, however,
present Isaac Cruikshank’s satirical print “Washing the Blackamoor” (1795)
(figure 19), which shows the Prince of Wales holding a basin of water while
two female attendants attempt to scrub the noticeably blackened face of his
mistress, Lady Jersey, as the Princess of Wales enters exclaiming “It vont do
she must put on another face.” Here, the whitewashing of the blackened
white woman is clearly an attempt to show that the indelible stain of Lady
Jersey’s adulterous behavior will not be removed but known wherever she
goes. Although the print clearly refers to a white British woman, its gendered
illustration of a white man actively participating in whitewashing a black-
ened woman does present literal implications about the African woman in
British literature and how her literal presence affects the trope’s deployment
and meaning.

Early modern portraiture may not allow us to glean the African wom-
an’s involvement with the trope, but literature from this period does. On
the subject of white male–black female representations in literature, Lynda
Boose has pointed out that there seems to be a deliberate attempt to police
such unions in early modern and medieval texts.

In terms of the ideological assumptions of a culture such as that of early
modern England, the black male–white female union is not the narra-
tive that requires suppression. What challenges the ideology substantially
enough to require erasure is that of the black female–white male, for it is
in the person of the black woman that the culture’s pre-existing fears both
about the female sex and about gender dominance are realized.19

Boose’s suggestion that the black female–white male relationship challenges
the ideology of early modern England substantially, and must be erased
because of the power of the black woman’s body, brings another, in this
case new and somewhat shocking, dimension to the meaning and deploy-
ment of the ‘washing a blackamoor white’ trope. Boose believes that black
women are essentially “unrepresentable” in works by white, male, British,

Figure 19.
“Washing the Blackamoor,” 1795, Isaac Cruikshank (1756–1811)
early modern writers because of “free-floating anxieties” about black women “contaminating the father’s designs for perfect self-replication.” In other words, the black woman is a threatening influence to paternalist society because her reproductive body signifies an inability to reproduce a white child-heir for the white man, thereby ruining not the possibility but the purity of his hereditary line. In this, she appears to resemble Henry Neville’s Philippa from The Isle of Pines (1668), the “Negro Slave” whom Amy Boesky describes as “a female version of Cush”—Cush being the “black and loathsome” grandson of the biblical patriarch Noah, by his son, Ham. “Like Cush,” Boesky continues, “[Philippa] is doomed to bequeath her ‘loathsome’ blackness to her progeny.” However, Neville does not allow Philippa to appear as an overwhelming threat to George Pine’s genealogy since the first child she gives birth to by him is described as a “fine white childe.” Boesky believes this is an indication that “Pine’s whiteness has so overwhelmed [Philippa] that her children . . . take on his features and none of her own.” Thus, Philippa’s reproductive ability to maintain the white male’s whiteness intact provides an example of a successful act of whitening since it leaves the paternalist’s hereditary bloodline at least phenotypically pure.

But it is the instances of black women lightening but not completely whitening the white male’s line that are so destabilizing to the meaning and moral of the ‘washing a blackamoor white’ trope. Instead of merely putting the white washer’s “Dark Brains” on display, the black woman’s involvement in the trope shows that she has the ability to reproduce a far more permanent signifier of the white paternalist’s failed whiteness: his dark offspring. This offspring is far more damaging to the reputation of the male whitewasher than the social stigma of ignorance leveled at Miss Moggridge, because he or she involves the black woman’s body in the process of threatening to actively deconstruct the white male washer’s power to reproduce himself. As Boose points out, the black female’s “signifying capacity as a mother threatens nothing less than the wholesale negation of white patriarchal authority,” and she confirms this negation by considering George Peel’s The Battle of Alcazar and The Legend of Morien, the Black Knight—texts in which the black woman produces black sons from unions with white men—sons whose blackness confirms her dominance in her relationship with the white paternalist. But a daughter produced from such a union might offer the white

20. Ibid., 46.
21. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 176.
paternalist an opportunity to not merely assuage his anxiety about his blood-line but secure its future. If this white male washer could use his financial influence to rig the marriage market and ensure that his black daughter would marry another white male he might reset in motion the whitening of his hereditary line. This could be achieved if the white paternalist made this black daughter an heiress and arranged her marriage in a document that duty would compel her to uphold. When Mr. Fairfield dies leaving explicit clauses about marriage in his will for his daughter, Olivia, to follow, *The Woman of Colour* realizes the complex dynamics involved in this reproductive deployment of washing a blackamoor white.

ALTHOUGH WRITTEN in an epistolary style already outmoded in 1808,25 *The Woman of Colour* still manages to radically transform a marriage plot that, according to Ann duCille, has been traditionally “coded white, female and European.”26 In letters composed by Olivia Fairfield to Mrs. Millbanke, her English governess who resides in Jamaica, the tale focuses on the problems that arise when this Jamaican mulatto heiress travels to England intending to marry her Caucasian first cousin, Augustus Merton, in a marriage arranged unilaterally in the will of her recently deceased father. Mr. Fairfield never met Augustus before his death; yet in choosing him as Olivia’s spouse he wanted to “secure his child a proper protector in a husband” (I, 9). Only one fact suggests why Mr. Fairfield considers this unknown nephew a “proper protector”: Augustus’s mother’s letters to Jamaica describe this son as the “image” (I, 22) of Mr. Fairfield. It is this strong physical affinity which drives Mr. Fairfield’s hope that his nephew will be as predisposed to bestow on Olivia a spousal brand of the protection that he has already provided as a father. But the very act of enforcing an arranged marriage to one’s double contains within it emotions other than protection—self-interest being one. In Jamaica, “the prejudices which [Mr. Fairfield] had imbibed in common with his countrymen, forbade his” (I, 7) marrying Olivia’s enslaved African mother, Marcia, before her untimely death. In light of this failure, Mr. Fairfield’s determination to reproduce, in England, the almost identical marriage that could not take place in Jamaica, resonates as a convenient posthumous attempt by the reformed rake to, proverbially, kill two birds with one act: absolve himself of his past “prejudices” as well as protect his daughter from the stigmas of her impure racial and sexual history. It is clear, however, that Mr. Fairfield’s act will not achieve these outcomes with equal success if we compare him with his contemporary peers.

This idea that an English paternalist can absolve the ethical indiscretions of his own past with an act designed to protect a person of color from future stigma is historicized in one of the most important acts that eighteenth-century English paternalists undertook. “When a change of ministry took place,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes in his 1808 review of the History of Abolition,

Mr. Fox and Lord Grenville brought not only their own, but all their official interest, to cleanse away this guilt from the national character; and our author [Thomas Clarkson] and his virtuous coadjutors received the final reward of their labours in the legal abolition of the [slave] trade relatively to the British empire.27

Although one would expect the 1807 abolition act’s primary concern to be the protection of free Africans from future enslavement, Coleridge’s response to it reveals a motivation of even greater importance. His cleansing metaphor presupposes that Britain has been sullied or blackened by its involvement in the slave trade,28 and that the paternalists’ act of abolition washes both the stain of the trade, and the guilt of Britain’s participation in it, away. We do not, however, get as concrete a depiction of the social protection that millions of vulnerable Africans were to receive as a result of abolition. As Peter Fryer has pointed out, “As late as 1822, Thomas Armstrong of Dalston, near Carlisle, bequeathed a slave in his will,”29 leaving us with an impression that even on ostensibly free soil, abolitionist legislation was motivated less by a concern for the protection of blacks and more by a need to display the enlightened legal identity of an ethically cleansed British nation.

My reading of Coleridge is confirmed further by the opinions of other British paternalists expressed in the Substance of the Debates on A Resolution for Abolishing the Slave Trade (1806). In this, the most extensive record of speeches given in both Houses of Parliament on the pros and cons of abolition, it is clear that the focus on documenting and recording the inhumanity of the slave trade that had characterized previous efforts on behalf of the


28. Deirdre Coleman’s excellent article “Janet Schaw and the Complexions of Empire,” Eighteenth-Century Studies 36 (2003): 169–93, confirms that Coleridge felt this way, and it also mentions the general “proliferation of metaphors of whitening and blackening during the last two decades of the eighteenth century, when metropolitan culture became increasingly agitated about its complicity in the cruelties of the slave trade” (170).

29. Staying Power, 203.
abolitionist movement are significantly toned down from this last, successful attempt to pass an abolition bill. Instead, friends of abolition, such as Fox and the Solicitor General, Sir Samuel Romilly, are more concerned with the cultural effect that a prolonged involvement with the slave trade will have on the British Parliament, the national character, and the economic reputation of the nation. Postponing abolition, they argued, showed that British MPs were, both, incapable of making good the 1792 resolution that had originally called for abolition within four years, and perversely content to continue involving the nation and its economy in a trade that was already perceived as an incontrovertible moral error against “justice, humanity and sound policy.”

The abolitionist historian Roger Anstey has observed that “abolitionists consistently used the argument of national interest in support of particular measures of abolition,” and his statement acknowledges, once again, the nationally biased motives behind abolition that I have described in the Debates and Coleridge’s review. Given this nationalist bias, I want to suggest that a narcissistic spirit lurks behind the 1807 abolition act. Even though it professed to, and of course did, aid Africans, “all [the] official interest” that successfully brought it into being spoke more of a paternal need to resolve Britain’s ethical quandary over the slave trade than of Britons’ desire to protect Africans. For this reason, the abolition act ethically misused the Africans that it professed to aid, (ab)using them only as a pretext for what seems to be a vainglorious attempt to distinguish British paternalists as ethical legislators, and, by extension, a British nation ethically absolved—indeed white-washed—of all association with “the vile trade.” Some Britons appear to have recognized this narcissism. As Eric Williams recounts, “Coleridge had been awarded the Browne Gold Medal at Cambridge for an ode on slavery. But in 1811 he sneered at the ‘philanthropy-trade,’ accused Wilberforce of caring only for his own soul, and criticized Clarkson as a man made vain by benevolence, ‘the moral steam engine or the giant with one idea.’”

**WHEN IT PRESENTS** Mr. Fairfield’s will demanding that Olivia marry Augustus for her own protection while also entertaining the idea that Mr. Fairfield

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30. (London: Dawson’s, 1968). This phrase was a familiar refrain throughout a large majority of the speeches.


32. ‘(ab)using,’ should be read as ‘using’ but I include the suggestive prefix to remind us that, under hegemony, ‘abuse’ and ‘use’ are not mutually exclusive. Under hegemony, abuse is always a part of being used.

has self-interested motives of his own for making this demand, *The Woman of Colour* links this English-Creole paternalist with his enlightened English contemporaries; they are all narcissistic abolitionists who use antiracial acts for their own benefit. But the novel also explores the interesting corollary that these antiracial acts are as useful in absolving the stigmas that surround Olivia as they are the sins of her father.

Mr. Fairfield’s will attempts to whitewash his mulatto daughter’s stigmas in one of two possible ways. The first involves her inheritance. “It is a Dowry, Methinks should make the Sun-burnt proverb false, And wash the Ethiop White” (V, i), remarks the Moorish woman, Zanche, in Nahum Tate’s reworking of John Webster’s *The White Devil as Injur’d Love, or The Cruel Husband* (1707). Her statement could not be truer of Mr. Fairfield’s rationale. By sending to England a daughter with a dowry worth nearly sixty thousand pounds, Mr. Fairfield shares Zanche’s hope that an awesome fortune can liberate a woman of color from the vagaries of racial prejudice, the dowry acting as a protective shield alleviating Olivia from the stigmas of blackness, illegitimacy, and slavery so that she may appear in a guise commonly associated with wealthy whiteness. Although we can use the same whitewashing trope to define Zanche and Olivia’s social transformations into figures who are able to enjoy the privileges of wealthy whiteness, they are very different when it comes to the issue of consent. In her narrative, Zanche proposes to steal her dowry, and in doing so, consents to and controls the terms under which she is transformed. But Mr. Fairfield’s will apportions Olivia’s dower with Augustus if she marries him and with Augustus’s older brother, George, if she does not. This means that he conceives Olivia’s transformation into a figure of wealthy whiteness without her consent and within a transferable purview of white male familial control.

Because of this, Mr. Fairfield’s behavior must also be considered in the cruder, far more malevolent light captured in the *Adventures of Jonathan Corncob* (1787). In the chapter titled “The West-Indian way of white-washing, or rather the true way of washing the blackamoor white,” this anonymous novel vividly illustrates the conditions under which an English-Creole paternalist nonconsensually controls a black woman’s transformation into a figure of whiteness. While in Barbados, Jonathan and a West Indian friend visit the plantation of the aptly named Creole, Mr. Winter, who is not at home:

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34. See the epigram at the beginning of Part Two for another example. Bissett’s ridicule of dame Heureux cannot hide the fact that her artistic endeavors are a deliberate attempt to control her own transformation into a figure of wealthy whiteness.
We were, nevertheless, ushered into an apartment, at one end of which was sitting an old negress, smoking her pipe. Near her was an elderly mulatto woman; at a little distance was a female still less tawny of complexion, called in the country, as I believe, a mestee; and at the other end of the room I observed a yellow quadroon giving suck to a child, which, though a little sallow, was as white as children in Europe generally are. I could not help remarking to the West-Indian this regular gradation of light and shade.

“This,” said he, “is the family of my friend, Mr. Winter; the three younger females and the child are the progeny of the old negress.”

“And who are the fathers?”

“Mr. Winter himself is the father of them all,” replied he: “when he was very young he had the mulatto woman by the negress: when the mulatto was twelve years old, he took her for his mistress, and had by her the mestee. At about the same age his intimacy with the mestee produced the quadroon, who had by him a few months ago the white child you see in her arms. This is what is called in this country washing a man’s self white, and Mr. Winter has the credit of having washed himself white at a very early age, being at this time less than sixty years old.”

This complicated incest, and the coolness with which my friend spoke of it, made me begin to think it no wonder that Barbadoes was subject to hurricanes.35

The shades of complexion resulting from Mr. Winter’s blatantly incestuous rapes physically testify to his nonconsensual villainy. Most importantly, however, although Jonathan sees only the cumulative display of whitewashed black female bodies, the reproductive act itself (“he had the mulatto woman by the negress . . . and [he] had by her the mestee” etc.) “is called . . . washing a man’s self white.” This “West-Indian way of white-washing” involves black women continually reproducing lighter versions of themselves as a result of repeated, violent, nonconsensual paternalist acts that are only indicative of a Creole paternalist’s interest—his brash, narcissistic desire to gratify himself without regulation, abusing even his own immediate bloodline. In the age of slavery, the epidermal transformations of West Indian women occur under perversions36 of paternal authority.

35. (Boston: D. R. Godine, 1976), 72–73 (my emphasis). Another reference to this West Indian way of whitewashing appears in this note from Thomas Morris’s “Quashy, or, The Coal Black Maid” (1796). In the American version (Philadelphia: Humphreys, 1797), the reference is whitewashed from the text.

36. Michael Ragussis states, “‘Perversion’ is a specialized term, especially prominent in the nineteenth century, for the wrong kind of conversion.” Figures of Conversion, 132.
By forcing his daughter to marry his physical surrogate without her consent, then, Mr. Fairfield’s behavior to Olivia can be read as a similarly perverse ‘West-Indian way of white-washing’ akin to Mr. Winter and as vainglorious as the British paternalists who abolished the slave trade. In this “complicated incest,” Mr. Fairfield displaces his own incestuous desire for Olivia onto his physical surrogate, Augustus, not so much because he wants this marriage to protect his daughter or symbolically absolve him of his sexual depredation against Marcia, as I suggested earlier, but because he is interested more in reveling in that sexual depredation so that, like Mr. Winter, he too can commit a heinous act of abolition against his offspring—the abolition of her blackness. For Mr. Fairfield uses Olivia as Mr. Winter does his slaves: they are all responsible for whitening a Creole paternalist’s familial line of descendants. Indeed, Mr. Fairfield insinuates that this benefit to his ancestral name interests him more than the protection of his daughter in another clause to his will which demands that Augustus adopt the “Fairfield” name if he marries Olivia. This clause ensures that not only will Olivia and Augustus’s whitewashed offspring resemble Mr. Fairfield even more than Olivia does because of their parents’ combined physical traits, they will also bear his revered name and reestablish its legitimate connection to whiteness.

Thus, *The Woman of Colour* explores how a forced interracial marriage of a wealthy mulatto woman to a white man in England enacts the violent history of abuse experienced by enslaved women of color in the West Indies but also how this abuse is also a narcissistic boon to white men, literally white-washing their ancestral involvement with, and connection to, slavery and the slave trade. I want to bring a new perspective to this history of West Indian abuse, however, by considering it through a comparative racial lens. Since the issues of race, transformation, and consent are all important components in the discourse of Jewish Conversion, and Michael Ragussis has described this abusive movement as an “English madness” during the era of slavery, I find it helpful to think of washing a black-moor white as an equally abusive example of the “English madness” to improve the situation of another of its racial others. Isaac Land’s work on Jonas Hanway, the English philanthropist who directed the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor, also proves helpful in establishing the connection between Jewishness and blackness in the construction of the English national identity. Hanway’s organization was responsible for shipping large number of the black poor to Sierra Leone in West Africa to found a new colony, literally getting rid of the black poor that littered the streets of London. But as Land points out, “In the early 1750s—before he became famous as the friend of orphans, chimney sweeps,
and unwed mothers—Hanway first became a public figure as the author of pamphlets opposing Jewish naturalization.” 38 Hanway’s efforts to resist the naturalization of Jews on the basis that they “would undermine the foundations of Britain’s greatness . . . and his efforts to expel ‘foreign’ elements from Britain” through the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor were “two sides of the same coin” 39 in Land’s opinion. Yet Hanway’s reputation for philanthropy made his work for the Committee seem progressive. As Land states, “humane actions could serve many purposes at once” 40 some of which are not commendatory. Manipulating Ragussis’s terminology, I want to classify these women of color as West Indian ‘figures of conversion’ who are forced to endure epidermal ‘acts of conversion’ without their consent because of British writers’ belief that such abusive acts are racially progressive. 41

CONSENT IS essential in any act of conversion because one must agree to transform oneself. In this way, every act of conversion is also a consensual act of abolition: if he converts, the Jew consents to abolish his former religious identity for a completely new one. But, as I have shown, Creole paternalists force black women to commit acts of whitewashing during the era of slavery that are, in fact, perverse acts of abolition since they involve the convert in a nonconsensual process of racial improvement allegorically akin to ethnic cleansing. These perverse acts of abolition, however, are complicated in that they are also perceived as improving the social lives of people of color: British paternalists protect free Africans from future enslavement with their vainglorious abolition act, Mr. Fairfield liberates Olivia from the stigma of illegitimacy with his arranged marriage, and even Mr. Winter’s successive rapes eventually create a child light enough to escape slavery by passing as white. These are all occasions where black figures who are whitewashed might consent to abide by perverse acts of abolition because they carry with them the benefits of freedom. Thus, washing a black-moor white—an act I will henceforth refer to as ‘epidermal conversion’ to reflect the potential for liberation enabled by an individual’s consensual transformation from blackness to whiteness—might be a useful trope from which to build a progressive discourse about the abolition of slavery. But can British writers present acts

39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., 98.
41. Ragussis also acknowledges a connection between epidermal conversion and Jewish conversion in Figures of Conversion: “The impossibility of racial transformation—the black man becoming white—becomes an analogy for the impossibility of religious conversion—the Jew becoming Christian” (25–26).
of epidermal conversion in ways that do liberating work, and without the racial, national, or incestuous narcissism that I attributed to the 1807 act of abolition and the actions of Messirs Winter and Fairfield?

Samuel Jackson Pratt’s unproduced two-act farce, *The New Cosmetic, or The Triumph of Beauty* (1790), implies that they can. It briefly touches on the possibility that a perverse yet unbiased act of epidermal conversion can liberate a black man. Pratt’s title refers to a caustic Caribbean elixir that whitens complexions, and a colonial Irishman, Greville, who wants to use it “to improve his pretty face” (I, iv). However, the pain associated with the process so scares him that he decides to test it first on a black slave named Quacou, “and if he endures it” (I, iv), Greville will then try it on himself. “Does it make a negro man white, massah?” Quacou asks. “It does more,” Greville replies:

For it makes him so lovely, that the very white women will be glad to adopt him as a husband; but I will tell you it is kept a profound secret from all the blacks, least they should become as white as ourselves, and so no longer continue in subjection to us. (I, iv)

Underscoring the fact that slavery is an arbitrary condition predicated on epidermal difference rather than an innate sense of inferiority, Greville offers Quacou seductive and unbiased benefits for consenting to the perverse act of racial obliteration. It will allow the “lovely” slave to personally “triumph” over two liberties that his blackness continually withholds from him: interracial marriage and social equality. Quacou’s use of the ‘new cosmetic’ ultimately ends in complete failure, however, a fact which suggests that *The New Cosmetic* cosmeticizes its own racial biases by proposing the benefits and then withholding the triumph of Quacou’s perverse act of epidermal conversion.

We can trace the idea that acts of epidermal conversion liberate black women with more success in two texts published in 1814. Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* and Frances Burney’s *The Wanderer* represent the theme of

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42. For white male West Indians, the theme of conversion differs. Creole men, such as Cecilia’s (1782) Mr. Albany, transform into morally excessive bastions of virtue after successfully overcoming the profligate vices that were common in eighteenth-century characterizations of West Indians. A male Creole’s inability to convert from profligacy to virtue ended in exile, as Belinda’s (1801) Mr. Vincent illustrates. But the notion of white male West Indian conversion, while extremely interesting and open for enquiry, does not enter the scope of this essay.

abolition prominently, openly employ the trope of epidermal conversion, and furtively debate the issue of consent in the characterizations of Fanny Price and Juliet Granville.\textsuperscript{44} In her edition of \textit{The Wanderer}, Margaret Doody has already pointed out the abolitionist themes surrounding Juliet’s introduction in the novel.\textsuperscript{45} Having left France disguised as a black woman, Juliet sees the English shore and darts “forward with such eagerness, that she was the first to touch the land, where, with a fervour that seemed resistless, she rapturously ejaculated, ‘Heaven, Heaven be praised!’” (I, i, 22, \textit{Wand}). Burney’s portrayal of this black woman’s desperate need to touch British soil can be no less than an explicit invocation of the Mansfield myth of immediate freedom for any slave who set foot on this ostensibly hallowed land of liberty. Joseph Lew also evokes Lord Mansfield’s memory in his very insightful reading of the abolitionist elements at play in the title and narrative of \textit{Mansfield Park}.\textsuperscript{46} In his and Doody’s analyses, Austen and Burney are clearly harking back to a very specific abolitionist past involving black slaves, Lord Mansfield, and debates about freedom for all English residents irrespective of race. But neither critic has considered the way their respective text addresses abolition in terms of epidermal conversion, something I will now discuss using Fanny and Juliet’s characterizations.

During her introduction to the text, Fanny is described as a child with “no glow of complexion” (I, ii, 12, \textit{Mans}), a description that draws attention to her unchanging color. She is epidermally dull. This physical trait has an explicit connection to Negroes. Aravamudan’s \textit{Tropicopolitans} reveals that, to the English, black people—whose fixed, dark complexions could not display the gradations of color prized in blushing—were considered ugly and, by extension, useless because of their epidermal inabilities to “glow.” While Fanny clearly isn’t Negro in any literal sense, her unchanging complexion indicates that she is marred by the same stigmas that Negroes faced: ugliness and especially uselessness, something that reveals itself in the contradictory family “habit of employing” (I, xv, 116, \textit{Mans}) her to run useful errands for their benefit while refusing to consider her an equal member of their

\textsuperscript{44} Mansfield Park \textit{(New York: Signet Classic, 1964)}, and \textit{The Wanderer}, ed. Margaret Doody \textit{(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991)}.

\textsuperscript{45} In Doody’s edition of \textit{The Wanderer}, see Appendix II, “Burney and Race Relations,” 884–87. Also, Burney’s characterization of Juliet should be considered in relation to William Wordsworth’s poem “The Banished Negroes” (1802), which also describes a Negro woman on her way to Britain from France.

society, just like a black slave. The same problems plague the blackened Juliet. Once she reveals the “dusky hue” of her face, hands, and arms, Elienor, Juliet’s rival for Harleigh’s affections, gave a “look of triumph” (I, i, 19, *Wand*) aimed at deflating in his eyes the allure of a woman now exposed as nothing more than a “tawny Hottentot” (I, i, 12, *Wand*). Moreover, Mrs. Maple, “incessantly . . . surveying the stranger,” emphasizes Juliet’s uselessness in financial terms when she complains to Harleigh, “I don’t think that we are much indebted to you for bringing us such company as this [Juliet] into our boat!” (I, i, 20, *Wand*). Unlike Negro women, however, these Caucasian females are not indefinitely consigned to the stigmas of “unchangeable uselessness.” As Ben Jonson’s masques of 1605 and 1608 remind us, when blackness is performed by virtuous white women it only precedes their epidermal conversions to beauty.

In both novels, female transformations from blackness to beauty are openly witnessed. Juliet enacts hers in front of Mrs. Ireton, the extremely wealthy proprietress who pays Juliet’s fare to London from Dover. Over the course of four days Mrs. Ireton notices how Juliet’s complexion changes “from a tint nearly black, to the brightest, whitest, and most dazzling fairness” (I, iv, 43, *Wand*). Fanny undergoes similar transformations in front of her own benefactor, Sir Thomas Bertram. “But where is Fanny? Why do I not see my little Fanny?” (II, i, 139, *Mans*), he asks as soon as he arrives back from Antigua, his diminutive adjective underscoring the visual image of his niece that he recalls from memory. When he actually sees her, “little Fanny” physically transforms before him; Sir Thomas observed “with decided pleasure how much she had grown.” An epidermal transformation accompanies this physical one:

> He led her nearer the light and looked at her again—inquired particularly after her health, and then correcting himself, observed that he need not inquire, for her appearance spoke sufficiently on that point. A fine blush having succeeded the previous paleness of her face, he was justified in his belief of her equal improvement in health and beauty. (II, i, 139, *Mans*)

Sir Thomas’s “little Fanny” transforms not simply into a woman in front

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47. Indeed, if, as I am suggesting here, Fanny’s employment early in the novel defines her black position within the Bertram household, we see even more evidence of her blackness as she contemplates visiting Portsmouth near the novel’s end. Fanny proclaims, “She was of use to no one else” (*Mansfield Park*, ed. Claudia Johnson [New York: Norton, 1998], 251; my emphasis) but Aunt Bertram, and in this companionate relationship we know that she is largely employed to get through the “few difficulties” of some piece of “needle-work of little use and no beauty” (16; my emphasis), two direct phrases about the work Fanny does which, once again, connect her to Aravamudan’s Negroes.
of him; the “fine blush” that “succeeded the previous paleness of her face” specifically illustrates Fanny’s epidermal conversion from a useless black girl with “no glow of complexion” to a beautiful white woman only slightly less striking than Juliet’s own transformation “from a tint nearly black, to the brightest, whitest and most dazzling fairness.”

From associations with the ugly and “unchangeable uselessness” of blackness then, Fanny and Juliet achieve the impossible—epidermal conversions to attractive whiteness. But to what end? Since Aravamudan has pointed out that ‘washing a black-moor white’ is an English trope used to express the idea of a “fruitless undertaking” as witnessed on the bodies of an unchangeable and useless race of ugly black people, I think Austen and Burney have appropriated this trope and they have transformed it into an expression of some advantage to white women whose ugly, useless, and unchangeable conception of themselves is changing because of contemporary debates about the rights of women.

These white women display successful acts of epidermal conversion that allegorize the issue of female consent in the face of hegemony. For Sir Thomas and Mrs. Ireton represent a collective notion of hegemony in the Gramscian sense of predominance obtained over individuals by consent rather than force. Although Fanny and Juliet silently consent to abide by hegemony when they accept acts of charity performed on their behalves, the actions of their hegemonic leaders are fraught with the same use and abuse of white women that I described between English-Creole paternalists and West Indian women of color. Mrs. Ireton uses Juliet in front of her opulent house in fashionable Grosvenor Square; the wealthy proprietor “turned exultingly” to the impoverished woman and “intently watched the impression which, when her servants appeared, would be made by their rich liveries” (I, v, 47, *Wand*). Here, Mrs. Ireton abuses Juliet’s physical response to opulence in order to perversely gratify her own narcissism.

Sir Thomas’s use of Fanny is even more narcissistically perverse than this because it has all the characteristics of Mr. Fairfield’s abuse of Olivia. The Baronet abuses his niece’s body in the marriage market, “sending her away” to bed at the end of the night “of her ball in order to recommend her as a wife [to Henry Crawford]” (II, x, 220, *Mans*) just as the Creole’s unilateral orders Olivia to England to marry Augustus. With these ostentatious displays of “absolute power,” Sir Thomas shares Mr. Fairfield’s “pleasing anticipation of what would be” (II, x, 219, *Mans*) the gratifying result of using these women in this way: the stain of poverty that blemishes Fanny will be whitewashed with marriage to Mr. Crawford just as Mr. Fairfield

hopes that his daughter’s marriage to Augustus will obliterate her black heritage. Sir Thomas’s use of Fanny even takes a self-interested turn immediately after his return from Antigua, when Edmund tells Fanny, “the truth is, your uncle never did admire you till now, and now he does. Your complexion is so improved! . . . and your figure” (II, iii, 154, *Mans*). Here, Edmund implicates his father’s admiration of Fanny’s “improved” body and complexion in a “complicated incest” reminiscent of *Jonathan Corncob*’s “West-Indian way of white-washing.” In this instance, the Antiguan plantocrat, Sir Thomas, commits repeated, violent, nonconsensual acts against Fanny’s body—sending her to bed, and later, to Portsmouth—not with the intention of raping her, but to force her to gratify his interest in her becoming Mrs. Henry Crawford just as the conditions in Mr. Fairfield’s will force Olivia to become Mrs. Augustus Fairfield.

Thus, Sir Thomas and Mrs. Ireton only use women as opportunities on which to inscribe their own narcissistic fantasies. While Fanny and Juliet consent to be ruled by hegemony, they do not consent to being perversely abused by hegemonic authority. Their critique of these figures appears in the act of epidermal conversion itself. Fanny and Juliet convert *in the face* of hegemony rather than *because of it*. Where the epidermal transformations of Ben Jonson’s Ethiopian Nymphs and Mr. Winter’s slaves take place outside the purviews of those texts, Fanny and Juliet’s epidermal conversions occur right before the eyes of Sir Thomas and Mrs. Ireton. In *The Masque of Beauty* (1608) and *Jonathan Corncob* we do not see any of the incestuous violence or transformative magic associated with epidermal transformation; we see only the completed acts—black women *already* re-produced as white through the violent nonconsensual act of a Creole slaveholder and the consensual will of a male monarch. When they commit their own self-controlled acts of epidermal conversion within the purview of hegemony, Fanny and Juliet show, allegorically, that they are *free* and able to *act by themselves*—to re-produce lighter, more attractive versions of themselves without the consent or influence of hegemony and despite its ostensibly benevolent yet undeniably self-interested and abusive gaze.

After these liberating acts of self-transformation, Fanny and Juliet are ultimately rewarded with marriage to the heroes, Edmund and Harleigh. But these marriages also integrate them back into the system of hegemony that formerly abused them, making the epidermal acts of conversion that Fanny and Juliet perform seem even more perverse than those of British paternalists and Creole slaveholders since, like Pratt’s *New Cosmetic*, they give the illusion of a black person’s liberation from hegemony only to ultimately revoke it.

Allegorically, then, Austen and Burney show that Fanny and Juliet’s perverse acts of epidermal conversion cannot do the work of racial liberation on
behalf of oppressed women of color because they exhibit a bias toward white proponents of the female cause. In their examples of epidermal conversion, Austen and Burney are not trying to draw attention to radically transformative acts such as the abolition of slavery or racism, and they make this clear by historicizing each text in an abolitionist past explicitly associated with black complexions and the question of liberty in England. Fanny and Juliet's representations only address the relationship British women have with the promise of freedom that the 1772 Mansfield Judgment appeared to ratify with its mythical claim of immediate freedom for black slaves. Austen and Burney appropriate the most potent example of Britain's ability to grant freedom to all—blackness—only to aesthetically transform it using a discourse of beauty and virtue of which the ultimate reward is marriage and not freedom. Thus, the figures of epidermal conversion in *Mansfield Park* and *The Wanderer* are only allegorical representations of the need for white women to consent to the way their bodies are to be (ab)used under hegemony, an undecidedly conservative and only moderately progressive approach to the rights of women even for its day.

In *The Woman of Colour*, Olivia also consents to abide by Mr. Fairfield’s will despite the fact that the marriage he arranges for her is racially abusive. Nevertheless, it takes place, and the newlyweds are happy; that is, until a combination of circumstances reveal a new fact: prior to Olivia’s arrival in England, Augustus had made a clandestine marriage with Angelina Forrester, a white Englishwoman of low birth who he has been led to believe had perished while he was away on business. Augustus’s conniving sister-in-law, Letitia Merton, had maliciously hidden Angelina away, however, only to reproduce her midway through the novel. Olivia’s interracial marriage is abruptly annulled once Angelina reclaims her husband by prior contract. During the text’s dramatic epilogue, a reader, identified as the “Friend” of the text’s “Editor,” complains about this ending: Olivia was “not rewarded . . . even with the usual meed of virtue—a husband” (II, 219). The Friend implies that denying marriage to a woman who deserves its protection is just as unfair as forcing her into an arranged one. The Editor, however, makes it clear that this choice is deliberate; marriage was never Olivia’s ultimate objective. Her role in the novel is greater. She is designed to wrest the trope of epidermal conversion away from the English paternalists and champions of the female cause who, as I have shown, appropriated it for their own biased purposes.

To witness the occasions where Olivia resists the perverse acts of epidermal conversion imposed by paternalists and performed by English hero-
ines, we must look closely at the author’s deliberate use of names, the most significant being the English surname “Fairfield.” It literally refers to the place where fairs and carnivals are held, and in doing so, recalls Stallybrass and White’s *Politics and Poetics of Transgression* and its discussions of fairs as carnivalesque sites of transgression where binaries—high/low, rich/poor, local/foreign, clean/dirty, fair/grotesque—occur and collapse.\(^{49}\) As an unportioned Jamaican mulatto heiress, Olivia is a ‘fair field’ in exactly this binary sense of the word; her racial, geographic, and financial hybridity situates her “at the intersection of economic and cultural forces” (29–30) that incorporate and collapse all of the binaries Stallybrass and White associate with the fair. However, Terry Eagleton and others have pointed out the limitation of fairs as sites of transgression since they are “licensed affair[s]” and are, therefore, “permissible rupture[s] of hegemony” (13) that only give the illusion of transgression. Stallybrass and White counter this suggestion, claiming that in “the presence of sharpened political antagonism, [a carnivalesque site] may often act as catalyst and site of actual and symbolic struggle” (14). I contend that during the era of abolition, *The Woman of Colour* is one such “catalyst and site of actual and symbolic struggle” against hegemony, a symbolic struggle that we come to understand by considering the author’s use of carnivalesque names, naming, and characterization.

By calling this novel *The Woman of Colour*, the author seems well aware of the resistance that carnivalesque discourse offers to a mulatto heroine struggling against racially oppressive forces. The title functions in the same way that an advertisement for an attraction at an English fair would, inviting the reader/fairgoer to view up close a dark-skinned female body.\(^{50}\) The epistolary genre, however, allows Olivia to control the way she represents her undeniably Negroid body in a manner not available to Saartjie Baartman, Olivia’s contemporary with respect to being a black woman on display.\(^{51}\) Conflating her position as an object on display with the fact that she is also a literate subject controlling how her body appears, the author makes Olivia into a bourgeois racial character in England with a perspective that Stallybrass and White did not account for and Saartjie Baartman could not possibly imagine: the subject who not only understands how carnivalesque rhetoric and imagery work but also uses these things in a narrative that deconstructs the terms under which she herself is considered a grotesque black female object in the first place.

\(^{49}\) Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986). (All subsequent references are in parentheses.)

\(^{50}\) See Garside’s *Bibliographical Survey*, 46–63, for the importance of a novel’s title at this time.

This deconstructive work begins with Olivia’s descriptions of characters whose names are explicit signifiers of conversion’s failure—figures such as the geriatric bachelor and spinster twins Colonel and Miss “Singleton,” who both make futile attempts to transform themselves. The Colonel had “nearly reached his grand climacteric yet had taken wonderful pains in trying to put himself back at least thirty years by powdering and pomatuming his grey hairs” (I, 122). And “Miss Singleton’s labours [were] as arduous as her brother” (I, 124), since her “feathers of the ostrich . . . mounted in several directions from her head . . . her bared ears, and elbows, and back, and bosom . . . [and] her volatility and frisky . . . airs” were the many tools of conversion by which she “threw herself back into the girl” (I, 124–25).

Thoroughly amused by their absurd actions, Olivia concludes, “this brother and sister . . . must never marry, but grow young (for old they can never be) together” (I, 123–24).

The “Ingots” are a “genteel vulgar” (I, 192) family of Nabobs, and, as their family name indicates, they are awaiting conversion to a more refined state that, ironically, will never happen. Olivia observes that “lady [Ingot] is a masculine woman” (I, 194), her son Frederic “is very effeminate and diminutive in his person” (I, 196), and Sir Marmaduke is a Singleton clone of which “the powder on his head, seems to be laid on with no sparing hand, to cover the depredations of time” (I, 196). “The Pagoda, the newly raised edifice of Sir Marmaduke” (I, 193), is his biggest travesty of conversion, however, since it signifies an attempt to re-produce Eastern culture in an English setting and earns from Augustus a moniker that perfectly reflects its comical inhabitants: “temple of folly” (I, 194).

These characters—the young oldsters, the masculine woman, the effeminate young man, the English Nabob—are all walking oxymorons, rhetorical figures who clown conversion by juggling two identities in ways that blur the distinctions between those identities. In other words, these clowns of conversion become perversions of what they should be (old, female, masculine, English) because they are absurdly trying to convert themselves into things that they are not (young, masculine, etc.). Of course, under this definition, a mulatto woman with a complexion not far removed from that of a Negro slave and a dowry far exceeding that of many a wealthy white heiress could be considered a clown of conversion too; yet Olivia’s letters take pains to distinguish her hybridized body from these other grotesque characters.

The Singletons’ absurdly effusive dancing (I, 121–25); Frederic Ingot’s “non-descript,” “monkey”-like clothes (I, 196) and “recumbent” (I, 199), “serpentine” (I, 231) body; Sir Marmaduke’s “dazzling” (I, 194) equipage; Lady Ingot’s “nervously strong” (I, 194) voice: these grotesque acts contrast with Olivia’s own black body in action. She is not, in any way, a colonial
character who merely mimics European forms of culture and politeness to absurd effect, such as Stallybrass and White’s “manteger” who “drinks with his lips ‘like a man’” (41). “You have frequently remarked that I walk in a manner peculiar to myself,” she tells her English governess, Mrs. Millbanke:

You have termed it majestic and graceful; I have been fearful that it carried something of a proud expression; but I believe it very difficult to alter the natural gait and I am too much of the common size, with regard to height, to walk like the generality of my sex. There must surely, however, be something very particular in my air... many a gentleman follows to repass me, and to be mortified at his folly when he has caught a view of my mulatto countenance. I laugh at this. (I, 111–12)

Olivia’s uncommon “height,” “majestic and graceful” walk, and “natural gait” are different from the “generality of [her] sex” but clearly more attractive than the grotesque contortions that the clowns of conversion perform. Here, Olivia refutes Stallybrass and White’s assumption that civilized behavior is “the essential and unchanging possession which distinguishes the European citizen from the West Indian” (41); she shows that civilized behavior comes as naturally to her black body as its obverse, savagery, comes to Europeans.

Additionally, Olivia’s ability to “laugh” at the “folly” of the white male viewer who is attracted to her “air” but “mortified” by her “mulatto countenance” illustrates the ascendant position she takes over white men. Her laugh is an indication that she dismisses, as irrelevant, the white male viewer’s blatant prejudice; instead, she enjoys the befuddled horror of his realization that he has found someone he considers grotesquely black undeniably attractive. Olivia’s ascendancy over the white male viewer becomes even more pronounced once her blackness itself is on display. During her first appearance at a ball she tells Mrs. Millbanke: “the men also—believe me—they walked up in pairs, hanging one on another’s arm, and, with a stare of effrontery, eyed your Olivia, as if they had been admitted purposely to see the untamed savage at a shilling a piece!” (I, 117). Here, Olivia responds to the white male viewers’ blatant prejudice with a carnivalesque perspective of her own. She describes them as “animals” (I, 117) who “slouched (for it could not be called walking) up to [her]” (I, 118), a movement that confirms their savagery just as her “natural gait” confirms her civilization. Furthermore, their parrotlike snatches of Continental languages (“Pauvre diable,” “Allons,” “mabella”) (I, 117) indicate that these men are animalistic hybrids of a particular sort—grotesque Macaronis, the eighteenth-century dilettante that an issue of the Ladies Magazine described as “A thing that has some resemblance to a
man.” In these letters, the empire doesn’t merely write back; Olivia, its grotesque offspring, enjoys her part in exposing the fact that whenever a black person becomes an object of derisive attention in England, it is the white male viewer’s prejudice rather than the African’s inferiority that one actually witnesses.

In the circus that *The Woman of Colour* presents England to be, white male viewers, Macaronic “animals,” and clowns of conversion are freaks for the reader’s amusement. Meanwhile, Olivia’s poised and graceful performance of black femininity transcends the grotesque stereotypes of savagery and inferiority that usually plague people of color because of the stigma of slavery. Of course, Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* (1688) contains another well-known example of an African who transcends such stereotypes and stigmas. But where Behn uses Oroonoko’s class and Europeanized beauty to signal that he is unique and deserves to be distinguished from the ordinary Africans she considers physically inferior, *The Woman of Colour*’s author uses Olivia’s class and European heritage to make the exact opposite point. “Though the jet has been faded to the olive in my own complexion,” Olivia remarks, “I am not ashamed to acknowledge my affinity with the swarthist negro that was ever brought from Guinea’s coast” (I, 3). Within this assertion of racial allegiance, Olivia conflates her Christian name with her complexion when she uses the word “olive,” and indicates that, despite her being a mulatto heiress, ordinary African blackness is inscribed in her skin as well as her identity. It is here that Olivia implicitly attacks the progressiveness of washing a black-moor white. Black people cannot and need not be turned white since she stands as a perfect example of the fact that blacks of all classes and colors can be just as civilized in their own skins and “equal with their masters, if they had the same advantages, and the same blessings of education” (I, 101).

The idea of epidermal conversion is discredited even further by the oxymoronic clowns and Macaronic “animals” who remind us just how grotesque converted bodies are while Olivia illustrates how beautiful black ones, such as hers, can be.

Indeed, *The Woman of Colour*’s array of grotesque white bodies makes its black heroine seem fair or pleasing in appearance. But Olivia is not the fairest of them all; that distinction literally belongs to Augustus’s real wife, Angelina Forrester, whose “transparent complexion” (II, 96) and Christian name suggest an ideal, seraphic whiteness. Angelina’s full name (Angel-in-a-Forest) even spells out the enclosed place where Augustus discovers the wife he thought was dead, living quietly in the cottage where Letitia had hidden her. Angelina’s name and complexion are the most significant parts to her

extraordinarily silent character since they are the keys to understanding her purpose in this novel. By transforming from a woman presumed dead to one whose name and whiteness portray her as a living embodiment of eternal life and whose liberation from the forest is rewarded with marriage to Augustus—the man whose “regularly handsome” (I, 69) face bespeaks a more appealing, less abusive brand of hegemony than his colonial double, Mr. Fairfield—Angelina performs the same perverse act of epidermal conversion that we have already seen in the transformations of Fanny Price and Juliet Granville. Furthermore, Olivia notices that Angelina seemed “peculiarly to require the assistance and support of the lordly creature Man, and to be ill-calculated for braving the difficulties of life alone” (II, 96–97). Weakness and dependence do not merely characterize Angelina, they represent the classic, desirable attributes that a hegemonic figure such as Augustus (his name, itself, a neoclassical archetype) looks for in an ideal wife. Together, the names and physical descriptions of Augustus and Angelina epitomize not only ideal forms of whiteness but also the ideal type of marital union that readers are usually expected to admire in a novel.

Despite its literal appeal, however, this marriage does not embody the fairest ideal of liberation championed in _The Woman of Colour_. Olivia embodies this distinction. Once her marriage ends, Olivia decides to give Angelina the Merton family jewels that she had formerly received. On her way through the forest that leads to Angelina’s cottage she happens upon a stunned Augustus, who is taken aback by Olivia’s decision to seek out and essentially reward her nemesis. “Are you not a being of ethereal mould?” (II, 88) he asks Olivia. With this question, Augustus constructs his black ex-wife as another ‘angel-in-a-forest,’ not for the way she looks inside an ideal marriage but for how she acts without one. By bequeathing valuable property to Angelina, Olivia performs a symbolic act of benevolence that teaches hegemonic figures such as Augustus (and by virtue of physical similarity, Olivia’s father) the spirit of performing selfless, unbiased acts of philanthropy that protect, aid, and truly liberate a vulnerable woman rather than use and abuse her. In this way, Olivia takes another dominant rather than submissive role in relation to white Englishmen—in practice, she demonstrates how a Fairfield will should liberate a woman through the autonomy gained from financial independence.

Such progressive behavior can only come from a woman of color. For although Augustus refers to Olivia in angelic terms similar to Angelina, the author clearly implies that, of the two, the black female’s example of ideal womanhood is far more active. When we hear Olivia state: “I was going to say, that I almost envied the shade of Angelina!—But I will try to be more rational” (I, 224), the author ostensibly shows her considering, yet ultimately rejecting, the perverse act of epidermal conversion that could transform
her into another transparent angel—another Angelina. What Olivia actually rejects, however, is the possibility of becoming another silenced, weak, colorless, and dependent representation of angelic white femininity that is Angelina in this novel. Thus, *The Woman of Colour* advocates that the most virtuous black woman should never try to transform herself to fill the space of an angelic white wife. For outside the marriage contract, the ideal black woman represents a more actively liberating challenge to hegemony than her bland white counterpart who depends on, and is content to be enslaved by, the usual reward of marriage to a benign hegemonic figure.

The author’s deliberate refusal to reward Olivia “with the usual meed of virtue—*a husband*” is, then, a direct critique of a novel genre that continually reinforces the appeal of female dependence. With her marriage over, Olivia decides to become a widow for the remainder of her life; not even a sincere proposal of marriage from the benign white Creole, Charles Honeywood, can tempt her out of this decision. Olivia’s steadfast adherence to widowhood is a resonant contrast to Fanny Price and Juliet Granville at the ends of their respective novels. She aggressively resists the final perversion that I have described Fanny and Juliet agreeably consenting to—marriage to benign figures of hegemony—and presents a radical alternative to British women. Instead of again venturing into the precarious arena of a marriage market always skewed toward the interests of white men, Olivia chooses to return to Jamaica to “zealously engage [her]self in ameliorating the situation, in instructing the minds . . . of our poor blacks” (II, 216). Olivia’s behavior here explicitly contrasts with another “portionless . . . HEIRESS,” Fanny Burney’s Cecilia, who renounces her fortune at the end of her narrative and “with cheerfulest resignation,”53 consents to change her surname to Delville. Instead of the dependent marriage that Cecilia cheerfully resigns herself to, Olivia chooses independent activism. Because it makes a deliberate point of privileging this choice, *The Woman of Colour* openly displays its difference from British novels that tend to present white women such as Fanny, Juliet, and Cecilia in plots that ostensibly support a woman’s transformation into a figure of freedom and independence only to propose a benign hegemonic marriage as her ultimate reward. In 1808, *The Woman of Colour* presents Olivia as an independent black female activist dedicated to the ultimate reward of her own emancipation as a woman as well as that of Negroes from the precarious institutions of marriage and slavery that have traditionally favored the interests of white men.

Olivia’s decision to remain a widow-for-life also rebuts her father’s abusive use of the “Fairfield” surname. Where the arrangements made in her

father’s will are designed to ensure that she begins reproducing whiter Fairfields, Olivia’s deliberate refusal to marry and procreate puts an end to her father’s dreams of racial obliteration, essentially resisting his “West-Indian way of white-washing” and blackening the Fairfield name for the remainder of Olivia’s life. In this way, a black widow gains complete control of the Fairfield name; and as a black widow—a human representation of the arachnid notorious for slaying its mate after mating—the author, once again, shows Olivia taking an ascendant rather than submissive position over Fairfield men. The author makes this black widow much more than a grotesque attraction for the amusement of Britons. Olivia has been designed to “teach one sceptical European to look with compassionate eye towards the despised native of Africa” (II, 220)—certainly a reference to the English boy and Dido who opened this chapter and whose symbolic importance cannot be understated. Here, the author/Editor assures us that, rather than the figure of racial obliteration that Mr. Fairfield intended, the seemingly grotesque black widow Fairfield is responsible for reproducing at least one racially and religiously ethical European while she puts to rest the ethically abusive one represented in the composite image of her father and his physical double, Augustus.

And it is with this reproductive act that The Woman of Colour makes its most compelling case for resisting perverse acts of epidermal conversion. In the scene with the little English boy that begins this chapter, so much depends on the impression that Olivia has on him: not only the vindication of the Negress, Dido, but also the conversion of the adolescent into a racially tolerant Englishman of the future. Once Olivia’s experiment proves to the boy that it is impossible to wash her, or any other black person, white, she asks him, “So you still dislike my poor Dido?” “She is very dirty,” said he . . . shaking his head; but colouring, he said, “I mean very black” (I, 98). Here, we witness the results of Olivia’s experiment. The boy’s conception of Negroes has improved; he now sees them as “very black” rather than “very dirty.” Moreover, his “colouring” betrays his feelings of guilt; he is aware

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54. Kathleen Wilson’s The Island Race (New York: Routledge, 2003), 129–68, proves that the very concept of a black widow was not alien to Olivia’s contemporaries. Teresia Constantia Neville, the subject of Wilson’s chapter, was known by this moniker after burying two of her rich colonial husbands in mysterious circumstances.

55. Wilson notes that “The Black Widow . . . hinted at the dangers West Indian topography posed to civilized English people” (ibid., 132). But as I go on to show, Olivia’s portrayal at the end of The Woman of Colour defuses this threatening perception of a black widow by stressing her independence and useful ability to produce a less prejudiced English child.

56. For another interesting example of the way adults can instill racial tolerance in their English children, see the fragment from Amelia Opie’s aborted autobiography contained in Cecilia Brightwell’s Memorials of the Life of Amelia Opie (Norwich: Fletcher and Alexander, 1854), 12–13.
of, and embarrassed about, his earlier narcissistic presumption that Negroes like Dido are “dirty” and whites like himself are clean. The experiment is so successful that “the little fellow” exclaims, “Miss Fairfield, if you are going to Dido, let me go with you” (I, 104). Presumably, his desire to seek out Dido indicates that he has been liberated from the prejudices he could have potentially “imbibed in common with his countrymen.”

This instructive scene is given an overtly political valence when we consider the little fellow’s name. He is called George, his father is called George, and there is every reason to believe that the eldest Mr. Merton is called George too since we’re twice told that the elder of the Merton brothers was the favorite of the father and the most like him in disposition. Therefore, little George Merton must be none other than the anonymous author’s invocation of the archetypal contemporary paternalist, George III,\(^{57}\) the “one sceptical European” who most needs “to look with compassionate eye towards the despised native of Africa.” Olivia’s inflexible black complexion becomes a useful and progressive political tool, making the archetype of British paternalism perform an unbiased and consensual act of conversion that abolishes his potential for prejudice. Allegorically, *The Woman of Colour*’s author inverts the political structure here, allowing Olivia to adopt an ascendant position over the monarch to reeducate him about the continued need for liberation—not of the Negroes from their blackness, but of Britons from their racial biases. Despite the 1807 abolitionist act that the supreme British paternalist has already ratified, *The Woman of Colour*’s author still wants this symbolic figure to be recognized as one of the first to liberate himself from the racial prejudices of his countrymen, an act which, in 1808, also marks one of the first direct literary calls for leadership on the issue of abolishing slavery.

“WHENEVER A stranger has identified me as something I’m not,” writes Monica Bhide,

I have always felt a need to correct the misimpression. . . . Now, more and more often, I find myself resisting that temptation . . . if I tell you what I am, I am going against my very essence. For some, their skin color defines them. For me, it sets me free—free of boundaries, free of geography. The color of my skin allows me to belong to many countries and yet be owned by none.\(^{58}\)

\(^{57}\) The importance that I attach to the author’s use of names is further enhanced by the fact that George III’s sixth son was called Augustus.

Clearly, Bhide feels emancipated by, and revels in, her complexion’s ambiguity. But ultimately, her ideas about racial emancipation seem as racially naïve as those of the little Lynchburg boy whom she babysits. By embracing her complexion’s link to a host of possible Others and resisting the urge to advocate for the Other that she is, Bhide avoids directly addressing the political significance of her complexion at a time in which the politics of terrorism affects the ways society and its functionaries read people like her. Viewed under the aegis of rigorous security checks at airports, greater scrutiny of charitable donations and mosque activities, and the tragic death of the Brazilian, Jean Charles de Menezes, on the London underground, Bhide’s anecdotes, ending in a desire for racial emancipation, read like tales told by an idiot, full of the sound and fury of racial injustice, but ultimately signifying nothing by their avoidance of the very real political, social, even deadly, consequences of race and racism.

Bhide’s resistance to contemporary racial realities locates her somewhere between a “Diminisher” and a “Denier,” two terms that the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie creates from her own bodily confrontation with the racial naivety of an American child. She also documents this experience as a Washington Post op-ed titled “The Color of an Awkward Conversation”:

In college I babysat for a Jewish family, and once I went to pick up first-grader Stephen from his play date’s home. The lovely house had an American flag hanging from a colonnade. The mother of Stephen’s play date greeted me warmly. Stephen hugged me and went to look for his shoes. His play date ran down the stairs and stopped halfway. “She’s black,” he said to his mother and stared silently at me before going back upstairs. I laughed stupidly, perhaps to deflate the tension, but I was angry.

I was angry that this child did not merely think that black was different but had been taught that black was not a good thing. I was angry that his behavior left Stephen bewildered. . . .

“That kid’s mother is so ignorant,” one friend said. . . .” It was just a kid being a kid. It wasn’t racist,” another said . . . I called the first friend a Diminisher and the second a Denier and came to discover that both represented how mainstream America talks about blackness.59

Diminishers, Adichie states, “believe that black people still encounter unpleasantness related to blackness but in benign forms and from unhappy people or crazy people or people with good intentions that are bungled in execution. Diminishers think that people can be ‘ignorant’ but not ‘racist.’”

Deniers, on the other hand, “believe that black people stopped encountering unpleasantness related to their blackness when Martin Luther King Jr. died. They are ‘colorblind’ and use expressions like ‘white, black or purple, we’re all the same’—as though race were a biological rather than a social identity.” Adichie’s anger is leveled at those who fail to recognize the seriousness and social significance underlying seemingly benign incidents of racism generated by her own and other black bodies. Her anger is a clear rejection of the racial emancipation that Bhide promotes in favor of another type of liberation:

The word “racist” should be banned. It is like a sweater wrung completely out of shape; it has lost its usefulness. It makes honest debate impossible, whether about small realities such as little boys who won’t say hello to black babysitters or large realities such as who is more likely to get the death penalty. In place of “racist,” descriptive, albeit unwieldy, expressions might be used. . . .

By banning the word “racist,” Adichie suggests that resisting the urge to appropriate it at every turn will prevent the conflation of all prejudiced acts under one all-inclusive rubric, thereby leaving room for the creation of a more precise language about racism in its many different and unique forms.

This racist emancipation is an aggressive, confrontational approach to the problems generated by the appearance of a woman of color’s body since it seeks to establish not the liberation of the female subject from the racial significations that her body generates, as Bhide proposes, but a more precise understanding of the ways in which a woman of color’s body is being signified in different contexts on a daily basis. But Adichie’s resistance to the word “racist” also does some serious diminishing and denying of its own. In one fell swoop, her proposal threatens to discount not merely the valence of the word that best speaks to the systemic problems of being a minority of color in a majority white society, but also the complex part that centuries of linguistic turns such as ‘washing a blackamoor white’ have played in the formation of racist thought. Critics like myself are still engaged with, and struggling to understand, this history and its influence in past and present Western societies.

It falls, then, to a two-hundred-year-old woman of color to temper the extremes of these modern women of color by providing tangible ways of both acknowledging a female body of color and resisting the racism leveled at it, and, by extension, those whom she racially represents. My discussion of Olivia’s English experience in *The Woman of Colour* has shown that this mulatto heiress can claim, as Adichie does, that “my skin color did
not determine my identity, did not limit my dreams or my confidence,” even while she was forced to exist under the spectral influence of her white father’s ironclad will. By putting the political, social, and potentially disastrous consequences of race and racism at the forefront of a tale that refuses to involve her in the emancipation of blackness from her father’s hereditary line as his will intended, but instead uses the transformation of little George Merton to illustrate the greater need for the emancipation of Britons from their ignorant prejudices, *The Woman of Colour* provides a context for Bhide’s and Adichie’s essays, proving to be far more politically and socially astute about discussing race than the former, and showing that the latter’s advocacy for new ways of confronting prejudice may be premature or even unnecessary. Olivia Fairfield’s characterization as the failed object of whiteness in *The Woman of Colour* is the “very essence” which makes us realize that the abolition of prejudice—true racial and racist emancipation—comes about, not by avoiding race as Bhide does, or avoiding the “racist” word as Adichie proposes, but by the privileged individual’s active participation in confronting, resisting, and destabilizing the racial biases that collectively exist in the English bloodline, English society, the English language, and the English-speaking world at large.

**OLIVIA’S PRESENCE** in *The Woman of Colour* shows the extent to which this novel has extended the influence of “Imoinda’s shade” from its original Restoration roots. The novel positions the biracial heiress clearly at the intersection of an inauspicious plot involving slavery and marriage with a unique, bigamous twist which is different from that Imoinda initially established in Behn’s and Southerne’s *Oroonoko*. The novel’s action works to make this location a site of Olivia’s emancipation from the stigmas associated with her blackness as well as the ascendancy of paternalism.

Moreover, its heroine illustrates a host of other subject positions that neither Behn nor Southerne could ever have imagined for either of their heroines: a female author of African descent who (except for the interjection of two letters and two short narratives) completely controls the voice of an entire text in stark contrast to Imoinda’s silence; a woman warrior of African descent who successfully attacks the ascendancy of paternalism from within its bloodline rather than on a battlefield as Imoinda did in Surinam; a widowed woman of African descent whose precarious experience in the marriage market challenges the sentimental genre’s tradition of elevating ideal heroines by killing them, offering instead a living heroine who is able to establish

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60. Ibid.
female independence as an attractive alternative for all women irrespective of race and that there is life after, and even without, marriage; a biracial heiress of African descent who, despite the privileges associated with her rank and biological connection to whiteness, is “not ashamed to acknowledge [her] affinity with the swarthiest negro that was ever brought from Guinea’s coast” (I, 3) irrespective of their class, as Olivia’s relationship with Dido shows; an educator-activist of African descent who decides to “again zealously engage [herself] in ameliorating the situation, in instructing the minds—in mending the morals of our poor blacks” (II, 216) in Jamaica only after she has reeducated the “morals,” “minds,” and “situation” of prejudice in England; a biracial woman of African descent who demonstrates that a female who considers herself “more than half an English woman” (I, 205), is just as, if not more than, capable of performing the social graces and behaviors the English are led to believe that their women alone are capable of performing.

In short, “though the jet has been faded to the olive in [her] own complexion” (I, 3), it is in the shade of this olive-skinned woman of African descent that we find the best illustration of how a fictionalized woman of African descent extends the seminal spirit of “Imoinda’s shade” into the arena of British abolition through an amalgamation that goes beyond the simple union of Mr. Fairfield and Marcia, and instead embodies the spirit of female resistance that the black and white shades of Behn’s and Southerne’s heroines stood for throughout the eighteenth century.