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Appropriation and Activism: "Negro Song" and English Abolitionists c1770–1800

[warn and apologise for offensive language]

Facing fierce opposition, William Wilberforce stepped forward in Parliament on 12 May 1789 to urge that Britain end its slave trade. Wilberforce's appeal was underpinned by evidence, collated from interviews, ship records and private collections, of the barbarity of enslavement.[1] Abolitionists, taking up the activism of Black writers in Britain, had long battled fake news about slavery.[2] Abolitionist song targeted in particular the pro-Slavery theory that Africans were incapable of feeling loss; to do so, this repertory dramatized an 'Affected' Negro whose heart was like that of a White Briton. Clearly wrong in depicting the African as helpless – a representation at the heart of the Abolition campaign (slide 1) – Abolitionist song nonetheless made the singer-subject an active story-teller who might give listeners ears to hear harsh truths.

In his speech of 1789, Wilberforce argued, as did Abolitionist song, that music itself evidenced the African's capacity to feel. To quote Wilberforce:

> We are told that their songs are songs of lamentation upon their departure which, while they sing, are always in tears insomuch, that one captain … threatened one of the women with a flogging, because the mournfulness of her song was too painful for his feelings.[3]

Here the pious Wilberforce evoked Psalm 137, "By the rivers of Babylon", and its line, "they that carried us away captive required of us a song", as Brycchan Carey points out.[4] But the song genre Wilberforce evoked was not sacred, but secular: a lament.

Laments were taken up by Abolitionist song composers, setting sentimental poetry already in circulation. To our post-Romantic sensibility, the pathos of Abolitionist song verses and the modesty of their musical settings might seem to trivialize the songs' subject. But for an educated late-eighteenth century Briton, sentimental poetry was understood to be

the most direct to way to touch the heart,[5] and uncomplicated music, as Gillen D'Arcy Wood explains, was held to communicate virtuousness in a peculiarly British-styled way.[6] Among British musical amateurs, Italianate operatic virtuosity was often viewed as something foreign, excessive, wanton and effeminate; simple, elegant vocal music of modest proportions, by contrast, communicated seriousness of purpose.[7]

Were there any precedents for the serious 'Negro lament' fostered by Abolitionist song composers from 1788? Charles Dieupart's 1723 da capo aria (slide) for Imoinda in *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave* – wholly overlooked until now – might have been one.[8] Adapted from Alpha Behn's novella of 1688, *Oroonoko* became eighteenth-century London's second-most beloved drama,[9] spawning revivals and several adaptations from 1696 onwards.[10] Imoinda, the 'Black Venus' of Behn's novella, became, in all stage versions, a White woman.[11] But as Lyndon Dominique shows, actresses playing Imoinda late in the eighteenth century began to blacken their skin;[12] playbook frontispieces suggest Sarah Siddons started this trend in 1783 (slide *).[13] Dieupart's 1723 lament aria, still circulating in the 1780s, may, in drawing-room performances, have been thought of as belonging to a Black Imoinda, whom first actresses, in spite of the written part, were re-inventing onstage as an African.

Surely 'Black' laments by White composers largely served to perform the sensibility of White British amateurs to themselves. But Abolitionist lament song also offered a stark repudiation of the false narratives of pro-Slavery propagandists like William Beckford (slide). In 1788, this former plantation owner thrust forward his account of '*Negroes … impartially*' examined according to '*local experience of nearly thirteen years in*' Jamaica (slide).[14] According to Beckford, enslaved Africans, rather than suffering during transport, would 'dance and sing throughout the journey without lamenting a change of life'.[15] Two years

later, Beckford gave an account of traditional burial music that, by his lights, showed the 'Negro' be incapable of feeling loss:

> When the body is carried to the grave, they accompany the procession with a song … [then] … send forth a shrill and noisy howl, which is no sooner re-ecchoed [sic]… than forgotten … After this ceremony, which in civilized countries is considered as a melancholy one, but of which few traces can be found on the sepulture of a negro, the affected tear is soon dried, the pretended sigh is soon suppressed.[16]

Opposing such convenient falsehoods, Abolitionist song projected a vulnerable, sensitive, deeply affected African subject. Which poetry did pro-Abolitionist composers appropriate to their mission? Who were the composers, and who the audiences? By what means did composers heighten the poetry? A sampling of fifteen Abolitionist songs from 1788 to 1802 (see handout) suggests some answers.

Composers of these songs drew on accounts, printed since 1773 in newspapers, pamphlets and poetry collections, purporting to relate 'real' life stories.[17] Identifiable authors were all Whites who ventriloquized the African experience. Celebrated poems like Thomas Day's 'Dying Negro' of 1773 and William Cowper's 'Negro's Complaint' of 1788, and lesser-known verses, such as Mary Robinson's 'Dark was the dawn' of 1796 mingled tales of separation, homesickness, torture and deprivation with reflections on the immorality of slave trade. Though a couple of poets wrote moralizing common ballads, most of these pro-Abolition song verses were first-person accounts in couplets, sometimes heroic, based on stories from the press. According to Day, his 'Dying Negro' was itself 'supposed to be written by [a] BLACK / to his intended wife', whom Day invented out of press notices from 1773 of an African man who, facing re-enslavement after running away from a London household, had killed himself.[18] Day's poem was set twice as a song. Another poem, by Welsh naval surgeon David Samwell, printed in *The Star and Evening Advertiser* of

November 1792, told of "an African Prince" who sold a boy "for a Metal Watch"; Samwell wrote under the pseudonym, "Meddyg Du", Welsh for "Black Doctor".[19] Samwell's poem was also set twice as song.[20] In 1796 an anonymous poem "Written on seeing a Negro Boy begging in great Distress" appeared in *The Monthly Mirror reflecting Men and Manners*, and composer Thomas Thompson set this poem three years later. On the page, there is much in these poems to object to, such as the blame Samwell places on an African prince rather than a British slave agent, a move that effectively exculpates White traders. In performance, however, musicians might create a singing subject's subtle and moving journey, as did Awet Andemicael and Nathaniel Mathan in their performance in April 2019 of Edward Miller's setting of Samwell's "The Negro Boy" (play video).

Who composed Abolitionist songs? The composers of these fifteen were variously organists, amateurs, and theatre professionals. Among fifteen composers, six were organists, most who served parishes in the North, where Abolitionist campaigns flourished. In Yorkshire, Thomas Beilby dedicated a song to the early Abolitionist Granville Sharp; where the Durham-born Sharp was a local hero. Edward Miller lived in Doncaster, also in Yorkshire, the county Wilberforce represented in parliament.[21] Thomas Thompson, a former Clementi student, was at home in Newcastle, and John Ross in Aberdeen.[22] Of the six organist-composers, only George Ebenezer Williams worked in London while composing early Abolitionist song. Four other composers published their music anonymously, including countertenor- composer John Moulds, who wrote for London playhouses and pleasure gardens,[23] and a 'Lady Correspondent' whose music Julia will discuss.

Although written largely for musical amateurs, Abolitionist songs were also crafted for the public stage: James Hook composed one for concertizing at Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, where he worked; actor John Collins wrote the poem 'The Desponding Negro' (slide) set by playhouse composer William Reeve, for Collins' own solo stage acts; and

Sadler's Wells treasurer Vincent de Cleve wrote an Abolitionist song for Thomas Brabazon Gray to perform at Covent Garden. Tenor James Burrows, named in the title of Miller's song which we just heard, was known for leading Freemason Lodge concerts, where the song was likely performed.[24]

By what musical means did composers dramatize the verses they had chosen? To accord with contemporary taste, a virtuous British song need to be simple, and politeness called for elegance. This translated into formally basic yet sleek strophic songs hung with melancholy. Typically composers deployed *galant* dance genres – minuet, bourree, gavotte, march, an Anglicized courante parading as a 'Siciliano' – a firm tonal centre, infrequently and predictably departed from, symmetrical phrasing and sequentially-repeated motives, and pauses for declamatory effect. Gestures and expressive markings tinged the music with sadness: liberal *agréments*, sighing appoggiaturas and in particular 'affective' tempo markings such as 'slow and plaintive', dotted and double-dotted rhythms that add weight to words and imitate gasps and sobs, and fermatas at melodic and poetic climaxes with gaps for the singer to fill 'ad libitum'. In Abolitionist song, the anodyne sits alongside the progressive, such as Williams's reaction to words of fringe poet and literati James Henry Leigh Hunt. Here, the organist Williams heightens the cry, 'O pity' by setting it as asymmetric fragments, tinging E minor with an F major chord (slide). But simpler treatments, like those by Beilby or Miller, seem to have prevailed.

To appreciate how radical Abolitionist song may have seemed to its audiences, we must appreciate the regularity with which Africans were mocked in contemporaneous 'Negro' song for the playhouse. From the 1760s onward, there was a fashion for blacked-up White singer-actors to perform 'Blackish' speech and comic airs. As Roxanne Wheeler and others chart, 'Blackish' speech might, depending on context, mark out a *commedia*-derived clever servant with the concomitant powers of that figure, subversive and otherwise.[25] The

fashion for 'Negro' comic song and its 'Blackish' verse began, however, with the frankly racist 1763 hit *The Padlock*, led by Charles Dibdin as Mungo.[26] Dibdin then forged a popular line for himself in comic Negro song which took the stigmatization of Africans much further.

Dibdin's 'Mungo' line unfolded until 1804 in songs he wrote like *Kickaraboo, Common Neger go down the road side, Quaco Bungy go about, One Negro wi my banjer, One Negro come from Jenny land*. He sang these numbers in one-man acts at a keyboard kitted out with "set of bells, a side drum, a tambourine, and a gong" (slide).[27] Such song mapped Black-ish talk and instruments onto a figure that, to quote Hans Nathan, was happy to be "worked hard … kicked and whipped, as long as he could strum his 'banjer' and sing and dance at the day's end"[28]. Dibdin amplified the primitiveness of his characterization through his scoring: for instance, in 'The Negro and his banjer' from *The Wags* (slide) his music simply see-saws over the home tonic triad. A correlate to Dibdin's denotative conceit found its way into one pro-Abolition song, *The Negro Girl*: sung in Blackish talk, it also just rocks back and forth on the tonic triad (slide). In contemporary pro-Slavery caricatures, speech bubbles placed Blackish speech into the mouths of perceived Abolitionist sympathizers (slide).

To conclude: song was one communicative means among many with which Abolitionists fought to alter public perception. Because a White creation, pro-Abolition song could not but misrepresent Africans. But polite English song allowed composers to bring their message across. Because the Slavery lobby put out that Africans' were affectively incapable of lamenting loss, Abolitionist song could be heard as real tales bearing witness to the opposite. Untrue in their representations, abolitionist poets and composers may perhaps have been true to their mission.

[1] Brycchan Carey, 'William Wilberforce's Sentimental Rhetoric: Parliamentary Reportage and the Abolition Speech of 1789', *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual* 14 (2003), 281–305; Brycchan Carey, 'Feeling Out Loud: Sentimental Rhetoric in Parliament, the Pulpit, and the Court of Law', *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment,and Slavery, 1760–1807* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 144-185. Famously Thomas Clarkson led the fact-finding mission, assembling information for his much-circulated *Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade* (1788). Clarkson's exhaustive research – he visited Bristol, Liverpool, Manchester, Bath, Gloucester, Worcester, Chester, Lancaster, and Birmingham – from May 1787 was carried out for the Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Ellen G. Wilson, *Thomas Clarkson: A Biography*, 2nd edn (York: William Sessions, 1996), pp. 38–54. During the 1790s, slaves in Jamaica articulated in song their aims in relation to Wilberforce's and his campaign; Hilary McDonald Beckles, 'The Wilberforce Song: How Enslaved Caribbean Blacks Heard British Abolitionists'*, Parliamentary History* 26, suppl. (2007): 113-140.

[2] Emergent 'scientific' racism typically underpinned arguments put forward by those defending the slave trade. Arguably most persuasive rebuttals were by Africans in Britain – Ignatius Sancho, Ottobah Cugoano, Olaudah Equiano – and the Black lobbying group, the Sons of Africa; see, for instance, Keith Albert Sandiford, *Measuring the Moment: Strategies of Protest in Eighteenth-Century Afro-English Writing* (Selinsgrove and London: Susquehanna University Press and Associated University Presses, 1988); Paul G. Edwards and James Walvin, *Black Personalities in the Era of the Slave Trade* (London: Macmillan, 1983). For a brief but useful survey of racist theories against which arguments had to be made, see Ann Thomson, 'Abolitionism and the Question Of Race', *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* 15 no. 1 (2008): 175–86. The classic study on racism in eighteenth-century writings is Roxann *Wheeler's The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (2000). For a sampling of racial profiling across media – periodicals, pamphlets, tobacco cards, stage works – see Catherine Molineux, *Faces of Perfect Ebony: Encountering Atlantic Slavery in Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[3] Brycchan Carey, 'William Wilberforce's Sentimental Rhetoric: Parliamentary Reportage and the Abolition Speech of 1789', p. 290.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Eighteenth-century literati argued that sympathy was the strongest means to improve morality, and that fictional narrative was understood to mobilize readers more effectively than moral philosophy. See John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Chris Jones, *Radical Sensibility: Literature and Ideas in the 1790s* (London: Routledge, 1993); Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[6] Gillen D'Arcy Wood, 'Introduction: Virtuosophobia', *Romanticism and Music Culture in Britain, 1770-1840: Virtue and Virtuosity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1–19.

[7] *Ibid*.

[8] The first notice for Diepart's song 'proper to the part' of Imoinda was 21 May 1723 Issue 6733 ("a new song proper to Imoinda in Oronooko"). According to entries for *Oroonoko* that I surveyed in *The London stage, 1660-1800: A Calendar of Plays*, only three notices for this song survive, all for Sarah Thurmond at Drury Lane. Thurmond played Imoinda from 1723 to 1731. Dieupart composed the song seemingly to enliven the benefit at which the song first appeared, on 21 May. It was announced again for 23 May and for 14 September 1723. *The London stage, 1660-1800: A Calendar Of Plays*, Part 2, vol. 2, p. 725 (21 May 1723).

[9] "The tragedy, the second most frequently produced drama in the eighteenth-century theatre appearing each season from 1696 to 1801, becomes the locus of issues surrounding femininity, monstrosity and miscegenation". Felicity Nussbaum,*The Limits of the Human: Fictions of Anomaly, Race and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 157.

[10] Thomas Southerne was the first adaptor; later ones were John Hawkesworth (1759), Francis Gentleman (1760), John Ferriar (1788) and the anonymous adaptor of *The Royal Captive* (1767). Despite these many revisions, it was Southerne's version of Oroonoko that held the boards. 'The Eighteenth-Century Marketing of Oroonoko: Contending Constructions of Maecenas, the Author and the Slave', in *Troping Oroonoko from Behn to Bandele*, ed. Susan B. Iwanisziw (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 141–73.

[11] Expanding on Joyce Green MacDonald's work, Nussbaum's was first to focus scholarly minds on this subject. See also Jennifer B. Elmore, "'The Fair Imoinda': Domestic Ideology and Anti-Slavery on the Eighteenth-Century Stage", in *Troping Oroonoko from Behn to Bandele*, ed. Susan B. Iwanisziw (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 35–58.

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[12] Lyndon J. Dominique, *Imoinda's Shade: Marriage and the African Woman in Eighteenth-Century British Literature, 1759-1808* (Columbus : Ohio State University Press c2012), p. 47. Dominique identifies four frontispieces of actresses with darkened sing: of Sarah Siddons (identified as 'Mrs. S. Kemble') Harriet Litchfield, Elizabeth Hartley andSarah Smith.
[13] Ibid.
[14] William Beckford (1744–99), *Remarks upon the Situation of Negroes in Jamaica, impartially made from a local Experience of nearly Thirteen years in that Island* (London: Printed for T. and J. Egerton, 1788). Despite belonging to one of England's most powerful slave holders, debt, due to losses from hurricanes, seemingly pushed Beckford to propagandize: within days of returning from Jamaica to London in 1786, he was incarcerated in the Fleet prison. Beckford was the illegitimate son of Alderman William Beckford's brother Richard, and his first cousin to the William Thomas Beckford of Fonthill Abbey. As David Hunter shows, the Beckford were leaders in musical taste, spending their slave-derived income lavishly. In the 1770 while on his GrandTour Beckford had met Leopold and Wolfgang Mozart in Rome and Naples. David Hunter, 'The Beckfords in England and Italy: A Case Study In The Musical Uses Of The Profits Of Slavery', *Early Music* 46 no. 2 (2018): 285-98, esp. 293–4.
[15] Beckford (1788), p. 10.
[16] William Beckford, *A Descriptive Account of a Part of the Island of Jamaica …. [with] Reflections upon what would probably be the Consequences of an Abolition of the Slave-Trade, and of the Emancipation of the Slaves*, vol. 2 (London: printed for T. and J. Egerton, 1790), p. 387-9 [in 2 vols.]
[17] Most of the poems are reprinted in James G. Basker, ed., *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems about Slavery, 1660-1810* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002); Basker's introductions tends to omit the earliest dates of publication for the poems discussed here.
[18] "This report appeared in *The Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* 28 May 1773, *The General Evening Post* 25-27 May 1773, and *Lloyd's Evening Post* 26-28 May 1773)" British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment,and Slavery, 1760–1807 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) [add pp.]
[19] Dr. David Samwell was a poet, naval surgeon, and member of the Gwyneddigion Society of London. He had accompanied Captain James Cook on his third and final voyage to New Zealand and Hawaii. W. Llewelyn Davies, 'David Samwell A Further Note,' *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1938), p. 281. I am grateful to Lisa Ford at Yale University for bringing this article to my attention.
[20] A broadsheet of the poem is undated; Samwell's obituary *Gentleman's Magazine* December 1798 identifies him as the author of this poem that the public had "favourably received". *Ibid*.
[21] The success of Wilberforce, who stood as an Independent was rooted in his commitment to the Abolitionist cause, but he faced fierce opposition in Yorkshire elections even after the Abolitionists prevailed. Kirsten McKenzie, 'My Voice is sold, & I must be a Slave': Abolition Rhetoric, British Liberty and the Yorkshire Elections of 1806 and 1807', *History Workshop Journal* 64 no. 1 (2007): 48-73.
[22] In Scotland, rather than its Enlightenment writers, the Church of Scotland and its missionaries in the West Indies powered the Abolitionist campaign, not least by petitions sent to parliament. Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756-1838* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).
[23] D'Arcy Wood, *Romanticism and Music Culture in Britain, 1770-1840,* pp. 217-18
[24] A freemason at the Doncaster Lodge from 1781, Miller may have composed *The Negro B*oy for a Lodge concert. Christopher Smith, 'Miller, Edward (1735–1807)' Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (2004) https://0-doi-org.catalogue.libraries.london.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/18721. Accessed 10 April 2019. James Burrows, who we know from its title performed this song, led concerts at the Lodge, according to other song titles with his name.
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[26] Wheeler writes: "Several influential scholars have doubted whether any play could be either abolitionist or antiracist in this era" yet she implies scholars may have focussed too much on George Colman, Jr.'s opera *Inkle and Yarico* (1787). *Ibid*., note 9, p. 81. As other scholars show, the popularity of comedies that featured denigrating Black stage stypes; see, for instance, Felicity Nussbaum, 'The Theatre of Empire: Racial Counterfeit, Racial Realism', *New Imperial History:Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840*, ed. Kathleen Wilson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), pp. 71–90 and David Worrall, *Harlequin Empire: Race, Ethnicity and the Drama of the Popular Enlightenment* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007). On racial profiling in Dibdin's performance of Mungo in *The Padlock*, see Felicity Nussbaum, '"Mungo here, Mungo there": Charles Dibdin and Racial Preference', in *Charles Dibdin and late Georgian Culture*, ed. Oskar Cox Jensen, David Kennerley and Ian Newman (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 23–42. Dorothy Couchman earlier argued against such a reading, asserting that Mungo was not merely a precursor of codified

stage racism, but also thanks to Mungo's song, a 'nuanced alternative' to such stage characterization. '"Mungo Everywhere": How Anglophones Heard Chattel Slavery, *Slavery & Abolition* 36 no. 4 (2015): 704-20.
[27] Charles Dibdin 'Memoir' in *The songs of Charles Dibdin, chronologically arranged, with notes, historical, biographical, and critical; . . . to which is prefixed a memoir of the author by George Hogarth, Esq.* (London, How & Parsons, 1842), p.xx ; cited in Hans Nathan, 'Negro Impersonation in Eighteenth Century England *Notes* 2nd ser., 2, no. 4 (1945): 245-254.
[28] Ibid.