The Traffic of Women:  
*Oroonoko* in an Atlantic Framework  
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What does it mean to teach transatlantically? Such a term verges on the obvious when we consider *Oroonoko*. After all, how would one teach such a text without attending in some way to the transoceanic movement and interrelation of people, objects, and people as objects? The Atlantic itself is so inextricable from Behn’s narrative that the text divides it almost evenly: to open the narrative at midpoint is to find Oroonoko concluding the Middle Passage, being sold off to Trefry—and embarking upriver in Surinam.

Genres and images identified with either side of the ocean mix with almost equal proportionality, so that the eyewitness testimony and bewilderment that fill European accounts of the Americas alternate with the heroic conventions of European romance. Objects and practices of Africa, Europe, the Americas, and Asia circulate throughout the narrative. The skin of the Coramantien Imoinda, now transported to Surinam, is described as “Japan’d” (40); the “Taffaty Cap” worn by the narrator and the “Stuff Sute” on her brother contribute to the “Amazement” with which the natives greet Oroonoko’s embassy (48); and a pipe of tobacco serves as central prop to his gruesome execution (64).

Nor is this transoceanic movement in one direction. As with nonfictional travel narratives, the presence of the published text shows that one person has returned to tell the tale, and Behn’s narrator emphasizes this return to Europe by referencing the dress of feathers she presented to the King’s Theatre (9). A story of encounter, colonialism, and enslavement, *Oroonoko* also is a text of transatlantic, even global, traffic. It embodies, even as it describes, the transport of commodities—including people—that helped constitute the early modern Atlantic world as a cluster of diverse regions conjoined by the ocean as watery highway.

Recently I had the opportunity to teach undergraduate and graduate versions, separately but simultaneously, of a course I titled Women and Writing in the British Atlantic World. The classes were organized around the study of women as both objects and authors of writing in a world that dramatically expanded, for better and for worse, the experiences available to them. This movement beyond the boundaries of a course on women writers was important to me, for I worried that a class focused only on female authors in transatlantic context would convey an incomplete narrative of unfettered opportunity. I wanted my students to encounter not only the Aphra Behns and Judith Sargent Murays of the Atlantic region, blazing paths both literally and literarily, but also the women not positioned to tell their stories. Alongside the work of Mary Rowlandson, Phillis Wheatley, and Mary Wollstonecraft we read texts by John Smith, Daniel Defoe, and Thomas Paine. With the exception of early exploration accounts and some
manifestations of the Inkle and Yarico story collected in Frank Felsenstein’s anthology, the course focused on anglophone writers and texts—a regrettable limitation but one that fit the purview of an English literature curriculum and imposed some limits on an already broadly defined course.

Texts varied between the two courses. The graduate seminar naturally tackled a more ambitious reading list, including Margaret Cavendish’s *The Blazing World*, Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple*, several captivity narratives, and many secondary readings. Both classes read *The Female American* (by the pseudonymous author Unca Eliza Winkfield) and Leonora Sansay’s *Secret History*. For many texts, the undergraduates read excerpts and the graduate students read the document in its entirety, so there was significant continuity between the discussions.

With its female authorship and narration, its juxtaposition of white women and women of color, and its consideration of women travelers even while in forms of captivity, *Oroonoko* was a centerpiece for both courses. For the undergraduates, it was bracketed by two texts connected with New England: Rowlandson’s captivity narrative and Sarah Kemble Knight’s account of her journey from Boston to New York in 1711. My graduate students encountered Behn’s texts just after studying a group of women’s funeral sermons and right before reading *Moll Flanders*. These geographic and thematic leaps were sometimes abrupt, but they facilitated my efforts to keep the attention of the students moving vertically and horizontally from week to week as I prompted them to think about women in vast systems of traffic.

I asked the students to consider traffic in both the early modern and contemporary senses of the word, as commerce and as the movement of people. My goal was to have them think of women participating in circulation but with their ability to act as agents of their own fates augmented or hampered by the writings that proceeded from or about them. More broadly, I wanted to see what happened to women—as authors, objects, and metaphors—when considered in the context of this supranational region. Organizing questions included the following: How did the colonization of the Americas and the transportation of several million African slaves there affect the lives, imaginations, and writings of European, African, and Native American women? What influence did the cultural and commercial intertwining of four continents play in representations of women? How did gender inflect colonial encounter, and how, in turn, did images of women catalyze conversations about matters ranging from theology and landscape to politics and trade, extending what Louis Montrose has described as “the sexualizing of [the New World’s] exploration, conquest, and settlement” (178)?

In designing this course, I had access to a growing body of scholarship but not to many model syllabi, anthologies, or documents designed for pedagogy. A comprehensive body of work on transatlantic literary teaching had yet to emerge at the time I taught this course, although some literature has appeared afterward. A notable example is *Teaching the Transatlantic Eighteenth Cen-*
Transatlantic teaching considers literature as interwoven with comparable or contiguous genres and texts in a wider arena. A benefit of such an approach is that historical narratives emerge to reflect more accurately the lines of influence that shaped literary production. We can more easily ascertain what the authors we are studying were reading, what was on their minds, and how their writings fit in the worlds that initially received them. For example, historical study that takes a fuller view of the Atlantic region recently repositioned the American Revolution in a cluster of struggles throughout the Americas between colonial societies and the European bureaucracies struggling to manage their sprawling empires (F. Anderson; Egerton et al.). Attendance to an Atlantic context in literary study makes visible the textual density of transatlantic correspondence, the vibrancy of colonial literary cultures, and the full impact of colonial settlement on the literary production of Europe (see, e.g., Bannet; Giles). An Atlantic framework, as well as some focus on the topics of intercontinental contact and movement, can make literary innovation more visible. Pamela J. Albert has noted that “as a consequence of global exploration, conquest and trade, the early modern era witnessed the emergence and transformation of many literary genres,” the novel being foremost among these, and *Oroonoko* was a central document in that genesis (7). A national literary history thus emerges from the shadow of a nationalist one.

By the time they encountered *Oroonoko*, my students already had read early descriptions of the Americas and at least one captivity narrative. With this background, they were positioned to consider not only how Behn echoes the accounts of exploration and conquest but also how what William Spengemann calls the genre of the “Brief True Relation,” with its emphasis on experience, created authorial space for a woman (390). Their grounding in these nonfictional narratives also prepared them to assess Behn’s experiments with form. Whereas students in the many surveys of British literature in which I have taught *Oroonoko* had breezed through the opening description of Surinam, these students were eager to trace its revisions of purportedly nonfictional accounts of America, especially in relation to gender. They pored over Behn’s description of Edenic native bodies, compared her account of native modesty with the sexual laxity at which Amerigo Vespucci marveled (50), and considered her description of Surinam’s bounty in the context of Walter Raleigh’s infamous promise to Elizabeth I, “Guiana is a Countrey that hath yet her Maidenhead” (96). They noted with some surprise that Behn did not share Vespucci’s fascination with the athleticism of native women but rather stressed modest courtship practices. Here the Atlantic context yielded one pedagogical benefit I had not anticipated: I did not have to work as hard as I normally do to dissuade students from mapping Behn in simplistic ways onto a modern feminist sensibility.
The same applied to discussions of slavery. Over the preceding few years, I had developed some reluctance to teach *Oroonoko*, partly because of exhaustion with what Srinivas Aravamudan has termed “oroonokoism” and its variant, “imoindaism” (30, 31). As he writes, “*Oroonoko* responds to trends in new historicism, criticism of empire, and race and gender studies, and these approaches rely on it, in turn, to satisfy a checklist of political concerns” (32). Especially in a survey of British literature, where the impetus is to move quickly while charting paths of development through genre and era, I have found it a struggle to steer my students away from the sense that our attitudes toward slavery, gender, colonialism, and race are the fulfillment of Behn’s anticipatory take on these issues. Key to this struggle is the critical bracketing of what Aravamudan describes as the “transferential relationship between the novella’s female first-person narrator . . . and its black hero” (30). Historical detachment and context strike me as key to moving past enchantment with the liberal and counterimperial potential of Behn’s text. Aravamudan’s fascinating reading of *Oroonoko* in the context of the English aristocratic practice of keeping ornamental slaves as pets does much to undermine an uncritical appraisal of Behn’s female narrator’s sympathy for Oroonoko and Imoinda. The Atlantic framework also helps. Having witnessed the nonchalance with which the capture and transport of people takes place in the literature of exploration and captivity, the students were quick to consider the larger affective and economic frameworks that surround Behn’s treatment of one couple’s enslavement.

Better equipped to separate Behn’s tonally flat description of the macroeconomic realities of the slave trade from the tragedy of Imoinda and Oroonoko, the students were primed to consider the story alongside parallel genres, such as captivity narratives. They wondered what made these two types of texts, relating circumstances that on a certain level were alike, so distinct in outcome and tone. Both Oroonoko and Rowlandson, for example, are captured by differently colored people and carried from their homes through a series of removes as they are bought and sold. Both swing between hope and despair in their quest for freedom, and both are granted occasional concessions by their captors. Both also experience the joyful rediscovery of loved ones in captivity and exile. Given these striking similarities, these two tales could hardly be more different in point of view, in hermeneutic framework, in moral overlay, in structure, and in style: Oroonoko’s story is of a great man brought low by betrayal, of lovers who choose death rather than the torment of continued enslavement. Oroonoko’s baseline response to his enslavement is rage, and the narrative tilts generically toward tragedy. In contrast, the core drama of Rowlandson’s text is the testing of her soul, and all events serve that narrative of spiritual struggle. Her baseline response to her captivity is gratitude to God, and the text most closely resembles a sermon or a spiritual journal: “Oh, the number of Pagans (now merciless enemies) that there came about me, that I may say as David, Psal 27.13, *I had fainted, unless I had believed, &c*” (74).
To focus on these similarities is certainly to overlook the treatment of these two captives, whose fluid status in captivity could lead to assimilation, redemption, or death but who in the situation of chattel slavery were slotted into the increasingly race-bound category of the imprisoned and abject. Still, to read these texts alongside each other is to acknowledge the wide range of genres through which one can tell stories of human beings deprived of their autonomy and thus to call attention to Behn’s decisions about genre and style. It is also to consider why and how stories of captivity and enslavement become vehicles for other sorts of stories and projects. Finally, it is to probe the significance of sexual practices and attitudes to the dynamics of chattel slavery versus Indian captivity.

A surprising point of correlation between the two texts is the turmoil of parental grief and fear. The emotions Rowlandson, Oroonoko, and Imoinda express at their captivity or enslavement are magnified beyond measure when they contemplate their offspring. Imoinda’s pregnancy is part of what provokes Oroonoko’s rebellion, while Rowlandson’s narrative is steeped in the raw emotions of a mother torn from most of her children and forced to watch one slowly die: “I must sit all this cold winter night upon the cold snowy ground, with my sick Child in my armes, looking that every hour would be the last of its life” (73). To look at these texts together, then, is to consider how the possibility or the presence of offspring provokes an escalation of affect, and sometimes of resistance, for human beings deprived of freedom.

To this mix the graduate students added Cavendish’s “Assaulted and Pursued Chastity” and The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World. These two texts, respectively termed a “romance narrative” and a “utopian fantasy” by Cavendish’s editor, Kate Gilley (xii), triangulated in fascinating ways with the other accounts of intercultural encounter, skin color, and race. Reading Behn after Cavendish made clearer how both writers map hyperchivalric codes onto stories of intercultural encounter, weaving a fantasy of a white woman’s queenly status in foreign lands among differently colored and obsequious peoples. The pairing also showed how royalist nostalgia revives itself through colonial excursion. Finally, it helped students isolate the position of the white woman in the exotic wilderness as a heavily laden rhetorical construct performing varying forms of work for a colonizing people.

Just as the preceding texts were crucial to the discussion of Oroonoko, Behn’s narrative did much to shape my students’ examinations of later readings. Moll Flanders produced intriguing contrast with the narrator of Oroonoko as a white woman describing her colonial experiences. While for Moll the anonymity of the colonial world facilitates a self-fashioning that brings about moral downfall and then recuperation, Surinam presents a gilded cage to Behn’s narrator, whose status as the daughter of the deceased lieutenant general elect bring entitled but little true power. The most powerful linkages, however, were with other accounts of slavery. Foremost among these were Sansay’s Secret History, a
story of domestic abuse in a slave-owning household during the Haitian Revolution, and several retellings of the Inkle and Yarico story, which describe a Native American or African woman sold into slavery by the refugee she has saved and loved. These texts share with Oroonoko stories of courtship, marriage, and love that come into disastrous encounter with the economies of slavery. They all likewise intimate parallels between chattel slavery and the limitations imposed on white women by their societies.

One discussion of Oroonoko dealt with the energy circulating around Imoinda's body and the question of who will penetrate her body. The contest between a virile young prince and an impotent old tyrant to deflower Imoinda ultimately results in her enslavement. When Oroonoko discovers her in Surinam, she exists in a cloister-like cabin, architecturally echoing the Coramantien otan even as it amplifies the aura of modesty that has protected her from the advances of slave and slaveholder alike. Yet it is the fear of her rape, along with her unborn child's enslavement, that provokes Oroonoko's disastrous rebellion. Slavery thus enters the plot at the junction of sexual prowess and political power.

This triangulation of slavery, sex, and power became more visible to the students after they had read Secret History, with its intertwining of contests for sexual control, threats of rape, and competitions between white and mulatta women for the attentions of slave-owning males. In illustration of her assertion that before the revolution on Saint-Domingue, "[e]very inhabitant lived on his estate like a Sovereign ruling his slaves with despotic sway," Mary, author of most of the novel's letters, tells the story of a white woman who ordered that her female slave, Coomba, be beheaded, cooked, and served to her husband because she saw what she thought to be "symptoms of tendresse in [his] eyes" (70). This vignette of white-on-black atrocity, fueled by sexual jealousy, is more than matched by corpse-strewn narratives of "the horrible catastrophe which accompanied the first wild transports of freedom" (77), some of which feature sexually voracious black men preying on white women. In Oroonoko, Behn is always dangling before the reader the prospect of violence toward women, both black and white. Imoinda is perpetually in danger of rape, whether in Coramantien or Surinam, and the white women of Surinam swing between fascination with and terror of Oroonoko. Secret History realizes those awful possibilities. It forces us to contemplate the female bodies torn apart by a slave economy that brings out the otherwise suppressed tyranny and savagery of men.

One can productively read the women's deaths in Secret History alongside William Blake's famous engraving "A Negro Hung Alive by the Ribs to a Gallows," first published in John Gabriel Stedman's Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam (1792 [Internet Archive]), or Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus, another text that links unwitting cannibalism to a woman's rape, although along a significantly different chain of causation. The pregnant Imoinda and the slaughtered Coomba stand in powerful counterpoint to Richard Steele's Yarico, whose pregnancy increases the profits of the cold-hearted Inkle (Felsenstein). Along with the mulattas, whose seductions
drain the fortunes of Saint-Domingue's slave-owning families, these figures foreground the place of the reproductive body in the discourses of slavery.

Reading these texts together, students were struck that troubled stories of heterosexual love and betrayal often abut or catalyze those of slavery. One effect of this mingling was the triggering of elaborate emotions that sidestep the realities of the slave trade. Students were surprised to see Matthew James Chapman retell the Inkle and Yarico story in a defense of slavery in his poem “Barbados” (Felsenstein 269–76). Through such readings they contemplated not only how gender and race intertwine, slipping over each other as identity categories to redirect the viewer's sympathies, but also how gender amplifies the poignancy of slavery while deflecting emotion from its true object.

I like to think that my students took away from this class a more finely tuned sense of how intrinsic women were to the structuring of an Atlantic world. Just as women were crucial to the systems of trade that wove these continents together, supplying bodies for the gathering and consumption of new commodities, they also provided much of the vocabulary, imagery, and narrative to make this expanded world intelligible to those who sought to dominate it. *Oroonoko* did much to link the separate components of this vision for them. In turn, reading Behn's narrative in this Atlantic framework made visible certain aspects that tend to vanish in my other courses. Above all, the experience made clear that Behn's story develops through the placement of women at every stage of that transoceanic chain of commerce, including the creation and consumption of colonial fantasy. To read *Oroonoko* in this way is thus to contemplate the status of the reader as one entertained, however poignantly, by the miseries of faraway peoples crushed by the circumstances overtaking them. That alone seems a worthwhile pedagogical outcome.