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Default positions: African Icons and stereotypes from Georgian print culture

A few years ago, the writer Chimamanda Adichie gave a TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) talk about the dangers of singular perspectives in storytelling.¹ Through personal anecdotes she highlighted the ways in which Africa is generally perceived through a narrow lens, so that the continent and its peoples are predominantly associated with irreconcilable difference, poverty and catastrophe. Poignantly she noted: 'It is not that stereotypes are untrue but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.'

During the revolutionary period in Britain, from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, it was slavery that undermined the image, identity and treatment of African people. In simple terms, the transatlantic slave trade was a global enterprise characterised by violence, fear and exploitation. It implicated white Britons in largely abusive encounters with Africans – at trading ports, on slave ships, in Caribbean plantations – and was an incubator for racist ideas that sought to further dehumanise the enslaved labour force driving economic growth. It is at this moment that the terms African, black, slave, and the invented classification of 'Negro' became synonymous – often used interchangeably in both descriptive and everyday colloquial language.

Against this backdrop British writers and artists produced a striking body of imagery, describing Africans in ethnographic and sensationalist terms, which served as critical propaganda to justify the brutality and domination. Whether in travel narratives describing outlandish savages, as mischievous or impassioned characters in plays and comic operas, through grotesque caricatures or even as passive subjects in abolitionist discourse, African people were represented in a reductive ethnic shorthand of peculiar and diminutive traits that codified black bodies as other, subjugated, uncivilised, exotic, obtuse, hyper-sexualised and marketable. The period's emphases on these ideas, through continuous reproduction in image and text, became so normalised that even now, in research, it can be difficult to distinguish facts from fictions.

So what are the stories that the Georgians decided to tell? The following essay will explore some of the attitudes and ideas about African people represented in London's rich and complex print culture.

The view from London

For most Georgian Londoners slavery was primarily viewed as something happening in distant colonies, out of sight and therefore out of mind. But there was also an African presence in the city, which was instrumental in agitating metropolitan anxieties and politics about slavery on British soil. Historical evidence reveals that these men, women and children experienced largely impoverished lives in London and other British cities, in a state of dependence and thus paradoxical freedom. The writer Ignatius Sancho would describe their plight sorrowfully at the time as: 'the miserable fate of almost all of our unfortunate colour'.² This was, after all, a city from which British slave ships were insured; where global trade brought sugar, tobacco and luxury foreign goods like Indian tea and Chinese silks, for leisurely British consumption; and where overdressed African children wore velvet breeches and a chattel collar to serve hot chocolate in polite living rooms. It was also a city where Africans participated in activist politics, where favourite servants were educated and occasionally published books; yet on whose streets dispossessed Black loyalists from the American wars (who fought for and were freed by the King) were left abandoned and begging for money.

The growing visibility of Africans as subjects in the popular sphere correlated with the period's boom in printed images and texts, which provided more diverse media for Londoners to learn and laugh about their city and its place within the world. Certainly Georgian print culture reveals many approaches to the representation of African and other foreign subjects that were not always negative. But at its worst what one finds can seem cruel and even ridiculous to the modern day viewer [fig. 1].

Take for example, the anecdotes of one travel writer, Herman Moll, who would note in his general observations on the inhabitants of Guinea in 1701: 'The natives are of a Coal-black Colour, and go stark naked without any sense of shame ... they greedily devour raw flesh, and even the entrails of Birds, extremely indulging

1. http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html

2. Ignatius Sancho, *Letters of the late Ignatius Sancho, an African: to which are prefixed memoirs of his life by Joseph Jekyll*, Joseph Jekyll (ed.), 5th ed. (London: Printed by Wilks and Taylor for W. Sancho, 1803).



T. Marryat (del.) and G. Cruikshank (sculp.). *Puzzled which to choose!! Or, the King of Timbuctoo, offering one of his daughters in marriage to Capt. - anticipated result of ye African mission.* Published in London by G. Humphrey, 10 October 1818. Hand-coloured etching and aquatint. 255 × 350 mm. British Museum, London.

their sensual appetites, and the female sex are apt to fall desperately in love with the Europeans.³ Such ideas were also reflected in texts produced by influential planters and investors in the West Indies who would defend their degradation of African people in vitriolic descriptions of life in the sugar colonies. Edward Long in his much cited *History of Jamaica* from 1774 would comment on the ‘corporeal sensations’ of Africans writing: ‘they are libidinous and shameless as monkeys, or baboons. The equally hot temperament of their women has given probability to the charge of their admitting these animals frequently to their embrace. An example of this intercourse once happened, I think, in England.’⁴

These kinds of texts would populate the same bookshelves as treatises on subjects from art theory and philosophy to anatomy and natural history, that all touched on the subject of human variety in one-way or another. Such as the question of an African’s blackness and general difference, which was regularly debated: was it climate, temperament, or a ‘juice’ in the cuticles of the skin that created its darkness? Philosopher

and politician Edmund Burke’s much cited treatise, *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and the beautiful* (1757), affirmed the idea that blackness was both threatening and unattractive. As Burke saw it, ‘the colours of beautiful bodies must not be dusky or muddy but clean and fair.’

Visually too, the black presence in paintings and prints provided cues that signposted the growth of Britain as an imperial power, with demographic consequences for the country’s ethnic make up. Wealthy merchants included attentive African servants as emblems in their portraits; black heads topped business trading cards advertising rum or tobacco; subversive ‘negro’ caricatures populated political satires that wrangled with the issues of the day; and human curiosities (an albino woman or an extra muscular man)

3. Herman Moll, ‘Africa’, chapter 9 in *A system of geography* (London: Printed for Timothy Childe, 1701).

4. Edward Long, *The history of Jamaica*, vol. 2 (London: Printed for T. Lowndes, 1774). 3 vols.

were advertised for public viewing and entertainment in playbills. Even some well-known poor street personalities such as Billy Waters, Joseph Johnson, and Charles McGee were included in images of London and as folk figures in printed volumes documenting the urban milieu – also known as ‘cries’.⁵ One such collection called *Vagabondiana* by John Thomas Smith, which included engraved portraits of Johnson and McGee with accompanying descriptions, noted: ‘Black people, as well as those destitute of sight, seldom fail to excite compassion.’⁶

All of this imagery (literary and visual) exerted pressure on African identity in the popular sphere, often contradicting and yet sometimes informing emergent abolitionist rhetoric which spoke of Africans in paternalistic terms: as the punished slave needing sympathy, civilising and ‘gradual’ emancipation.

Blacks in eighteenth-century caricature

Irreverence towards the abolitionist view of Africans was often expressed in humorous prints of the day known as satires or caricatures. Maverick artists produced these single sheet engravings and etchings, as bawdy tabloid images – primarily for the consumption of moneyed English men who were sometimes subjects themselves. Their manly humour was coarse and unforgiving, often sexual in tone or including scatological motifs. Scholars generally split these prints into two categories: political satires responding directly to specific events concerning the royals and polity; and social satires, which mocked everyday life often between social hierarchies. But there is certainly conflation between these two approaches. Political prints were often the product of commissions, which highlights the peculiarly self-effacing nature of the genre.

Overall satires represented African Londoners as a sort of ironic social menace: simplistically voicing their discontent at servitude, highlighting their masters’ follies, engaging in petty criminality or participating in sexual encounters with white Britons. Thus we find a cast of exaggerated servants, concubines and beggars who populate these comic prints as participants in a complex and colourful urban drama. Like the theatrical harlequin these figures were often simple, mischievous and yet truthful, making them useful for voicing what the viewer may be thinking but could not (or would not) say.

Using these tropes, artists would also reference topical themes and ideas from literary or popular culture making many jokes layered in their interpretation, even though they may seem straightforward visually. An anonymous social print called *The Rabbits* is an interesting example [fig. 2]. Here we find a Black rabbit seller

called Mungo kneeling at the door of an English woman who reluctantly inspects his wares. She holds one dead rabbit upside down with the tip of her fingers, whilst a servant hidden in the doorway holds one of his nostrils. Beneath the image their dialogue is conveyed:

‘Miss: “O la how it smells – sure its not fresh.”

Mungo: “Be gar Misse dat no fair – If Blacke Man take you by Leg so – you smell too.”

Perhaps such a tongue-in-cheek reaction may seem surprising for the period. Certainly this small act of defiance can be viewed as ironic since it was produced at the height of abolitionist fervour in London and whilst Africans were violently reclaiming freedom from French colonisers in the Haitian revolution. It is also critical to know that Mungo is the name of a popular character from the comic stage in Isaac Bickerstaff’s play *The Padlock* (1763). The stage Mungo was an audacious enslaved domestic played in blackface, whose witty exchanges with his master (an aging bachelor named Don Diego) provided a memorable and humorous impertinence that continued to be referenced decades after the play’s debut. In *The Rabbits* it is therefore undeniable that Mungo’s pose mimics the abolitionist icon of the supplicating slave, but offering a subversive twist by giving this particular ‘slave’ a ‘trade’ and a voice of his own. This irony is even further stretched when we consider the allusions to the nature of slavery in the colonies, where the inspection of Africans for signs of health and disease had a direct correlation to the price paid by planters. So much is implied by this seemingly simple interaction.

The long story

Africans in Georgian London were trapped in a culture of stereotypes with meanings far beyond their control, although not necessarily their understanding. Ignatius Sancho saw, heard and noted the ‘the ill-bred and heart-racking abuse of the foolish vulgar.’ And Olaudah Equiano would ask about the role of slavery in undermining the African image: ‘Are there not causes enough

5. For a fascinating and detailed exploration of the London ‘cries’ tradition representing the urban poor, see Gillian Forrester’s essay ‘Mapping a New Kingston: Belisario’s Sketches of Character’ in Tim Barringer, Gillian Forrester, and Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz, *Art & emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and his worlds* (New Haven: Yale Centre for British Art, 2007).

6. Smith, John Thomas. *Vagabondiana, or, anecdotes of mendicant wanderers through the streets of London: with portraits of the most remarkable, drawn from the life* (London: Published for the proprietor and sold by J. & A. Arch, Mr Hatchard, and Mr Clarke, 1817).



2. Anon. *The rabbits*. Published in London by Robert Sayer, 8 October 1792. Etching with stipple. 250 × 200 mm. British Museum, London.

to which the apparent inferiority of an African may be ascribed? ... Might it not naturally be ascribed to their situation? ... Does not slavery itself depress the mind, and extinguish all its fire, and every noble sentiment?⁷ What then, can be learned about the African story from these unseemly pictures and texts, produced by an implicitly biased European imagination? Ironically, much of this imagery is all we have to illuminate particular Black experiences of this period. At the very least, these works are a reminder that Africans were here, and acknowledged as a presence, at a time when many have believed them to be absent.

The attitudes and ideas these works express have, however, echoed through the ages. How different, really, are the pernicious words of Edward Long from the acts

of racism meted out on black footballers by ignorant fans? In his seminal book *The nature of prejudice*, psychologist Gordon W. Allport noted that stereotypes are 'sustained by selective perception and selective forgetting'.⁸ So perhaps what is most important is to reflect on the images of Africa and the African diaspora we currently consume, and challenge the default positions that inform our understanding of history, as well as our everyday thinking.

7. Olaudah Equiano, *The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, 9th ed. (London: Printed for and sold by the Author, 1794).

8. Gordon W. Allport, *The nature of prejudice* (Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley and Beacon Press, 1954). ■