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Black Lives, White Witnesses: An Argument for a Presentist Approach to Teaching Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*

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Black Lives, White Witnesses: An Argument for a Presentist Approach to Teaching Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*

Abstract

This essay outlines a presentist approach to teaching Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688), in which a white woman witnesses a Black man's brutal execution at the hands of enslavers. This approach explores the capacity of Behn's novel—a colonialist narrative scholars frequently identify as troubling or frustrating—to generate discussions about "white witnessing," particularly white people's consumption of images of Black people in peril. This includes recent videos of Black people killed by police or white citizen vigilantes. Many Black individuals identify these videos as traumatizing, frequently noting how they have failed to spur structural reform. Of central concern in the classroom discussion described in the essay is the sympathy white witnesses experience in response to images of racist violence, a feeling that can bring reassurance—even pleasure—to the white witness but that in and of itself does little, if anything, to address the systemic causes of such violence and may actually serve to sustain them. In addition to considering how instructors can draw upon this novel from the past to generate discussions about critical issues of the present, the essay describes how they might place *Oroonoko* in conversation with texts from diverse periods, places, and genres in order to expose the limitations of and fill the gaps in Behn's narrative.

Keywords

Oroonoko, Aphra Behn, slavery, teaching, presentism, Black lives, sympathy

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Cover Page Footnote

This essay is based on presentations I gave at the 2022 Northern Plains Conference on Early British Literature and the 2022 British Women Writers Conference. I gained invaluable feedback and insights during conversations at both conferences and would like to thank Lisa Ann Robertson, Jared Richman, Tara Lyons, Roxanne Eberle, Johanna Bailie, Jeremy Webster, and Lana Dalley for sharing in these conversations. I especially thank Kellie Holzer for emphasizing how presentism informs my approach. I am grateful as well to the students at South Dakota State University who have explored Behn's novel with me. In particular, I extend my gratitude to the reviewers and editors at *ABO* for their generous and indispensable feedback on earlier versions of this essay.

To what end do we open the casket and look into the face of death?
—Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts” (4–5)

A copy of Sir Peter Lely’s portrait of Aphra Behn hangs in a prominent position on the wall of my campus office, where it can be seen by anyone who approaches my open doorway. I hung Behn’s portrait in this spot not only because she is a writer I have long admired and frequently teach but also because I wanted her image to communicate something about me and my interests in the long eighteenth century, women’s writing, and the history of feminism. Increasingly, however, I feel unsettled by her image, a feeling connected largely to my experiences teaching her 1688 novel *Oroonoko*, which I have taught numerous times in a variety of undergraduate and graduate courses. Despite its sympathetic portrayal of an African prince who is forcibly transported to the colony of Suriname, enslaved, and then violently executed by his enslavers, *Oroonoko* nonetheless supports colonial interests, upholds the institution of slavery, and engages the rhetoric of white supremacy to rationalize both. How does Behn’s portrait, positioned as it is on my wall, serve as an extension of the colonizing and race-making impulses embedded within her novel? As a white woman teaching at a predominantly white institution, how does my positioning of Behn’s portrait reinforce those impulses? Given our discussions of Behn’s novel, what message am I sending to students who approach my doorway? What effect might this message have on Black students, Indigenous students, and students of color?

Because it centers the experiences of a Black character, represents that character sympathetically, and engages with the issues of race, slavery, and colonialism, *Oroonoko* has become a popular text to teach and is generally viewed as making a valuable contribution to courses in early British literature and the long eighteenth century. My understanding of the value of Behn’s novel is shifting, however, and I’ve begun to consider it in terms of its capacity to generate discussions about “white witnessing,” particularly white people’s consumption of images of Black people in peril. This includes recent videos of Black individuals killed by police or white citizen vigilantes, images that many Black people identify as traumatizing.

Behn’s novel focuses on the life of Oroonoko, a prince from the African country of Coramantian who, along with his wife Imoinda, is enslaved on a plantation in Suriname, where Oroonoko meets the narrator, a young Englishwoman who claims to have some influence within the settler community. Oroonoko attempts unsuccessfully to bargain with his captors for his and Imoinda’s freedom and, losing patience upon learning Imoinda is pregnant, leads an unsuccessful revolt, after which he is whipped nearly to death. Once he recovers, he and Imoinda

agree to a murder/suicide pact, but after he kills her, he is seized by his captors and brutally executed.

Scholars of *Oroonoko*—including Robert L. Chibka, Moira Ferguson, Laura Brown, Charlotte Sussman, and Pumla Dineo Gqola—identify the novel as troubling, even frustrating. Some of the troubling elements of the narrative are soon apparent to my students, particularly its Eurocentric descriptions of Oroonoko, Imoinda, and the Indigenous people of Suriname. One element of the text students often do not immediately identify as problematic is the narrator, who, though she constructs the representations students recognize as troubling, often does so in a way that minimizes her presence in the narrative. Behn’s narrator identifies herself as an “eye-witness” to most of the events that occur in the novel (9).¹ The approach to teaching *Oroonoko* I describe below encourages students to consider how the narrator’s whiteness informs her configuration of this role. In doing so, they are able to not only identify the elements of white witnessing that structure the novel’s narrative perspective but also consider how many of these elements continue to characterize white witnessing in the present day. In particular, we discuss how the white witness may experience sympathy for the victim of racist violence, a feeling that can bring reassurance—even pleasure—to the white witness but that in and of itself does little, if anything, to address the systemic causes of such violence and may actually sustain them.

Below, I describe how I’ve integrated *Oroonoko* into a graduate-level seminar on English literature since 1660 that I title Living “In the Wake” of Colonization and Slavery.² The title of the course references Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, from which some of the course readings are drawn. I identify my approach to teaching *Oroonoko* as a presentist one, as my students and I consider how we can use this text from the past to understand and address problems in the present. Presentism informs how I structure the course as well; though we focus largely on English literature of the long eighteenth century, we place *Oroonoko* in conversation with texts from locations and periods outside of these parameters, texts that expose the limitations of and fill the gaps in Behn’s narrative. The course meets for three hours once a week; below, I describe four class sessions, one focusing on presentism, two on *Oroonoko*, and one on twenty-first-century videos of Black individuals killed as a result of racist violence. These videos almost always document the deaths of men and boys, much as Behn’s novel focuses particularly on the physical brutality enacted upon her masculine protagonist.³ In addition to describing the content of these sessions, I offer ideas for other texts that can be used to flesh out the remainder of the course.

Presentist teaching/teaching presentism

Though recent scholars have advocated for presentist approaches to the study of history and literature, presentism—which Lynn Hunt defines as “interpreting the past in terms of present concerns”—has also met with skepticism. So that students understand why I’ve structured the class as I have and why we approach *Oroonoko* as we do, I focus one of our sessions on the controversy surrounding presentism in both historical and literary studies. For this session, I assign the following readings, which we discuss in the order listed:

Presentism in historical studies:

- Lynn Hunt, “Against Presentism”
- Saidiya Hartman, preface (“The Hold of Slavery”) and introduction to *Scenes of Subjection*
- James H. Sweet, “Is History History? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present”
- Keisha N. Blain, “Black Historians Know There’s No Such Thing as Objective History”

Presentism in literary/textual studies:

- David Sweeney Coombs and Danielle Coriale, introduction to the V21 Forum on Strategic Presentism
- Stephanie Insley Hershinow, “Forster’s Synchronism and 18th-Century Studies”
- Travis Chi Wing Lau, “‘Strategic Presentism’ and 18th-Century Studies”
- Christina Sharpe, “The Wake,” Chapter 1 of *In the Wake*

According to Jeffrey R. Wilson, the “real tension” between historicists (his designation for those who reject presentism) and presentists is that “[t]he historicist wants to understand the world, the presentist to change it.” Or, one might say, the presentist wishes to understand the world in order to change it. My students and I begin our discussion of historical presentism with the 2002 statement issued by Hunt (then president of the American Historical Association [AHA]). Though most presentists are attentive to the differences between past and present, Hunt criticizes presentism for overemphasizing the similarities between the two and for viewing the present as “morally superior” because “[o]ur forbears constantly fail to measure up to our present-day standards.” According to Hunt, the study of present concerns, which she associates with “various kinds of identity politics,” should be left to sociology, political science, and ethnic studies. Though

Hunt associates identity politics with race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, one objective of this class session is to emphasize how a concern with race in particular lies at the heart of the debate surrounding historical presentism. I tell students it is, perhaps, not coincidental that the decade prior to Hunt's statement saw the publication of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* and Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*. I introduce students to Gilroy's ideas, noting his emphasis on the embeddedness of contemporary Western experience in the history of colonialism and slavery. According to Gilroy, there can be no progress within the present as long as this history is viewed as being separate from "the ethical and intellectual heritage of the West" (49). In preparation for class, students read the preface and introduction to Hartman's book. Like Gilroy, Hartman questions "narrative[s] of progress," identifying emancipation as "a point of transition to what looks more like the reorganization of the plantation system than self-possession, citizenship, or liberty for the 'freed'" (16). According to Hartman, slavery exercises a "stranglehold" upon the present while "the failures of the Reconstruction still haunt us" (18).

Students and I go on to discuss the reemergence of the presentism debate in 2022. We consider the statement of James H. Sweet, president of the AHA at the time, which largely echoes Hunt's position. Noting the continued centrality of race in the debate surrounding presentism, we discuss how Sweet's statement—which white supremacist Richard Spencer described as "reasonable in the extreme" (qtd. in Flaherty)⁴—appeared amid the ongoing controversy surrounding the teaching of history that acknowledges the foundational role of slavery in the formation and development of the United States. Sweet levels his critique specifically at Nikole Hannah-Jones's *1619 Project*, which emphasizes how the continuing legacy of slavery shapes the present.⁵ Our discussion of historical presentism culminates in our reading of Keisha N. Blain's response to Sweet, in which she describes how "the persistence of racism, white supremacy, and racial inequality" makes it impossible for Black historians to write about the past "as though it were divorced from present concerns."

In the years between Hunt's and Sweet's statements, discussions of presentism emerged within literary studies, particularly within Shakespearean, Victorian, and eighteenth-century studies. Students read David Sweeney Coombs and Danielle Coriale's introduction to the V21 Forum on Strategic Presentism, as well as statements presented by Stephanie Insley Hershnow and Travis Chi Wing Lau during a roundtable responding to V21 at the 2018 conference of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS). As these readings demonstrate, literary presentism, much like historical presentism, traces the ways in which the challenges of the present are rooted in the past. According to the V21 Collective,

a “strategic presentism” requires that we “think critically about the past in the present in order to change the present” (Coombs and Coriale 88).

Students and I discuss strategies for thinking “critically about the past in the present” within the context of literary studies. Drawing upon the work of Shakespearean scholar Evelyn Gajowski, I introduce students to Michel Serres’s concept of time as a “crumpled handkerchief” where two points that would appear far apart if the handkerchief were spread flat (points that might represent texts from different time periods) are brought together. We read Hershino’s argument for a “naïve synchronism” that approaches novels as “simultaneously generated” instead of developing along a linear trajectory, thereby allowing for “connections between moments of historical time” and for “thinking about the novel without the silos of periodization.” To anchor our discussion of the ways in which literary presentism can reveal connections between racial injustices of the past and present, students read the first chapter of Sharpe’s *In the Wake*, in which she describes the necessity for developing an approach to textual analysis that would enable one to encounter “the past that is not yet past” (9), as well as the experience of living “in the still unfolding aftermath of Atlantic chattel slavery” (2) and “the unfinished project of emancipation” (5).

I conclude this session by explaining how our presentist approach will involve using Behn’s account of slavery to generate questions regarding representations of racial injustice in our own time, specifically videos of racist violence enacted upon Black individuals. Though this entails identifying points of connection between the past and present, a sense of moral superiority, as Lau asserts, need not be the outcome. The result is more likely to be a greater understanding of the ways in which progress hasn’t been made as well as the work that has yet to be done. I explain as well how our presentist approach will involve placing *Oroonoko* in conversation with other texts, relaxing the boundaries of periodization, place, and genre. Though we will approach these texts not as supplements to *Oroonoko* but as significant literary contributions in and of themselves, we will look back to *Oroonoko* as we discuss them, acknowledging how they expose the limitations of and fill the gaps within Behn’s novel.

White witnessing and the problem of sympathy in *Oroonoko*

Our discussion of *Oroonoko* is divided into two sessions, the first focusing on the concept of white witnessing, the second on the sympathy white witnesses experience in response to the suffering of Black individuals.

White Witnessing

For our session on white witnessing in *Oroonoko*, students read the following:

- Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko*
- Saidiya Hartman, “The Stage of Suffering,” from “Innocent Amusements,” Chapter 1 of *Scenes of Subjection*

According to Toni Morrison, within a predominantly white culture whose history includes the enslavement of Black people, the characteristics that define a white perspective within white-authored literature often emerge out of attempts “to imagine an Africanist other”; Morrison asks, “What are the signs, the codes, the strategies designed to accommodate this encounter?” (*Playing in the Dark* 12). A major objective of our first session on *Oroonoko* is to identify the characteristics of white witnessing as it is represented in the text—its frequent attempts to remain hidden and appear neutral; its lack of self-awareness; its exploitative capacity; its reinforcement of the ideas of white superiority, dominance, and power. In addition, we consider the signs, codes, and strategies employed by the narrator of Behn’s novel, which imagines the type of encounter Morrison describes. Our approach is informed by our discussion of Hartman’s “The Stage of Suffering,” a brief section from the first chapter of *Scenes of Subjection*. In this section, Hartman discusses the letters of John Rankin, published in 1833, in which he describes the horrors of slavery. According to Hartman, the letters demonstrate how “the crimes of slavery are not only witnessed but staged” (22). Often, the events he describes “are disclosed through the reiteration of secondhand accounts and circulated stories from ‘unquestionable authorities’ to which Rankin must act as a surrogate witness” (22). Our discussion of Hartman encourages us to ask not only how the narrator of *Oroonoko*—as a direct or surrogate witness—“stages” the events of the narrative but also how her whiteness shapes the ways in which she does so.

To help students respond to these questions, I arrange them into small groups and instruct each group to track how the narrator positions herself as a witness to the events she describes. When is she *definitely present*, participating directly in these events? When does she *obscure her presence or absence*, adopting a seemingly objective journalistic tone that makes it difficult to discern whether her account is firsthand or secondhand? When is she *definitely absent*, acting as a surrogate witness? How are these representations of white witnessing connected to the violence of colonialism and, by extension, the violence to which Oroonoko is subjected at the end of the novel?

Students notice that the narrator engages directly in the events she describes for only about a quarter of the novel, and I encourage them to consider how her participation in the events of the narrative at these moments is shaped by her status as a white colonizer.⁶ They observe that, in nearly all of these scenes, the narrator interacts with Oroonoko in a manner designed to establish the superiority, protect the interests, or ensure the dominance of the colonizing culture. Though the narrator represents her relationship with Oroonoko as one of friendship and mutual admiration, most of their direct interactions in Suriname are characterized by her attempts to monitor and control his movements (Chibka 524; Brown, *Ends of Empire* 51). I direct students' attention to the exchange in which the narrator, offended that Oroonoko doesn't believe the colonists will keep their promise to free him and Imoinda, informs him that his lack of faith in their word "would but give us a fear of him and possibly compel us to treat him so as I should be very loth to behold; that is, it might occasion his confinement" (49). The narrator, in other words, threatens Oroonoko with imprisonment.

I direct students' attention as well to the ways in which the narrator's whiteness shapes those scenes in which her presence or absence is unclear. We consider the scenes in which she describes the Indigenous people of Suriname, the landscape of Suriname, and the buying and selling of enslaved people. While students quickly discern how the narrator's status as a colonizer shapes her description of the Indigenous people, they tend to detect the colonizing impulse that shapes her account of the landscape less readily. I draw their attention to the passage in which her seemingly benign description of the lush beauty of Suriname's trees transitions into an account of how the trees can be transformed into commodities, including timber that "bears a price considerable" and candles that "give us sufficient light" (51). As Brown notes, the narrator's language throughout the novel signifies "the period's fascination with imperialist accumulation" ("The Romance of Empire" 52). Meanwhile, as Ramesh Mallipeddi states, "[T]he visual pleasures of seeing and contemplating" in Behn's novel "are closely allied to the desire to possess and master" (479).

The narrator's description of the buying and selling of enslaved people similarly reflects the shaping influence of the colonizing gaze:

Those who want slaves make a bargain with a master or a captain of a ship, and contract to pay him so much apiece, a matter of twenty pound a head for as many as he agrees for, and to pay for them when they shall be delivered on such a plantation. So that when there arrives a ship laden with slaves, they who have so contracted go aboard and receive their number by lot; and perhaps

in one lot that may be for ten, there may happen to be three or four men, the rest women and children; or be there more or less of either sex, you are obliged to be contented with your lot. (12–13)

This sanitized account describes the experience of buying and selling people without hinting at the experience of being bought and sold. In other words, it represents the viewpoint of the enslaver rather than the enslaved. Though Behn's narrator adopts the position of the neutral observer, her description nonetheless reflects the perspective of the white colonizer.

This perspective also shapes the narrator's descriptions of events from which she is definitively absent. Students note that the narrator is absent from the events she describes for roughly two-thirds of the novel. They quickly ascertain that this is the case during the scenes set in Coramantien but don't always immediately notice that it is the case during crucial moments that occur in Suriname, when the narrator removes herself from the scene of action. To use Chibka's word, she "conveniently" heads downriver twice during this section: first, when Oroonoko is whipped; and second, during his execution (523). In other words, the narrator is not present for the two most brutally violent events she describes in the novel; rather, in presenting these scenes to the reader, she acts as a surrogate witness.

Students consider the narrator's reasons for leaving at these critical moments and the implications of her absence. She states that she and the other white women leave the plantation prior to Oroonoko's whipping because they fear he is planning a revolt and will "cut all our throats" (68). She asserts that she leaves again prior to Oroonoko's execution because witnessing the physical and emotional toll the whipping takes on him makes her physically ill. According to Mallipedi, the narrator's illness signifies how she "registers the effects of plantation cruelty via her own distress. ... [S]eeing Oroonoko and listening to his sad speech are so disorienting as to prevent her from being present at the final execution"; because she isn't present, she can't be considered "immediately related to nor directly responsible for Oroonoko's tragedy" (489). However, as Kelly Wezner notes, the narrator's absence doesn't excuse her from responsibility for what happens to Oroonoko (20). She deliberately removes herself from a situation she recognizes as volatile, admitting that her absence creates the opportunity for the violence that follows: "I suppose I had authority and interest enough there ... to have prevented it" (68). The narrator pleads feminine delicacy to excuse her absence and deny her culpability.

In other words, she falls back upon misogynistic notions of feminine fragility she does not exhibit in other contexts—when risking her life to raid tigers' dens, for

example, or visiting an Indigenous community despite her “mortal fears” of being killed—so that she may limit her sympathetic response to Oroonoko’s plight to affect without action, thereby rendering it innocuous to the system that brutalizes him (56). The narrator’s inaction encapsulates the strategies available to socially and economically advantaged white women who choose to protect a system that, though it disempowers them in many ways, nonetheless extends them certain benefits, including relative comfort and safety. Behn’s narrative starkly demonstrates what white women too often choose to ignore—namely, that these benefits frequently come at the expense of other people’s lives and well-being.

The Problem of Sympathy

For our second session on *Oroonoko*, which focuses on the potential problems with sympathy as it is experienced by white witnesses of racist violence, students read the following:

- Lynn Festa, “Sentimental Visions of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Studies”
- Ramesh Mallipeddi, “Spectacle, Spectatorship, and Sympathy in Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*”

To structure our discussion, I present students with a set of questions regarding the representations of such violence in *Oroonoko*, questions we will later ask in relation to videos of violence enacted upon Black individuals: Whom are these representations for? What is their purpose? Whom do they benefit? What don’t they show? Regarding whom the representations are for, we discuss how Behn envisioned a white audience and consider the extent to which this influenced the framing, or staging, of her narrative, including those scenes depicting the violence inflicted upon Oroonoko.

We move on to discuss the purpose served by these representations of violence, identifying the generation of sympathy as a primary one. According to Mallipeddi, whose essay students read for this session, *Oroonoko*’s body becomes “the primary site for the operation of sympathy in the novella” (476).⁷ Mallipeddi writes, “[N]otwithstanding its troubling representation of colonial contact, ... Behn’s novella remains one of the earliest fictional works ... to establish connections between slave suffering and sympathy” (492). However, as I emphasize in our discussion, sympathy is an element of white witnessing that must be subjected to scrutiny. To inform our discussion of the issues at stake when engaging with the concept of sympathy, particularly in relation to colonialism and slavery, my students and I draw upon passages from Hartman’s

Scenes of Subjection, as well as Lynn Festa's essay "Sentimental Visions of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Studies."⁸

Hartman's discussion of Rankin's letters pointedly articulates the problem with sympathy, particularly in relation to white witnessing of Black people's suffering. Hartman describes how Rankin, to better understand the suffering of the enslaved, imagines what it would be like if he, along with his wife and children, were enslaved and whipped. Imagining oneself in the place of another who suffers, Hartman explains, is frequently viewed as essential to the establishment of sympathy: "By bringing suffering near, the ties of sentiment are formed" (22). Mallipeddi describes the sympathy Behn's narrator experiences for Oroonoko in similar terms, stating that "she transforms the scaffold into a scene of militant sympathy, responding to the hero's victimization with her own suffering" and that "she is united with him through vicarious suffering, made possible by her capacity for sympathy" (489). As Hartman explains, however, this process of identification erases the identity of the other person: "[I]n making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration" (25). Within the context of slavery, feelings of sympathy ultimately reinforce the "expectations and desires definitive of the relations of chattel slavery" by "exploiting the vulnerability of the captive body as a vessel for the uses, thoughts, whims, and feelings of others" (24).

Festa similarly discusses the failure of sympathy to adequately respond to the suffering inflicted by the institution of slavery specifically and systems of colonialism and empire more broadly. Drawing upon Hartman's and Festa's discussions, students and I outline the problematic aspects of white witnessing and the sympathy it generates within the context of slavery and/or colonialism. The resulting list includes the following:

- White people require authentication of Black people's suffering via direct or surrogate white witnessing. (Hartman 29)
- The generation of sympathy white witnessing elicits requires especially brutal and graphic representations of Black individuals in peril. (Hartman 28, 30)
- The sympathy a white witness experiences in response to a Black person's suffering may serve as a source of pleasure. (Festa 33–34; Hartman 29)
- By imagining they are subjected to the suffering a Black individual has endured, the white witness erases the identity of the Black sufferer. (Hartman 24–28)
- The white witness may feel reassured by representations of white dominance in images of violence against Black individuals. (Hartman 31)

- The white witness may feel that experiencing sympathy in response to the suffering of a Black individual is a sufficient response to that suffering. (Festa 33)

While this list isn't exhaustive, it can help students develop their analysis of white witnessing in Behn's text and, later, in relation to videos of racist violence against Black individuals.

If the foremost purpose of the racist violence represented in Behn's novel is to generate sympathy, who are the beneficiaries of that sympathy? Students recognize that, within the context of the narrative, Oroonoko derives no benefit from the sympathy the narrator feels for him. Outside of this context, they identify the author and her audience as potential beneficiaries. They learn that, while Behn's primary motive for publishing her narrative was likely a financial one, she died shortly after its publication, leaving Thomas Southerne, with his 1695 stage adaptation of *Oroonoko*, to claim the earliest benefits of the public's emerging fascination with Behn's hero (Todd xvi, xxx; Rosenthal 25–26). We go on to consider how the chief beneficiaries of the sympathy generated by the images of violence in *Oroonoko* are arguably the surrogate white witnesses past and present who read Behn's novel and derive pleasure from the sympathy they experience for her protagonist.

Students and I discuss how such pleasure is frequently predicated upon a nondisruptive sympathy, sympathy that is an end in itself and therefore poses no threat to the system that gives rise to the suffering, a system from which the white witness benefits. To use Festa's words, "[H]aving felt, one need not do" (33). As Janet Todd describes, theater audiences were profoundly moved by stage adaptations of Oroonoko's story; however, many of those who "wept over the fall of an idealized African prince on the stage" were also "benefitting financially from the slave trade" (xxx). Todd represents this as an inconsistent response; however, feeling sympathy in response to images of racist violence is completely compatible with upholding—and may help maintain—the system that perpetuates such violence. As Todd notes, *Oroonoko* proved to have some benefit for the enslaved during the nineteenth century, when it "became part of the emancipation struggle" (xxx). Nonetheless, as Ferguson asserts, Behn's novel "does not sustain an abolitionist reading. ... [T]he text exalts Oroonoko's heroism and rebellion as long as they do not threaten British colonialism and royal authority" (345, 348). In fact, many of Behn's readers may have found it reassuring that a rebellion led by someone as exceptional as Oroonoko proved no match for British colonial power.

Our second session on *Oroonoko* culminates in a discussion of that which Behn’s narrator does not show her readers. This includes the perspectives of the “common” enslaved people, the labor in which they engage, and the conditions in which they live. As Gqola suggests, Trefry’s inability to rape Imoinda due to her remarkable beauty and virtue gestures toward that which the text obscures—the reality of the sexual assaults endured by other enslaved women on the plantation who evidently don’t possess Imoinda’s exceptional qualities (111). Though the narrator references enslaved families, she never mentions the common practice of forced familial separation. Ferguson notes that a section of the novel takes place on board an enslaver’s ship but does not portray the atrocious conditions of the Middle Passage (346). Presentism offers strategies for filling the gaps in Behn’s narrative, which I do as the course progresses by including texts by Black authors from different periods and places who bear witness—either through firsthand accounts or imaginative poetry and prose—to that which Behn fails to describe. Mary Prince’s *History* (1831) describes the experience of a “common” enslaved woman and details the excruciating labor to which the enslaved were subjected. Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) emphasizes enslaved women’s experiences, including sexual assault. Both Prince and Morrison describe the pain of familial separation. For representations of the Middle Passage, I include—in addition to Morrison’s novel—sections from Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* (1789), as well as Robert Hayden’s “Middle Passage” (1945). We also discuss the six Maroon tribes of present-day Suriname, the descendants of enslaved people who escaped their Dutch enslavers and established communities in the country’s inland forest regions (that which *Oroonoko* tries but fails to do). We explore *Lands of Freedom: The Oral History and Cultural Heritage of the Matawai Maroons in Suriname*, a web-based “storytelling map” developed by the Matawai community in collaboration with the Amazon Conservation Team.

Also absent from Behn’s narrative are the perspectives of the Indigenous people of Suriname or details regarding the circumstances that led to the colonization of their territory or their physical marginalization within it. Indigenous people of seventeenth-century Suriname transmitted their stories orally; because these stories aren’t immediately available to us, I direct students toward information about Indigenous groups living in Suriname today, groups who are working to maintain their languages and oral traditions and regain their land rights. Students watch a brief documentary on Suriname’s Indigenous population produced by the Organization of Indigenous People in Suriname for presentation to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Though we acknowledge that the experience of colonization differs across time and place, we nonetheless counter the colonizing perspective represented in Behn’s narrative with Indigenous voices from the region in which we live. Following Megan Peiser’s advice to “[s]tart

with the treaty of wherever you teach” (186), we consider the 1851 Treaty of Traverse des Sioux and the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868; we go on to read Ella Cara Deloria’s *Waterlily* (c. 1940) and Layli Long Soldier’s *Whereas* (2017).

Living, and dying, “In the Wake”: Twenty-first-century videos of racist violence

A presentist approach to reading *Oroonoko* develops students’ ability to analyze how representations of white witnessing are staged and encourages them to ask a particular set of questions regarding these representations: whom are they for, what is their purpose, who benefits from their circulation, and what don’t they show? In the fourth session, which I describe below, I encourage students to ask these questions of videos of racist violence perpetrated against Black individuals, along with an additional question: what can be done? In preparation for this session, students read the following:

- A selection of public-facing scholarship: Zoé Samudzi, “White Witness and the Contemporary Lynching”; Melanye Price, “Please Stop Showing the Video of George Floyd”; Alissa Richardson, “We Have Enough Proof”
- Johannes C. Eichstaedt et al., “The Emotional and Mental Health Impact of the Murder of George Floyd on the US population”
- Safiya Umoja Noble, “Teaching Trayvon: Race, Media, and the Politics of Spectacle”
- Christina Sharpe, “The Stop,” “‘Cradle to Grave,’ Womb to Tomb,” and “Retinal Attachment,” from “The Hold,” Chapter 3 of *In the Wake*

Near the end of Chapter 3 of *In the Wake*, sections of which students read for this session, Sharpe includes a photograph of Oakland police officer Johannes Mehserle, taken by Oscar Grant on New Year’s Day 2009 as Grant lay detained on the platform of Bay Area Rapid Transit’s Fruitvale station. Mehserle shot and killed Grant moments after the photograph was taken. Multiple videos of the shooting immediately began to circulate via social media, YouTube, news broadcasts, and news websites. The videos were downloaded more than 450,000 times over the course of four days from one local news website while, on the Sunday after the shooting, one video uploaded to YouTube was viewed an average of one thousand times an hour (Bulwa and Stannard). Since Grant’s death, numerous videos of Black men and boys being killed by police or white citizen vigilantes have been released to the public and played repeatedly on television, the internet, and social media. This includes videos documenting the killings of Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Samuel DuBose, Alton Sterling,

Philando Castille, Terence Crutcher, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Jonathan Price, Patrick Lyoya, Donovan Lewis, Derrick Kittling, and Tyre Nichols.

My students and I apply the questions we asked regarding representations of racist violence in *Oroonoko* to these videos, beginning with whom the videos are for. Samudzi, Price, and Richardson locate the videos within a long history of images of white violence against Black people meant largely for white consumption, a history that includes photographs of enslaved or formerly enslaved people with exposed backs scarred from whipping and photographs of lynchings. As these authors explain, Black individuals sometimes film and upload these videos in order to bear witness to racist violence; meanwhile, people from multiple racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds view and share them. Nonetheless, these videos are largely circulated by and within white-controlled/dominated media for a white viewership, and very little care or caution is exercised in relation to how, when, where, and how often they are shown. If control over the circulation of these videos is ever in the hands of the victim's family, it rarely remains there.

We move on to discuss the purpose for circulating these violent images which, as it did for *Oroonoko*, raises the issue of sympathy. According to Samudzi, at the heart of the white argument for watching these videos is the belief that the white witness will feel enough sympathy for the victim to take the action needed to end such violence. But, as Samudzi, Price, and Richardson all argue, while some of the perpetrators of this violence have been held accountable, there has been no large-scale reform. Samudzi writes, “[T]he translation of passive witnessing into structural . . . justice is an idea that is as misguided as it is old. If the argument is that witnessing this violence is enough or is necessary to galvanize action, my single question is when?”

I encourage students to dig deeper into the implications surrounding the sympathy white viewers feel in response to these videos by revisiting our earlier discussion of sympathy in relation to *Oroonoko*, including our list outlining the problems inherent in white witnesses' sympathetic responses to Black people's suffering. I ask them to consider whether the sympathy experienced by white witnesses of videos depicting racist violence has, like the sympathy experienced by Behn's narrator, largely been nondisruptive sympathy—sympathy that ultimately makes it easier for white witnesses to live with, dismiss, or ignore their own participation in the larger systems that give rise to this violence. Samudzi asserts this is the case; she describes how sympathy felt by white witnesses reassures them by proving they do care about Black lives; however, this sense of reassurance allows the white witness to believe that, since they identify with the victim rather than the perpetrator, they are not part of the problem. There is nothing more they need

to do, including working to dismantle a system from which they benefit. Drawing upon Hartman's work, Samudzi explains how the sympathy of the white witness ultimately erases the victim: the sympathetic white witness engages in a process where they first "other" the victim of violence and then "obliterate" them by absorbing their suffering. In other words, the experience becomes about white feelings, not Black lives.

We turn our attention from the ways in which white witnesses may experience these videos to those in which Black witnesses may experience them, drawing upon the articles by Samudzi, Price, and Richardson and the study by Johannes C. Eichstaedt et al. As these readings emphasize, the ongoing repetition of images of violence against Black people can prove traumatizing for Black witnesses. Eichstaedt et al., drawing upon Gallup and U.S. Census data gathered before and after Floyd's murder, found "an unprecedented level of anger and sadness in the population, particularly among Black Americans" after his death, noting that "compared to White Americans, Black Americans reported significantly larger increases in depression and anxiety symptoms." We discuss Sharpe's account of Temple University Hospital's gun violence prevention program, Cradle to Grave, in which she describes the trauma experienced by Black children subjected to images of people killed by guns and pressured to participate in the reenactment of the death of a Black adolescent boy.

If videos of racist violence cause trauma for many Black individuals without prompting a meaningful response to the systemic causes of such violence, then how—and for whom—are they beneficial? To address this question, we turn to Safiya Umoja Noble's essay on the media's response to the death of Trayvon Martin. Noble describes this response as a "spectacle" that "undermined ... a deeper inquiry into violent racialized death in the United States" (12–13). According to Noble, representations of racist violence on social media elicit likes, clicks, and shares as they contribute to the formation of public identities and online communities—some united by sympathy, others by cruelty. Meanwhile, the circulation of such representations via mass media boosts news ratings, which in turn increases advertising (12). By perpetuating stereotypes of Black masculine criminality, these representations profit the music, film, television, and prison industries (15).

As with *Oroonoko*, my students and I consider what the media's relentless circulation of videos depicting racist violence directed at Black men and boys obscures. Price emphasizes how these videos represent only a fraction of what there is to know about the victims. In addition, they lead to the perception that police violence is almost exclusively directed at Black men and boys when, as

Sharpe discusses, Black women and girls are frequently the targets of such violence—often in ways that are sexualized—as are Indigenous people, people of color, and transgender people. This violence is part of a larger criminal justice system in which violence against people from marginalized communities takes multiple forms—not only physical assault but also incarceration and indifference. To begin to fill in the gaps, I direct students’ attention to the work of the African American Policy Forum (*#SayHerName*), the Prison Policy Initiative, The Urban Indian Health Institute (including their report *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*), and the National Center for Transgender Equality.⁹

We then discuss our final question: What can be done? We consider not watching these videos as a possible response, but students note how this doesn’t address the problem of systemic racism. We discuss how reducing their circulation (which Hartman and Richardson support) may nonetheless limit the damage they cause. As noted above, these videos may traumatize Black witnesses and generate nondisruptive sympathy among white witnesses; at the same time, they may desensitize white witnesses to images of racist violence and condition them, via the perpetuation of the myth of Black criminality, to interpret even the most mundane activities as meriting police intervention if they are performed by a Black person. The deeper problem that must be addressed, however, is the violence the videos document, which—as our readings stress—can be done only through structural change. We discuss the initiatives of organizations such as the Movement for Black Lives, including redirecting funding allocated for policing and imprisonment toward nonpunitive approaches to community safety; sending trained interventionists to address domestic violence and mental health crises; decreasing policing in schools while increasing counseling; and developing drug policy that emphasizes health rather than punishment (*M4BL*). We also discuss legislation that would make no-knock warrants obsolete and choke holds illegal, as well as efforts to repeal Stand Your Ground and citizen arrest laws, which enable white citizen vigilantes to rationalize their actions and escape punishment.

Conclusion

[W]e are living in the afterlives of slavery, sitting in the room with history, in a lived and undeclared state of emergency.

—Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (100)

In *Unsettled: A Reckoning on the Great Plains*, Dawn Morgan describes the “unsettling” experience of demythologizing the narratives upon which her settler family’s understanding of their history rests. As a settler educator whose initiation

into academic feminism was dominated by the work of white scholars studying the work of white women writers—including Behn—I recognize the importance of demythologizing the narratives that have shaped my professional identity. For those who, like me, have long admired Behn’s work and have found not only value but also pleasure in teaching *Oroonoko*, it is perhaps tempting to read the sympathy the novel’s narrator expresses toward its hero as a positive element of the text, one that renders Behn’s narrative somewhat less troubling. Succumbing to this temptation, however, requires a denial of just how insidious the sympathy experienced by white witnesses of racist violence is when it does nothing to disrupt the institutions that impose or sanction such violence, thereby ensuring its repetition. The value of Behn’s novel lies not in its representation of sympathy but in its representation of sympathy’s limitations.

What my students do in response to our discussion of Behn’s novel—or if they do anything at all—is their choice. However, I increasingly believe that it would be irresponsible of me not to introduce them to the ways in which the problematic elements of a text like *Oroonoko* can help us think about—and respond to—the problems of the present, including the ongoing violence to which Black individuals are subjected in the United States. In an essay describing her course on eighteenth-century Black lives, Kathleen Lubey identifies doing so as an ethical obligation:

We are living the grave reality that the systemized murder of Black people, often at the hands of police, continues apace. ... [A]s experts in the period containing the apex of the British slave trade as well as its slow erosion under the pressures of abolitionism, we have the opportunity (I would argue, the responsibility) to help students understand the racially unjust present that we have inherited. (145)

One aspect of this racially unjust present, as Sharpe notes, is the “deliberate, repetitive, and wide circulation on television and social media of Black social, material, and psychic death” (21). This includes the circulation of videos of racist violence perpetrated against Black individuals. Why, over three hundred years after the publication of *Oroonoko*, do white witnesses still require evidence that such violence exists? Why does the violence continue, and what can be done to end it? As Blain argues, presentism is essential to confronting these questions. She writes, “The commitment to engaging present concerns is not simply a method or approach to the scholar’s craft of research and writing. It is a matter of life and death.”

Notes

¹ Wezner and Mallipeddi discuss the narrator's function as an eyewitness, including how she frames what she sees for her readers.

² The approach I describe could be adapted for other types of courses as well, including a split-level course for graduate and advanced undergraduate students or an upper-level undergraduate course.

³ According to Davis, though people from a variety of groups marginalized due to race, gender, and/or sexuality are disproportionately subjected to systemic or state-sanctioned violence, Black men and boys have long been the particular targets of such violence due to the dominant white culture's perception that they are especially threatening, dangerous, and predatory (xiv). See Davis's introduction to *Policing the Black Man*, as well as the other essays featured in her edited collection.

⁴ Media outlets including FOX News, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New Republic*, the *Atlantic*, and the *New York Times* covered the controversy surrounding Sweet's statement. For an overview of this controversy, see Flaherty.

⁵ In an earlier statement, Sweet defends the teaching of so-called "divisive concepts"—a term he rejects—in public K–12 schools, including the history of colonialism, slavery, and racism. He also emphasizes the value of critical race theory and the *1619 Project* ("Divisive Concepts").

⁶ In a paper delivered at the 2023 British Women Writers Conference (BWWC), Webster discusses how whiteness is embodied in those scenes in which the narrator is most visibly present, specifically those in which she describes her visit to the Indigenous community.

⁷ A version of Mallipeddi's article also appears in *Spectacular Suffering*; see Chapter 1, "Spectacle, Spectatorship, Sympathy: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and the English Commercial Empire" (25–50). References are to the article.

⁸ See also Festa's *Sentimental Figures of Empire*.

⁹ During this discussion, I direct students to Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," which I recommend assigning at some point during the course.

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