THE BLACK, BRITISH ATLANTIC: BLACKNESS IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE

BY

DONGHEE OM

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2014

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Lauren M. E. Goodlad, Chair
Associate Professor Julia F. Saville, Co-Chair
Professor Emeritus Leon Chai
Professor Robert D. Parker
Abstract

My dissertation is about transnational aspects of the Victorian era from the vantage point of what Paul Gilroy described more than two decades ago as the “black Atlantic.” Looking at various ways in which the black Atlantic was at times a British Atlantic, my dissertation aims to complicate a flow of discussion that Gilroy’s Americanist successors have interpreted largely in light of U.S. slavery and its discursive contexts. Specifically, I explore how some nineteenth-century British authors such as Jane Austen, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Mary Seacole, and Wilkie Collins rejected popular notions of blackness as a racial marker of African slavery with its implied negative qualities. Instead, their works convey a different idea about blackness as a pliable marker of cultural agency that not only constitutes a part of English culture, but is performed by people regardless of racial affiliation. This notion of blackness as performative signifier goes beyond the slavery metaphor in Victorian literature to frame an interpretive paradigm that allows us to read blackness in broader socio-political contexts. As I show how canonical and non-canonical nineteenth-century British literature used various kinds of black performativity to undo essentialist notions of blackness, race, and identity itself, I demonstrate the integral status of blackness in Victorian literature. This in turn points to nineteenth-century English culture not as an isolated entity that imposed itself on Africans and on slave-owning colonies of the British Empire, but as participant in a larger cultural network called the black Atlantic. The black Atlantic thus invites us to revise British literature and culture by questioning the assumed homogeneity of white-centrism and even the stability of whiteness itself as foundational for English identity.
In the first chapter, I look at how Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Persuasion* (1818) engage blackness without featuring a single black or mixed-race character. Reading this absence as literary strategy, I argue that the two novels reject the popular view of blackness as too restrictively applied to oppression and marginalization, and associate it instead with women’s autonomy and social participation in an era of heightened debate over slavery following the 1807 Slave Trade Act. Here blackness comes to represent an ethically viable form of women’s autonomy that doesn’t necessarily unsettle the established social order even as it challenges the mercantile logic of sexual hierarchy represented by the corrupt marriage market. In fact, by validating women’s autonomy in the context of middle-class ethics, Austen suggests that such autonomy is a *prerequisite* of social stability.

Chapter two explores how Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s three antislavery poems—“The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” (1847/1848), “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave” (1850), and “A Curse for a Nation” (1855/1866)—extend beyond the issue of American slavery to address British racism. Representing blackness as a signifier of artistic creativity, the poems aesthetically challenge essentialist notions of black inferiority in a mid-Victorian society troubled by post-abolition economic decline and colonial unrest in the British West Indies. EBB’s antislavery poems thus work to liberate blackness from the chains of racial essentialism and draw on black performativity to expand the language of the poet’s social criticism.

Chapter three investigates Mary Seacole’s performative identity in her travel narrative, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857). Knowing her Victorian readers will be predisposed to read her mixed-race body as a marker of otherness, Seacole plays with their belief in ways that de-essentialize race: first, she disrupts whiteness as a racial signifier ontologically grounded in skin color by portraying her successful performance of the idealized
English mother in the Crimea. Seacole then represents her physical “blackness” as a marker of life-saving hybrid medicine, a cultural signifier that revises racist notions of identity. In the process, she exposes Englishness as an unstable marker of identity that can be performed by people of different races.

Chapter four considers how Wilkie Collins problematizes binaristic notions of race in *Armadale* (1866), *Miss or Mrs?* (1873), and *The Guilty River* (1886). Collins’s radical reevaluations of racial others vis-à-vis Englishness and Britishness come at a time when a series of colonial uprisings like the Indian “Mutiny” and the Morant Bay rebellion exacerbated the growing acceptance of permanent racial hierarchies (as opposed to the older notion of eventual human universality). *Armadale* emphasizes blackness as a marker of sympathy—the essential element of English morality seldom seen in the author’s time. Affirming blackness as the moral essence of Englishness, *Miss or Mrs?* and *The Guilty River* reflect Collins’s growing frustration with the way a kind of binaristic thinking he challenged in *Armadale* continued to thrive in English society. These texts ultimately call for understanding English identity as an ongoing expression of inter-racial, inter-cultural reciprocity.
Many thanks to Lauren Goodlad, Julia Saville, Leon Chai, and Robert Parker,
for teaching me how to read and write.
# Table of Contents

Introduction: The Blackness of Victorian Literature

Chapter 1: “The Natural Sequel of an Unnatural Beginning”: Performing Blackness in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*

Chapter 2: Aestheticizing Blackness in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Abolitionist Poetry

Chapter 3: From the Black Sea to the Black Atlantic: Blackness and Performativity in *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*

Chapter 4: “The fire that lights those big black eyes of his is not an easy fire”: (Ir)rationalizing Blackness in *Armadale, Miss or Mrs?*, and *The Guilty River*

Conclusion

Notes

Bibliography
Introduction: The Blackness of Victorian Literature

In 2008, a mass of rare and largely disregarded illustrations and photographs of Korea that had appeared in British weeklies from 1858 to 1911 was assembled and published in a book titled *Korea Illustrated by British Weeklies 1858-1911*. Notable in many of these images is the fact that British travellers in Korea often drew the Korean and Chinese populace they encountered as Africans. Such depictions may well illustrate an English notion of racial identity that regarded racial otherness as equivalent to blackness. Indeed, as Jennifer DeVere Brody observes in *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture*, the myth of a pure and white English identity (ironically extracted from a people of hybrid racial and cultural origin) required a foil—an equally fictitious image of a primitive, morally corrupt “black” other against which it could define itself.

Yet in a culture that associates racial and ethnic purity with national sovereignty, cultural signifiers that function as reminders of its hybridity inevitably generate certain anxieties. Engaging this issue, Timothy L. Carens draws on Sigmund Freud’s use of the terms *heimlich* and *unheimlich*: *heimlich* = both the familiar and “what is concealed and kept out of sight,” and *unheimlich* = both the strange and what “ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (2). In this context, blackness could signify the hitherto repressed uncanny object that provoked discomfort in Victorian England’s imperial imagination.

As I shall argue, however, some nineteenth-century British authors such as Jane Austen, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Mary Seacole, and Wilkie Collins did not share their contemporaries’ notion of race and particularly blackness. And while these authors discerned the repressed hue of blackness within the cultural landscape of English society, they did not necessarily regard blackness as “unheimlich.” In their varying degrees, they convey instead
different idea about blackness as a pliable marker of cultural agency that not only constitutes a part of English culture, but is also performed by people regardless of their racial affiliation. Such a notion of blackness as performative anticipates E. Patrick Johnson’s theory of black performativity. Denying the notion of blackness as an irreducible racial feature that has taken hold of both racists and black activists alike, Johnson argues that blackness is an intangible signifier of cultural and sociopolitical performance deriving from, but not necessarily rooted in, the experience of black people. To Johnson, blackness is a phenomenon manifested in different ways through performance by both black and nonblack people. Like Brody, Johnson too dismisses any attempt to authenticate blackness (as well as identity itself) precariously based on the fiction of negative comparison (1-16).

This notion of blackness as a performative signifier extends the scope of blackness beyond the slavery metaphor in Victorian literature to frame an interpretive paradigm that reads blackness in broader socio-political contexts. This paradigm can enrich our understanding of the ways Britishness and the black Atlantic mutually inflect each other. In the following chapters I will investigate how attention to once marginalized voices like that of Mary Seacole invites a new understanding of English and British identity as well as how the works of more canonical authors like Jane Austen, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Wilkie Collins reveal the complexity of blackness in Britain while advancing a demonstrably “Atlantic” understanding of Britain’s location. By so doing, I explore how these authors configure a spatial domain Paul Gilroy has famously described as the “black Atlantic.” In his seminal work The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness, Gilroy defines a “transcultural, international formation” that unsettles the widespread yet “unthinking assumption” of a stable and homogeneous boundary among culture, ethnicity, and the nation state (4-5). Furthermore, Gilroy portrays
blacks as a signifier of diasporic experience that is neither essentially tied to black skin nor the culture of phenotypically black people, and, by so doing, enables both blackness and the associated diasporic experience to transcend specific historical and geographical contexts so as to influence the lives of others. Gilroy’s call to imagine the Atlantic as “one single, complex unit of analysis” (15) where identities are continuously formulated and altered through intercultural exchange informs my work on the transatlantic aspect of Victorian literature. But if Gilroy focuses on the transnational life experiences of African-American men such as Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Richard Wright, my work attempts to describe various ways in which the black Atlantic was at times a British Atlantic, rather than one Gilroy’s Americanist successors have interpreted largely in light of U.S. slavery and its discursive contexts. Thus I focus on white and mixed-race British male and female authors whose transcultural and transatlantic understanding of identity radically reconceptualized British identity politics. Since this points to how questions of identity, ethics, and national culture in Victorian literature are embedded in the Atlantic world, it also shows how Victorian literature inflects the black Atlantic.

Long before Gilroy invited us to take the Atlantic as “one single, complex unit of analysis,” Victorians had already conceptualized the Atlantic world as transnational from the perspective of Britain’s multi-faceted global expansion, including the complicated history of slavery and its aftermath in the West Indies. The question, then, is whether to read nineteenth-century literary tradition in hierarchical, center-periphery terms or whether we might more productively consider it in terms that defy binary division. Undoubtedly, many Victorian writers saw Britain as the nucleus of an Atlantic world, but the works in my dissertation suggest that whether individual Victorians were conscious of it or not, Victorian literature never
imagined a monolithic white “Englishness,” but from its outset integrated black bodies.

Implications of blackness in a transatlantic context can be found even in the canonical Victorian texts discussed in the following chapters. This leads us to consider how blackness in Victorian literature challenges the supposed white centrality of Victorian literature. The integral status of blackness in Victorian literature is a starting point from which one can see nineteenth-century British culture not as an isolated entity that imposed itself on Africans and on slave-owning colonies of the British Empire, but rather as an interdependent entity part of the larger cultural network called the black Atlantic. By pursuing this thesis, my work questions the supposed white-centrality of British literature and culture even as it tries to reexamine the Atlantic world from specifically British perspectives.

My dissertation consists of four chapters. The first begins by examining Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Persuasion* (1818). The uniqueness of these novels lies in the way they attempt to positively understand blackness beyond race and slavery in the wake of the 1807 Slave Trade Act without featuring a single black or mixed-race character. *Mansfield Park*’s representations of slavery and empire have drawn much scholarly attention, and critics have observed Austen’s analogy between the novel’s heroine Fanny Price and African slaves. While I acknowledge a comparison that renders Fanny figuratively “black,” I also argue that Austen ultimately severs Fanny’s blackness from a racialized slave subjectivity and instead associates it with the very English morality that Mansfield Park struggles to retain. Specifically, Fanny’s blackness (which her social superiors at first dismiss as morbidly servile “weakness”) comes to signify a modest sexual propriety that other young female characters in the novel lack, a quality that not only sustains Mansfield Park’s moral authority but also becomes the foundation of the female autonomy Fanny ultimately comes to enjoy. By having Sir Thomas finally recognize
how Fanny embodies the morality his own daughters lack and so vindicate her marriage with his son Edmund, Austen portrays female autonomy as women’s right to be free of the patriarchal and mercenary restraints of a corrupt marriage market and thereby to envision their own future. Austen suggests this autonomy is actually necessary to sustain the integrity of patriarchal English society: witness how Sir Thomas comes to reevaluate Fanny’s refusal to marry Henry Crawford as a noble act that ultimately saves Mansfield Park from moral ruin.

In *Persuasion*, Austen expands the notion of women’s autonomy by exploring the possibility of women’s participation in the social sphere through Anne Elliot’s performance of blackness. Despite being the second daughter of a baronet, Anne’s subject position, like that of Fanny, is initially likened to that of a “black” other as her own family members look down on her and expect only work from her. Yet the novel draws on such a racialized perspective only to revise it—to show that Anne’s blackness signifies a moral ethos compatible with that of professional organizations like the British Navy. Anne’s final reunion with her once-rejected lover Captain Wentworth (which introduces her into the navy circle) is not simply a romance fulfilled: it affirms women’s capability to partake in civic affairs that negotiates their autonomy in a patriarchal English society. While debunking a morally compromised English patriarchy represented by the corrupt marriage market, Austen emphasizes that the kind of female autonomy she advocates does not stand at odds with middle-class morality and will actually contribute to the stability of English social order.

In the second chapter, I consider how the unspoken blackness in Austen’s novels plays against the performance of blackness and whiteness in the anti-slavery poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. As with the Austen novels discussed in the previous chapter, scholarly discussions of EBB’s three antislavery poems—“The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point”
(1847/1848), “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave” (1850), and “A Curse for a Nation” (1855/1866)—emphasize slavery as a master term, focusing on EBB’s racial ancestry and her feminist agenda. While these poems condemn the brutality of slavery, they also challenge racist notions that blackness = inferiority by representing it as a performative signifier of artistic creativity within a multilateral Victorian culture instead of an antithesis to the imagined whiteness of Englishness. For example, “The Runaway Slave” displays the creative faculty of its black speaker and her black lover through their artistic expressions of love and nature, especially as illustrated by a series of black imagery. At the same time, the poem contemplates American slavery’s disruption of such a creative faculty: American slavery is despicable not only because of the unjust physical violence, exclusion, and suffering it causes, but also because it specifically destroys love, fine feeling, child-bearing, and singing, all of which express creativity. “The Runaway Slave” suggests that blackness is less about the body of a black slave than about the black slave’s sensitivity, making blackness more than a marker of marginalized otherness that gives whiteness its hegemonic position.

“Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave” shows how EBB interprets the American sculptor Hiram Powers’s white marble statue of a Greek maiden put on sale at a Turkish slave market as subtly conjoining beauty and agony to create an aesthetic thunderstorm that can “strike and shame” all—regardless of race—who exploit and enslave other people. The poem traces the source of the statue’s aesthetic agency to the tension arising from a mix of beauty and agony, illustrated by the shadow that obscures the boundary between blackness and whiteness in its subtle hue. EBB suggests that the aesthetic agency of the statue derives from a flexibility that transcends fixed notions of race, especially in discourses on slavery. This would be affirmed the following year when the statue’s presentation at the 1851 Great Exhibition would prompt John Tenniel to
publish in *Punch* a reactionary image of a black slave titled *Virginian Slave Intended as a Companion to Powers’ ‘Greek Slave.’* Intended as a critique of *The Greek Slave*’s alleged displacement of African slavery by Greek slavery, the *Virginian Slave* could come about only because *The Greek Slave* had stimulated Tenniel to think of black slavery—that he regarded the statue as invested in white slavery affirms EBB’s interpretation of Powers’s statue as capable of transcending race in its attack on slavery and tyranny.

Unlike “The Runaway Slave” and “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave,” “A Curse for a Nation” never refers to blackness in its scathing critique of American slavery and British social injustice. This absence of blackness in the poem, however, merely points to the consequences of moral depravity brought about by slavery: if blackness represents artistic creativity, its absence could signify aesthetic aridity. As part of a nation deeply implicated in tyranny and injustice, the speaker herself is not exempt from the curse she writes about and is thus unable to fully exert her artistic powers. While this forces the speaker to rely on the dictations of an angel who orders her to write the poem/curse, her sense of guilt makes her unable to articulate the pleasures of aesthetic beauty that blackness represents. This ultimately illustrates a world of tyranny that crushes artistic creativity, a desolate world without creative blackness.

The third chapter investigates Mary Seacole’s performative identity in *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857). Scholarly discussions of Seacole have focused on the friction between her Creole Jamaican origin and her desire for acceptance into English society. Critics have argued Seacole positioned herself against racial others in order to transform her identity from colonial other to “white” Englishwoman. Seacole’s racial and cultural identity is further complicated by others considering her black or African-American—even though she believed herself English and openly expressed her dislike of Americans. The
chapter argues that such contradictory understandings result from a singular performance of identity that both appropriates and revises contemporary notions of race and blackness.

*Wonderful Adventures* betrays Seacole’s awareness of her socially marginal position in the British Empire. But Seacole’s narrative also shows that she anticipated an English bias that would interpret her nonwhite skin color as “blackness” in the sense of otherness. Seacole, I suggest, actually used this to her advantage through gendered and deracialized performances of English motherhood and hybrid medicine which demonstrated race to be an unstable marker of identity. By performing the English mother who morally and physically supported her homesick “sons” of the British army on the battlefields of the Crimea (the fact of her being called “Mother Seacole” by her “sons” proving her success), Seacole shows that English motherhood and Englishness itself are cultural practices that have no real ties to whiteness. By successfully performing the role of a skilled medical practitioner of both western and creole medicine who could heal as no English army doctor could, Seacole presents her “black” body as a marker of life and cultural sophistication instead of that of a racialized other. By encouraging her readers to see her West Indian life as a rehearsal for her debut on the main stage of a major British imperial venture, Seacole weaves Britain and the West Indies into a borderless network in which identity is always articulated as a comprehensive performance of cultural values instead of a fixed entity ontologically grounded in unchanging (and unchangeable) material conditions such as race. *Wonderful Adventures* is thus a text on black performativity that revises popular mid-Victorian notions of blackness, race, and identity itself.

The fourth chapter explores how Wilkie Collins problematizes binarized notions of race in *Armadale* (1866), *Miss or Mrs?* (1873), and *The Guilty River* (1886). Collins devoted more attention to mixed-race characters and the black-white dichotomy associated with their presence
in English society than any other well-known literary figure of his time. As critics have noted, his attention to mixed-race characters (often descendants of African slaves) who are frequently central characters in his novels reflects this Victorian author’s concern with the inevitable consequences of English contact with racial others following Britain’s imperial expansion as well as the possible effects of such contact on English identity. Critics have, however, disagreed about whether Collins’s mixed-race characters reflect the author’s anxiety about the threat of colonial others to the stability of the British Empire or his belief that they contribute to its sustenance. Among the critics, Audrey Fisch is notable for viewing Collins’s appreciative attitude towards racial others as provisional. She argues that he sees the inevitable integration of nonwhite characters into English society as welcome only because they usefully sacrifice themselves to acquit England from the moral burden of past involvement in transatlantic slavery.

However, my readings of Armadale, Miss or Mrs? and The Guilty River show that Collins saw nonwhite people neither as a threat to English stability nor as scapegoats for English sins. In fact, his use of mixed-race characters in these texts reflects a desire to question the Manichean understanding of race in his time. In Armadale, for example, the mixed-race Ozias Midwinter’s blackness is devalued by most Englishmen as expressive of the violent, uncivilized side of his character. Yet the novel will ultimately present Midwinter’s blackness (as well as the figurative blackness of his socially marginalized white double Allan Armadale and the novel’s anti-heroine Lydia Gwilt) as a marker of sympathy, which the novel also suggests is an essential element of English morality seldom seen in his time. The moral agency that Armadale projects through blackness diminishes in Miss or Mrs? and The Guilty River, even as the two novellas acknowledge blackness as a valid constituent of Englishness. In Miss or Mrs?, the representations of the mixed-race Natalie Graybrooke and the twin siblings Sir Joseph and Miss
Lavinia, who perpetually contradict each other, reveal Collins’s determination to confront the persistent English binarism he interrogated in *Armadale.* That the mixed-race and nameless Lodger at the center of *The Guilty River* indulges in contrasts shows Collins to be dissatisfied with a reality where the pervasive force of English binarism has permeated even the minds of mixed-race subjects as they assimilate into English society. However, instead of connecting the deaf Lodger’s mixed-race heritage with his otherness, the novella represents deafness as the driving force behind the Lodger’s indulgence in reductive binaristic thinking, ultimately making him an apathetic recluse who morbidly assumes an antagonistic relationship to non-deaf people. *The Guilty River* rejects such binaristic thinking: first, by making it the cause of the Lodger’s downfall. Furthermore, by intermixing light and shade in a way that transforms dismal and “un-English” nature into something that inspires art and distinctively English memories, the novella suggests beauty emerges by erasing color boundaries (between blackness and whiteness). In this fashion, Collins shows how black and mixed-race people contribute to the current grandeur of the English social and cultural landscape. English identity thus becomes a collaborative expression of white and nonwhite correspondence.

In the conclusion, I reflect on how my project might contribute to both black Atlantic studies and nineteenth-century British literature. The recently published *New Perspectives on the Black Atlantic* (2012) edited by Bénédicte Ledent and Pilar Cuder-Dominguez critiques Gilroy for not discussing black Atlantic figures outside the Anglophone cultural tradition. While such criticism attests to the currently unsettled status of black Atlantic studies, it seems unfair to accuse Gilroy of not having addressed issues outside his field of expertise. If, as William Boelhower argues, black Atlantic studies is destined to be archeological because of the fragmentary existence of material black voices across borders, Gilroy’s focus and methodology
might be considered less an object of criticism than that of emulation: despite its critique of Gilroy, *New Perspectives* points toward a more comprehensive paradigm for black Atlantic studies not by offering such a paradigm itself, but by introducing alternative cultural figures (such as those of the Francophone Caribbean world) alongside those presented by Gilroy. My work, in turn, contributes to black Atlantic studies by excavating the unusually “black” voices of nonblack authors from the English literary tradition. At the same time, I also try to advance nineteenth-century British literary studies by showing how some of its authors unconventionally challenged established notions of race and national identity by way of an equally unconventional and counterintuitive effort to rethink the very concept of blackness, hitherto considered an anti-cornerstone of English identity.
Chapter 1

“The Natural Sequel of an Unnatural Beginning”: Performing Blackness in

*Mansfield Park and Persuasion*

From “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven: A Poem” by Anna Letitia Barbauld

But who their mingled feelings shall pursue

When London’s faded glories rise to view?

The mighty city, which by every road,

In floods of people poured itself abroad;

Ungirt by walls, irregularly great,

No jealous drawbridge, and no closing gate;

Whose merchants (such the state which commerce brings)

Sent forth their mandates to dependant kings;

Streets, where the turban’d Moslem, bearded Jew,

And woolly Afric, met the brown Hindu;

Where through each vein spontaneous plenty flowed,

Where Wealth enjoyed, and Charity bestowed.

[. . .]  

London exults:—on London Art bestows

Her summer ices and her winter rose;

Gems of the East her mural crown adorn,
And Plenty at her feet pours forth her horn;
While even the exiles her just laws disclaim,
People a continent, and build a name:
August she sits, and with extended hands
Holds forth the book of life to distant lands.
    But fairest flowers expand but to decay;
The worm is in thy core, thy glories pass away;
Arts, arms and wealth destroy the fruits they bring;
Commerce, like beauty, knows no second spring.
Crime walks thy streets, Fraud earns her unblest bread,
O’er want and woe thy gorgeous robe is spread,
And angel charities in vain oppose:
    With grandeur’s growth the mass of misery grows.  (lines 157-68; 305-20)

While Anna Letitia Barbauld’s “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven” prophesies Britain’s decline due to its prolonged entanglement in the Napoleonic Wars, the poem identifies racial and cultural diversity as the source of Britain’s cultural and economic opulence, which it is now fighting to retain.  London is represented as the hub of vibrant metropolitan exchange that welcomes all-comers from around the world.  Profits amassed from trading with foreigners such as Muslims, Jews, Africans, and Indians have provided unprecedented economic prosperity to Britain.  Furthermore, the cultural diversity brought about by the influx and intermixture of foreign bodies has enhanced the nation’s “Arts,” including scientific knowledge that now allows the people to enjoy “summer ices” and “winter rose.”  The poem, however, predicts that Britain will
eventually squander away its economic and cultural heritage in meaningless warmongering until its acclaimed glory becomes a memory of the past.

The poem was not appreciated by any political faction, and conservative reviewers attacked its criticism of Britain’s arrogant war-mongering with France as an act of self-destruction that was “in a most extraordinary degree unkindly and unpatriotic,—we had almost said unfilial” (qtd. in Wu 9). Yet the open-mindedness of the poem is not limited to its “unpatriotic” condemnation of Britain’s war with France insofar as it considers the negation of racial absolutism as the true source of Britain’s economic and cultural agency: the racial, cultural, and religious diversity that is to be found in the streets of London, with neither a “jealous drawbridge” nor a “closing gate” that refuse to privilege or exclude any race in particular, blurs the distinction between racial blackness and whiteness. In such a vibrant environment, Barbauld sees the “woolly Afric” not as a slave but as an affluent merchant trading on equal terms with other races (“through each vein spontaneous plenty flowed”), including white Britons. The poem’s depiction of the “wooly Afric” and “brown Hindu” as beneficial constituents of Britain’s political economy instead of the marginalized and discredited “other” illustrates how British literature saw racial diversity as a welcome part of its texture.

Suggesting that racial diversity stimulates a vibrant cultural and economic exchange that vitalizes the nation, the poem shows racial open-mindedness while shunning the poplar racism of early nineteenth-century Britain.¹

Published a few years after the poem, Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* also do not imagine blackness and whiteness in terms of contemporary racial bigotry and illustrate the complex functioning of blackness in mainstream British literature. This chapter investigates how Austen strategically deconstructs the conventional notion of blackness as a racial marker of
inferiority by reconfiguring blackness as a performative signifier of British middle-class morality that would ironically validate female autonomy in ways that both draw on and revise popular analogies between black slaves and white Englishwomen. Instead of evoking black slavery simply to highlight the degree of oppression women suffer, Austen uses the analogy to question false notions of race and gender that sustain the discriminatory logic of the racist and masculinist British society. As I shall argue, Mansfield Park and Persuasion unsettle the validity of contemporary belief in women’s inferiority that justifies their confinement in the domestic sphere, first by drawing on the correlation between this patriarchal idea and the equally popular notion of blackness as a marker of slavery and the negative qualities it evokes, and then by demonstrating how blackness is in fact a malleable signifier that may well represent the very values against which it had hitherto been defined. Specifically, after rejecting the traditional notion of blackness as a racial marker associated with the body of an African slave and the images of mean servility and treacherous rebellion it has evoked, Mansfield Park and Persuasion reinterpret blackness to endorse female autonomy. Furthermore, the novels show how women, by unquestioningly embracing the pervasive desire for mastery encouraged by the corrupt social order, cooperate with and strengthen the system that victimizes them. The solution Austen envisions for female autonomy is neither submission nor insurrection but relinquishment of a perverse desire for mastery that underwrites conventional gender norms.

Why does Austen choose to discuss blackness without featuring a single character of African origin in either of her novels? As Katie Trumpener argues, the invisibility of the West Indies in Mansfield Park is not a result of Austen’s reluctance to confront a troubling issue but a discreet literary strategy to represent the negative consequences of colonial enslavement (174-76). Although there are no Africans or other characters of color in Mansfield Park and
Persuasion, their white heroines Fanny Price and Anne Elliot discursively perform blackness in ways that emphasize its subtle connection to British culture. This demonstrates that blackness (and its associated synonyms) played a complex, textured role in the British literary imagination at this time: while British literature used blackness—both literal and figurative—as a means of establishing white centrality, some of its canonical works also used blackness to challenge white centrality.

Mansfield Park and Persuasion reconfigure blackness as a malleable cultural signifier that can be performed by white characters such as Fanny Price and Anne Elliot. Austen draws on the popular analogy between black slaves and white women, aligning the heroines’ social otherness with that of African slaves. Incapable of synchronizing their desires to the norms of the corrupt social order, Fanny and Anne become outsiders in their own social circles. Precisely speaking, it is this inability to perform the roles that society requires them to play (which, in Fanny’s case, includes a literal performance on stage in a house-play) that marks their otherness and the metaphorical “blackness” of their disempowerment. As I shall argue, however, Austen neither represents her heroines as a “grateful negro” who blindly supports her master’s cause nor as a militant insurgent who renounces the authority of the social order, for subservience and rebellion both consolidate the conventional myth of blackness as a racial marker. Instead, Fanny and Anne perform blackness in ways that separate blackness from the body of the African slave and its derogatory connotations. Austen appropriates the analogy between black slaves and white Englishwomen to deconstruct a conventional racial trope, which in turn gives her leverage to revise traditional gender norms and articulate a socially viable form of female autonomy.
E. Patrick Johnson argues in his study of blackness and performance that white Australians can perform and be transformed by gospel—a cultural marker of collective African American experience associated with blackness but which need not be limited to one geography or phenotype (160-218). Here, the Australians’ performance of gospel becomes a performance of blackness that is bound neither to the physicality of black people nor their specific history. Johnson, however, also reminds the reader that the sense of freedom the white Australians experience from singing gospel derives from “shedding of the residual traces of British propriety.” In this way, “the universality of gospel ‘touch[es]’ them in the same way it does black Americans” (187). Yet the substance of the “black” experience transferred from African Americans to white Australians is inevitably transformed in the process—blackness becomes what is performed rather than a racial essence or a feature unique to certain geographies and histories.

Austen’s heroines also perform blackness to a similar effect. While Fanny and Anne do not knowingly appropriate a popular black cultural signifier as the white Australian gospel singers do, this chapter maintains that the unconventional desire the two heroines articulate for a socially acceptable form of female autonomy emerges from their inferior subject positions. The two must transcend this “black” position of supposed inferiority by performing blackness not as a slave identity but as a legitimate token of British middle-class morality, which would in turn enable them to negotiate female autonomy—from choosing a marriage partner to civic participation—within a patriarchal society. By doing so, Fanny and Anne revise a morally corrupt masculine whiteness articulated through various forms of sexual dominance. As Fanny’s performance of blackness refuses to acknowledge autonomy as an exclusively masculine privilege, Anne’s performance of blackness negotiates the possibility of women’s
participation beyond the domestic sphere in association with professional organizations like the British Navy. Yet not failing to take into account the conservatism of her middle-class readership, Austen strategically represents the heroines’ performances of blackness as ethically viable forms of female autonomy that do not necessarily unsettle the established social order even as they challenge the mercantile logic of sexual hierarchy that constitutes the backbone of the corrupt marriage market. In fact, by validating female autonomy in the context of middle-class ethics, Austen asserts that female autonomy is a *prerequisite* of social stability.

*Mansfield Park: The Moral Agency of a “Black” Female Autonomy*

Among Austen’s novels, *Mansfield Park* has evoked the largest body of criticism on the issue of slavery and imperialism. Moira Ferguson writes that “gender relations” in Britain “parallel and echo traditional relationships of power between the colonialists and colonized peoples” so that “European women visibly signify the most egregiously and invisibly repressed of the text—African-Caribbeans themselves” (118). Ferguson compares Fanny Price to the figure of the “grateful negro” who is happy to find a place in her new abode (124). Edward Said juxtaposes two sets of corresponding locales—Mansfield Park/Portsmouth and England/West Indies—and stresses the parallel between domestic and colonial spaces in which the domestic virtues of the home (Mansfield Park) help rationalize imperial colonization (West Indies) (80-97). Susan Fraiman, however, challenges Said’s notion of Mansfield Park as an exemplary site of moral and domestic order: whereas Said considers Fanny’s renunciation of her Portsmouth home as a validation of the English estate and of English subjugation, Fraiman sees “an inquiry into Mansfield’s corruption that challenges the ethical basis for its authority both at home and [. . .] overseas” (810). Unlike Said, Fraiman believes that Austen deliberately
inserted the slavery metaphor to criticize the English gentry’s oppressive hegemony over women. To Fraiman, Said’s analysis of the novel is problematic because it does not take gender and women’s agency sufficiently into account.

Deidre Coleman, in turn, rejects what she sees as the tired postcolonialist practice of aligning slavery and empire that views Mansfield Park as a West Indian plantation and Fanny Price as an allegorical slave. Countering Fraiman’s opinion that Austen deliberately manipulates the slave metaphor for her feminist agenda, Coleman instead maintains that Austen cross-examines the function of the allegory. Like Ferguson, Said, and Fraiman, however, Coleman nonetheless recognizes the symbolic value of slavery in the novel as she acknowledges that slavery would have been the most significant allegory that connected domesticity and colonialism for female writers like Austen who used it to criticize women’s subjectivity in Britain.  

If, as critics argue, we can make connections between Fanny and black slaves because of her socioeconomic position as a poor female protégée of an authoritarian slave-owning baronet, Fanny’s disempowered subject position may in this context be conceived as metaphorically “black.” However, while acknowledging the association critics have made between Fanny and the slave that validates the heroine’s blackness, I argue that Austen’s treatment of blackness in Mansfield Park and Persuasion is far more complex, and that the analogy between Austen’s heroines and black slaves serves as a groundwork on which the author both recognizes and uses the malleability of blackness as a deracialized marker to show the exigency of female autonomy.

Mansfield Park represents the Bertrams as making a similar analogy to that critics have made between Fanny and an African slave when Fanny’s metaphorical “blackness” is articulated
in the rehearsal scenes of *Lovers’ Vows*, in which Tom Bertram obliges Fanny to perform the role of Cottager’s wife:

“Me!” cried Fanny, sitting down again with a most frightened look. “Indeed you must excuse me. I could not act any thing if you were to give me the world. No, indeed, I cannot act.”

“Indeed but you must, for we cannot excuse you. It need not frighten you; it is a nothing of a part, a mere nothing, not above half a dozen speeches altogether, and it will not much signify if nobody hears a word you say, so you may be as creepmouse as you like, but we must have you to look at. (115)

Ironically, instead of denying Fanny’s claim that she cannot act, Tom represents her as a non-speaking subject and defines the purpose of her existence as a silent object on display. Tom’s words imply that Fanny’s part requires no real acting on her part when he defines Fanny’s role—”creepmouse”—as identical with her timid and passive character. As Tom affirms Fanny as “a mere nothing” both on- and offstage unqualified to participate—act—in society, Fanny’s position is aligned with that of a black slave whose “blackness” denotes passivity and servitude.

Similarly, Sir Thomas also interprets Fanny’s unexpected refusal to marry Henry as a natural result of her passive and sensitive nature that signifies her inferior constitution. Although he initially condemns Fanny’s negative reaction to Henry’s offer as an ungrateful act of rebellion manifesting “that independence of spirit” (249), Sir Thomas soon comes to translate his niece’s decision as *indecision*: “He knew her to be very timid, and exceedingly nervous; and thought it not improbable that her mind might be in such a state, as a little time, a little
pressing, a little patience, and a little impatience, a judicious mixture of all on the lover’s side, might work their usual effect on” (250). Here, Austen shrewdly unsettles the conventional notion of blackness as a marker of passive servitude by drawing out the irony in which Fanny’s passivity and self-denial that mark her blackness (especially as she pleads her unworthiness to marry Henry) also become a challenge against paternal authority. Moreover, after Maria’s scandalous elopement with Henry, Sir Thomas is obliged to reconsider his niece’s rebellion as deriving from “sterling good of principle and temper” (370) that has enabled her to penetrate to Henry’s corrupt nature. Fanny thus resists patriarchy and revalues blackness as a marker of moral agency that counterbalances the sexual corruption that threatens the moral authority of Mansfield Park—the representative site of English domesticity.

Henry’s scandalous elopement with Maria is presented as the decisive event; revealing the sexual depravity of the status quo and making Sir Thomas “[s]ick of ambitious and mercenary connections” and cherish “more and more the sterling good of principle and temper” that are necessary to secure “all that remained to him of domestic felicity” (370). This suggests that had Maria, like Fanny, refused to internalize the mercenary logic of the marriage market and had she been capable of marrying for love, such catastrophic scandal would never have occurred. At this point the reader would also learn that Sir Thomas had actually offered Maria a chance to revoke her engagement with the foolish Mr. Rushworth, and that she had willfully declined it. Maria’s refusal to break her engagement with the man whom she neither loves nor respects offers an insight into the moral corruption that the novel critiques. At the decisive moment when her father gives her a chance to free herself from Mr. Rushworth, Maria’s vanity prevents her from coming to terms with her genuine feelings: she is chained by her desire to achieve mastery over Henry Crawford—and perversely attaches herself to a man she despises.
Therefore, while Sir Thomas regards Maria’s elopement as a hyper-performance of female autonomy—”that independence of spirit” which must be regulated—the novel instead suggests that it is in fact Maria’s lack of autonomy that ultimately leads her to sexual ruin. Maria’s elopement with Henry results from her infatuation with his gallantry and flattery and her desire to demonstrate her sexual powers. She is incapable of imagining her autonomy beyond the dynamics of sexual mastery. Maria’s misidentification of sexual mastery as autonomy causes the sexual corruption that destroys both Maria and Mansfield Park’s domestic stability.

Similarly, Mary Crawford regards women’s autonomy as a function of sexual power:

‘Ah, I cannot deny it. He [Henry] has now and then been a sad flirt, and cared very little for the havoc he might be making in young ladies’ affections. […] and there is this to be said, that very few young ladies have any affections worth caring for. And then, Fanny, the glory of fixing one who has been shot at by so many; of having it in one’s power to pay off the debts of one’s sex! Oh, I am sure it is not in woman’s nature to refuse such a triumph.’ (284-85)

Mary’s interpretation of the “havoc” that flirts like Henry create in women’s hearts as “debts” that should be settled reflects her desire to resist male acts of sexual dominance. At the same time, however, Mary’s use of the word “triumph” to describe the repayment of debts suggests that her notion of autonomy is not an act of dismantling the dynamics of (male) sexual dominance but that of reversing the roles within the given structure—to enjoy the same pleasure of dominance over men. Moreover, Mary emphasizes that the “triumph” Fanny will achieve by marrying Henry will not only be an achievement of sexual mastery over the man who has
previously exerted his sexual power over many women, but also a triumph over other women as well, for Fanny’s conquest would mark her as one among the “very few young ladies” worthy of affection. To Mary, then, the desire for sexual mastery that she believes is inscribed in every woman’s “nature” constitutes the core of any woman’s autonomy.

The novel, however, demonstrates that sexual mastery is not a synonym for autonomy but its antonym as it highlights Mary’s recollection of her performance of *Lovers’ Vows* as the single most memorable event of her life:

He [Edmund] was to be describing and recommending matrimony to me. [. . .] “When two sympathetic hearts meet in the marriage state, matrimony may be called a happy life.” I suppose no time can ever wear out the impression I have of his looks and voice, as he said those words. It was curious, very curious, that we should have such a scene to play! If I had the power of recalling any one week of my existence, it should be that week, that acting week. Say what you would, Fanny, it should be that; for I never knew such exquisite happiness in any other. His sturdy spirit to bend as it did! Oh! it was sweet beyond expression. (281)

From Mary’s account of her fond memories of rehearsing *Lovers’ Vows* at Mansfield Park, her happiness has less to do with the pleasure of acting than a demonstration of sexual dominance: while Mary appreciates what she understands as Edmund’s implicit confession of love performed through Anhalt, what really makes her feel “exquisite happiness” is not the affirmation of Edmund’s love but the pleasure of having made his “sturdy spirit to bend as it did.” Delighting in her hold on Edmund, Mary’s vision of matrimony which she also recommends to Fanny in
terms of a hierarchical power relationship starkly contrasts with Edmund’s belief in matrimony as a union between “sympathetic hearts.” The novel ultimately rejects this power-obsessed mindset by making its bearer suffer the loss of Edmund’s regard. Incapable of construing human relationships outside the desire for power, Mary disregards the moral issue at stake. She dismisses Maria and Henry’s elopement as “folly” instead of vice as she evaluates the situation before Edmund. Like Maria, Mary’s obsession with mastery eventually leads her to sexual ruin instead of autonomy; the disturbing memory of her moral vacancy drives Edmund to an appreciation of “a very different kind of woman” (369).

Fanny, in contrast, both accepts and resists the established norms that regulate her sexuality. Raised in her uncle’s house to internalize her otherness and to nurture no expectations of entering the upper-class marriage market with her cousins, Fanny has been kept from embracing the mercenary logic of the corrupt marriage market. However, Edmund’s influence has made Fanny embrace the norms of sexual propriety in its most idealized form; for example, she disapproves of Agatha and Amelia of Lovers’ Vows regarding their dialogue as “unfit to be expressed by any woman of modesty” (108). Fanny likewise condemns Henry Crawford’s flirtations with her cousins, but his unexpected advances toward her force her into a paradoxical situation in which she must challenge patriarchal authority in order to preserve it: without even the briefest consideration of Henry Crawford’s wealth and social status, Fanny adamantly refuses to marry him even against her uncle’s will. Fanny’s refusal not only quarantines her sexual purity from the contaminating influence of the mercenary marriage market obsessed with hierarchy and material display, but would also benefit Mansfield Park by preventing the sexually corrupt Henry from being added as a new family member. Fanny’s
challenge to Sir Thomas’s authority makes the preservation of sexual and moral purity sufficient cause to justify rebellion against complicit patriarchal power.

I have suggested that Fanny’s inability to act in *Lovers’ Vows* and her refusal to comply with established norms by accepting Henry are regarded by others (except Edmund) as demonstrating her morbid passivity—a “blackness” that marks her inferiority. On both occasions, Austen emphasizes Fanny’s desire not to act by rejecting performance: indeed, her unwillingness to act before an audience parallels her unwillingness to “act” by accepting Henry’s offer. However, like Edmund whose decision to perform in *Lovers’ Vows* is influenced in part by the jealousy he feels at the prospect of seeing another man perform with Mary, Fanny’s sexual jealousy at seeing Edmund and Mary perform as partners renders her incapable of escaping performance: her curiosity, combined with a compulsive desire to see how Edmund and Mary perform love—an event to which Fanny looks forward with dread “as a circumstance almost too interesting” (131)—turns her into a keen observer of the rehearsals and the various scenes of sexual strife they produce. From her relegated position, Fanny discerns and disapproves Henry’s enjoyment of manipulating Maria’s feelings through theatrical performance as well as inciting the jealousies of her fiancé and her sister. Yet Fanny, too, cannot avoid the dynamics of sexual desire that she condemns as she grows “full of jealousy and agitation” at seeing Edmund perform in unison with Mary (125). Austen’s choice to present *Lovers’ Vows* as a pivotal play of the novel not only reflects her interest in the politics of sexual dominance, but also her desire to explore an ethically viable mode of female autonomy by negotiating competing notions of blackness featured in the sexual rivalry of Fanny and Mary. Despite her resolution to stand aloof from *Lovers’ Vows*, Fanny finds herself unable to escape the sexually-charged theatricality she critiques when Mary enters her room seeking her favor:
‘Am I right?—Yes; this is the East Room. My dear Miss Price, I beg your pardon, but I have made my way to you on purpose to entreat your help.’ [. . .] I came here today intending to rehearse it with Edmund—by ourselves—against the evening, but he is not in the way; and if he were, I do not think I could go through it with him, till I have hardened myself a little, for really there is a speech or two— [. . .] There, look at that speech, and that, and that. How am I ever to look him in the face and say such things? Could you do it? But then he is your cousin, which makes all the difference. You must rehearse it with me, that I may fancy you him, and get on by degrees. You have a look of his sometimes.’

‘Have I?—I will do my best with the greatest readiness—but I must read the part, for I can say very little of it.’

‘None of it, I suppose. You are to have the book of course. Now for it. We must have two chairs at hand for you to bring forward to the front of the stage. [. . .] Now for my soliloquy.’ (132-33)

Mary’s request to Fanny to rehearse with her is deliberate and calculated. As a seasoned veteran of the London fashionable circle well-acquainted to men, Mary is certainly staging her own little act when she informs Fanny of her coyness at the prospect of voicing “that speech” to Edmund. Shrewd enough to discern the secret love Fanny nurtures for Edmund, Mary’s pretext reveals the true objective of her visit: to demonstrate her sexual superiority as she reduces Fanny to a passive audience forced to watch and strengthen (by giving advice) the performance of her sexual powers over Edmund by performing the part of the sexually aggressive Amelia
Wildenhaim. Mary’s act is in fact a double entendre: by approaching Fanny in the guise of a bashful girl too embarrassed to voice her sentiments even in performance, Mary is also mockingly performing Fanny. Anticipating how Fanny would have reacted in a similar manner had she been made to perform “that speech” with Edmund, Mary’s masquerade undermines Fanny in four ways. First, by drawing Fanny into acting with her, Mary enjoys her influence over Fanny that momentarily suspends Fanny’s refusal to participate in Lovers’ Vows, doubly affirming Fanny as “a mere nothing” as the passivity her “blackness” that had first driven her to refuse Tom’s request to act now renders her incapable of adhering to that resolution. Second, it confirms Fanny as incapable of expressing her desire for Edmund in any circumstances as she cannot even act it out on a fictional stage. Third, it strips Fanny of her femininity by forcing her to assume the role of a male character. Finally, by affirming that Fanny will only be able to “read” Edmund’s speech because she is unable to “say” it at all, Mary’s private little play achieves the ultimate victory—the confirmation that Edmund will never be able to “say” such words of love to Fanny. Her initial question upon entering the room—”Am I right?”—which she answers herself—”Yes”—doubly signifies her awareness of Fanny’s sexual desire as it affirms her sexual power. At least when it comes to sexual rivalry, Mary betrays a desire to remind Fanny of her inferiority by re-evoking racialized notions of “blackness” that mark Fanny’s inferior—passive and servile—subjectivity.

However, the way that Fanny complies with Mary’s request actually illustrates her resistance against Mary’s desire to boast her sexual power and evoke Fanny’s “blackness”: Fanny counters Mary’s theatrical performance with a theatrical performance of her own—by performing Edmund instead of Anhalt while focusing on the “modest feeling which the idea of representing Edmund was so strongly calculated to inspire” (133). Such performance can be
interpreted as a form of resistance because it enables Fanny to fulfill her resolution not to contribute to the making of *Lovers’ Vows* by performing outside its context. Furthermore, the performativity of blackness by which Fanny articulates moral propriety enables Austen not only to dismiss Mary’s repressive exertion of her sexual power but also to destabilize racialized notions of blackness: what Mary incorrectly views as passive submission characterizing the “blackness” of the marginalized “creepmouse” from whom she expects full compliance in fact turns out to be resistance that exposes the fantasy of her superiority over Fanny. As Fanny’s blackness comes to embody the “modest feeling” instead of the mean servility Mary perceives it to be, blackness is delinked from an essentialized slave positionality and becomes associated instead with moral authority that marks her autonomy: as Fanny’s performance of blackness illuminates, by way of contrast, the impropriety of Mary’s sexually-charged performance and also articulates the impossibility of a mutual bond between Mary and Edmund, blackness comes to signify Fanny’s sexual propriety that grounds the basis of her autonomy—for her former acts of “weakness” would be recognized by Sir Thomas as those of moral conviction that would rationalize her marriage with Edmund.

That Fanny’s ultimate reward for performing blackness should be the fulfillment of her desire to marry the man she wants suggests that Austen negotiates the boundaries of female autonomy within the context of matrimony. Insofar as Fanny’s resistance to Sir Thomas and Henry primarily stems from her desire to marry the man she loves, Fanny’s performance of blackness on one level articulates female autonomy as the right to choose matrimony on her own terms free from the constraining logic of upper-class matchmaking culture obsessed with demonstrating power. To justify this purpose, the novel configures love as a moral issue: Fanny’s love for Edmund is emphasized as grounded in her appreciation of his moral integrity.
that contrasts with Mary’s preoccupation with socioeconomic status and Maria’s sexual desire rooted in the vanity of “young heated fancy” (249). Fanny thus denounces Mary as unworthy of Edmund due to her lack of morality, even when her wealth and physical beauty affirm her as a highly desirable object in the marriage market. Furthermore, by assuming the authority to judge the vacancy of Mary’s feelings for Edmund, Fanny legitimizes her moral superiority, which in turn validates the sincerity of her own desire for Edmund. The novel further confirms the essential link between morality and love when it describes Henry’s declaration to implement moral reforms in his Norfolk estate to please Fanny as an attempt “well aimed” (318) and that he would most certainly have won Fanny’s heart had he kept true to his word (367).

However, while representing Fanny as an unexpected advocate of women’s autonomy by identifying love as a subject of moral concern, Austen also reveals the limits of Fanny’s morality. Fanny’s approval of Henry’s plan to improve his estate through moral reforms invites the reader to align it with Fanny’s previous appreciation of the moral reforms Sir Thomas has implemented in his West Indian estate. Regarding the much-discussed scene of the Bertrams’ silence on Fanny’s slave-trade question shortly after Sir Thomas’s return from Antigua, Katie Trumpener counters Said’s reading of the “dead silence” as an illustration of the Bertrams’ collective sense of guilt over their involvement in West Indian slavery. Rejecting Said’s interpretation as separated from “historical, political, and generic context,” Trumpener calls for a “historicizing reading” of the novel that enables the reader to consider Austen’s depiction of the Bertrams’ silence on the slave trade as “politically hard-hitting rather than evasive,” since contemporary readers would have been expected to contextualize the scene in the popular abolition controversy (162-63). Following Trumpener, George Boulukos also points to the fact that the silence following Fanny’s question on the slave trade (instead of slavery itself) derives
from Maria and Julia’s indifference to their father’s morally creditable feat—his implementation of ameliorative measures for his plantation slaves that affirms his moral authority (369-71). Sir Thomas has indeed not been silent: he has already answered Fanny’s slave-trade question, evidently pleased with his niece’s gratifying attention to his moral accomplishments, and it is the unwillingness of Fanny’s cousins to continue the topic that forces Sir Thomas to drop the subject. Yet Fanny’s admiration of her uncle’s management of his West Indian property overlooks the fact that Sir Thomas’s humane treatment of his slaves has more to do with his preoccupation with enhancing the productivity of his estate and secure financial stability than a genuine concern for the welfare of his slaves, whom he regards as property. When it comes to the issue of plantation management, humane treatment serves as a means to maintaining an effective workforce.

That Austen should point to the moral limits of her heroine at the very moment she makes her aspire to female autonomy may point to a strategic compromise Austen may well have chosen to make within the restraining forces of the British social order after the 1807 abolition of the slave trade. Fanny’s tacit connivance at the ownership of black bodies while she resists the logic of the marriage market that endorsed the bartering of women’s bodies in a way mirrors the rationale of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act which outlawed the slave trade but not slavery itself. At the same time, it reveals Austen’s interest in race and her radical reinterpretation of blackness as a malleable condition that she might connect to gender issues. Considering the familiar history of slave uprisings of her time, Austen would have anticipated the resistance that a more explicit voicing of women’s autonomy in tandem with African slavery would incite from her readers who might misinterpret the author’s intention as an unacceptable disavowal of English social norms. That Austen considers women’s right to marry without being regulated
by the patriarchal norms of society as comprising the essence of female autonomy reflects her effort to articulate female autonomy as a condition that does not necessarily undermine patriarchy. In fact, by deliberately circumscribing her notion of women’s autonomy, Austen presents it as a socially viable condition that would ultimately serve to sustain the status quo by preserving it from moral corruption, as illustrated by Sir Thomas’s favorable appraisal of his niece’s former rebellion and his willingness to accept her as “the daughter that he wanted” (371). In *Persuasion*, Austen expands the notion of women’s autonomy by exploring the possibilities of women’s participation in the social sphere through Anne Elliot’s performance of blackness.

**Persuasion: Blackness and Women’s Social Participation**

Like *Mansfield Park*, *Persuasion* also at first articulates blackness in terms that associate it with conventional assumptions about race. Anne Elliot’s rapid loss of bloom following her forced separation from Frederick Wentworth illustrates the negative consequences that the corrupt marriage market could bring upon the woman who succumbs to its logic. Instead of having her act of submission recognized, Anne paradoxically ends up losing her father’s respect. Dismissed by Sir Walter and her sisters as “only Anne” (11), she becomes an other in her own house and is deemed incapable of participating in the decision of important family matters. Moreover, from as early as its description of Sir Walter’s disappointment in his second daughter in the beginning pages, *Persuasion* associates Anne’s supposed inferiority with blackness, as for example in her father’s consideration of her “dark eyes” as a critical physical defect (11). Like *Mansfield Park*, *Persuasion* too sets off by aligning the position of its heroine with that of a black slave as Anne’s father and sisters treat her as a non-entity and expect her only to work: not only do they expect Anne to accept the humility of being treated as a lesser entity than the
socially inferior Mrs. Clay, but even Anne’s younger sister Mary treats her like a maid who is always expected to attend and work for her comfort.

In line with Sir Walter’s derogatory remark about the “mahogany” (22) skin color of the sailors as well as a description of Captain Harville as a “dark man” (Ch. 11), *Persuasion* also at first features the British Navy through the racialized language of blackness. Moreover, in addition to Sir Walter’s representation of the sailors’ physical “blackness” as marking their inferior social position, the novel also evokes the British Navy’s involvement in African slavery. Indeed, as an author who makes “creative use of the naval facts and experiences taken from her own considerable fund of naval knowledge and from the lives of her sailor brothers and elsewhere to form the ‘imagined life’ of her naval characters and the circumstances of their careers” (Southam 184-85), Austen does not refrain from exposing the history of the British Navy’s implication with slavery and sexual corruption by introducing corrupt navy officers such as Admiral Brand and his brother whom Admiral Croft accuses of illegally impressing some of his ablest sailors. The British Navy’s brutal practice of pressganging British and American sailors during the Napoleonic Wars is comparable to acts of enslavement, and Admiral Croft condemns Admiral Brand and his brother as perpetrators of such immoral actions. The novel also suggests that the navy is not entirely free from contemporary gender prejudice: even the morally creditable Wentworth betrays the navy as an organization that can regard women as passive and incompetent beings when he expresses his antagonism toward having women aboard naval vessels. In addition to Wentworth’s opinion of women as unfit for seafaring, his attitude towards choosing a marriage partner betrays a mind strongly prejudiced against women in general: upon entering the novel “ready to fall in love with all the speed which a clear head and quick taste could allow,” Wentworth is skeptical about finding the woman whom he really
wants—a woman with a “strong mind, with sweetness of manner.” With little hope of finding such a woman, Wentworth informs his sister that he is willing to bear with less, although “it must not be much” less (54).

*Persuasion* also evokes the British navy’s morally culpable history of slavery in its description of the series of oppressive events at Lyme, a pivotal site of action in the novel. First of all, Lyme itself is a place implicated in the Atlantic slave trade: although on a smaller scale compared to the great ports of London, Bristol, and Liverpool, Lyme had been a participating slave port at least until the mid-eighteenth century (Heuman and Walvin 6). It is also at Lyme that Louisa Musgrove attempts to perform a master-slave relationship with Wentworth that concludes in her fall from the Cobb:

> There was too much wind to make the high part of the new Cobb pleasant for the ladies, [. . .] all were contented to pass quietly and carefully down the steep flight, excepting Louisa; she must be jumped down them by Captain Wentworth. In all their walks, he had had to jump her from the stiles; the sensation was delightful to her. The hardness of the pavement for her feet, made him less willing upon the present occasion; he did it, however; she was safely down, and instantly, to shew her enjoyment, ran up the steps to be jumped down again. He advised her against it, [. . .] but no, he reasoned and talked in vain; she only smiled and said, ‘I am *determined* I will’: he put out his hands; she was too precipitate by half a second, she fell on the pavement on the Lower Cobb, and was taken up lifeless! (91; emphasis added)

Louisa’s stubborn resolution to defy Wentworth’s entreaties to step down from the Cobb reflects
her desire to demonstrate her mastery: the “sensation” she feels from her repeated jumps from the stairs denotes her satisfaction at having placed Wentworth beneath her both physically and emotionally before her small audience. Louisa’s overbearing insistence ends in the fatal fall, and her banishment to the sick-room of the Harvilles marks the end of her hold on Wentworth. Furthermore, the violent history of Lyme looms in the background of Louisa’s fatal injury when the villagers gather “to enjoy the sight of a dead young lady, nay, two dead young ladies, for it proved twice as fine as the first report” (93). Therefore, the anguish of the navy officers that underlies the performance of their close-knit brotherhood at a site stained with a dark history tacitly evokes the guilty memories of the British navy’s active involvement in slavery before the 1807 abolition of the slave trade. The brotherhood of the navy officers performed in the setting of a scenic English country port (whose “fine wind” used to convey the slave ships to the West Indies) is thus inflected by a distinctively black Atlantic experience.10

However, while initially evoking memories of bondage and oppression, Persuasion ultimately represents Lyme as a site of liberation—a place where the protagonists are liberated from established gender obligations. Louisa’s fatal fall at Lyme ironically offers Anne an unexpected opportunity to unwittingly disprove Wentworth’s belief in her inferior character through an unparalleled performance of “duty and obligation” before the seasoned navy officers:

Captain Wentworth, who had caught her [Louisa] up, knelt with her in his arms, looking on her with a face as pallid as her own, in an agony of silence. ‘She is dead! She is dead!’ screamed Mary, catching hold of her husband, and contributing with his own horror to make him immoveable; and in another moment, Henrietta, sinking under
the conviction, lost her senses too, and would have fallen on the steps, but for Captain Benwick and Anne, who caught and supported her between them.

‘Is there no one to help me?’ were the first words which burst from Captain Wentworth, in a tone of despair, and as if all his own strength were gone.

‘Go to him, go to him,’ cried Anne, [. . .]

Captain Benwick obeyed, [. . .] while Captain Wentworth, staggering against the wall for his support, exclaimed in the bitterest agony,

‘Oh God! her father and mother!’

‘A surgeon!’ said Anne.

[. . .]

Anne, attending with all the strength and zeal, and thought, which instinct supplied, to Henrietta, still tried, at intervals, to suggest comfort to the others, tried to quiet Mary, to animate Charles, to assuage the feelings of Captain Wentworth. Both seemed to look to her for directions.

‘Anne, Anne,’ cried Charles, ‘what is to be done next? What, in heaven’s name, is to be done next?’

Captain Wentworth’s eyes were also turned towards her. (92-93)

The veteran navy officer who has distinguished himself in many an urgent scene of violence and death is suddenly reduced to a state of helpless despair. During this emergency, it is not Wentworth but Anne who performs the role of the “captain” and stimulates her panic-stricken “crew” into action. As traditional gender roles reverse, the apparent “masculinity” of Anne’s performance—in contrast to the conventional “femininity” of the fainting Henrietta and
hysterical Mary—is sanctioned as an ultimate performance of feminine virtue as Wentworth would come to acknowledge Anne’s feat as “perfection itself, maintaining the loveliest medium of fortitude and gentleness” (194). Austen allows Wentworth to affirm his unchanging love for Anne and acknowledge her prior “feebleness of character” (54) as strength founded on a sense of moral duty only after witnessing her successfully perform his duties of leadership.

Furthermore, it is at Lyme that Anne’s black eyes, which her father dismisses as a physical defect, are represented as reflecting vitality of mind and body. Anne’s physical (and sexual) rejuvenation at Lyme, marked by the recovered radiance of her “dark” eyes, further illustrates Austen’s resistance to regarding black features negatively. It is also at Lyme that Anne undergoes physical transfiguration. Contrary to Sir Walter’s belief in the sea as the depredator of beauty, the “fine wind” of the sea restores Anne’s “bloom and freshness of youth” and “the animation of the eye” (87). The illuminated blackness of Anne’s eyes signifying rejuvenation associates blackness with vibrancy and life instead of subordination and insensibility. Anne’s rejuvenation at Lyme renews her sexual appeal, as the captivated Wentworth and Mr. Elliot attest, and the power she exerts over the helpless navy officers as she performs the role of “captain” during the aftermath of Louisa’s fall “liberates” hopes for an alternate form of gender relationship. Wentworth’s acknowledgement of Anne’s unconventional performance of blackness as illustrating her moral vibrancy are reaffirmed when Anne declines her father’s request to visit Lady Dalrymple because of her pre-engagement with the impoverished and invalid Mrs. Smith. When Sir Walter openly expresses his disgust at his daughter’s “most extraordinary taste” that makes her appreciate “Everything that revolt other people—low company, paltry rooms, foul air, disgusting associations” (127-28), what the vain Sir Walter sees in his daughter as mean servility is affirmed as reflecting a gentle and
sympathetic mind. At Lyme, then, blackness, too, is liberated from its bondage to slavery.

It is also at Lyme that Wentworth is liberated from his moral obligations to Louisa as well as his prejudice against women. As Wentworth first becomes fully conscious of his bondage to Louisa at Lyme, Mr. Elliot’s “passing admiration” of Anne, and “the scenes on the Cobb, and at Captain Harville’s” in which Anne demonstrates her leadership following Louisa’s injury, initiate the process of his liberation: as Wentworth finally relinquishes his bitter resentment against Anne and reaffirms his love for her, he escapes the “angry pride” that had consumed him during their eight years of separation. At the same time, Wentworth is also liberated from his own state of ignorance about Anne’s moral agency as he finally learns to “distinguish between the steadiness of principle and the obstinacy of self-will, between the darings of heedlessness and the resolution of a collected mind” (194-95). Ultimately, Wentworth’s recognition of Anne’s character enables him to shed his longstanding prejudice against women as inferior to men, and his reward for internalizing his “lessons” is liberation from his moral obligation to Louisa as she grows attached to Benwick during her recovery.13

Moreover, liberation occurs bi-directionally, as Wentworth’s freedom from his false position with Louisa means that Louisa too is freed from the falsehood of which she has been an unwitting victim.

If Wentworth’s liberation is initiated through his witnessing of Anne’s performance of leadership at Lyme, it also needs to be considered that the value of Anne’s character is illuminated after she meets Wentworth and his navy coterie. This, I argue, enables one to consider the possibility that Persuasion’s representation of Anne’s connection with the British Navy illustrates the latter as a catalyst of female autonomy. Before investigating this issue, however, there is a question that first needs to be addressed: if, as I have argued, Persuasion
depicts the navy as retaining some oppressive features that evoke its past involvement in slavery and oppression, how can the navy be positively represented as an organization that might help women liberate themselves from certain constraints of society?

Although *Persuasion* does evoke tropes of oppression alluding to the British Navy’s history of slavery, the novel nonetheless focuses on future changes. Wentworth’s change of attitude towards Anne after his enlightenment, for example, has implications beyond the change of an individual: by describing the conversion of a representative member of the navy, Austen suggests that the organization itself is capable of discarding the longstanding gender bias. Such belief is further illustrated in the debate between Captain Harville and Anne on the (in)fidelity of men and women. When Captain Harville adheres to the contemporary belief that men are naturally more steadfast than—and thus superior to—women, Anne refutes him by asserting that the oppressive confinement of women in the domestic sphere with no opportunity of diversion deprives them even of the freedom to be inconstant (187-89). Captain Harville finally acknowledges defeat without reserve: “There is no quarrelling with you.—And when I think of Benwick, my tongue is tied” (189). Captain Harville’s willingness to withdraw from the popular notion of women’s inferiority points to the author’s confidence in the navy as an organization capable of acknowledging (and possibly even realizing) gender equality.

In fact, Wentworth and Harville’s examples can be read as literary representations of Austen’s belief in the moral change that is already under way in the navy. Sir Walter’s tirade on the “blackness” of the sailors’ complexion transforms blackness from a pejorative racial signifier to a marker of service and self-sacrifice, as readers are expected to spurn Sir Walter’s conceited opinion, sympathizing instead with Anne’s appreciation for the sailors’ weather-beaten complexion as a product of their self-sacrificing service to the nation: “The navy” has “done so
much for us” (21), says Anne. The brotherly love Wentworth’s coterie shows at Lyme, too, positively evokes blackness in its black Atlantic context as it mobilizes the trope of brotherhood famously used by the abolitionist movement while pointing to a different model of white middle-class male identity. Demonstrating how blackness can be transformed from a racialized signifier of inferiority to a positive and performative signifier of moral agency, Austen predicts that the British Navy that bears the mark of blackness (both historically and discursively within the novel) will transform into a morally creditable organization. The attention to future changes may well be the reason that Persuasion casts the historical stains of the British Navy upon the older generation of sailors represented by Admiral Brand and his brother, suggesting that, along with the senior sailors who leave the service, the navy’s moral corruption will eventually become a thing of the past, a history that will be rewritten by the morally laudable young officers represented by Wentworth and his coterie. Therefore, Persuasion represents its young navy officers as impervious to serious moral corruption and sexual depravity. Having realized his misunderstanding about Anne, which had made him nurture pessimistic views on women, Wentworth readily acknowledges his mistake (he imputes the cause to his unpardonable pride) after finally understanding the true nature of Anne’s character (199). Captain Benwick’s wavering attention to Anne and Louisa, which ends in his speedy marriage to Louisa shortly after his fiancée’s death, is endorsed by Anne as actually proving his warm character: “He had an affectionate heart. He must love somebody” (135). Additionally, in Mansfield Park, Sir Thomas approves the young midshipman (to be promoted to lieutenant) William Price as a man of “good principles, professional knowledge, energy, courage, and cheerfulness” (184). William is also depicted as sexually incorruptible, as his desire to spend the rest of his life living with his sister instead of seeking a woman of his choice reflects a mind void of sexual desire.
The character of the reformed navy that Austen anticipates is also distinguished by comparison with high society’s refined yet mercenary values represented by Elizabeth and Mr. Elliot. This is of course not to say that Austen somehow believed the navy to be indifferent to material wealth. On the contrary, Persuasion’s navy officers are genuinely concerned with moneymaking, as Wentworth’s keen reflection on the making of his fortune in the West Indies demonstrates. Yet unlike the members of high society who pursue wealth for selfish and mercenary reasons, the navy officers aspire for wealth to satisfy a morally sanctioned goal—to raise a family. Having returned to England after making his fortune in the West Indies, Wentworth’s sole objective is to marry a woman with a “strong mind” and “sweetness of manner” (54) instead of using his wealth to elevate his social position. Although Wentworth’s marriage with Anne introduces him into high society, Austen makes it clear that their marriage is the culmination of a love that has remained unchanged during their years of forced separation. Like Wentworth, Captain Benwick does not consider his wealth as a means to marrying into power, although he too is drawn into high society through his marriage with Louisa Musgrove. Before Fanny Harville’s death, Captain Benwick’s sole objective had been to make enough money to marry and settle with his fiancée, a sister of his impoverished brother officer.

The associations of thoughtfulness, moral responsibility, and practical capability that Austen makes with blackness are thus not Anne’s attribute alone. It is the trait that links her to the naval officers and distinguishes her from the pale and effete aristocracy to which her father aspires. For that reason, Anne eagerly desires to join the navy circle after witnessing for the first time the lives of the British Navy officers at Lyme. Although a daughter of a baronet, Anne feels more at home in Captain Harville’s cramped cottage and appreciates his “ingenious contrivances and nice arrangements” that she believes have transformed a shabby little abode.
into a “picture of repose and domestic happiness” (83). Anne values the most, however, the “bewitching charm in a degree of hospitality so uncommon” characterizing the brotherly love of Wentworth’s navy coterie that starkly contrasts the “usual style of give-and-take invitations, and dinners of formality and display” that illustrate the hypocrisy of mainstream society (82). As Anne Frey argues, *Persuasion* reflects Austen’s view of the navy as an alternative to the morally defunct aristocracy, as the “sense of duty and obligation” that characterizes the former renders it capable of performing the social responsibilities the latter has neglected (221).\(^{15}\)

Here I would add that while *Persuasion* may certainly promote the navy as an organization capable of creating an alternate mode of national identity, the novel also represents the navy as an organization through which women may emerge as autonomous subjects. If the navy would indeed “create affective ties that spill outward to encompass officers’ families and friends, both male and female, creating new communities tied together through a sense of duty and obligation” (Frey 221), women may be able to work and engage men on equal footing in this new professionalized cultural setting. The British Navy is represented as a meritocratic organization when Sir Walter complains about the navy “as being the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of” (22). In such an organization, incompetent and irresponsible individuals like Richard Musgrove are ignored whereas capable women like Mrs. Croft find a space of useful interaction in their husbands’ social circles. Even though some institutional inequity would persist—there being no visible prospective for women to become officers—the very fact that the navy is capable of providing a space for women to engage in meaningful and public activities reflects the possibility that the organization could offer women a venue for making modest advances toward autonomy. Thus Anne eagerly watches Mrs. Croft walking
“in happy independence” with Admiral Croft on the streets of Bath and delights in observing her
“looking as intelligent and keen as any of the officers around her” when “a little knot of the navy”
is formed around the couple (136), believing that she witnesses an ideal model of fellowship—
”the company of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation” (122).
In such “good company,” eligible women like Mrs. Croft (and Anne herself) associate and
collaborate with men on equal terms. The picture of such companionship vividly shows when
Anne, as a passenger, witnesses the Crofts’ collaborative effort to drive the carriage back home
from Lyme. Moreover, by emphasizing that it is Mrs. Croft who twice saves the group from
collision by “coolly giving the reins a better direction herself” (78), the novel tacitly suggests
that women can work judiciously and effectively in partnership with men.

Mrs. Croft’s transatlantic experience further complicates contemporary gender norms.
While Mrs. Croft has made one-time trips to India, Cork, Lisbon, and Gibraltar, her transatlantic
voyages (made four times) comprise the largest part of her naval experience and enable her to
participate in the work of the navy at sea. Such experience that secures Mrs. Croft a certain
degree of physical and social autonomy also questions conventional gender hierarchy by
affirming interpersonal relationships and social participation as contingent on personal merit
instead of one’s sex. Moreover, by confidently stating that “While we were together, you know,
there was nothing to be feared” (61), Mrs. Croft represents her lifelong accompaniment of
Admiral Croft in his predominantly transatlantic naval missions as satisfying both domestic and
social responsibilities: her presence on a ship allows the couple to maintain a happier life in
each other’s company while enabling her husband to better perform his duties as agent of the
state. With the navy, Mrs. Croft enjoys physical mobility free from cultural and geographical
restraints16 while fulfilling both domestic and national needs. Moreover, such untraditional
experience actually establishes Mrs. Croft as an authority in domestic happiness even when she has spent most of her married life at sea, while relegating Mrs. Musgrove—a model figure of domesticity in the conventional sense—to the position of a silent listener who can only speak to corroborate Mrs. Croft’s decision to accompany her husband at sea (where their lives would be perpetually at risk) based on her mundane experience on land, the comical nature of the latter affirming the superiority of the former: “‘Ay, to be sure.—Yes, indeed, oh yes, I am quite of your opinion, Mrs. Croft,’ […] ‘There is nothing so bad as a separation. I am quite of your opinion. I know what it is, for Mr. Musgrove always attends the assizes, and I am so glad when they are over, and he is safe back again’” (61). From Anne’s point of view, Mrs. Croft is an exemplary sailor’s wife who meaningfully contributes to the domestic and social affairs of an expanding empire while enjoying a certain level of independence. Most importantly, Mrs. Croft’s life as a member of the navy circle erases the traditionally conceived boundary between domestic and social spheres as performance in the latter simultaneously becomes a performance in the former.

Mrs. Croft’s naval experience also gives her agency to challenge sexually discriminating attitudes from men. When Wentworth betrays his assumption of women as inferior to men by openly expressing his disdain at having women aboard a naval vessel, Mrs. Croft counters his prejudice. As a living evidence that nullifies Wentworth’s view on the unworthiness of women at sea, Mrs. Croft not only dismisses her brother’s biased opinion as idle talk founded upon an unfair and stubborn belief in women as irrational beings, but also shrewdly attributes such conventional bias as belonging to the “fine gentleman” of mainstream society (60).

As a sailor’s wife who has voluntarily lived most of her married life at sea with her husband, Mrs. Croft becomes a role model to Anne who values her openness and candor that
favorably reflects the characteristics of the navy. The novel links the unconventionality of Anne and Mrs. Croft’s values through tropes of blackness by highlighting (and associating) their “bright dark eyes” (44). The correlation, which once again affirms the agency of blackness to mark a new form of middle-class morality, both anticipates and justifies the closing of the novel that sees Anne entering the “profession” of “a sailor’s wife” that requires her to “pay the tax of quick alarm” (203). Deidre Shauna Lynch emphasizes Austen’s reference to the sailor’s wife as a form of occupation and interprets it as Austen’s intent “to gesture toward a new value system in which readerly feelings can count, and be rewarded, as work” (xxxi). But while Lynch restricts the profession’s principle role to a passive form of reading—as Anne’s “vigilant study of newspapers and Navy lists” make up for “the lack of occupations for women that she laments” (xxxi)—the closing sentence of Persuasion suggests that participation in the profession may well extend beyond the traditional realm of the domestic. When Austen writes that the profession “is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance” (203; emphasis added), she is not simply relegating the role of the sailor’s wife to the domestic sphere. In contrast, by inserting the conditional clause, Austen shrewdly points to the alternate possibility—that it may not be possible for this newly emerging profession to be confined within the traditionally determined boundaries of the domestic; that the profession could just as well be celebrated for its “national importance” as well as “domestic virtues.” The fact that one of the first things Anne does after marrying Wentworth is to enlist her husband to assist Mrs. Smith recover her West Indian property in lieu of Mr. Elliot can illustrate Anne practicing her “profession,” correcting a deplorable social injustice caused by a legal executor who stubbornly refuses to act for justice.¹⁷ Anne’s employment of her husband, however, need not be interpreted as a literary allusion to women dominating men. Instead, it signifies a form
of collaboration that pictures a new middle-class dispensation in which women and men work as allies. ¹⁸

Desiring to attain the “happy independence” that she can realize by her membership in navy society, Anne counters Mr. Elliot’s preoccupation with “[b]irth and manners” by emphasizing knowledge and experience as essential to “good company” (122) and asserts her belief in personal merit as the defining factor of one’s position within a group as well as the ethos of the group itself. Endorsing the collective ethos of the young navy officers as “frank,” “open-hearted,” and “eager” (131) and contrasting it to high society’s “heartless elegance” (182) that signifies discrimination and ostentatious display, Austen anticipates the (reformed) navy as an organization where sexual discrimination cannot flourish, because this progressive and “open-hearted” organization that values personal merit and stimulates cooperation among its male and female members would be indisposed to let such practice get out of hand. Therefore, despite the moral shortcomings of some of its members and its implication in the violent history of slavery and oppression, the novel envisions the navy’s change into an ideal organization where women might someday participate in the social sphere. It is a change Austen defers, but anticipates.

Austen’s reconfiguration of blackness as a malleable signifier of a moral ethos that can be applied towards articulating female autonomy also functions as an analogy to a precondition she suggests for female autonomy: that women must first divest themselves of the desire for (sexual) mastery that conditions male-oriented British society. Such a view can be perceived in the ways Persuasion specifically fulfills and frustrates the desires of its young female characters, as the novel explicitly rewards those who do not manifest a desire for mastery and punishes those who do. For example, the close of the novel leaves the unhappy Elizabeth Elliot in a precarious
position as Mr. Elliot’s elopement with Mrs. Clay suggests that her hope of remaining as mistress of Kellynch Hall has been permanently compromised. Represented as her father’s avatar “very like himself” (11), Elizabeth is destined to suffer humiliation as she would be forced to yield her privileges to none other than the socially (and visually) inferior Mrs. Clay. Worse, with little to expect from her father by way of inheritance and with no prospect of marriage, Elizabeth is by implication doomed to be relegated to the state that Lynda Hall terms “superfluous”—a situation in which a single woman has neither money nor children and is regarded as a nonentity by society in general (par. 9). Having inherited “a considerable share of the Elliot self-importance” (35), Mary Elliot is preoccupied with social rank and easily falls victim to the disappointments of comparison: “she had something to suffer [...] in seeing Anne restored to the rights of seniority, and the mistress of a very pretty landaulette” (201). However, the suffering that Mary undergoes is frivolous, and her willingness to marry Charles Musgrove demonstrates that she is less obsessed with superiority than her father and eldest sister. It is thus not a coincidence that Mary, unlike Elizabeth, is neither doomed to suffer perpetual disappointment nor face a precarious future.

Austen’s description of the course of events leading to Louisa’s injury at Lyme vividly marks the author’s disapprobation of the desire for mastery. Here, the novel represents Louisa’s fall from the Cobb as an inevitable outcome of her flirtation and desire to demonstrate her power over Wentworth. Yet while Louisa’s performance of “obstinacy of self-will” (23) is the cause of her fall, it is also necessary to consider the fact that her ordeal is temporary. This, I maintain, is related to the author’s sympathy with Louisa’s unpretentious and good-natured temperament as represented through her appreciation of the navy:
Anne thought she left great happiness behind her when they quitted the house; and Louisa, by whom she found herself walking, burst forth into raptures of admiration and delight on the character of the navy: their friendliness, their brotherliness, their openness, their uprightness; protesting that she was convinced of sailors having more worth and warmth than any other set of men in England; that they only knew how to live, and they only deserved to be respected and loved. (83)

While one might dismiss Louisa’s ecstatic praise of the British navy as deliberate flattery intended to please Wentworth, the novel’s prior affirmation of Louisa’s unaffected personality encourages the reader to consider her exaggerated expressions as nonetheless reflecting a sincere acknowledgement of the British navy’s ethos generated by the camaraderie of the sailors grounded in their shared life at sea. Louisa’s praise corresponds with Anne’s silent regard for the navy: as Louisa speaks, Anne has been loath to part with the “great happiness” she desires to partake of at Captain Harville’s home. Louisa’s hyperbolic exclamation on the sailors being the only ones who “knew how to live” resonates with Anne’s approval of Captain Harville’s “ingenious contrivances and nice arrangements,” the products of “his profession” that endow his shabby residence with dignity (83). For that reason, although Louisa must temporarily suffer the loss of health and love for having momentarily desired to publicly boast her influence over Wentworth, her genuine acknowledgement of the navy’s value enables her (along with Anne) to join the navy circle as her loss of Wentworth is compensated by the new love she finds in Captain Benwick.

That Persuasion frustrates the desires of Mr. Elliot, in addition to those of the female characters obsessed with mastery, further reflects Austen’s condemnation of the pervasive desire
for domination as the driving force of the oppressive gender norms that integrate the minds of both men and women into its dynamics. Unanimously favored by the Elliot circle, Mr. Elliot is not only represented as Sir Walter’s heir but also as the exemplary young successor of upper-class value that explicitly sanctions desire for (sexual) mastery. Colonel Wallis’s account of Mr. Elliot’s first marriage alludes to Mr. Elliot’s obsession with mastery that even exceeds his desire for money. What had ultimately prompted Mr. Elliot to marry his deceased wife of inferior birth had been the fact that she was “excessively in love” with him and had “sought him” first. As Colonel Wallis affirms, “Without that attraction, not all her money would have tempted Elliot” (113). Even if one is to doubt the credibility of Colonel Wallis’s testimony, the important thing to consider is that Mr. Elliot—undoubtedly savvy with the upper-class mindset—rightly expects the story to be readily accepted by the Elliots as a reasonable excuse: “Here was a great deal to soften the business. [. . .] Sir Walter seemed to admit it as complete apology; and though Elizabeth could not see the circumstance in quite so favourable a light, she allowed it be a great extenuation” (113). The end of the novel, however, sees Mr. Elliot “discomfited and disappointed” at the realization that “his best plan of domestic happiness” has been destroyed by Anne’s engagement with Wentworth. Moreover, the novel ends with a strong allusion to Mr. Elliot’s ultimate sexual subjection to Mrs. Clay who, despite his false motives, “may finally carry the day” (201).

Here Austen by no means suggests that women should refrain from desiring power and accept subjection to men. Instead, these events point to Austen’s attention to the nature of power that draws people into its dynamics: within the hierarchical structure of nineteenth-century Britain, women are both victims and collaborators as they reproduce the logic that oppresses them, especially in the marriage market. The remedy Austen prescribes is not
insurrection—in addition to its impracticability, women’s domination over men would only consolidate the oppressive gender structure that presupposes the superiority of one group over the other—but relinquishment, suggesting that overcoming the alluring desire for mastery ultimately rejects the power-obsessed rationale of the social order and destabilizes its authority. Finally, Austen’s attention to society’s gender hierarchy suggests the subtle correlation she establishes between the prevalent desire for mastery in nineteenth-century British society and the equally prevalent tendency to predicate blackness as a marker of African slavery; both serve to perpetuate an oppressive social system. Therefore, the novel’s delinking of blackness from the racialized slave metaphor could be considered a literary representation of incapacitating the desire for mastery that Austen wishes to see regulated. At the same time, the fact that Austen designates professional organizations like the navy as a medium for women’s civic participation that would simultaneously enable them to fulfill domestic duties, instead of openly voicing her support for women’s participation in the public sphere, may well reflect a strategic move on the author’s part to avoid disapprobation from her conservative middle-class readers.

As I have argued, Persuasion rejects its young female characters who indulge in morally unsanctioned forms of (sexual) dominance. Conversely, the novel rewards the young women who refrain from embracing such desire by allowing them to enjoy a certain degree of autonomy as they become directly or indirectly associated with the navy. Along with Anne, the author shows sympathy towards Louisa and Mrs. Smith who relinquish their former lifestyle after physical hardship. As Louisa enters the navy circle by marrying Captain Benwick, the novel suggests that she will change: Anne confidently predicts that Louisa will be happy as she becomes more like her husband and turns into “a person of literary taste, and sentimental reflection” (135). Moreover, the novel further invites the reader to understand that, as Louisa
grows into a serious reader, she too will contribute to those “readerly feelings” which, according to Lynch, Austen considers a form of civic participation (xxxi). In turn, like Mrs. Croft’s, Louisa’s existence—especially with her “fine naval fervour” (135)—will invigorate her husband, contributing to the performance of his duties at sea. Mrs. Smith’s connection with the navy comes through Anne, and she recovers her late husband’s legacy through Wentworth. The novel, moreover, implies that Mrs. Smith’s “elasticity of mind, that disposition to be comforted, that power of turning readily from evil to good, and of finding employment which carried her out of herself” (125) resonates with the navy’s ethos exemplified by Captain Harville’s ability to improve his surroundings in his illness and poverty. That *Persuasion* specifically favors a character who turns from mercenary ambitions is further illustrated in its representation of Mrs. Clay. Branded as a social climber conniving to entice Sir Walter into marrying her, Mrs. Clay finally gives up her endeavors for the sake of the man she loves and leaves Bath for Mr. Elliot. Additionally, even when she strives to flatter and seduce Sir Walter, Mrs. Clay does not hesitate to counter Sir Walter’s invective against the sailors’ “wretched” appearance by emphasizing the necessity and honor of the profession as well as suggesting the inevitable effect service and labor have on a person’s appearance (22-23). A daughter of a lawyer herself, Mrs. Clay unreservedly expresses sympathy towards professional organizations, of which the navy is one. For her appreciation of the navy, in addition to her abandonment of scheming after Sir Walter, the novel suggests with heavy irony that Mrs. Clay will ultimately be rewarded by having her initial dream of becoming Lady Elliot fulfilled by outwitting the manipulative Mr. Elliot, a feat that demonstrates her competence within both the domestic and the social.
Reconfiguring Blackness and Female Autonomy

Austen’s attention to the younger female characters whom she approves or rejects according to their (dis)association with the corrupt norms of the social order is equally discernible in *Mansfield Park*, as in the (mis)fortunes of Fanny Price, Mary Crawford, Maria and Julia Bertram. It is also worth noting that unlike the younger women of both *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, the elder women—with the exception of the exceedingly obnoxious Mrs. Norris—are allowed to enjoy “tolerable comfort” at the novel’s close, suggesting that they are “not greatly in fault themselves” (362). The seeming inconsistency in Austen’s discrimination of older and younger women can suggest a move on the author’s part to appease her conservative middle-class readers who would not have found reason to resent the author’s chastisements on immoral young people. Yet by doing so, Austen tacitly inculcates into the readers’ minds the morally justifiable principles of women’s social participation—which functions as a paradigm for judging the characters—while evading accusations of challenging the status quo of the predominantly racist and sexist society.

Most importantly, Austen interrogates contemporary gender norms by questioning traditional notions of race and blackness. Fanny and Anne’s performances of blackness manifest female autonomy and also reflect the author’s intention to reinterpret blackness in a meaningfully positive way. *Mansfield Park* features Fanny’s performance of blackness that negotiates the boundaries of female autonomy in a male-dominated society by questioning the notion of autonomy as an exclusive right of men as well as supporting women’s choice of matrimony free from the restraints of the corrupt marriage market as their *moral* right. In *Persuasion*, Austen appropriates tropes of blackness—both physical and moral—to extend the boundaries of female autonomy from the domestic to the public sphere by exploring the
possibilities of women’s active participation in society. Women, through their affiliation with professional organizations like the British Navy, will attain autonomy by contributing in both the domestic and the public sphere, a participation that also complicates their boundary. If Sir Thomas’s aversion to “that independence of spirit [. . .] in young women” (249) that includes women’s desire for autonomy represents early nineteenth-century Britain’s “typical conservative fear” (413), his affirmation of Fanny’s assertion of her autonomy as a force that saves Mansfield Park from moral ruin, as well as Anne’s performance of her autonomy that transforms Wentworth and redeems Mrs. Smith, converge to reveal Austen’s belief that female autonomy may well serve as an antidote to the vices of the society she wants to see reformed instead of threatening its stability. The kind of female autonomy Austen endorses will not disrupt social order because it is sustained by unaffected feelings and sound moral principles. On the contrary, female autonomy will in fact contribute to restore English domesticity from the corruption it has suffered through the pervasive logic of the mercantile society obsessed with mastery. Fanny and Anne’s performances of blackness thus validate female autonomy and unman the gendered violence of early nineteenth-century Britain. Projecting her hopes for female autonomy through a discursive reconfiguration of blackness, Austen revises the fiction of white masculinity that comprises the axis of early nineteenth-century Britain’s national ethos.

Written under the influence of the reformist climate in 1840s Britain, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s treatment of blackness in her antislavery poems is much more direct, literal, and polemical than that of Austen, which is more rhetorical (often figurative as well as literal) and allusive in nature. Such difference of approach may not only have been enabled by the reformist atmosphere of her time, but also by the form of the occasional poem rather than the more decorous novel of manners. In the following chapter, I investigate how EBB explores in
unequivocal terms what it means to be black and female in white, slaveholding America, and what the British public’s duty should be when faced with accounts of such racialized and sexualized brutality.
Chapter 2

Aestheticizing Blackness in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Abolitionist Poetry

Considering the transatlantic antislavery motives of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” (1847/1848), “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave” (1850), and “A Curse for a Nation” (1855/1856), it is perhaps natural that much of the scholarly discussion has explored these poems’ representations of race and gender within the context of Atlantic slavery, including the possibility of EBB’s African ancestry and the relationship between her anti-slavery cause and her feminist agenda. While almost all discussions tend to conceive blackness as a racialized, physical trait associated with African slavery, this chapter argues that EBB’s antislavery poems show a far more flexible and creative thinking about blackness by representing it as a signifier of discursive and aesthetic conditions in which race is not always the master term.

According to Jennifer Brody, the English invented a binary structure through which they tried to erase the truth of their racial hybridity by contrasting the fictitious concept of a moral and civilized white English identity against that of a supposedly immoral and primitive blackness (1-13). Through her analysis of mixed-race women in the anonymously published The Woman of Colour, William Thackeray’s Vanity Fair, and Dion Boucicault’s The Octoroon, for example, Brody argues that nineteenth-century British literature generally represented a mulattaroons’ dark skin as a marker of her African mother’s moral depravity instead of that of her English father. However, a mulattaroon could assume a civilized white English identity provided she could get “an upstanding Englishman” as her husband or father. In sum, a mulattaroon “must
be either black or white—never a subject in-between” (17).

In this chapter, I argue that EBB’s antislavery poems challenge such a dichotomy, one that envisioned blackness as a corrupt racial marker acting as foil to the superiority of whiteness. The poems associate blackness with *artistic creativity* so that blackness becomes a malleable cultural signifier that can be positively (re)configured through performance. Thus the poems affirm the aesthetic agency of blackness in a way that resists and transcends the material conditions of slavery. This unsettles the contemporary binarism of color and creates an aesthetic space defined by moral responsibility—a space that questions the mercantilism of the nineteenth-century Atlantic world.

EBB supported abolition even though her family owned properties in Jamaica.²⁶ As I shall argue, EBB’s antislavery poems—the first of which was published a decade after emancipation in the British West Indies—reflect the poet’s belief in black moral and intellectual capacity and her equally firm belief in manumission in America. Many of her Victorian contemporaries, of course, did not share her attitude. In fact, as Catherine Hall observes, the continuous decline in sugar productivity following emancipation that led to the economic ruin of the British West Indies led many pro-abolition Victorians to relinquish their belief in the “universal family of man” that saw blacks as equal to whites in their capacity for moral and intellectual improvement. Hall notes that such a change of attitude emerged from the mid-1840s after the decline of the West Indian economy following abolition prompted many Victorians to find the reason for the economic crisis in the supposed laziness and incompetence of the emancipated blacks. This would lead to a proliferation of racial discourses that aimed to rationalize hierarchies among different ethnic groups (338-41). Thomas Carlyle’s “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question” (published in 1849 and then revised and republished in 1853
under the provocatively racist title “Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question”) vividly exemplified such an attitude, as he hurled bitter invectives against the emancipated blacks whose supposed unwillingness to work, he believed, played a part in West Indian ruin. Thus blacks were registered in the Victorian imagination as constitutionally primitive, ignorant, and incapable of self-governance.27

This chapter investigates how the scope of EBB’s three antislavery poems extends beyond the issue of slavery in America as they pose an aesthetic challenge to the essentialist notions of black inferiority in Britain that prevailed from the mid-1840s onward. As the poems demonstrate the poet’s understanding of and sympathy for the lived experience of the oppressed on both sides of the Atlantic, they anticipate E. Patrick Johnson’s attention to performance as a means to “provide a space for meaningful resistance of oppressive systems” by offering a venue towards “deconstructing essentialist notions of selfhood” (9). At the same time, the poems anticipate Johnson’s notion of “cross-cultural appropriation” in which “the colonized have made use of the colonizer’s forms as an act of resistance,” an act which offers “fertile ground on which to formulate new epistemologies of self and Other” (6). For example, EBB’s use of the dramatic monologue in “The Runaway Slave” show cross-cultural appropriation as it at once enables a white Englishwoman to perform a black slave mother while representing a black slave as a valid agent of a distinctly “white” literary form who sings to her child as Western women do. By representing blackness as a malleable and performative signifier, “The Runaway Slave” anticipates Johnson’s argument on “dialogic engagement” in which the performer and audience “engage the Others’ political, social, and cultural landscape” (213). But whereas Johnson focuses on the white Australian choir members’ physical performance of African-American gospel and its life-changing effect, “The Runaway Slave” illustrates a transatlantic cross-cultural
performance: a white English poet’s sympathetic imagination enables her to “perform” the experience of a black slave mother, drawing her audience into the “political, social, and cultural landscape” of the African slave mother which envisions, in the words of D. Soyini Madison, a subjectivity that “becomes a poetic and polemic admixture of personal experience, cultural politics, social power, and resistance” (qtd. in Johnson 213).

“Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave,” in turn, performs blackness through a white body—an American sculptor Hiram Powers’s white marble statue of a Greek maiden called *The Greek Slave*—to critique racialized assumptions about slavery as exclusively bound to bodies of black Africans, assumptions *Punch*’s reactionary production of the black *Virginian Slave* would later exemplify following *The Greek Slave*’s presentation at the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition. Contrary to attacks on the statue as reflecting the American artist’s desire to displace American slavery with Turkish slavery of Greeks during the Greek War of Independence, I shall argue that “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave” reflects EBB’s interpretation of the statue as a work of art that silently articulates a union of aesthetics and morality in ways that invite people to see both blackness and whiteness as sources of artistic beauty. Even as it draws on the aesthetic strategies of “The Runaway Slave” and “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave,” which affirm the artistic agency of blackness, “A Curse for a Nation” makes no reference to blackness and the aesthetic traits associated with it in its attack on American slavery. I argue, however, that this too is an aesthetic strategy on the poet’s part to illustrate how sterile might look a world that subjects its people to slavery and stifles their aesthetic potentials.
“The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point”: Blackness and Artistic Creativity

“The Runaway Slave” brings together America, the West Indies, and Britain into a black Atlantic framework, which Paul Gilroy describes as “one single, complex unit of analysis” (15), by aesthetically rendering possible what is realistically impossible. In the first stanza, the speaker states that she has arrived at Pilgrim’s Point by running all the way through the night. As E. Warwick Slinn points out, it would have been physically impossible for a slave to have made the journey on foot from the southern plantations to Massachusetts in a single night. The speaker also refers to her child as wanting his “liberty” and the “master-right” (lines 125-126), but whereas a child born of a black slave and a white master had such rights in British Jamaica and could even be educated in Britain, the same child automatically became a slave in America. There were also no cocoa-nuts or hurricanes in the American South, and the scene in which the speaker’s lover carves a bowl from a cocoa-nut amid the roaring hurricanes (76-77) could only have taken place in the West Indies (Victorian Poetry 68).28 As I shall argue, representation of such impossibilities portrays a black slave capable of reflecting on and challenging the sociopolitical construction of whiteness in ways that anticipate David Lambert’s attention to slaves’ representations of whiteness, “less ‘masculine’ forms of [slave] resistance” that discursively interrogate the dominant notion of race (108).

If one of the defining features of the dramatic monologue is to demonstrate the “temperament and character” of the lyric speaker “who is patently not the poet” (Abrams and Harpham 85; emphasis original), EBB’s presentation of the lyric speaker as a black slave mother not only illustrates the poet’s repudiation of American slavery, but also her rejection of a false notion that imagines blackness as a negative opposite to whiteness signifying the primitiveness of nonwhite people. By drawing the reader’s attention to the speaker’s race through repeated
emphasis ("I am black"), "The Runaway Slave" suggests that black voices are part of both British and American cultural and social tradition and questions conventional assumptions about white moral superiority represented by the ghosts of the Pilgrim Fathers. By thus demonstrating that the dramatic monologue is by no means an exclusively "white" literary form, the poem poses a nuanced challenge to the racialized and racist attitude that imagines whiteness as a legitimate marker of Victorian literature. Even if one were to point out that the black lyric speaker is, after all, a literary creation by a white English poet, the apparent discrepancy of race and socioeconomic position between speaker and poet ironically destabilizes whiteness as a valid marker of British literary tradition, because the very fact that a white, English, middle-class woman can so effectively identify herself with a fugitive slave mother across the Atlantic debunks race as an essential marker of human experience.

For example, "The Runaway Slave" represents the racialized and binary association between blackness and whiteness as artificial and oppressive. The poem illustrates this through a series of connections and disconnections between its black and white characters. First, the black lyric speaker’s engagement in the reciprocally fulfilling relationship with her black lover breaks the assumption of a black slave body as essentially bound to her white master: transcending subservience ("we slaves"), "we" comes to mean "we sharers of love." Such a relationship between the two slaves is an emotional one and indicates that they are not objects to be owned but humans with feelings and individual wills. To the whites, however, the relationship the lyric speaker has with her lover is deeply unsettling because it demonstrates the slaves’ humanity. Being nothing more than property, blacks have "no claim to love and bliss" (93), and it is to reaffirm such a belief that the white master rapes the lyric speaker after murdering her lover. Here a violent obliteration of the black-black connection occurs when the
speaker’s master separates her from her lover. The rupture is followed by the speaker’s violent reconnection with her white master when he rapes her, and she gives birth to a “white” child who bears “The master’s look, that used to fall / On my soul like his lash .. or worse!” (144-145).

Even when the speaker runs away from her master to sever the enforced relationship, the black-white connection remains intact because the black mother is unable to abandon her white child in her flight, for the child becomes “An amulet that hung too slack” on the speaker’s breast (107-108). The black-black relationship can only be restored after the speaker murders her child, and, after burying him under “black earth” (185), sings the love song which the child reciprocates, now that he has become symbolically black through a ritual of burial. Thus showing how a (white) society that refuses to protect individuals from injustice and violence could never expect those individuals to be nurturers of their own children, the poem critiques the myth of white superiority and questions whether white people are really as enlightened, civilized, and capable of responsible self-governance as they believe themselves to be.

Indeed, “The Runaway Slave” emphasizes the moral and artistic agency of blackness by describing every aspect of the black-black connection in terms of freedom and artistic creation while describing every element of the black-white connection in terms of violence and anguish. The short period of love between the speaker and her black lover, along with the reconciliation between the speaker and her dead and “blackened” child, is expressed through the rhetoric of music and plastic art. First, the melody generated by the poem’s lines enables the speaker to revive her lover’s avowal of love: “When the shingle-roof rang sharp with the rains, / I heard how he vowed it fast” (73-74). At the same time, the lover is carving for the speaker “a bowl of the cocoa-nut / Through the roar of the hurricanes” (76-77), generating a scene ripe with musical notes and craftsmanship. Additionally, the speaker’s concealment of her love song with the
melodic variations of her lover’s name reflects the slave’s artistic sensibility. Music also celebrates the moment of reconciliation between the speaker with her dead “black” baby: the black mother sings to the black baby the “soft and wild” song, and she hears “The same song, more melodious” rise from the baby’s grave to “join the souls of both of us” (190-195). This “same song” further validates black artistic creativity as it is no different from what the white women sing to their children. Moreover, this “same song” the speaker once sang for her dead lover brings him back into the scene and completes the reconciliation where the speaker, the lover, and the baby are united. Even when the speaker gives an account of “dark things” in nature, she depicts them in musical terms: “a little dark bird, sits and sings”; “a dark stream ripples out of sight”; and “the dark frogs chant in the safe morass” (31-33). Blackness, in its brief moments of happy unity, is thus performed by aesthetic language that illustrates artistic creativity and passion as opposed to the rhetoric of cruelty, injustice, and agony associated with the black-white connection.

By contrast, the poem associates whiteness with barbaric violence. Stanza XIV describes the speaker and her black lover’s separation with terms such as “wrack,” “wrung,” “cold,” “dragged,” and “blood,” all associated with violence and death. The moment of reconnection between the speaker and her white master in stanza XV is replete with such words as “wrong,” “grief,” “shame,” “strangle,” “sob,” “agony,” “dull,” “wet,” “weep,” “tears,” and “die,” all associated with anguish and some with violence. Consequently, the speaker describes her relationship with her white baby with expressions of denial and hatred: the speaker “could not bear / To look in his face” because “it was so white” (120-121), and every moment she glances at her son, she “saw a look that made me mad! / The master’s look, that used to fall / On my soul like his lash .. or worse!” (143-145). This creates a morbid situation in which a baby
cannot invite love even from its own mother. By showing how such a distorted relationship in which “a child and mother / Do wrong to look at one another, / When one is black and one is fair” (138-140) would end in infanticide, the poem suggests that such an inhumane society as that which upholds slavery is in danger of disintegration, for the cruel injustice it inexorably evokes prevents its members from maintaining the most basic of human relationships.

After she is raped by her master, the speaker laments that “it was too merciful / To let me weep pure tears and die” (104-105), suggesting that she believes her body to be no longer the same after it had been violently used to demonstrate the whites’ belief in their racial hegemony. The speaker’s fears are confirmed when her baby, by a stroke of bitter irony, turns out to be white. While the impossible whiteness of the slave’s mixed-race baby shows the alignment of whiteness with violence and blackness with unwarranted suffering, the rape has brought blackness’s aesthetic (and artistic) harmony to “wrack” and has cast it back to the realm of racial binarism, as the brutally physicalized image of a white man raping a black woman expresses blackness as a physical trait naturally associated with slavery. Like the lyric speaker herself, the transcendent, aesthetic possibilities of blackness generated by the poetics of artistic creativity are viciously crushed by rape. The speaker, therefore, cannot “die”—and thus end the poem—until she has rescued blackness from the pit of racial binarism into which it has fallen. At a symbolic level, then, infanticide can be read as the means that the speaker uses to achieve this goal. By murdering her rape-begotten child, the speaker symbolically cancels the rape by castrating the slaveholders’ “white masculinity” that has empowered them to commit the crime. Infanticide, therefore, is a ritual of cleansing that is a precondition to restoration. By burying her murdered child, the speaker enacts the transformative power of the black soil that restores the black-black relationship, the matrix of artistic creativity. Only after fulfilling this feat does the
speaker reach Pilgrim’s Point to summon the Pilgrim ghosts and confront their “hunter sons,” thus confirming that infanticide does indeed become a catalyst for reviving the aesthetics of blackness in musical harmony.29

Such a representation of infanticide demonstrates EBB’s refusal to represent blackness as one term of a binary black-white opposition and illustrates how a society allegedly based on Puritan Christian principles of brotherly love and forgiveness becomes instead an unforgiving and divisive hierarchy. The poem’s reference to the failed American Union (the “Two kinds of men in adverse rows, / Each loathing each; 234-235) further exemplifies this. The speaker turns the word “Union” into an oxymoron by casting it as a nexus of division and mutual antagonism: black slaves against white slaveholders, Northern abolitionists against Southern defenders of slavery. Additionally, such a society displaces the relationship of black lovers characterized by mutual affection and understanding with that of a black mother and white child—a perverse relationship characterized by enmity and hierarchy; for even the baby, complete with the “master’s look” that would make her mother “mad,” envisions a master-slave relationship between son and mother. This disruptive force of the Union inevitably compels its members to contradict their professed faith in Christianity founded on the “seven wounds in Christ’s body fair” (236). Its people “set” in “adverse rows,” the Union’s oppressive racial binarism resists all religious and philanthropic reasoning. The speaker’s rejection of the Union, then, demonstrates EBB’s desire to abolish racial binarism.

While the lyric speaker draws on religious authority to attack racism and slavery, one might argue that the speaker actually denounces Christianity that vindicates slavery and offers no recourse to the injustices nonwhite people like herself, her black lover, lover, and her mixed-race yet “white” baby are doomed to suffer. The black lyric speaker seems to question God’s
authority by describing him as a creator who, by scorning his own black creations and throwing them “Under the feet of his white creatures / With a look of scorn,—that the dusky features / Might be trodden again to clay” (25-28), presents himself as biased and discriminatory. God also seems heartless because he persists in remaining silent to the pleas of the persecuted couple and the bereaved speaker (86-91). Even his angels, instead of sympathizing with the speaker’s hopeless plight that had driven her to the point of murdering her own child, only “point and mock at what was done” with “a white sharp finger” (180-182), because they are incapable of seeing the child as anything more than an object of appropriation, a “fruit” to be “plucked” and “sucked” (159-160). The poem’s representation of such self-contradicting images of Christianity through the mouth of a fugitive slave mother indeed seems to ridicule its moral authority.

But the alienation between the speaker and God is not permanent. Neither does the speaker consistently maintain an antagonistic stance toward Christianity. In fact, the speaker’s attitude toward Christianity is not antagonistic at all. Considering the racism in America at the time of the poem’s publication enables one to discern the kind of Christianity the speaker denounces. As advocates of racial hierarchy, most of the whites in antebellum America not only regarded the blacks as occupying the bottom of the racial ladder, but also imagined them to be biologically similar to other primates. Moreover, natural historians such as John Jeffries argued that the supposed similarity in facial angles between blacks and apes justified the comparison, and it became a trend that both scientists and artists reproduced in exaggerated measures (Lemire 184-86). In fact, such belief in “the revolting characteristics” of Africans can even be discerned in antislavery writings (Sánchez-Eppler 28-30). To the many whites who regarded themselves as devout Christians, such widespread ideas of blacks as belonging to the
margins of humanity and thus essentially different from whites in God’s eyes justified slavery, making it compatible with their religious faith.

What the speaker beholds with “broken heart’s disdain” (253), then, is not Christianity itself but the distorted version of American Christianity that justifies slavery. Marjorie Stone maintains that after going through the trials of murder, rape, and infanticide, “the slave questions and finally discards her faith in the benevolence of the white man’s God with his ‘fine white angels’” (“Cursing” 157). Following Stone, Slinn argues that the black speaker considers God an insubstantial entity—an imaginary creation of the white man to justify slavery. The speaker thus “turns white men’s theology back on themselves, subverting the Christian concept of redemption that might justify slaveowning infliction of punishment” (Victorian Poetry 88-89). As Slinn suggests, the speaker directs her invective at the “white men’s theology,” a dogma that rationalizes oppression.

In fact, the speaker’s attack on American Christianity reflects her unremitting faith in God. As she recalls enduring the whipping by the slaveholders, she says that “Your white men / Are, after all, not gods indeed, / Nor able to make Christs again / Do good with bleeding” (239-242). These lines may seem to deny the Trinity as they imagine the existence of multiple “Christs” as well as nullify the ultimate one-time saving power of Christ’s crucifixion that constitutes the backbone of Christian theology. However, the same lines also point to the fact that it is not the speaker who contemplates such possibilities. It is instead the white slaveholders, who, in their effort to justify slavery through religion, endeavor to rationalize the suffering of their slaves as something meaningful (both economically and morally). The speaker’s evocation of God’s curse on the snake to the present state of affairs, in turn, informs the slaveholders of the oncoming divine retribution, a metaphorical warning that can only retain
its efficacy within the context of Christian faith. Even the speaker’s unforgiving resolution to leave the slaveholders “curse-free” in her “broken heart’s disdain” (252-53), a performance that deviates from Christ’s demonstration of total forgiveness, need not be read as a digression from Christian doctrines: the speaker is not the Christ and therefore has no reason to indulge in messianic emulations; in fact, nothing can be more anti-Christian than for a human being to assume the role of Christ.

What at first seemed like sacrilege, then, turns out to be a moral attack on a corrupt religion. Furthermore, death creates life as the speaker sublimates infanticide into the aesthetics of unity and mutual understanding. As destructive acts are renewed into creative ones in this reconciliatory process, readers who have been morally alienated from the speaker are drawn to her in full sympathy. The supernatural reconciliation between the ethically unimaginable and the culturally creative in the monologue of a black runaway slave manifests EBB’s desire to interrogate and transcend the hopelessly inveterate binarism of contemporary racism on both sides of the Atlantic. Therefore, one might also read “The Runaway Slave” as illustrating EBB’s effort to redefine blackness as a creative potential as opposed to the conventional belief that conveniently dismisses blackness as a racial marker of ignorance and lack of imagination. Even as the dramatic monologue allows the English poet to impersonate a fugitive slave mother to illuminate and indict the inhumanity of American slavery, the dramatic monologue, more importantly, also enables the poet to expand her poetic agency and address sociopolitical issues pertaining to familial, legal and civil rights—denied to a slave—that advances a re-imagination of blackness as a creative agency in her international readership. In the following discussion of “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave,” I explore how EBB experiments with an alternative mode of representing blackness as a source of artistic creativity detached from racial implications—
namely, through a restrained allusion to the “blackness” of a white marble statue.

“Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave”: Erasing the Boundaries of Race

In 1844, an American artist Hiram Powers created a controversial statue called The Greek Slave. The white marble statue featuring a nude Greek maiden put on sale at a Turkish slave market was controversial because it was created by an artist whose own homeland was infamously implicated in African slavery. Therefore, when The Greek Slave was exhibited at the Great Exhibition of London in 1851, Punch ridiculed the statue as an American effort to divert attention from American slavery and had John Tenniel create an image of a black slave titled Virginian Slave Intended as a Companion to Powers’ ‘Greek Slave’ featuring a black slave standing on a pedestal with her hands tied to a post. As the title word “Companion” suggests, the Punch image was a symmetrical parody of Powers’s statue: its facial expression, the direction of its gaze, the posture of its shoulder and legs mirrored those of The Greek Slave.

However, the very criticism The Greek Slave drew from various sectors ironically contributed to heightening public awareness of the American slavery that the artist had been accused of (deliberately) overlooking, thus drawing attention to both white and black slavery. As I shall argue, EBB’s “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave,” published a year before Punch’s Virginian Slave, reflects the poet’s awareness of The Greek Slave’s aesthetic potential to transcend racial boundaries in its silent attack on slavery—that the statue invites people to connect beauty and morality with blackness as well as whiteness, even when Powers is accused of irresponsibility. Having praised Powers during her visit to his studio in 1847 as “a high-souled man” capable of moving the public (Prins 53), EBB interprets The Greek Slave as a sublime work of art that challenges all forms of oppression regardless of race or skin color:
They say Ideal beauty cannot enter
The house of anguish. On the threshold stands
An alien Image with enshackled hands,
Called the Greek Slave! as if the artist meant her
(That passionless perfection which he lent her,
Shadowed, not darkened where the sill expands)
To, so, confront man’s crimes in different lands
With man’s ideal sense. Pierce to the centre,
Art’s fiery finger!—and break up ere long
The serfdom of this world! appeal, fair stone,
From God’s pure heights of beauty against man’s wrong!
Catch up in the divine face, not alone
East griefs but west,—and strike and shame the strong,
By thunders of white silence, overthrown.

The speaker’s definition of Powers’s statue as an “alien Image” questions normative views of beauty. Conventional wisdom would not deny the speaker’s designation of the statue as an “Ideal beauty” because it is white and presents a neoclassical image of a Caucasian woman. The statue, however, is “alien” because it is an ideal (white) beauty that has approached “the house of anguish” in chains. If ideal beauty indeed cannot enter the house of anguish, the poem suggests that Powers’s brilliance lies in his ability to keep his statue beautiful to look at while signaling just enough anguish in its pose to indict all forms of slavery as specifically anti-
Christian. The catalogue listing for Powers’s statue at the Great Exhibition takes note of “the cross and locket visible amid the drapery” near the chains, concluding that the slave is a “type of resignation, uncompromising virtue, or sublime patience” (Stone and Taylor 189). As suggested by the poet’s view that the statue does indeed “Catch up in the divine face, not alone / East griefs but west,” EBB did not fail to discern the statue’s subtle expression of a universal Christian morality that enables it to call attention to Christian Americans’ oppression of Africans even as it critiques Turkish Muslims’ oppression of Christian Greeks. The poem also suggests that the statue’s association of whiteness with slavery does not reflect Powers’s desire to ignore American slavery but instead unsettles the normative view that whiteness does not function as a signifier of the oppressed. The poem thus articulates the statue’s potential to debunk a false and racialized binarism that connects whiteness to normality and blackness to otherness. EBB’s positive interpretation of Powers’s statue, then, stands at odds with Punch’s racially-charged attack on Powers’s statue through the Virginian Slave, illustrating the normative black-white binarism.

The poem’s critique extends beyond British and American prejudice on race to a generalized attack on tyranny when it declares the statue can “confront man’s crimes in different lands” and “Catch up in thy divine face, not alone / East griefs but west.” Although one might be inclined to consider “west” as solely referring to America, the plurality of “different lands” as well as the European notion of conceiving itself as “West” in opposition to the “Oriental East” suggest an understanding of “west” as including both Europe and America. But considering that slavery had been legally abolished in Europe at the time the poem was written, it is not unreasonable to maintain that the “serfdom of this world” that the marble statue denounces doesn’t exclusively address slavery in America and the Middle-East, but also refers to all modes
of tyranny including class and gender oppression. That EBB does not regard slavery as the
dominant mode of oppression is especially true when one considers how, for example, EBB
groups American slavery with the various sociopolitical injustices committed in Europe in Casa
Guidi Windows.\textsuperscript{31}

The poem’s ability to address social and political oppressions beyond slavery still leaves
unresolved the following question: doesn’t the speaker’s description of the white marble statue
as an alien image too beautiful to be at home in the “house of anguish” nonetheless acknowledge
it as an ideal image? Does the speaker not thereby idealize its whiteness? If so, is the poem
not complicit with a racialization of beauty that it rejects, since it too ultimately associates ideal
beauty with whiteness?

The speaker exonerates the poem from such implications by (re)identifying the essence
of beauty in The Greek Slave. As I have argued, the poem considers the capability of Powers’s
statue to illustrate the tension in which beauty and anguish coexist as the core of its artistic
agency that enables it to “confront man’s crimes in different lands.” In the poem, the essence
of this tension is captured in the shadow of the sill, the shadow marking the “passionless
perfection” imbued in the statue by “man’s ideal sense.” Here the poem emphasizes the hue of
this shadow as neither black nor white (“Shadowed, not darkened”). The subtlety of color in
the shadow not only denotes the restrained illustration of anguish that conventional wisdom
deems unimaginable in ideal (white) beauty, but also challenges racial binarism: deliberately
rendered indistinct in the shadow, neither blackness nor whiteness functions exclusively as a
marker of anguish that the shadow represents. Instead, ideal beauty (the white statue) and
anguish (the dark house of anguish) are cast as aesthetic and moral categories that apply to all
human beings. Thus the shadow questions the racialized dichotomy in which whiteness and
blackness are equated with the powerful master and the suffering slave. The essence of “Ideal beauty,” therefore, does not lie in the statue’s whiteness but in the disruption of conventional notions of race and slavery by cancelling both whiteness and blackness (occurring in the shadow) as essential signifiers of slavery. As EBB’s use of figurative language enables the reader to imagine how ideal beauty can veil, but also invoke anguish, the erasure of whiteness and blackness as valid markers of slavery encourages the reader to understand that a sculptor can use the white marble and the Turkish enslavement of Greek women during the Greek War of Independence symbolically to approach anguish regardless of race, class, and gender.

If, as Marjorie Stone argues, both abolitionists and slavery’s apologists drew on the ambiguity of Powers’s statue to support their own cause (“Between Ethics and Anguish” 134), the very fact of the statue’s ability to evoke debates on black and white slavery demonstrates its aesthetic agency that connects beauty and morality with all humanity. “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave” reflects EBB’s recognition of such agency in Powers’s statue—an example of unracialized art that can function as the medium to bring universal beauty and universal suffering together to “strike and shame the strong” without saying a word. The production of the poem itself exemplifies this, as it proves that the stormy “white silence” of the statue has prompted EBB to think of black as well as white suffering. EBB’s reading of The Greek Slave, then, anticipates the reactions of other artists such as John Tenniel; for his Virginian Slave comes into being only because the stormy “white silence” of Powers’s statue has prompted Tenniel to speak about black suffering in America even when he seemed to have thought The Greek Slave was just about Greek suffering. “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave” thus suggests that the essence of beauty in Powers’s statue is an aesthetic agency illustrated by the poem’s representation of the shadow—that subtle medium that erases the boundary between blackness and whiteness—that
transcends racialized discourses on slavery. Preoccupied with the whiteness of a white American artist’s statue, *Punch* failed to discern *The Greek Slave’s* silent appeal to resist all forms of institutionalized oppression as well as discourses of race that often accompany such oppressions. *Punch*, however, unconsciously heard the “white silence” on the topic of black suffering even though it didn’t seem to realize that was what was happening.

“A Curse for a Nation”: Blackness and Artistic Aridity

Whereas “The Runaway Slave” and “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave” highlight the aesthetic agency of blackness through language of aesthetic performance, “A Curse for a Nation” neither performs nor even alludes to blackness. Exemplifying how “Art’s fiery finger” might “strike and shame the strong,” “A Curse for a Nation” takes on the antislavery agenda of “The Runaway Slave” and “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave” and denounces American slavery through the voice of an angel who calls on the speaker (a female English poet) as a scribe: the speaker, although acutely aware of the various forms of social oppression in her own country, is compelled by the angel to “Write a Nation’s curse” and “send it over the Western Sea” (3-4). The transatlantic scope of the poem that demonstrates EBB’s awareness of the social injustices in both Britain and America enables it to address universal oppression: as Andrew M. Stauffer describes, “A Curse for a Nation” can be regarded as a “chameleon poem” for its drastic reconfiguration of the abolitionist context (32). After its initial appearance in *The Liberty Bell* (1855), where it condemned American slavery, the poem’s reappearance in *Poems Before Congress* (1860)—a volume that denounced England’s unwillingness to support the Italian Risorgimento—led much of the English reading public to understand the object of the poem’s curse as England instead of America. The controversy it generated led some reviewers to criticize the poem as a product of
“diabolical impulses” instead of “an angel’s inspiration” (Stone and Taylor 279-80). Following EBB’s argument in one of her letters that she “cursed neither England nor America” and that her poem “only pointed out how the curse was involved in the action of slave-holding” (qtd. in Stone and Taylor 280), I argue that EBB shows how the agency of the poem to critique slavery and its associated discourses of race can be understood by way of what has been left unsaid: namely, “A Curse for a Nation” challenges universal oppression and racism through its total absence of any reference to blackness—which “The Runaway Slave” and “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave” have associated with aesthetic agency in their different ways. “A Curse for a Nation” nonetheless achieves this goal by selectively drawing on the lyric strategies of the other two poems.

“A Curse for a Nation” is similar to “The Runaway Slave” in that both speakers are drawn into cursing. The speaker of “The Runaway Slave” portrays black slaves as involuntary martyrs who are expected by the whites to “Do good with bleeding” (242) as they suffer in bondage. These martyrs, however, are destined to ruin the whites instead of delivering them (Stone, “Cursing” 163). Considering this prior link between slaves and martyrs, one can reasonably conjecture that the “martyrs” in “A Curse for a Nation” who are strangled by the people who “do the fiend’s work perfectly” may also refer to slaves. Yet unlike the speaker of “The Runaway Slave” who freely curses without scruples, the speaker of “A Curse for a Nation” expresses a deep anxiety about her moral authority to curse. Fully aware of her own nation’s culpability on various moral issues, the speaker positions herself as a mediating agent who curse in obedience to the angel’s exhortations, a passivity emphasized by the repetition of the angel’s command—“This is the curse. Write”—at the end of each stanza. This scrupulous reluctance arising from an English poet’s recognition of various forms of moral injustice in England enables
her to deliver the curse on American slavery (33-36). Despite EBB’s public depiction of her poem as cursing neither Britain nor America, the angel’s confirmation of the inseparability of moral responsibilities of the two countries invites one to read “A Curse for a Nation” as a protest both against British social injustice and against American slavery even before the poem was republished in 1860.33

The speaker’s confession (“bound by gratitude, / By love and blood, / To brothers of mine across the sea” (9-11)) further illustrates the fact that America and Britain—the two major constituents of the Atlantic world (“Western Sea”)—are complicit in their callous apathy toward the oppressed:

Because ye have broken your own chain

With the strain

Of brave men climbing a Nation’s height,

Yet thence bear down with brand and thong

On souls of others,—for this wrong

This is the curse. Write.

Because yourselves are standing straight

In the state

Of Freedom’s foremost acolyte,

Yet keep calm footing all the time

On writhing bond-slaves,—for this crime

This is the curse. Write.
Because ye prosper in God’s name,

With a claim

To honor in the old world’s sight,

Yet do the fiend’s work perfectly

In strangling martyrs,—for this lie

This is the curse. Write. (53-70)

The three reasons that justify the curse against the Americans can likewise be applied without moderation to the English middle-class. Having broken free from British governance, the Americans consider themselves as “Freedom’s foremost acolyte,” but at the same time they have abused their freedom by stubbornly maintaining the brutal institution of slavery. The English middle-class that has rejected aristocratic rule and cherishes its socioeconomic independence is no different from the Americans in its conduct toward the working-class whose wretched living conditions are identical to those of “bond-slaves” (53-64). Additionally, as the Americans “do the fiend’s work perfectly” on their slaves, the English capitalists are equally culpable in their treatment of the colonized subjects around the world whose labor comprises the backbone of Britain’s economy.

In the second section of the poem where the matter of each curse is presented, the cursed are destined to a perpetual impotence, forced to “watch while kings conspire / Round the people’s smouldering fire” (71-72) and will be condemned to helpless silence, unable to exert their moral authority by expressing their indignation at the injustices they see. Even when they witness the “bloodhounds” justly overthrown by the people, their pang of conscience will force
them into silence, unable to openly “favor the cause” (78-84), and the feeling of despair will intensify on hearing the prayers of the “good men” as they realize that they are the object on which “Christ may avenge his elect / And deliver the earth” (92-94). Even when they speak, their speech will be inaudible: the objections they utter on witnessing “strong men draw / The nets of feudal law / To strangle the weak” (85-87) will be a stone hurled back, crippling their conscience and making their soul “sadder within” (89). Likewise, the moment they pride themselves on their “own charters kept true,” the feeling of shame will return, “for the thing which ye do / Derides what ye are” (102-104) and their own “conscience, tradition, and name / Explode with a deadlier blame” (109-110) than the worst of contempt their enemies might display. Taking into account EBB’s belief in the inseparable connection between righteous governance and elimination of social injustice, the involuntary silence of the cursed in the face of national and international injustice will destroy their moral authority and destabilize their national and international hegemony.

Furthermore, in the final stanza of the poem, the last curse dictates, “Go, wherever ill deeds shall be done, / Go, plant your flag in the sun / Beside the ill-doers!” (113-15).

Regardless of the object of the curse, whether the Americans or the British, both “ill-doers” will always be paired on the same ground of sin. The poem illustrates, then, not an English voice denouncing the morally inferior Americans, but an extended critique of tyranny itself following “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave.” That the British public would at a later point perceive the poem as supporting the Italians’ struggle for independence further testifies to the poem’s agency to address issues of oppression beyond national boundaries. It might even be possible to compare the speaker of “A Curse for a Nation” with the marble statue in “The Greek Slave” in that both would at first seem unlikely (or even inappropriate) media to critique slavery and oppression—
the former being a white Englishwoman deeply implicated in her own nation’s sins and the latter featuring a white neoclassical Greek woman. But just as EBB generates critical agency from her reading of Powers’s statue, the angel’s “reading” of the initially resistant speaker that eventually opens her eyes to her moral qualifications also creates critical agency. In this context, the speaker of “A Curse for a Nation” might even be imagined as a poetic voicing of the statue’s sculptural figuration.

But “A Curse for a Nation” differs from “The Runaway Slave” and “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave” in that the poem, even as it attacks American slavery, makes no allusion at all to the blackness that the other two poems advocate as one source of artistic agency. This, I would argue, results from the speaker’s self-conscious recognition of her own implication in the nation’s sins. According to Slinn, the substance of the speaker’s curse is the loss of national agency deriving from the loss of moral authority. To a morally culpable nation that imagines its agency as a sovereign entity, the curse predicts that the nation will acutely feel the loss of that agency as it discovers that it can do nothing but “merely enact the product of its own actions, the moral quiescence that marks its own hypocrisies. Its curse, in other words, is to become the helpless agent for its own degraded morality” (“Barrett Browning and Female Agency” 50). If, as Slinn argues, the curse does forewarn of the loss of agency at the level of moral and political authority, I maintain that the curse could also be understood as envisioning the loss of agency at the level of the aesthetic which the poem’s lack of reference to blackness reflects. For example, “A Curse for a Nation” excludes all the artistic expressions associated with blackness “The Runaway Slave” articulates: all the smiles, the love, the singing, the carving, the dark music of flowing streams and hidden creatures simply do not exist in this poem. Such absence of blackness ultimately shows EBB’s belief that a world without creative darkness of this sort is a
barren world. A world that enslaves people cannot be a world where all people maximize their imaginative and creative potentials. Living in such a world, the speaker of “A Curse for a Nation” is persistently plagued with a guilty conscience and cannot articulate blackness in ways that express artistic beauty reflecting moral responsibility. The absence of blackness in the poem could thus itself be understood as an aesthetic performance that affirms artistic aridity as the inevitable consequence of moral corruption. At the same time, it reveals the speaker’s paradoxical position: because the speaker herself cannot be exempt from the curses she writes, she too is restrained from fully exercising her own artistic creativity. Incapable of functioning as an autonomous agent formulating her own lines through her creative agency, the speaker relegates herself to the role of scribe who must rely on the angel to voice the words of the poem. Such absence of aesthetic agency signified by the absence of blackness in “A Curse for a Nation” thus implicitly affirms blackness as a malleable agent of art instead of as a marker of race.

**Reimagining the Atlantic Matrix: The Aesthetic Cartography of EBB’s Black Atlantic**

EBB’s abolitionist poetry liberates blackness from its bond to the bodies of African slaves and envisions a world free from oppression. Representing blackness as a signifier of moral and aesthetic agency, EBB’s antislavery poems project a new moral cartography of the Atlantic matrix that derives from—but at the same time interrogates—the materialism of the Atlantic world sustained by enforced labor. As I have argued, “The Runaway Slave” exploits fictional license by imbricating the geographical, cultural, and social realities of the West Indies and Britain onto an African slave mother’s experience in America: cocoa-nuts and hurricanes are distinct products of the West Indies, and the speaker’s belief that her mixed-race child will ultimately grow up to be entitled to her master’s privileges (thus making him “white” in her eyes)
was something that could happen in Britain. The aesthetic effect of such geographical and cultural amalgamation is an illustration of the inextricable moral link between Britain, America, and the West Indies that constitute the Atlantic world. The fact that Pilgrim’s Point—a place marking the founding moment of America by British immigrants—should become the destination of the speaker’s impossible journey from the South further demonstrates the inseparable political, social, and economic bond between America and Britain.

The slave’s journey to Pilgrim’s Point, then, should not be read like Austen’s realist novels, but allegorically. It is a time-travel, a return to the founding moment of freedom and pledge to moral integrity. By contrast, the slaveholders’ goal has less to do with securing the slave’s body than with preventing her from reaching Pilgrim’s Point. As the slaveholders pursue the slave to this site of origin, they are at the same time running away from the place, themselves becoming fugitives of their ancestors’ memorable moral history. The speaker’s success in reaching her destination ultimately signals the slaveholders’ moral culpability, and through her curse she pronounces divine judgment upon them. The curse, in turn, again brings Britain into the scene. While the “hunter sons” are deemed as “born of the Washington-race,” the Pilgrims themselves were British, and the ghosts of the Pilgrims who “dare not meet by day” the speaker’s contemptuous gaze and slide into the dark confirm the lingering anxiety that the legacy of oppression which the Pilgrims joyfully imagined they had left behind on the shores of Britain may well have travelled with them across the Atlantic. Pilgrim’s Point, therefore, becomes a symbolic site where an invisible web of moral implications conjoins Britain, America and the West Indies. The exposure of this web by the aesthetics of “The Runaway Slave” delineates the moral contours of the Atlantic matrix, and “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave” and “A Curse for a Nation” expand its boundaries.
While the “divine face” of Powers’s statue that performs the “griefs” of both the east and the west affirms the moral integrity in the newly proposed Atlantic matrix in “The Runaway Slave,” the poem also expands the moral boundaries of this matrix eastward by adding to it the eastern regions represented by the Turkish Empire that traded in white slave women (Stone and Taylor 190). In addition to the moral issues connecting America and Britain in “A Curse for a Nation,” the poem’s adaptability to the Italian Risorgimento introduces Europe into the scene. Despite the Victorians’ attack on the poem as harboring “diabolical impulses” of a disgruntled female poet, “A Curse for a Nation” is indeed a product of “an angel’s inspiration” as it reflects the poet’s sympathy for democratic principles she believed to be universally applicable. As a matter of fact, the lyric speakers of all three poems I have discussed in this chapter advocate democratic principles. The curses inspired by a divine spirit that sanction equality of men before God in “A Curse for a Nation” echo the curses of a black slave mother that invoke divine retribution in “The Runaway Slave” as well as the “thunders of white silence” the speaker of “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave” invokes “[f]rom God’s pure heights of beauty” that will “strike and shame the strong.” Therefore, it becomes possible to see a likeness across the three lyric speakers who unanimously affirm universal principles of freedom in the Atlantic matrix—freedom not only from the institutionalized oppression represented by slavery but also from the racialized and racist discourses that stigmatize blackness as an essential marker of otherness.

Paul Gilroy characterizes the black Atlantic as “The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation” that “can be defined, on one level, through this desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity” (19). EBB’s black Atlantic anticipates Gilroy’s desire to break free from the delimiting forces of racial and national framework: it is an aesthetic space characterized by moral responsibilities that...
functions as a counterdiscourse to the racism and materialism of the corrupt and self-complacent world, and the globalization of its moral boundaries broadens the aesthetic territory beyond its geographical appellation.
Chapter 3

From the Black Sea to the Black Atlantic:  Blackness and Performativity in

*The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*

Current scholarship has it that Mary Jane Grant Seacole wrote *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857) largely in her quest for acceptance by a predominantly white Victorian society. Yet this Jamaican Creole widow of mixed African and European descent would win that acceptance only after she had successfully performed the masculine duties of sutler, hotel manager, and field doctor on the battlefields of Crimea. Thus scholars like Sandra Pouchet Paquet can speak of how Seacole “forces a redefinition of her Creole Jamaican self from a marginalized, redundant, colonial woman of color to the celebrated Mother Seacole—Crimean heroine, and uncompromising purveyor of English values at the margins of Empire” (662).

Nonetheless, although recognized in her lifetime both in Britain and Jamaica, Seacole was quickly forgotten after her death until Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee republished her narrative in 1984. As Jane Robinson observes, it was perhaps the hybridity of Seacole’s identity that affected her speedy and prolonged exit from British and Jamaican memory: “she could never, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, be extolled as a true British heroine: she was too black. And despite the (quiet) pride she had in her homeland and her Afro-Caribbean roots, she couldn’t fully identify or be identified with black Jamaicans: she had become too white” (199). Moreover, despite her lifelong self-representation as English, scholars have often classified Seacole as *black*—and, at times, even *African-American*—though
Seacole described herself as “only a little brown—a few shades duskier than the brunettes whom you [Englishmen] all admire so much” (4). This chapter examines how such conflicting portrayals of Seacole’s racial and cultural identity are anticipated by a performative identity that both draws on and complicates the notion of blackness. As I shall argue, Seacole comes to life in Paul Gilroy’s description of diasporic Africans who “begin as African-Americans or Caribbean people and are then changed into something else which evades those specific labels and with them all fixed notions of nationality and national identity” (19). Mirroring the lives of these diasporic people who “transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity” (Gilroy 19), Wonderful Adventures, I maintain, reveals the author’s performative assertion of identity following her adventures on both sides of the Atlantic: knowing that her Victorian readers will be predisposed to read her mixed-race body as a marker of otherness, Seacole plays with their notion of race in ways that de-essentialize race. In the process, Seacole exposes Englishness as an unstable marker of identity that can be performed by people of different races even as she acknowledges its agency.

Amy Robinson argues that Seacole seeks to exemplify the nature of her unconventional identity performance as exceptional instead of transgressive, and that she refrains from “claiming a large-scale revision of the binary constructs of race and gender which would allow others similarly to offer their services for empire.” In an effort to distinguish her “English” subject position, Seacole purposely “erases her debt to a Caribbean national context” (545-46). Additionally, critics such as Jessica Howell, Jane Robinson, and Sandra Pouchet Paquet regard the primary objective of Seacole’s writing as “self-glorification” (Howell 122), arguing that her narrative is “neither a political statement nor an artistic exercise” but “a glorious advertisement” (Robinson 173). Wonderful Adventures ultimately projects the author as a “public but solitary
figure who has no real continuing connection with family, with Jamaica, or with other women” (Paquet 655). Nonetheless, although Wonderful Adventures is silent about Seacole’s private life, we know she maintained close ties with her Jamaican relatives and friends, who figure as the principal benefactors in her will (J. Robinson 195-97). For that reason, Seacole’s will, as Sandra Gunning points out, acts as an “alternate text” to Wonderful Adventures that “ironically gestures to all the unspoken ties to Jamaica that are deliberately pushed out of the frame of the autobiography” (977). Gunning, however, dismisses the possibility of any conscious challenge on Seacole’s part to the problems of race, class and gender hierarchies of her time. She maintains that Seacole was not really interested in addressing the issues of social inequality triggered by the male-centered project of colonialism, noting, for example, her reluctance to admit her association with women, her criticism of non-British racial others, and her partiality for white and male British patrons (951).

Countering such readings that assume stable national and cultural boundaries between Britain and its West Indian colonies that Seacole allegedly attempted to traverse, Sara Salih’s reading of Wonderful Adventures highlights the exigency of embracing a reading practice that considers different forms of identities—”Imperial, racial, national, social and gendered”—as always “imbricated and implicated in complex ways” and never “discrete and self-contained” (185). Disputing the prevalent view that Seacole “discarded a pre-existing ‘Jamaican’ and/or ‘West Indian’ national identity in order to reconstruct herself as a ‘British’ subject” after settling in England (172), Salih plausibly argues that Seacole did not (re)construct a “British or non-black” identity for herself because she did not necessarily consider British and Creole identities as incompatible (181; 185). Also questioning such views that regard Seacole as having rejected one identity in favor of another, I propose to show how Seacole appropriated the tropes of
motherhood and blackness as well as Englishness to pose a nuanced challenge to the backlash of racism that followed the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies, and, eventually, the Indian rebellion. According to Simon Gikandi, *Wonderful Adventures* reflects Seacole’s feeling of crisis about identity and authority because the narrative voice of a colonial other—even when she is offering a firsthand account of her own life—simply lacks the authority enjoyed by the white English, when writing was the only venue through which she might hope to have her English identity recognized (142). It is possible, then, that Seacole’s emphasis on the socially-confirmed roles she played as “mother” and “doctor” in the Crimea partly reflects her self-conscious awareness of the possibility that her story might not carry the same weight as those written by other white Englishmen and women. As I shall argue, however, what really shows in Seacole’s emphasis on her performance as mother and doctor is less a sense of crisis than a sense of performativity—a confidence in the (in)stability of her identity because identity is performative and has no ontological base. Interpreting Seacole’s appropriation of the Victorian tropes of domesticity and race as performance, I suggest that Seacole, by performing the English mother, purges racial markers of their traditional moral associations by dissociating whiteness from Englishness. By performing the art of hybrid medicine, she reinterprets blackness as a marker of cultural instead of racial heritage.

**The Crimean War as Stage**

From the moment she resolved to serve the British army in the Crimea, Seacole saw the battlefield as a stage for performance where “very humble actors are of great use” (78). After the armistice Seacole toured this military theater one last time before leaving the Crimea, seeking to imprint the scene in her memory. Looking back on a conversation with her friends she writes:
“It was with something like regret that we said to one another that the play was fairly over, that peace had rung the curtain down, and that we, humble actors in some of its most stirring scenes, must seek engagements elsewhere” (197).

Seacole’s representation of the battlefield as a theatrical stage invites us to understand her actions as *performances*, which in turn points to her identity as unfixed and able to shift according to the different “engagements” that each stage required. At the same time, this construction of the Crimean stage decentralizes Britain’s geographical and cultural position as it reflects her view that the centrality of a locale is contingent upon its being a stage of action. In this way even “a little corner” of the world such as the Crimea (73) can warrant the attention of the British public.

As Seacole sees it, her rise to fame in the Crimea comes about through a combination of circumstances. First, there was the notorious incompetence of British authorities whose lack of preparation turned the Crimean battlefield into a scene of crisis. To Seacole, the public outcry over this fiasco opened up new possibilities for involvement and recognition. By this time, Seacole had spent most of the fifty years of her life in Jamaica and various regions in Central America such as Cruces (a town in Panama) where she eventually gained reputation as an able medical practitioner. Already familiar with both Creole herbal medicine and western medicine, which she learned in Jamaica, Seacole accumulated experience in treating various knife and gunshot wounds in Central America after healing the Americans and the Cruces natives who constantly fought each other. Seacole also became an expert on epidemic diseases after battling them in Central America, and even claims that an autopsy she secretly performed on a dead baby enabled her to obtain exclusive knowledge in the treatment of cholera.

Seacole was also an experienced entrepreneur: she had run a store with her husband in
Jamaica and had successfully maintained the first British Hotel in Cruces after her husband’s death. Therefore, even after her request to join Florence Nightingale’s nursing group was rejected, Seacole could still embark for the Crimea on her own terms, with plans to establish a second British Hotel that would eventually become a landmark in the British camp.

Such experiences allowed Seacole to connect her Caribbean world to the Crimean peninsula by making the medical and entrepreneurial knowledge she acquired in one sphere relevant to the other. This juxtaposition reveals the main purpose of Seacole’s detailed account of her Caribbean period: to justify her experiences there as a pre-ordained rehearsal that naturalizes her role in the Crimea as a seasoned performer. Thus the moral and physical trials she voluntarily endured in a West Indies scene plagued by disease and violence enable her to refine her medical and entrepreneurial faculty in such a way as to prepare her for service in the Crimean War, the role she suggests she was born to perform. The West Indies thus becomes a stepping stone that validates her transition to the Crimean peninsula, and readers who initially felt Seacole’s presence in Central America to be justified would be led to accept her presence on the Crimean battlefields as equally necessary. In the Crimea, Seacole battled disease and moral corruption that plagued her British “sons.” In London, she battled mid-Victorian racism by recounting her Crimean adventures with an inherently performative understanding of her own identity. Wonderful Adventures seeks to problematize race through a two-stage performance: first, Seacole disrupts the notion of whiteness as a racial signifier ontologically grounded in skin color by portraying her successful performance of the idealized English mother in the Crimea. Seacole then unsettles conventional notions of blackness by reconfiguring it as a cultural signifier associated with English and Creole medicine.
Unmasking Whiteness: Seacole’s Performance of Motherhood

As reflected by Sarah Stickney Ellis’s argument on women’s education in 1839, the Victorian imagination of ideal English womanhood was embodied in the image of a humble woman “clothed in moral beauty” who watched over the “fireside comforts” of man’s home (1722). Seacole likewise imagines Englishness primarily in terms of domestic comfort and peace deriving from moral order, self-discipline, and organization, and represents her British Hotel as an English refuge for British soldiers in the Crimea. She proudly depicts the British Hotel as a site that evokes memories of the English home, a “lieu de mémoire” (Baucom 18): it is a place where (English) “comfort and order were always to be found” in the midst of the “confusion and disorder” that existed “elsewhere,” created not only by Russian bullets and shells, but also by “[m]ismanagement and privation” by the incompetent British authorities (113).

Moreover, Seacole suggests that the British Hotel not only materialized “comfort and order” by providing homesick soldiers with otherwise unobtainable comforts that evoked the memories of home, but also protected them from moral corruption (145). By prohibiting disruptive conduct such as excessive drinking and gambling, Seacole calls the readers’ attention to the morality of her hotel whose comforts were widely appreciated by the British soldiers as “some few gleams” from the “sun” (113). Seacole’s rules were voluntarily kept by her patrons, as shown by the fact that an officer who served as her “Provost-marshal” had little work to do (145). The British Hotel differed from other mercantile establishments in the area because it satisfied both the material and moral needs of the soldiers.

Seacole’s concern for the physical and moral safety of her soldier “sons” establishes her authority as that of a matriarch of a sanctuary. As a wise Christian mother, Seacole can foresee vices that will entice and ruin her sons, vices promoted by neighboring establishments run by
questionable characters like the “bad Frenchwoman” that will drive Seacole’s rage “to an unwonted pitch” (162). Thus she implies that it was her righteous anger against immoral public houses that induced God to destroy “the worst of these places” with “Fire” (162), representing her work as sanctioned by God and perhaps comparable to that of a missionary. While such representation reflects Seacole’s confidence in the agency of her performance, it also suggests her keen understanding of Victorians’ preoccupation with motherhood as “one of the primary defining structures of empire” (Mercer 12).

The British Hotel also functioned as a private hospital. Seacole’s medical skills and the nourishment she offered (both unattainable in the army hospitals) made wounded soldiers flock to her hotel for treatment. Stating how many soldiers from the ranks “had a very serious objection to going into hospital for any but urgent reasons” (125), Seacole represents the British Hotel as the ultimate site of moral and physical healing. A place that offered the best of everything—both materially and spiritually—the hotel was “acknowledged by all to be the most complete thing” in the British camp (113).

Moreover, Seacole constructed the British Hotel as a place of resistance. Although she doesn’t explain why she christened the site on which she built her hotel “Spring Hill,” it is possible that she named it after Spring Hill near Kingston, her hometown in Jamaica. Even after slaves were emancipated in the British West Indies, white Jamaican planters sought to exploit black labor by imposing excessive rent for housing and land use (or, in some cases, refusing to rent out at all) and also tried to force black women and children to work against their will. A violent conflict broke out when the ex-slaves at Spring Hill resisted such encroachment by the white planters, and Spring Hill became one of the representative sites of white moral depravity and black resistance (Hall 121-22). Recounting her experience with blacks who had
settled in New Granada Republic after escaping from slavery in the U.S., Seacole praises them as “generally superior men.” Here she identifies the American ex-slaves’ aversion to (white) oppression as evidence of their superior nature and approves their hostility towards slaveholding Americans (50-51). On her own account, Seacole too had taken part in persuading an American slave to abandon her mistress temporarily residing in Panama. Therefore, if Seacole did not fail to observe in the well-known Spring Hill conflict the spirit of resistance that blacks had demonstrated against unjust oppression by their former masters—a spirit she endorsed in her account of the blacks in New Granada—it may have been that she intended to express her determination to defy any adversity that might come her way in a foreign land beset with war. At the same time, shrewd awareness of the negative effect an open endorsement of black resistance might have had on her mid-Victorian readers may account for Seacole’s decision to remain silent on the subject of names.

Furthermore, by taking on a name that evoked racial conflict and turning it into a marker of racial harmony, Seacole converts a story of labor-exploitation and resistance into a story of performative identity. Seacole’s impulse to represent an exclusively “English” establishment (the British Hotel) on a “Jamaican” site (Spring Hill) may reflect her desire to create a space that unsettles traditional norms of race and gender. Unlike Spring Hill in Jamaica, Spring Hill in the Crimea was a place where nonwhite women like herself and her young maid could make a decent living through their own labor. While in Jamaica Seacole would have been slandered and abused by racist white men, here white men openly expressed their appreciation of her service and protected her. Whereas the Jamaican Spring Hill was known as a representative place of labor extortion that threatened to disintegrate families, Seacole’s Spring Hill weaved an alternate form of interracial kinship. Seacole thus demonstrates how a name that once seemed
inflexibly bound to a specific historical and geographical memory can be radically redefined in a different sociopolitical context. What ultimately emerges from the assumption of names, then, is a triumphant assertion of performative identity.

Such belief in the performative nature of identity enables Seacole to further characterize the British Hotel as a site that resists conventional conceptions of race. By performing the English mother, Seacole complicates the notion of the very identity she assumes. Her performance of the English mother turns a woman of color into the mother of largely white sons, anticipating Judith Butler’s discussion of the “reformulation of kinship” pertaining to “the redefining of ‘house’ and its forms of collectivity, mothering, mopping, reading, and becoming legendary” through which “the appropriation and redeployment of the categories of dominant culture enable the formation of kinship relations that function quite supportively as oppositional discourse” (Butler 240-41). E. Patrick Johnson uses Butler’s idea to articulate black gay men’s transgressive performance of sexuality in ways that both appropriate and reinterpret the normative family. As Johnson’s black gay men “refigure ‘mother’ as a complex mix of fierce gender-bending love and protection” (102), Seacole reinterprets mother as a race-bending protector of English values as well as English lives. In other words, whereas many scholars have regarded Seacole’s assumption of English motherhood as a discursive transformation of a nonwhite Creole woman into a “white” Englishwoman, Seacole also separates whiteness from Englishness and Britishness. Seacole thus makes patriotic national identity and the domestic characteristics that comprise English motherhood into traits accessible to both whites and nonwhites. Moreover, her appropriation of English motherhood reveals the British Hotel as a paradoxical site that both affirms and transgresses Englishness—a space where Seacole enjoys the influence of her transgressive performance as her “sons” acknowledge her motherhood.
Also, considering that she had learned her hotel management know-how from her Creole mother, from the moment she decides to “open an hotel for invalids in the Crimea in my own way” (80; emphasis added), the British Hotel is destined to become a culturally hybrid Jamaican style boardinghouse. Seacole’s account of the soldiers’ praise of the British Hotel as “the most complete thing” among all the establishments of the neighborhood attests to the impossibility of understanding Englishness in terms of race.

Seacole’s performance of English motherhood at the British Hotel on Spring Hill points to how cultural implications of a geographical space can be transformed through transatlantic displacement: as the Jamaican boardinghouse that is a product of British involvement in the transnational system Paul Gilroy has called the black Atlantic is reproduced in the Crimea, Englishness is deracialized. This provides Seacole with the leverage to complicate Victorian racism as well as to open up alternate possibilities of configuring blackness.

**Contesting Race: Blackness and the Performativity of Identity**

According to David Lambert, the Victorians conceived the term “Creole” as highlighting both the non-whiteness of the West Indian native and the un-Englishness of West Indian white settlers (35-40). Affirming the Victorian notion of white Creoles as “degenerate products of the (English) species” (29), Carolyn Berman further points to the Victorian preoccupation with “techniques of social discrimination” concerned with understanding the supposedly essential “relationship between visible [and subtly visible] characteristics [of a person] and invisible properties” that would enable one to identify the other even when the other looked racially white (31). While Seacole’s description of her mixed-race body—“I have a few shades of deeper brown upon my skin which shows me related—and I am proud of the relationship—to those poor
mortals whom you once held enslaved” (14)—marks an awareness of her inevitable otherness in the Victorian imagination, the pride she takes in her racial heritage initially rejects any racist attempt to read her skin color as a marker of a negative set of “invisible properties” ascribed to the other.

But writing *Wonderful Adventures* in the mid-1850s in London, Seacole would have been acutely conscious of racism in the middle-class public that would provide her primary readership. Contrary to what some critics have suggested, lack of overt support for racial equality and a careful distancing from antislavery debates in *Wonderful Adventures* reflect Seacole’s savvy negotiation of her uneasy position as a mixed-race Creole widow in a predominantly racist society. As I shall argue, Seacole tactically performs her belief in racial equality through a deliberately “racist” attitude toward the Spaniards and Greeks she encounters in Central America and the Crimea. While her desire to be loved and accepted by the Victorians was undoubtedly deep, it seems clear she felt an equally deep antagonism to racism. As Seacole could not have afforded to jeopardize her career by openly challenging British racism in 1857, we can surmise she published *Wonderful Adventures* to fulfill a double objective: to be recognized as an Englishwoman while making a subtle foray into Victorian social debates on race represented by the famous exchange between Carlyle and Mill.

Critics such as Bernard Mckenna have viewed Seacole’s flagrantly negative portrayals of racial others as a strategic maneuver on her part to identify with her British readers by distancing herself from those she criticized (225). That Seacole remains silent on her daily interactions with nonwhite associates seems to corroborate such opinion. Seacole is especially critical of the natives in Cruces whom she brands as cowardly, ignorant, and unable to help themselves (26-27). In the Crimea, she condemns the French Zuave soldiers and the Greek and
Turkish indigenes as morally depraved while classifying their intellectual capacities. Furthermore, although Seacole established the first British Hotel in Cruces and also healed natives when the area was plagued with epidemic disease, she does not tell her readers what close relationships she might have formed with natives, though she seems eager to offer a detailed description of her life in the company of the British. These all seem to portray Seacole as wanting to break free from her “blackness.”

What Seacole wants to break free from, however, is not blackness but the conventional notion of blackness as an ontological essence. Paradoxical though it may seem, her negative portrayals of racial others evidence her belief in race as having no essential value in itself. *Wonderful Adventures* shows that among the various people Seacole encounters, the two ethnic groups she derides the most are the “Spaniards” in Cruces and the Greeks in the Crimea. It should be noted, however, that both Spanish and Greeks were by Victorian conventions racially white. Mill, for example, fully acknowledges the whiteness of the former in “The Negro Question”: “In what is black Haiti worse than white Mexico? If the truth were known, how much worse is it than white Spain?” (45). While it is rather unclear whether Mill’s reference to “white Mexico” includes the darker-skinned indigenous people as well as its ruling-class Spaniards, Seacole erases the distinction between Spanish-speaking indigenes of Cruces and the Spanish who rule them by referring to both as Spaniards. Additionally, she describes the Americans as impulsive and foolhardy racists who were the primary source of turmoil in Cruces. While her depiction of these people counterpoints her English subject position, it also shows how for Seacole moral and cultural agencies bear no real association with race.

As mentioned, Seacole’s attitude towards the New Granada blacks on the other hand is visibly positive. Unlike many Jamaican Creoles who despised the African-born blacks on the
island (Hall 78), Seacole openly commends the blacks in New Granada as a talented group of people most qualified to govern the fledgling nation (50-51). Such acclamation is entirely based on character and deeds instead of skin color. The New Granada blacks are superior to the Spaniards because they proved their manhood by refusing to submit to unjust oppression by white Americans and willingly risked their lives to achieve freedom. And the fact that these ex-slaves refused to let themselves be intimidated by their former oppressors further shows that their actions are informed by a strong sense of justice.

There are, however, blacks who are different. The incompetent “coarse black priest in a black surplice” in Cruces, for example, is utterly incapable of fulfilling his duty to offer guidance to the suffering people, and Seacole vents her exasperation at this “stupid priest” whose only way of helping a dying woman is to pray in vain “to some favourite saint in Cruces” (33). In the Crimea, Seacole is again frustrated when her black cook Francis falls victim to superstition after being bitten by rats. Like the natives of Cruces, Francis cannot help himself at a time of crisis except to react “in a violent passion”—as the Cruces indigents supplicated their saint-idiols with “passionate prayers and cries” (26)—and cries out that the rats were bewitched by the spirits of dead Russian soldiers. Seacole, by contrast, immediately takes realistic measures by securing a cat. Disgusted by the spiritual stupor of the “silly fellow,” Seacole farcically describes the black cook whose “rolling” eyes and “gleaming” teeth are as useless as those of vermin. Furthermore, by describing his hair as “wool,” Seacole compares Francis with the “live sheep” that are just as helpless from rat assaults (115-16).

Yet Seacole’s derogatory depictions of the black priest and cook, instead of indicating race-based antagonism, suggest that competence and incompetence are not possessed by any race inherently—just as there are noble blacks like the ex-slaves of New Granada who resist adversity
to their favor and self-improvement, so there are ignoble ones like the Cruces priest and Francis who are reactionary and helpless. To Seacole, it is only natural that every society—white and nonwhite—should have its share of worthy and unworthy members. Belief in the superiority of the white race is therefore a false notion, as she sees no intrinsic connection between character and skin color. In this way, Seacole’s criticism of the black priest and the cook can be read as a critique directed at the very racism she has often been accused of having exhibited against the people of color she encountered. Thus the repeated criticism of certain members of various racial groups in Wonderful Adventures is itself a discursive performance articulating the author’s belief that one’s character and abilities are molded by cultural environment rather than biological factors.

Elsewhere Seacole offers a self-reflexive demonstration of the emptiness of racial performance by representing herself as involuntary anti-heroine of a racialized farce when a trip to the camp of French allies ends in humiliation. Having discovered that the sick grey mare she was obliged to ride was covered with blotches, Seacole makes a bungling attempt to cover them with flour:

Could I not conceal the poor mare’s worst blemishes. Her colour was grey; would not a thick coating of flour from my dredger make all right? There was no time to be lost; the remedy was administered successfully, and off I started; but, alas! the wind was high and swept the skirts of my riding habit so determinedly against the side of the poor beast, that before long its false coat was transferred to the dark cloth, and my innocent ruse exposed. The French are proverbially and really a polite and considerate nation, but I never heard
more hearty peals of laughter from any sides than those which conveyed to me the horrible assurance that my scheme had unhappily failed. (123-24)

Here Seacole’s seemingly “innocent ruse” of whitening her mare may well have been purposely inserted in her narrative for a double purpose. The moment in which the white “false coat” of Seacole’s mare is smeared onto the “dark cloth” of her own skirt conjoins horse and rider—the skin colors of both being a mix of black and white in their respective categories—as performers of whiteness destined to humiliating failure before their French audience. Yet one might ask what would have induced Seacole, with all her sensitive self-esteem, to include this self-deprecating anecdote at the expense of her own dignity. Angelia Poon sees Seacole’s presentation of the incident as an “open joke” that encourages her readers to believe in the innocuousness of her “masquerade as an English subject” (513). I would, however, argue that the episode offers a counterdiscourse to any skeptical opinion that might dismiss her multilayered identity performances throughout the narrative as harmless “masquerade.” Seacole’s decision to recount the story of her own humiliation is an introspective take on the ridiculousness of racial performance as well as an attempt to convert a burlesque performance of race into a burlesque performance on race: like the artificial whitening of a grey mare, the performance of race cannot qualify as a legitimate expression of identity, just as race itself is an invalid marker of identity. Therefore, if race cannot signify Englishness (which is itself an amorphous concept), nonwhite people like Seacole can legitimately become “English” through cultural performance without having it dismissed as masquerade. At the same time, Seacole’s
failed racial masquerade may also act as a critique of contemporary racial performances like the American minstrel shows.

That said, we can now come back to the opening of Wonderful Adventures, which has often been read as Seacole’s unabashed embrace of white Englishness, but which should instead be read as problematizing race:

I am a Creole, and have good Scotch blood coursing in my veins. My father was a soldier, of an old Scotch family; and to him I often trace my affection for a camp-life, and my sympathy with what I have heard my friends call “the pomp, pride, and circumstance of glorious war.” Many people have also traced to my Scotch blood that energy and activity which are not always found in the Creole race, and which have carried me to so many varied scenes; and perhaps they are right. I have often heard the term “lazy Creole” applied to my country people; but I am sure I do not know what it is to be indolent. All my life long I have followed the impulse which led me to be up and doing; and so far from resting idle anywhere, I have never wanted inclination to rove, nor will powerful enough to find a way to carry out my wishes. That these qualities have led me into many countries, and brought me into some strange and amusing adventures, the reader, if he or she has the patience to get through this book, will see. Some people, indeed, have called me quite a female Ulysses. I believe that they intended it as a compliment; but from my experience of the Greeks, I do not consider it a very flattering one. (1-2)
Despite the apparent acknowledgement of a link between character and ethnicity, what’s at issue here is not the same brand of racism Seacole criticizes when she expresses distaste at being called a “female Ulysses.” Her reaction, instead, is deliberately ironical—it hurls the notion of white superiority symbolized by the figure of the white Greek hero back to its source: there are lazy Creoles, for sure, but then there are lazy and immoral Greeks, not to mention good-for-nothing “white” Spaniards, Americans and incompetent English bureaucrats. In addition, while Seacole seems to stress her father’s whiteness in her hybrid racial features, it is actually the “soldier” in her father to which Seacole attributes her affinity for travel that eventually led her to the Crimea. Seacole’s assertion that her “Scotch blood” may be the source of a vigor “not always found in the Creole race” does not indicate a desire to distance herself from—and thus acknowledge—the general Creole laziness. Instead, as Lorraine Mercer suggests, Seacole’s statement “I am sure I do not know what it is to be indolent” refutes the racism that brands the Creoles as indolent as it “not only describes her individual worth, but also the worth of ‘my country people’” (9), including her Creole mother to whom she owes her diligence. In this context, rejection of a white mythical hero not only testifies to Seacole’s indifference to attaining a racially white ethos, but also to her conviction that whiteness is impossible because it is—in its association with Ulysses—a myth.

Seacole perhaps most effectively exposes the mid-Victorian myths of race and demonstrates the performativity of identity by performing blackness—by making her readers realize that the signs of blackness in her Creole appearance, instead of evoking negative resonances of Africa and slavery, signal the resources of a unique knowledge of the healing arts:
My mother kept a boardinghouse in Kingston, and was, like very many of the Creole women, an admirable doctress; [. . .] It was very natural that I should inherit her tastes; and so I had from early youth a yearning for medical knowledge and practice which has never deserted me. When I was a very young child I was taken by an old lady, [. . .] I was so spoiled by my kind patroness that, but for being frequently with my mother, I might very likely have grown up idle and useless. But I saw so much of her, and of her patients, that the ambition to become a doctress early took firm root in my mind; (2)

Seacole views her affinity for medicine as inherited from her mixed-race mother rather than her white father. Explaining how both the patroness who spoiled her and the mother who prevented her from becoming “idle and useless” and shaped the foundation of her career as an able doctress were, in fact, Creoles, Seacole locates the agency of her “usefulness”—a key concept of the Victorian middle-class mores—\(^50\) in a distinctly “un-white” Creole culture. At the same time, she carefully avoids making any essentialist connections by tracing her passion for medicine to her cultural upbringing as opposed to any hereditary disposition rooted in her “black” blood. Specifically, it was her frequent observation of her mother’s performance of medical duties that drew her toward medicine.\(^51\) If her desire to become a doctress was formed in these circumstances, what distinguished Seacole from other Creole women who, like her mother and herself, were skilled herbalists, was her determination to learn both Creole and western medicine\(^52\) and use this knowledge to construct a uniquely hybrid “English” identity on both sides of the Atlantic.

Therefore, when Cruces residents referred to Seacole as “the yellow woman from
Jamaica with the cholera medicine” (27), she can argue that her “yellow” face became a marker for a life-saving hybrid style of medicine that saved Cruces from the epidemic. Moreover, Seacole demonstrates that whereas her skin color is a mere biological trait that does not condition her character or ability, it may nonetheless be “performed” to reflect a particular cultural agency. As Seacole thus represents herself as the guardian of Cruces—characterized by the “blackness” of her Creole face—comparable to the British who preserve social order in the area (41-42)—she then also illustrates the performativity of blackness. Seacole performs the same brand of blackness in the Crimea when she suggests her hybrid medical skills make her indispensable to the British soldiers, especially men of the rank and file who preferred to be treated by her rather than by their professional army doctors. Seacole presents this as a natural consequence, suggesting that the effectiveness of her medical skills could not be equaled by even the best English army doctors, as her former patient from the “Army Works Corps” can verify: “I also certify that my fingers were severely jammed whilst at work at Frenchman’s Hill, and Mrs. Seacole cured me after three doctors had fruitlessly attempted to cure them” (130-31).

By performing this distinctive form of “usefulness” that served the British Empire well during a critical moment in its military and imperial history, Seacole makes her readers aware that the unprotected, nonwhite Creole widow who speaks to them is no less “English” than they are. At the same time, she shows that blackness is a malleable cultural signifier displayed in various performances instead of a racial marker prescribing the characteristics of certain nonwhite people. But even as Seacole calls readers’ attention to the profound effect cultural environment has on the formulation of character, she carefully suggests that identity is neither an issue of ontological essence nor even cultural upbringing but of performance: as she herself has demonstrated, while cultural upbringing will indeed influence desire, disposition, and ability,
identity is always manifested differently through a performative interplay between all of these factors in key moments and/or circumstances. By articulating the performativity of blackness, Seacole thus emphasizes the performative nature of identity.

**Politics and Narrative**

Behind its seeming indifference to social issues, Seacole’s move to see identity as performative calls, then, for a reading of *Wonderful Adventures* as a strategically formulated narrative designed to influence public opinion on race in mid-Victorian Britain. First, the narrative’s attribution of character to environment rather than genes evokes the well-known exchange between Carlyle and Mill (respectively titled “Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question” and “The Negro Question”) concerning the newly emancipated Jamaican blacks during the years 1849-1853, just before Seacole left for the Crimea. Adducing cultural upbringing as the decisive factor in shaping a person, Mill vehemently denounces Carlyle’s racial absolutism that stigmatized blacks as essentially inferior (46-47). While we do not know how familiar Seacole might have been with this famous debate, *Wonderful Adventures* at least parallels the key arguments presented by Mill. Seacole’s emphasis on her self-sacrificial service during the Crimean War guided by a selfless motherly love mirrors Mill’s argument on the value of service and a will to serve as opposed to Carlyle’s notion of work as virtue in itself (43). From Mill’s point of view, Seacole’s effort to alleviate the sufferings of British soldiers through medical and material support would qualify her work as the worthiest object.

Furthermore, the story of Seacole’s own life and that of the New Granada blacks she describes disprove Carlyle’s notion of the lazy and useless “Quashee.” The narrative of this Jamaican Creole “Englishwoman” thus productively engages the renowned correspondence between two
eminent English minds of the time.

At the same time, *Wonderful Adventures* suggests that Seacole’s concept of identity was not confined to the Victorian liberalist notion of identity as it shifts the whole basis of definition from the ontological to the performative. As Gikandi argues, Seacole’s tenuous position as a colonial subject obliged her to stage and claim her English identity by demonstrating her “mastery of the codes and conventions of Englishness” (139-40). This, in turn, would eventually force Seacole into a “cultural cul-de-sac” where she “cannot speak or exist except in the terms established by the *imperium,*” a position in which Seacole must continually speak to assert her existence but can only speak the language of British colonial culture at the very moment she challenges it (142; emphasis original). Seacole certainly does speak the language of the empire when she acknowledges the agency of Englishness by performing the English mother, but when she does so, she also reveals its performative nature and upsets the empire’s fundamental assumptions about race. By performing blackness, Seacole emphatically defines identity as performative— influenced by but not ontologically bound to geographical and cultural environments. *Wonderful Adventures* is thus itself a performative text on performativity that appropriates and rethinks the contemporary myth of identity.
Chapter 4

“The fire that lights those big black eyes of his is not an easy fire”:
(Ir)rationalizing Blackness in Armadale, Miss or Mrs?, and The Guilty River

Few authors have brought more mixed-race characters into the spotlight of the Victorian literary tradition than Wilkie Collins. As Audrey Fisch points out, Collins’s works “provide an unexpected and underexamined exception to the representation of black and mixed-race people in Victorian England” (313). Critics, however, have varied in their interpretations of Collins’s nonwhite characters. In her analysis of Armadale, The Moonstone, and The New Magdalen, Lillian Nayder suggests that these works express Collins’s feelings of guilt regarding Britain’s history of transatlantic slavery as well as his anxiety over a “reverse colonization of England by the Creoles and Hindus who invade the home country and threaten to colonize it” (Wilkie Collins 101). Nayder argues that Armadale’s representations of its white and mixed-race heroes Allan Armadale and Ozias Midwinter suggest that Collins imagined reversing such reverse colonization through the union of white Englishmen and their black subjects, albeit by displacing issues of race with those of gender—by pitting white and nonwhite men against the threat of legally and sexually independent Englishwomen like Lydia Gwilt (Wilkie Collins 100-132). Timothy Carens, however, suggests that Collins did not fear such reverse colonization because he believed that the “irrational and diabolic forces” which the English had conventionally attributed to racial others were actually traits of the English themselves. By identifying the English as the real possessors of “outlandish” desires, Collins unsettles the “antithetical constructions” the English had created to justify their superiority over the people they colonized.
Focusing on Collins’s preoccupation with “the relationship between Great Britain and the racialized world that lies beyond her shores,” Gabrielle Ceraldi argues that Collins’s representations of foreigners like Professor Pesca and Count Fosco in *The Woman in White* reflect Collins’s notion of foreigners as “invariably stronger and more virile than their pallid English counterparts.” According to Ceraldi, Collins dismissed Victorians’ smug belief in themselves as occupying the top end of the evolutionary ladder (a belief ostensibly exhibited through the Great Exhibition), and believed that such complacency actually kept Britain from “the very ‘struggle for existence’ that would guarantee its future development.” As his works after *The Woman in White* would show, Collins believed that Britain’s imperialist ventures would save Britain from stagnation (173-76).

While these arguments suggest that Collins was concerned about the possible deterioration of the British Empire caused by contact with its foreign subjects and the moral corruption they represented, critics such as Caroline Reitz and Audrey Fisch see Collins as more confident in future race-relations that would not threaten the stability of the empire even though he had guilty feelings about Britain’s history of colonial slavery. In her essay titled “Colonial ‘Gwilt’: In and Around Wilkie Collins’s *Armadale*,” Reitz uses the novel’s anti-heroine Lydia Gwilt’s last name to highlight Collins’s belief that the “cultural logic emerging in and around Collins’s novel is not characterized by guilt about the cost of progress so much as Gwilt—a word which suggests a state of being not quite guilty or, to be precise, of guilt mitigated by necessity,” just as Collins represents Lydia Gwilt as a villainess who “is also undeniably sympathetic” (94-95). To Collins, Reitz argues, Britain was “not quite guilty” of its imperial history because its destiny, like the destinies of Allan and Midwinter, was divinely sanctioned (94). As Allan and Midwinter represent the conditions of a traditional and shifting England respectively (98), the
“national resolution represented by the coming together of the two Armadales must happen because it is necessary” (99). As Rev. Decimus Brock’s view that God has designated Midwinter to save Allan instead of harming him ultimately prevails, Armadale suggests that “English civilization is both inevitable and divinely required” (100), and that Britain’s history of Atlantic slavery will not only cease to haunt the motherland but will also strengthen it as Britain learns from its “colonial mistakes” (101).

While Reitz suggests that Armadale acknowledges the inevitable intermixing between white English rulers and their nonwhite colonial subjects, she also suggests that the novel nonetheless anticipates that this new generation of Englishmen will be armed with the appropriate “local knowledge” of the colonized region they rule that will keep the empire from repeating past errors and guide it to prosperity. By contrast, Fisch focuses on Collins’s interest in the role Britain’s nonwhite subjects might play to sustain the empire by restoring “white” English morality. Fisch argues that while Collins saw mixed-race and black colonial subjects as natural outcomes of British colonialism and their integration into English society as inevitable, such integration would not only be innocuous to English stability but even beneficial. This is because Collins believed that the mixed-race subjects would either assimilate peacefully (as in Miss or Mrs.? and Black and White) into English society, or take on the moral burdens of pathological white and masculine English identity (as in Armadale and The Guilty River) deriving from British slavery. Therefore, if Reitz’s argument on Collins’s confidence in white Englishmen armed with adequate local knowledge marginalizes black and mixed-race people, Fisch articulates Collins’s belief in the roles nonwhite people could play to serve the empire. However, Fisch seems to regard Collins’s sympathetic view of Britain’s nonwhite subjects as having been conditional—that their assimilation into English society would only be appreciated
upon their fulfilling their proper role as scapegoats for English sins. Furthermore, by synchronically juxtaposing two sets of diachronic texts—Black and White (1869) and Miss or Mrs? (1871) / Armadale (1866) and The Guilty River (1886)—to demonstrate the first set as reflecting Collins’s belief in blacks’ peaceful integration into English society and the second set as articulating the necessity of black sacrifice, Fisch assumes that Collins’s thoughts on English race relations remained largely unchanged.

In this chapter, however, I analyze Armadale, Miss or Mrs? and The Guilty River to demonstrate that Collins neither regarded black and mixed-race people as potentially dangerous nor as self-sacrificing agents to consolidate the moral and political stability of the British Empire. Instead, I argue that Collins strategically uses his mixed-race protagonists to counter the racial binarism of the 1860s.\textsuperscript{54} In Armadale, Englishmen depreciate Ozias Midwinter’s blackness as a marker of the man’s “savage” and “heathen” otherness. However, Midwinter’s blackness ultimately comes to signify sympathy—the moral core of Englishness which Collins suggests has become obsolete in mid-Victorian society. Yet if Collins represents blackness as a signifier of English moral agency in Armadale, the belief he expresses in the agency of blackness to initiate social change diminishes in Miss or Mrs? and The Guilty River. While Miss or Mrs? continues to represent blackness as positively English, the novella reflects Collins’s growing frustration that the kind of binaristic thinking he has challenged in Armadale continues to thrive in English society. The Guilty River further illustrates this disheartening reality by showing how even the mixed-race subject, who, as represented by the deaf Lodger, is by now fully assimilated into mainstream English society, has ended up internalizing the very binarism that vindicates racism. But through its representations of the Lodger’s demise and the transfiguration of the woods and the unsightly river that make the primary stage of the story, The Guilty River once again
disavows binary thinking and suggests that beauty materializes through the *erasure* of boundaries. This attests to Collins’s belief in the essential contribution of black and mixed-race people in the making of the English social landscape as well as their indispensability in English society. Moreover, through its depictions of the ever-changing hues of the wood and river, the novella suggests that Britain, like any other nation, “derives a splendor not its own” (314). By doing so, Collins reconfigures English identity as a comprehensive manifestation of an unceasing intermixing of different peoples instead of a normative and fixed trait.

**Armadale: Deracializing Blackness**

When Lydia Gwilt visits Dr. Downward (a former abortionist who has by this time changed his name to LeDoux to evade exposure) at his newly established London sanatorium to discuss how she might deal with Allan Armadale who managed to survive the death-trap she had laid for him in Italy, Dr. Downward suggests poison as the solution to silence the man whose widow Lydia has been impersonating:

“Do you see that bottle,” he said—”that plump, round, comfortable-looking bottle? Never mind the name of what is beside it; let us stick to the bottle, and distinguish it, if you like, by giving it a name of our own. Suppose we call it ‘our Stout Friend’? Very good. Our Stout Friend, by himself, is a most harmless and useful medicine. [. . .] But bring him into contact with something else—introduce him to the acquaintance of a certain common mineral substance, of a universally accessible kind, broken into fragments; [. . .] and let Samson himself be in that closed chamber; our stout Friend will kill him in half an hour! (642)
This brief lecture on the law of chemistry enlightens readers to the fact that a matter can become poison or medicine depending on how it mixes with other materials, which in turn suggests the impossibility of placing fixed values on earthly matters. Moreover, by personifying the chemical matter as “our Stout Friend,” the novel suggests that it is equally erroneous to place fixed (moral) values on people: like “our Stout Friend,” a person can also become poison or medicine to other people on different occasions. Such a view shows up in Lydia Gwilt’s parting words to her half-poisoned husband Ozias Midwinter, who saves his friend Allan from his wife’s poison gas by switching rooms with him: “Still, I had some innocent moments, and then I loved you dearly. Forget me, my darling, in the love of a better woman than I am. I might, perhaps, have been that better woman myself, if I had not lived a miserable life before you met with me. […] The one atonement I can make for all the wrong I have done you is the atonement of my death. It is not hard for me to die, now I know you will live. Even my wickedness has one merit—it has not prospered. I have never been a happy woman” (665-66).

Lydia’s belief that society would have evaluated her differently had she lived a different and happier life is ironically sanctioned by Pedgift Sr.’s hearty praise of her as possessing the ideal qualifications of a first-class lawyer: “What a lawyer she would have made,” he exclaimed, fervently, “if she had only been a man!” (363). Pedgift’s admiration of Lydia’s shrewdness and her ability to improvise under extreme pressure shows that while English society would condemn these qualities as “poison” in a woman (both to the society and to the woman herself), it would regard them as virtue in a man. But even as Armadale seems to affirm this view by having Lydia become the victim of her own poison plot, poison actually becomes the means to Lydia’s moral redemption as it enables her to atone for her past deeds, and “lit her whole countenance as
with an inner light, and made her womanly and lovely once more” (665). The novel, then, suggests that identity is but a manifestation of a person’s collective experience subject to change under different circumstances.

Indeed, *Armadale* demonstrates a complicated shift of identities by presenting five characters sharing the name “Allan Armadale”: a wealthy Englishman who is an absentee owner of the largest estate in Barbados and his disinherited son who adopts the pseudonym of “Fergus Ingleby”; the wealthy Englishman’s nephew Allan Wrentmore who legally assumes his uncle’s family name in compliance with the terms set by his uncle to inherit his West Indian property in place of Ingleby; Allan Wrentmore’s Creole son who adopts the pseudonym of “Ozias Midwinter,” and finally, Ingleby’s posthumous son “Allan.” On discovering that his cousin Wrentmore has dispossessed him, Ingleby crosses the Atlantic to seek his revenge, an uncertain objective that is unexpectedly facilitated by Wrentmore’s blind attachment to him. Upon learning of Wrentmore’s passion for Jane Blanchard (the daughter of Mrs. Wrentmore’s former lover Stephen Blanchard), Ingleby, impersonating Wrentmore, visits the Blanchards in Madeira after Wrentmore falls victim to poisoning by an unknown assailant. By the time Wrentmore becomes fit enough to travel to Madeira, Ingleby and Jane Blanchard are already married, and the couple elopes in a French timber ship named *La Grace de Dieu*. Wrentmore covertly joins Mr. Blanchard’s chase after the runaway couple by disguising himself as a sailor on Mr. Blanchard’s yacht, and when the timber ship is discovered crippled after a storm, Wrentmore boards the ship with the crew and locks Ingleby in a cabin to drown during the confusion of the rescue mission. On his deathbed, the paralyzed Wrentmore is obliged to leave the details of his murder in writing to two strangers—a Scottish lawyer named Neal and a German doctor—to warn his son Midwinter after discovering that Ingleby had left a posthumous
son whom he believes will most likely seek to avenge his father’s death. Wrentmore’s plan to keep the secret of his murder from his wife (a mixed-race Creole from Trinidad) backfires, however, as she eavesdrops outside the door.

While Wrentmore’s fear that Midwinter might be harmed unawares by Ingleby’s revengeful son compels him to confess his crime in writing, his failure to keep the secret of his deeds from his Creole wife alludes to the impossibility of concealing the details of British slavery in the West Indies: the conflict between Wrentmore and Ingleby begins with the inheritance of the largest slave estate in Barbados and moves on to the possession of Jane Blanchard’s body. Moreover, as Neal and Midwinter’s mother (who marry each other after Wrentmore’s death) express their morbid fear of the unavoidable revelation of Wrentmore’s crime to his son, whom they believe to have inherited the murderous passion of his dead father, by whipping and starving him like a slave, the couple end up reproducing the violence associated with the past they have been struggling to forget. This irony may well reflect Collins’s belief that Britain cannot avoid the repercussions of the haunting history of Atlantic slavery.

Indeed, as John Sutherland points out in an introduction to the novel, the fact that Armadale’s story begins in 1832—a year before slavery was formally abolished in the British West Indies—places slavery at the novel’s backstage as well as making Midwinter a “child of slavery” (xx). Slavery as a crucial framework of critical analysis in the novel has been extensively discussed by critics such as Lauren Goodlad and Nathan Hensley who suggest that the history of Britain’s involvement in the transatlantic slave trade cannot be conveniently kept at bay. According to Hensley, Armadale identifies West Indian slavery as the source of nineteenth-century Britain’s “global modernity,” suggesting that the vast wealth Britain had amassed from its slave-powered colonies had been “forgotten, laundered, ‘Blanched’—arriving
through Liverpool but transformed into cleaner, more respectable English money in countryside manors like Thorpe-Ambrose” (625). Hensley argues that the novel to some extent attempts to obliterate Britain’s shady history of slavery in favor of a more egalitarian present, putting forth an “ambivalent historicism” in which moral violations perpetrated during the age of slavery reemerge in the present as “ghosts of past damage that will not go away” (625). Hensley thus reads the final scene of the novel where the sun shines on Midwinter’s face as an ambivalent moment that illustrates the “persistence of a dark history in the present, and the future” as the light that replaces the “overpowering metaphorical darkness” of past violence fails to eradicate this darkness; for Midwinter’s dark face—“flush with Trinidadian blood”—continues to manifest its hue under the sunlight (627). Here Hensley’s elaborate argument seems to suggest that Armadale assumes blackness as a negative racial marker as it exclusively connects Midwinter’s dark face with the “dark history” of slavery and its associated violence.

By contrast, Lauren Goodlad unsettles such binary division of blackness and whiteness as she analyzes the novel’s representation of blackness and race in terms of geopolitical aesthetics. Focusing on the spatial expressions of transatlantic experience, Goodlad argues that Armadale attempts an archeological excavation of “disavowed histories” of Atlantic slavery as it embarks on a “Benjaminian quest for Erfahrung—for the integrated experience of repressed global histories” (2; 4). According to Goodlad, Midwinter’s racial hybridity functions as a representative trait of Armadale’s geopolitical aesthetic as “his complicated transatlantic past” articulates his superstition as deriving from both his black and white blood (10). Even as Midwinter “bears the genealogical marks of both master and slave” deriving from his black Atlantic experience, he never becomes fully conscious “of the historical experience that haunts him” (11). As Midwinter tries to “liberate himself from a racial legacy his white namesake
[Ingleby’s son Allan] is never made to bear, *Armadale* wavers between the impulse to recuperate lost experience and to spare the mixed-race subject from further suffering” (12). Such ambivalence, Goodlad maintains, reflects a somewhat unsuccessful attempt on Collins’s part to exhume “the submerged legacy of Atlantic slavery” (7). 

Neither does such ambivalence liberate Midwinter from the burden of history. As the final chapter of *Armadale* confirms the validity of Reverend Brock’s interpretation of Allan’s dream as God’s warning to the two namesakes to unite against the consequences of their fathers’ sins that materialize in the person of Lydia Gwilt, the novel does not actually guarantee that Midwinter, like Allan, will get to experience a life of carefree oblivion after making a one-point return to the past on the eve of Allan’s marriage. Instead, by stating how Midwinter’s uncanny experience on board *La Grace de Dieu* is something he “was destined to remember to the end of his life” (116), the novel implies that Midwinter’s confidence in the “Good” of his future will always be followed by the memory of “Evil” from which the “Good” originates. However, as Reitz suggests, this ghost of “Evil” need not be repressed because it will not threaten the status quo, for it can now be rationally explained away as perhaps an inevitable element of history from which God has extracted present stability. This also reflects Collins’s notion of Britain’s past involvement in Atlantic slavery—the source of the “Evil”—as a history that should be both acknowledged and transcended: while the English cannot deny their history of West Indian slavery that left a permanent mark in their society—perhaps most visibly by the presence of foreign bodies—they can nonetheless (re)interpret such history as a source of present “Good.” In this new era, whites and nonwhites, like Allan and Midwinter, will “never be divided again” (677).

Acknowledging the inevitable mixing of white and nonwhite people in mid-Victorian
England, critics such as Audrey Fisch argue that while Collins considered nonwhite people as “a potentially disruptive problem for English society” (313-14), he nonetheless believed that their unavoidable presence would be beneficial as they would either peacefully assimilate into English society, or, better, “sacrifice themselves to restore a degraded white society to its rightful position” (319-26). As I shall argue, however, Armadale does not represent people of color as mere means to an end. Collins’s attitude towards the “blackness” of racial others differed from those of his contemporaries in that he strategically used his two white and mixed-race heroes to challenge the binary notion of white superiority and black inferiority, the concept which, according to Jennifer Brody, was artificially invented to rationalize the distinction between the hybrid English race from their “black” counterparts. Armadale rejects such a fabricated construct by representing its mixed-race hero less as a self-sacrificing instrument for restoring English morality than an exemplary performer of the moral essence English society has lost. Specifically, the novel reinterprets Midwinter’s blackness as a marker of (Christian) sympathy England needs to recover. By doing so, the novel demonstrates that blackness and whiteness are not opposing traits with intrinsic values, but, like “our Stout Friend,” two neutral signifiers that illustrate the multilateral dimensions of Victorian culture.61

Yet Armadale at first seems to project a negative view of blackness as a racialized marker of irritable passion in its descriptions of Midwinter and his Creole mother. For example, Midwinter’s mother seems to betray a self-conscious belief in her racial inferiority as her “hot African blood burned red in her dusky cheeks” while demanding to know whether Jane Blanchard (her husband’s first love) was white or black (31). Midwinter’s self-deprecatory evaluation of himself as an “ill-conditioned brat” with “my mother’s negro blood” (89) also seems to disclose his derogatory attitude towards his racial heritage. To the middle-class
Englishman Brock represents, Midwinter’s dark and foreign look justifies the “savage rapture of gratitude and surprise” (65) he displays when he realizes how Allan had taken care of him during his illness. Unable to remember a time in his life when he had not been “hunted, and cheated, and starved” (66), Midwinter fervidly expresses his gratitude for Allan’s kindness. Moreover, Midwinter voluntarily assumes a slave positionality, referring to himself as a “dog” that cannot resist his master’s calls (82-83), and vows that he will not hesitate to sacrifice himself for the first man in his life who had shown him genuine sympathy (102). When Dr. Hawbury’s “professional eye” observes Midwinter resolutely following Allan “like a dog” after he rescues the pair from the wreck of La Grace de Dieu, the doctor readily associates Midwinter’s physical features (ostensibly depicted by his “varying color”) as a signifier of a pathologically neurotic other: “I wouldn’t change nervous systems with that man for the largest fortune that could be offered me” (137).

However, I want to suggest that Collins calls on these representations of Midwinter not to reproduce a familiar image of an inferior racial other but to highlight how English society has grown incapable of sympathizing with the socially marginalized. The “horrible sincerity of astonishment” Midwinter shows “at having been treated with common Christian kindness in a Christian land” (65) is less a description of a slavish neurotic susceptible to overreaction at the smallest kindness bestowed on him than Collins’s cynical commentary on the truly “horrible” reality of a so-called “Christian land” devoid of “common Christian kindness.” The novel further calls attention to this hypocrisy by illustrating English society’s outrage at Midwinter’s uncommon sympathy towards the poor: upon witnessing Midwinter express his deep sympathy for the wretched living condition of an insolent urchin who insulted him by giving the boy money instead of punishment, the grocer unreservedly voices his opinion of Midwinter as
mentally disordered, a judgment comparable to Brock and Dr. Hawbury’s view of Midwinter’s hypersensitive nature (306-7). Additionally, the butcher accuses Midwinter of extravagance after observing him serve the meat he bought from his shop to a starving dog shivering in the cold. Here the incongruity of the butcher’s smug assertion of his moderatism—“I’m not a hard man, ma’am”—with his heartless indignation at seeing a man waste meat “fit for a Christian” on a dying creature illustrates the extent to which English society has veered away from the moral principles it verbally advocates (307).

Collins thus negates the public conception of Midwinter’s physically “black” features as a marker of otherness characterized by neurotic subservience, and instead associates Midwinter’s blackness with the “old unforgotten sympathies of the old unforgotten time” (307). Midwinter’s performance of blackness, then, evokes the hypocrisy of mid-Victorian England where sympathy only exists as a memory. The issue of sympathy lies at the heart of Armadale’s plot. If the novel’s plot is largely conditioned by Lydia Gwilt’s plot to claim her share of the Armadale legacy, deep sense of entitlement that she feels from her former mistress Jane Blanchard drives Lydia to commit herself to this objective. Believing that the cruel apathy Jane Blanchard had demonstrated to her 12-year old maid by casting her out of England after using her to betray her own father had ultimately reduced her to destitution, Lydia bitterly seeks compensation from her son Allan. As Lydia’s foster mother Maria Oldershaw acknowledges, “the old lady’s heavy debt of obligation, after what you did for her in Madeira, is not paid yet; and that the son is the next person to settle with you, now the mother has slipped through your fingers” (159). It would be possible, then, to read this anti-heroine whom contemporary critics demonized\(^6\) as none other than a manifestation of the unsympathetic English society.
*Armadale* further articulates blackness as a marker of sympathy by associating Lydia’s subject position with that of a racial other. As Goodlad argues, the novel illustrates Lydia’s “slave-like positionality”: while her “vilified red hair” becomes a “substitute for skin color,” Lydia is “‘beaten,’ ‘half starved,’ and ‘exhibited’ in the ‘market-place’ before being turned into Jane Blanchard’s ‘plaything.’” She also experiences imprisonment and her first husband’s whip. Goodlad suggests that these experiences anticipate Lydia’s attraction to Midwinter, as both desire to “break the chain” of their past (25-26). Such a mode of suffering marking Lydia’s “blackness,” however, becomes a source of unconventional sympathy:

“I knew it, the first moment I saw you! I knew that you, too, had suffered; that you, too, had sorrows which you kept sacred! Strange, strange sympathy!” (385)

While Lydia’s reaction to Midwinter’s sympathy towards her position after she became a “victim” of Allan’s secret inquiry is deliberate and calculated, Lydia nonetheless finds herself drawn to Midwinter and wonders “whether there was a time when I might have loved him?” (385). Moreover, the mutual sympathy which Lydia believes has been established between Midwinter and herself is “strange” in that it is based on her belief that both parties have regarded their past “sorrows” as “sacred.” Such remembrance of past sufferings enables Lydia to appreciate Midwinter’s sympathetic nature, which English society dismisses as an anomaly. At the same time, this “strange sympathy” is concomitant with blackness in that it is represented as an exclusive product of a “sacred” yet painful life-experience evoking that of African slaves. Sympathy thus becomes a principal feature of Lydia’s blackness.

*Armadale’s* association of blackness with sympathy, which the novel underscores as a
feature of English moral legacy, suggests that Collins did not see the role of racial others as mere instruments to restore an exclusively “white” English heritage. In fact, *Armadale* articulates the impossibility of a virtuous “white” Englishness by describing English society’s dismissal of Allan’s sympathy to Midwinter as decidedly un-English, perhaps even as a form of blackness: when Allan opens his heart to the sick and friendless Midwinter and unhesitatingly undertakes full responsibility for restoring him, even Reverend Brock—the clergyman of the parish who preaches the virtue of the good Samaritan—construes the situation as an “emergency” and remonstrates Allan for recklessly committing himself to a stranger without first calculating the cost (61-63). Additionally, the sheer amazement that Allan’s London lawyers display upon witnessing their client’s sympathetic decision not to immediately assert the prerogatives of his newly acquired status as heir to Thorpe-Ambrose by granting the deceased Arthur Blanchard’s mother and cousin ample time to prepare their departure from Thorpe-Ambrose illustrates an unsympathetic England preoccupied with “rights” and “position” (81). In such a society, Allan’s sympathetic nature is problematic because it disrupts social stability by disregarding established boundaries of race and class: those who have been “very oddly brought up” like Allan can unabashedly treat their social (and racial) inferiors like Midwinter and a law office clerk “as his equal and his friend” (82, 102; emphasis added). By thus recounting how the English reject Allan and Midwinter’s sympathetic actions as disturbingly foreign—“black”—the novel aligns moral virtue with blackness while associating whiteness with heartless insensitivity.

Moreover, instead of affirming conventional assumptions about the inequality of whites and nonwhites, *Armadale* projects a view that regards them as equal by presenting both its white and nonwhite characters as moral exemplars who possess the “great nature” that should characterize Englishness. Indeed, Midwinter and Allan identify with each other despite their
social and racial differences because both are capable of performing blackness in their capacity to sympathize with the socially marginalized. Such shared performances of blackness that validate the equality of the novel’s white and nonwhite protagonists also demonstrate that blackness, while initially associated with “the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people,” is nonetheless a malleable signifier that can be performed by both whites and nonwhites to “provide a space for meaningful resistance of oppressive systems” (Johnson 8; 9).

By representing blackness as a marker of a sympathetic moral ethos Midwinter and Allan perform, Armadale not only challenges mid-Victorian racial binarism but also comments on the persisting force of colonial slavery: if slavery is an institution that crushes sympathy among its members, the novel’s illustration of the dearth of sympathy in mid-Victorian England may well point to the disheartening fact that, some thirty years after Britain had officially emancipated its slaves, the specter of this brutal history still haunts the country. This suggests that the story of Midwinter and Allan does not, as Fisch argues, project the author’s complacent belief that “all is still well in England,” and that abolition has adequately cleansed the stains from “white” English identity (325-26). On the contrary, Armadale projects a view that all is still not well in England; the repercussions of slavery still haunt the present, and will not disappear until English society learns to be more sympathetic to its marginalized members.

As the ending of the novel anticipates a hopeful future for both its white and mixed-race heroes, it also projects Collins’s hope for a morally reformed and less discriminatory English society. Here it is necessary to point out that the kind of “happy” ending Armadale proposes does not fully meet the expectations of its English middle-class readers, insofar as a landed gentleman’s marriage to a poor retired major’s daughter leaves much to be desired. However, as a wealthy inheritor of the Thorpe-Ambrose estate, Allan shuns the monotonous and
hypocritical upper-class culture and embraces the company of middle-class professionals. Therefore, while Allan’s circle is destined to be graced by the Milroys, the Pedgifts, and Midwinter, it is a society whose members are valued according to their personal merit rather than hereditary title or wealth. By articulating the agency of sympathy that Midwinter and Allan perform and the auspicious future it brings about, *Armadale* draws attention to the process that unites its two heroes from their initially diametrically opposite positions. Moreover, by presenting Thorpe-Ambrose—the estate that can be read as a relic of British slavery—as the site that anticipates the propitious unfolding of sympathy and equality between the men whose lives have been touched by the repercussions of slavery, the novel projects a hope to see such a “happy ending” come to pass in England.

However, if Collins believed in sympathy as the antidote for an England still plagued by the specters of slavery at the time he wrote *Armadale*, he was destined to be disappointed. Published in 1871 and 1886 respectively, *Miss or Mrs?* and *The Guilty River* reflect Collins’s recognition of the discouraging fact that racial binarism continued to thrive after *Armadale*; and worse, that even the black and mixed-race subjects who have by this time been fully assimilated into mainstream English society have internalized this troubling ideology that had provided the grounds for rationalizing racism and slavery.

**(Re)Configuring the Problem of Binarism:  *Miss or Mrs?* and *The Guilty River***

Published in 1871, *Miss or Mrs?* features a mixed-race heroine Natalie Graybrooke, the only child of the wealthy bachelor Sir Joseph whose sole objective in life is money. As Norman Page and Toru Sasaki note in an introduction to the novella, *Miss or Mrs?* represents “the world of Victorian capitalism in which human lives are motivated and moulded as much by
investments, inherited wealth, marriage settlements and conspicuous consumption as by falling in love or the other natural impulses of the heart” (xii). Indeed, Sir Joseph regards his daughter Natalie as capital which he must “invest” by marrying her off to his friend and financial advisor Richard Turlington, a rich merchant hiding a villainous history. Turlington, on his part, eagerly seeks to marry Natalie in order to secure her father’s dowry to settle his company’s debt. Natalie, however, refuses to be bartered as a commodity, and secretly marries her lover and cousin Launcelot Linzie. When Turlington comes to know of the clandestine marriage, he realizes that the only way he can now pay off the debt is to murder Sir Joseph and usurp his dead friend’s inheritance in his capacity as the sole executor of Sir Joseph’s will. Turlington contrives to carry out the plan by recruiting the villainous Thomas Wildfang, a retired seaman who had in the past assisted Turlington in his shady affairs. When the plot fails, however, Turlington makes one last attempt to kill Sir Joseph in his Somersetshire house, but accidentally shoots himself after his gun malfunctions.

*Miss or Mrs?’s attention to crimes involving fraud, murder and clandestine sexual maneuvers seems unusual for a novella written as a Christmas story. Equally unusual is the novella’s representation of its mixed-race heroine Natalie Graybrooke. Portraying Natalie as an object of exotic beauty, the novella attributes Natalie’s uncommon physical precociousness (at fifteen her physical development is described as matching that of girls over twenty) to her mixed-racial heritage of “Negro blood” and “French blood” (9-10). As Audrey Fisch argues, however, such distinction is temporary, and the novella “negates the idea that Natalie’s difference from other lighter-skinned Victorian heroines should influence her story” because it ultimately represents Natalie as “not different from her lighter-skinned counterparts” in that she is “a faithful representation of passive, submissive Victorian womanhood” (314-15). Although
the novella’s representation of blackness as a source of a woman’s sexual charm once again reflects Collins’s unconventional view of blackness as a flexible and positive signifier, Collins neither attributes moral vibrancy to blackness nor asserts the possibilities of its social agency in *Miss or Mrs?* as he had done in *Armadale*. While one might certainly see this difference as once again attesting to the impossibility of blackness as a stable marker of any particular moral or cultural entity, I maintain that *Miss or Mrs?’*s somewhat restrained articulation of blackness limited to female sensuality, in conjunction with the novella’s numerous representations of binary tropes, illustrate the persistently unsympathetic and discriminating English society.

If *Armadale* underscores sympathy to question the false notion of blackness as the negative antithesis of whiteness, *Miss or Mrs?* uses tropes of binary oppositions to illustrate how they degrade society. For example, while Natalie’s “black” physical beauty presents a picture of a sexually mature woman, the stark contrast it marks with the immaturity of Natalie’s character natural to English girls of her age undermines her health, as she suffers from an ailment characterized by “languor” and “an utter inability to devote herself to anything which took the shape of a serious occupation” (10). Therefore, while Natalie’s quick wits allow her to lead Launce in petty romantic affairs involving code-signals with food and clandestine meetings in Turlington’s yacht, she relies totally on Launce and her friend Lady Winwood when it comes to managing the more “serious occupation” of resisting patriarchal authority that coerces her to marry a villain she detests. The novella highlights such enervating consequences of contrast through yet another contrasting illustration between the passive and irresolute Natalie and the resourceful and resolute Lady Winwood who masterminds the plot to prevent Natalie’s marriage with Turlington: “In person, Lady Winwood was little and fair. In character, she was dashing and resolute—a complete contrast to Natalie, and (on that very account) Natalie’s bosom friend.
[... ] Natalie’s languid brown eyes looked softly down in submissive attention from an elevation of five feet seven. Lady Winwood’s brisk blue eyes looked brightly up in despotic command from an elevation of four feet eleven (in her shoes)” (38).

The novella perhaps most effectively lampoons English binarism through its comic depictions of Sir Joseph and his sister Miss Lavinia’s inability to express themselves without being contradicted by each other. Described as twins, “The two always told a story in couples, and always differed with each other about the facts” (12). As shown by the insufferable digressions brought about by such dual storytelling, Sir Joseph and Miss Lavinia’s reliance on each other’s contradiction renders them unable to organize their thoughts and formulate a coherent narrative. Yet without such contradiction, “neither of them had ever been known to attempt the relation of the simplest series of events, without breaking down” (12). Moreover, the utter inability of the pair to even perceive their reliance on binary opposites (“Contradicting each other! [...] We never disagreed in our lives”; 35) demonstrates the extent to which English society has internalized binaristic thinking.

The moral consequences of English binarism not only rationalize racism but also distort basic human relationships, most notably by conjoining personal affections with money. As Sir Joseph and Miss Lavinia try to convince Natalie to marry Turlington, the couple defines love as a by-product of marriage: “My child! this is a matter of experience; love will come when you are married” (36). Here love ultimately becomes a by-product of wealth, as Sir Joseph only believes in marriages in which the bride and bridegroom match each other’s wealth (24). In the English marriage market, then, money and love are inseparable in that the former becomes the prerequisite for the latter. Collins emphatically dismisses such a belief as a pagan doctrine—an “average ignorance of human nature” and “average belief in conventional sentiment” that
rationalizes the “all-devouring altar of Marriage” (36). *Miss or Mrs?* further illustrates the abuse of binarism by describing Sir Joseph’s obsession with his Banker’s Book containing the records of his income and expenditure. In Sir Joseph’s own account, “the outgoings on one side [. . .] and the incomings on the other” in his Banker’s Book literally sum up the essence of his life, and it is to him the most “interesting” and “instructive” reading that cannot be outshined by the “best novel that ever was written” (55). Sir Joseph’s empty life, then, is a result of his total inability to conceive life beyond the context of loss and gain.

*Miss or Mrs?’s* representations of binary tropes thus reflect Collins’s growing awareness of the injuries they have inflicted on English society. Fifteen years later, *The Guilty River* would again interrogate the pervasive agency of binary thinking that influences whites and nonwhites alike. Like *Armadale*, *The Guilty River* also features two male protagonists, one white and one mixed-race. The white Gerard Roylake is a formerly exiled son of a wealthy English squire who, like Allan, inherits a large fortune while living a marginalized life. The mixed-race “Lodger” (whose name is never disclosed in the story) is an ex-surgeon whose deceased mother was an emancipated American slave. Unlike *Armadale*, however, *The Guilty River* presents an entirely different relationship between its white and mixed-race heroes in that Gerard and the Lodger’s relationship is for the most part represented in terms of rivalry and antagonism instead of brotherly alliance.69

The hostile relationship between the novella’s white and mixed-race heroes could be read as *The Guilty River*’s effort to synthesize the disparate representations of blackness in *Armadale* and *Miss or Mrs?* by representing blackness as both a marker of moral sympathy and a source of physical beauty. *The Guilty River* associates blackness with physical beauty when Gerard admires Cristel’s “dark beauty” and her “beautiful dusky arms” (251). But while
Gerard’s description of Cristel emphasizes the beauty of her dark hue, his description of the mixed-race Lodger’s physical beauty seems to deliberately overlook its dark features: when the Lodger makes his first appearance in the novella, Gerard is genuinely astonished by “the most beautiful face that I had ever seen” (254). Yet Gerard’s description of the mixed-race Lodger’s countenance focuses on the uncanny admixture of masculinity and femininity his facial lines evoke with no reference to its hue. Even considering the fact that Gerard does not know of the Lodger’s mixed-race heritage at the time of their first encounter, his indifference to the Lodger’s skin color (as opposed to his perception of Cristel’s dark skin moments before he meets the Lodger) seems odd, almost as if Gerard assumes that the Lodger is white. Yet the Lodger’s countenance would be confirmed as “black” like that of his black mother: “resembling my good mother physically, I might hope to have resembled her morally” (264).

While the affirmation of the Lodger’s blackness on one hand associates blackness with physical beauty, Gerard’s inability to perceive the Lodger’s blackness, on the other, could be read as the novella’s erasure of racial boundaries that make blackness and whiteness indistinguishable. Such merging of colors may attest to Collins’s challenge to contemporary notions of blackness as foreign and unattractive. By first letting his readers assume the “whiteness” of the Lodger’s physical beauty (as Gerard himself might have done), Collins then nullifies such an assumption by disclosing the Lodger’s mixed-race heritage. By doing so he encourages his readers to acknowledge that blackness is not an anomaly but an integral element of English bodies as well as English culture. Moreover, the Lodger’s juxtaposition of his mother’s moral agency with her black physicality implicitly associates blackness with morality. Here Collins suggests sympathy as a representative feature of the Lodger’s mother’s moral ethos: as the Lodger confesses in his farewell letter to Gerard, it is the influence of his mother’s spirit
on his deathbed that finally enables the man to recover his sympathy, thus making him resolve to atone for his deeds by reconciling Gerard and Cristel whose relationship he broke.

But while the Lodger’s blackness would ultimately come to represent sympathy, his obsession with binary opposites drives him to take pleasure in morbid self-love until the last moments of his life. First, by making the short period during which the dying Lodger regains his sympathy under the influence of his mother’s spirit coincide with the period during which he regains his hearing (“her spirit has been with me ever since my hearing was restored”; 351), *The Guilty River* affirms apathy as pathological. The novella, moreover, imputes the Lodger’s apathy to his obsession with binary oppositions that would become the cause of his undoing. As the Lodger himself confesses, “I don’t believe the man lives, [...] who enjoys Contrast as I do” (318). The Lodger’s binarism makes its first appearance in his diary titled “Memoirs of a Miserable Man.” After a brief introduction, the Lodger begins the task of “painting my own portrait in words” with two contrasting colors: “I divide my life into two Epochs—respectively entitled: Before my Deafness, and After my Deafness. Or, suppose I define the melancholy change in my fortunes more sharply still, by contrasting with each other my days of prosperity and my days of disaster? Of these alternatives, I hardly know which to choose” (260-61).

Eventually, the Lodger’s binarism renders him incapable of even appreciating his own handsome face without a contrast, and he thus hires an ugly servant, telling him that he needs “a contrast of something ugly about me” because he is so handsome (306).

As the Lodger’s reference to “the time of my earliest recollections to the miserable day when I opened the sealed packet” (264) suggests, his acquaintance with the criminal history of his father’s family initiates his embrace of essentialist beliefs in identity, which in turn leads to his obsession with binaries. While going through his mother’s belongings after her funeral, the
Lodger comes across a sealed package sent to his mother anonymously. Breaking the seal, the Lodger finds documents detailing the list of crimes committed by the male members of his father’s household. This knowledge compels the Lodger to believe that an evil nature has lay dormant within him all through his life; an evil inherited from the “vile blood” of his criminal father whose sin “was the most infamous in the list of the family crimes” (264). In his effort to free himself from such obsessive thoughts, the Lodger seeks refuge in the equally essentialist belief in the agency of his black mother’s “good” blood which he hopes will offset the evil force of his father’s “vile” blood. As a result, the Lodger comes to understand himself in terms of a Manichean binarism in which both his white father’s “vile” blood and his black mother’s “good” blood flow without mixing with each other.

The Lodger’s binarism is thus fueled by his desire to cast his dead father out of his life, and the son’s demonization of the father anticipates Jennifer Brody’s insightful argument on the binary structure that the English conjured to fabricate their identity as positively “white” against the equally fabricated identity of the inferior “black” subject. However, just as such effort is undercut by the undeniable hybridity from which images of whiteness and blackness had been extracted, the Lodger’s demonization of his dead father is undermined by the hybridity of his father’s morality which the Lodger’s own narrative unwittingly betrays. In the memoir, the Lodger reminds the “Keen observers, who read these lines” how he has “passed over my father with the briefest possible allusion to his death” (262). What the Lodger is loath to acknowledge here, however, is less the crime his father committed than the fact that his father was a major contributor to the making of the “wholesome influences” that quarantined his son from temptation: from the Lodger’s own account, his father had been savvy enough to discern his son’s affable personality and conferred with a “wise friend” so that he could place his son
“among the right set of men” at Cambridge (261).

The Lodger also insinuates that his father had little affection for him by claiming that his father did not know his son well enough to discern that he was “quite unfit for the sort of training imperatively required by the Law” (262). Yet the Lodger unknowingly contradicts his own claim by boasting how he came to indulge himself in law as he contrived ways that would have enabled his criminal grandfather to escape prosecution as well as devising cunning schemes, including secretly abducting a young woman from her father’s house (a scheme he actually plans to execute on Cristel). While this makes the Lodger comparable to Lydia Gwilt whose lawyerly talent Pedgift Sr. unreservedly praises, it also suggests that the Lodger’s father knew his son much more than the son is willing to acknowledge and was genuinely concerned about his welfare. As the Lodger’s narrative thus brings to light a father’s affection for his son, it also reminds readers that the Lodger’s father was a man who, despite having heartlessly abandoned a girl in his youth after making her pregnant, could appreciate the moral virtues of a black ex-slave and had sincerely loved her without being prejudiced by her race and class, a love he proves by marrying her against the heated opposition of his family. The Lodger’s invectives against his father, then, reveal the hybridity of his father’s morality.

Furthermore, the Lodger’s own narrative offsets his effort to construct an impeccably flawless image of his past during which he was “Fortune’s spoilt child.” For example, the Lodger suggests that the medical training he undertook in “one of the great London hospitals” during his days of prosperity made him a first-rate surgeon. The Lodger tries to validate this point by recounting an incident when the treatment he rendered to Lord Uppercliff’s broken leg made the nobleman “so well satisfied with my services that he refused to be attended by any of my elders and betters in the profession” (262). According to the Lodger, the nobleman’s regard
for the young surgeon was such that he even admitted him into his circle. However, Mrs. Roylake’s account of Lord Uppercliff’s physical disability resulting from the malpractice of “a plausible young surgeon” (300) puts in question the Lodger’s medical capacity. Additionally, the Lodger’s strangely curtailed account of the occasion of his mother’s death—”We had parted at night when she was, to all appearance, in the enjoyment of her customary health. The next morning, she was found dead in her bed” (262)—makes the readers wonder how such a competent doctor as the Lodger could have been so incapable of detecting the symptoms of malady in his own mother living under the same roof.

The clear-cut distinction the Lodger’s exaggerated narrative makes between his unrealistically uncontaminated past and his accursed present demonstrates just how deeply the Lodger has saturated himself in binaristic thinking. Such drive to dichotomize destroys the Lodger as it renders him incapable of sympathizing with others. Rejecting those who can hear as “no longer my fellow-creatures” (267), the Lodger divides humanity into two groups—those who can hear and those who cannot—and configures the relationship between the two groups as antagonistic. The Lodger perversely misinterprets his friends’ sympathetic efforts to sustain him as malicious pretense and believes them to be “talking of me contemptuously, and amusing themselves by making my misfortune the subject of coarse jokes” (266). Even despising the genuine affections women express to him, the Lodger goes into reclusion after erroneously concluding that all his acquaintances who can hear have forsaken him.

In such a frame of mind, the Lodger experiences a conflict between egotism and a sense of inferiority. Declaring to Gerard that “Vanity and I have parted company” after his deafness made him more worthless than the “ugliest man living” who can hear (257), the Lodger contradicts himself when he asserts afterwards that deafness and isolation have made him
“become of enormous importance to myself” (260), a disposition Cristel observes: “He is very vain” (281). The conflict between humility and egotism makes the Lodger insensitive to other people’s intentions. As the Lodger compares himself with Gerard, his sense of inferiority renders him incapable of discarding an “inveterate suspicion” that a landed gentleman would somehow go out of his way to court a miller’s daughter on the first day of his arrival in England (although Gerard does eventually fall in love with Cristel): “Young, personally attractive, and a great landowner,” he said. “I saw you just now talking familiarly with Cristel Toller. I didn’t like that at the time; I like it less than ever now” (257). At the same time, the Lodger’s ego compels him to pursue “his own train of thought, as resolutely and as impertinently as ever” (258), and he callously interrogates Gerard and warns him to back off from Cristel. Refusing to accept anything but the assumptions generated by his contradictory mind, the Lodger can only perceive people as friends or enemies according to their readiness to conform to his will. Thus he demands to Gerard: “Which are we—enemies or friends?” (280).

Gerard’s answer, however, unnerves the Lodger. Resisting the dichotomy imposed on him, Gerard declares that he will neither recognize the Lodger as friend nor enemy but will ignore him as a stranger (280). It is during this critical moment that the Lodger resolves to murder Gerard, a resolution disclosed by an “internal struggle” on his face (280). While one might consider sexual jealousy as the main cause for the Lodger’s desire to poison Gerard, one should also consider that the Lodger’s resolution to murder Gerard does not subside even after Gerard changes his mind and cordially acknowledges the Lodger as a friend; for Gerard’s change of attitude, at least at that moment, could be understood (however mistakenly) as his willingness to concede to the Lodger. But by showing how the Lodger takes advantage of Gerard’s good will to kill him, the novella suggests that Gerard’s refusal to recognize (and thus threaten) the
Lodger’s binaristic worldview may well have sustained the Lodger’s determination to poison him. Beneath The Guilty River’s plot of treachery and romance, then, lies Collins’s deep interest in the persistent force of binarism that works on the human mind.

The pathological nature of binarism reveals itself even when the Lodger momentarily relinquishes his essentialist notion of identity and acknowledges the hybridity of the English people during his conversation with Gerard and Cristel:

Perhaps I am in one of my tolerant humors to-day; I see nothing disgraceful in being a Cur. He is a dog who represents different breeds. Very well, the English are a people who represent different breeds: Saxons, Normans, Danes. The consequence, in one case, is a great nation. The consequence, in the other case, is the cleverest member of the whole dog family—as you may find out for yourself if you will only teach him. Ha—how I am running on. My guests try to slip in a word or two, and can’t find their opportunity. Enjoyment, Miss Cristel. Excitement, Mr. Roylake. For more than a year past, I have not luxuriated in the pleasures of society. I feel the social glow; I love the human family; I never, never, never was such a good man as I am now. (319-20)

During this brief moment of his reunion with “the human family,” the Lodger momentarily regains his former self as he genuinely appreciates “the pleasures of society” with his two visitors. The most visible change this brings about in the Lodger is the subsiding of his binarism, a change marked by his comparison of the English with a mongrel dog. He sees them both as representative types of “different breeds.” Here the Lodger subsumes English identity under his pseudonym (“Cur”) and represents himself as the exemplary Englishman, “the
cleverest member of the whole dog family.” By doing so, the Lodger blurs the distinction between blackness and whiteness as the intermixture of the racially “white” Saxons, Normans, and Danes produces a mixed-race “Cur” with “black” blood. The Lodger’s insight, however, ironically highlights the morbidity of his own binarism: the fact that the Lodger can only articulate heterogeneity during a momentary return to his former self prescribes binaristic thinking as pathological, a state deriving from a perverse and isolated mind.

*The Guilty River* most explicitly illuminates the blurring of color boundaries when it describes the metamorphosis of the woods and the river that offer the main stage of the story, thus challenging binarism by suggesting that true beauty materializes through the *erasure* of boundaries:

On the river-margin of the wood, I was confronted by a wild gleam of beauty in the familiar view, for which previous experience had not prepared me. Am I wrong in believing that all scenery, no matter how magnificent or how homely it may be, derives a splendor not its own from favouring conditions of light and shade? Our gloomy trees and our repellent river presented an aspect superbly transfigured, under the shadows of the towering clouds, the fantastic wreaths of the mist, and the lurid reddening of the sun as it stooped to its setting. Lovely *interfusions* of sobered color rested, faded, returned again, on the upper leaves of the foliage as they lightly moved. The mist, rolling capriciously over the waters, revealed the grandly deliberate course of the flowing current, while it dimmed the turbid earthy yellow that discolored and degraded the stream under the full glare of day. While my eyes followed the successive transformations of the view, as the hour advanced, tender and solemn influences
breathed their balm over my mind.  (314; emphasis added)

On his way to the mill to meet the Lodger, Gerard is astounded by the play of the lights and shadow that transforms the outlook of the woods and the river.  While it might at first seem that Collins is attributing the agency of such transformation to the binary contrast of light and shadow, Collins emphasizes the “interfusions” of “sobered color” with shadows of varying degrees.  This grows clearer in Collins’s emphasis on the “dimmed” hue as the ultimate beautifier as opposed to the “full glare” of light that “discolor[s] and degrade[s],” and even the Lodger feels the “mystery of those growing shadows and fading lights” (317).  The detailed account of the beauty produced by such diminishing of boundaries could possibly be extended to a reading of the English social landscape inhabited by people of different colors.  Collins may well be suggesting that in order to bring about “splendor” in English society, one must shun the “full glare” of whiteness that “discolor[s]” and “degrade[s]” society by emphasizing the fictitious virtue of whiteness at the expense of blackness.  One must realize that one cannot see the “beauty” of society by focusing on the color lines of different peoples, because, like nature, beauty reveals itself when these color lines are “dimmed.”  Just as light and shadow / whiteness and blackness equally contribute to create beauty, whites and blacks equally contribute to the making of English society.

Indeed, Collins did not regard the presence of nonwhite people in English society as merely tolerable.  While Fisch argues that the “necessary presence” of the Lodger illustrates his status “as a foil and of the unseen contribution of black people to English society” (322), Collins’s illustration of the transforming beauty of the woods and the river suggests that black and mixed-race people are not a “foil” for white people.  Neither are their contributions to
Victorian society “unseen”; like the harmonious correspondence of light and shadow, black and mixed-race subjects have contributed equally, and equally visibly, alongside the whites in the making of England. Therefore, the existence of nonwhite people in England is not just an inevitable add-on but a prerequisite to transform a “gloomy” and “repellent” social landscape into something that will exert “tender and solemn influences” on its people. As texts that unconventionally feature mixed-race characters as protagonists, *Armadale, Miss or Mrs?*, and *The Guilty River* collectively interrogate the pervasive structure of racial binarism and question the assumption that blackness is a fixed racial essence. In that way, these texts propose an alternate perspective on the reading of the English social landscape, articulating a belief that “all scenery [. . .] derives a splendor not its own” and that the “splendor” of England is neither a pre-existing essence nor a standard of comparison, but a manifestation of the ever-fluctuating “interfusions” of white and nonwhite Britons of multiple racial and cultural backgrounds.
Conclusion

In a recently published volume of essays entitled *New Perspectives on the Black Atlantic* (2012), the editors Bénédicte Ledent and Pilar Cuder-Dominguez criticize Gilroy’s picture of the black Atlantic for restricting itself to North America and the Caribbean. By contrast, the editors want “to go beyond Gilroy’s mostly North American focus to encompass an examination of the ‘Black Atlantic’ in the context not only of Africa but also of Europe” which they rightly believe “played a crucial role in the slave trade and colonisation, and is often chosen as the destination of migrants from Africa and other parts of the world, dramatically increasing the diversity of racial, religious and cultural backgrounds on the old continent” (11). The book’s concern with black Atlantic experiences of people from Africa, Europe, and non-Anglophone Caribbean regions has much to offer the growing field of black Atlantic studies. What I also take from the book’s richly informative yet rather harsh critique of Gilroy is less a sense of his alleged parochialism than an affirmation of black Atlantic studies as a burgeoning yet unsettled field of study. At the same time, such criticism of Gilroy may also reflect the tension between a discrete and specialized modern academia and the centripetal force underlying the black Atlantic concept that moves toward encompassing all geographical and cultural territories associated with the history of Atlantic slavery.

William Boelhower’s insight into the archeological nature of black Atlantic studies is valuable for what it says about the character and future direction of black Atlantic studies. Acknowledging a dearth of documentary evidence about the lives of black slaves forcibly dispersed throughout (and beneath) the Atlantic world, Boelhower compares the task of a black Atlantic scholar to that of an archeologist: both need to be motivated by “the desire to make
mute or fragmented things speak” so as to “make the scattered shards say what they do not say of their own accord” (94). This distinctively archeological mission privileges collaboration over critique. From an archeological standpoint, it seems less meaningful to criticize what other scholars have been unable to “excavate” than to investigate underexplored areas for texts that can help to build a black Atlantic archive. *New Perspectives*, in fact, does precisely that by introducing new sites into the black Atlantic discourse. However, its novelty seems only to affirm the comprehensive worldview already projected by Gilroy.

My work, in turn, contributes to black Atlantic studies by expanding our sense of the “scattered shards” of archival artifacts as well as by introducing a British literary perspective into the discussion. The “black Atlantic” authors I discuss suggest that the scarce and fragmentary heritage black Atlantic slaves left behind them might involve not only material and immediately discernible artifacts and art forms, but also more circuitous and less visible marks left within diverse cultural scenes that witnessed their lives. The texts I discuss represent such marks etched into the English cultural psyche. In an era that saw heightened debate over slavery following the 1807 Slave Trade Act, Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* did not interpret blackness as a term restricted to oppression and marginalization, but associated it instead with women’s autonomy and social participation. However, in texts that do not feature black characters, blackness—like the notion of women’s autonomy in a patriarchal society—exists only as a resonant silence that nonetheless points to invisible social, political, and cultural connections between three vertices of the nineteenth-century black Atlantic triangle: Britain, America, and Africa.

EBB’s antislavery poems and Mary Seacole’s travel narrative interpret blackness as a marker of cultural agency against the current of mid-Victorian racism incited by post-abolition
economic decline and colonial unrest in the British West Indies. If EBB’s “The Runaway Slave” demonstrates performatively that one can create aesthetic beauty out of black bodies, “Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave” plays with the notion of whiteness and blackness to articulate an aesthetic agency that nullifies established ideas of race. “A Curse for a Nation,” in turn, envisions a loss of national agency at the level of the aesthetic which the poem’s lack of reference to blackness reflects. EBB’s antislavery poems thus liberate blackness from the chains of racial essentialism and draw on black performativity to expand the language of the poet’s social criticism.

Because of her experience as a socially marginalized woman of color, Seacole had certain preoccupations with bodies that other white authors did not share. As a mixed-race creole widow, she had to live through racial and sexual discrimination. As a result, the mode of performativity that would enable Seacole to challenge the racist norms of English society had to be preceded by actual physical performance on her part as an English “mother” and doctor to the British soldiers battling for their lives in the Crimean War. Only on this basis could Seacole’s narrative perform blackness to revise racist notions of identity and integrate Britain and the Caribbean world into “one single, complex unit of analysis” (Gilroy 15).

Wilkie Collins’s radical reevaluations of racial others in relation to notions of Englishness and Britishness come at a time when a series of colonial uprisings such as the Indian “Mutiny” and the Morant Bay rebellion exacerbated the growing acceptance of permanent racial hierarchies as against the older notion of eventual human universality. While Armadale, Miss or Mrs?, and The Guilty River collectively envision blackness as the moral essence of Englishness, they call for an understanding of British identity as an ongoing expression of inter-racial, inter-cultural reciprocity.

The writings of these authors, then, are not merely secondhand accounts of black
identity by the socially privileged, and the fact that they represent English endeavors to reconsider what blackness might mean in English society and culture validates their inclusion in the black Atlantic archive. My effort to “excavate” these more pluralistic and hybrid British voices from the fictional soil of white Britishness might testify to the value of reading Victorian literature and culture from a specifically black Atlantic perspective insofar as it shows how blackness emerges from both mainstream and non-canonical literary texts in very unpredictable and fascinating ways. The black Atlantic paradigm invites us to revise British literature and culture by questioning the assumed homogeneity of a white-centric point of view and even the stability of whiteness itself as a foundation of British identity. This interpretative model also advances our understanding of nineteenth-century Britain as part of a larger cultural network (instead of the isolated, autonomous reference point it believed itself to be) and lets us see how canonical and non-canonical nineteenth-century British literature portrayed various kinds of black performativity to undo essentialist notions of blackness, race, and identity itself.
Notes

Chapter 1: “The Natural Sequel of an Unnatural Beginning”: Performing Blackness in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*

1 As Catherine Hall notes, the notion of colored people inhabiting the tropical regions as idle and uncivilized had been prevalent in the British imagination as early as the late eighteenth-century (49).

2 Numerous critics have acknowledged an alignment that nineteenth-century British writers made between the conditions of black slaves and white Englishwomen. For more information, see Coleman, Ferguson, Fraiman, and Said. Coleman, in particular, maintains that Jane Austen herself had a clear interest in the black slave-white woman analogy.

3 After observing and interviewing the members of an all-white Australian gospel choir group, Johnson shows how gospel—a distinctly “black” cultural product of African-American experience—connects the two historically and culturally disparate groups of the African-Americans and white Australians. Johnson notes how the Australians’ performance of gospel enabled them to experience “self-expression and psychological release” (179) like the African-Americans who sang gospel music to relieve their burdens. The members also believe that the therapeutic power of gospel derives from the African-American experience of oppression and resistance, and some even associate their history of exiled convicts with that of black American
slaves. Johnson regards this moment as that in which the experience of a group of people transcends its specific historical and geographical context to influence the lives of another.

4 According to Jennifer Brody, the construction of a supposedly “pure,” “white,” and masculine English identity had been realized through negative comparison with the bodies of black women (1-13; emphasis added).

5 Coleman presents the parallel in Emma between the “governess-trade” and the “slave-trade” as evidence of Austen’s interest in the slave metaphor and its connection to white Englishwomen (292-93).

6 Such desire to place Fanny on silent display may even possibly evoke the trope of the famous Hottentot Venus in early nineteenth-century freak shows.

7 Drawing on Fraiman’s essay, Trumpener points out that Said’s misinterpretation is also a result of his failure to contextualize Mansfield Park with Austen’s other novels.

8 The British Navy was known for its sexual corruption, ranging from illegitimate sexual affairs to sodomy (MP 400).

9 Similarly, Admiral Crawford in Mansfield Park is described as a violent and sexually corrupted character.
Additionally, Wentworth’s wealth accumulated during his exploits in the West Indies defines his relationship with the Musgroves and the Elliots and further contextualizes the novel’s plot in a black Atlantic framework.

In *Mansfield Park*, Mary Crawford also warns Fanny of her belief in the negative influence of the sea to physical beauty: “do not stay at Portsmouth to lose your pretty looks. Those vile sea-breezes are the ruin of beauty and health” (326).

Anne’s captivation of Mr. Elliot also endows Anne with a potential agency to subvert her traditionally inferior position within her household by displacing Elizabeth as mistress of Kellynch Hall.

It might even be possible to say that Louisa’s fall from the Cobb that liberates Wentworth from his false position also liberates Captain Benwick from his state of mourning as he finds new love for Louisa during her recovery.

In fact, as the sexually oppressed subject of the novel, Anne’s sexuality is from the beginning of the novel exclusively manifested in a transatlantic context. With neither “change of place” nor “novelty or enlargement of society” (28) to distract her after her breakup with Wentworth, Anne closely follows his transatlantic accomplishments by keeping up to date with navy lists and newspapers. Anne’s speculations on Wentworth’s success conclude in her faith in “his constancy” that gives her “no reason to believe him married” (29).
According to Frey, Admiral Croft’s takeover of Kellynch-hall is a symbolic event illustrating the author’s belief that the navy’s participation in national leadership will improve social order instead of disrupting it: “The failure of these aristocratic communities is evident from the first scenes of the novel, when the Elliots’ excessive spending forces them to place their estate for rent. The naval communities, in contrast, promise to reform the gentry. Admiral Croft literally moves into the Elliot estate, and the changes he makes to the house improve it” (217).

Mrs. Croft says that the only time she ever suffered from misery and sickness was the time spent by herself at Deal separated from her husband who was at sea (61).

Considering that sugar was the key product of the British West Indies and that most of its slaves worked in sugar plantations (“10 things”), the late Mr. Smith’s West Indian property would likely have been a slave plantation. The process of Mrs. Smith’s recovery of her husband’s legacy would again validate female agency in a black Atlantic context.

Lynda Hall argues that Mrs. Smith’s struggle against her marginality within both society and the novel itself sets an example for Anne who performs “her ability to adjust to change and loss with an ‘elasticity of mind’ that is not portrayed in Austen’s earlier novels” (par. 29). But the kinds of independence that Anne and Mrs. Smith seek differ: while Anne desires a certain degree of sexual independence by participating in the social sphere on her own terms without restraint from conventional norms, Mrs. Smith desires economic independence (and the sexual independence it induces) in order to re-enter high society. In other words, whereas Anne’s
sexual independence challenges and complicates social decorum on gender roles, Mrs. Smith’s sexual independence consolidates it.

19 Though the Musgroves are respectable landed gentry, Mary’s marriage with Charles Musgrove only gains her “a little artificial importance” with her father who regards the Musgroves as inferior to the Elliots: “Mary had merely connected herself with an old country family of respectability and large fortune, and had therefore given all the honour, and received none” (11).

20 The transitory nature of Louisa’s affection for Wentworth is suggested when Louisa is quick to fall in love with Benwick during her recuperation.

21 Even then, it is Mrs. Croft who is most richly blessed with the joys of life among the elder women. Mrs. Croft is the only elder female character of Persuasion who directly challenges the norms of the Establishment, as in her redefinition of the term “reasonable” during her conversation with Mrs. Musgrove:

“And I do assure you, ma’am,” pursued Mrs. Croft, “that nothing can exceed the accommodations of a man-of-war; I speak, you know, of the higher rates. When you come to a frigate, of course, you are more confined; though any reasonable woman may be perfectly happy in one of them; and I can safely say, that the happiest part of my life has been spent on board a ship. (61; emphasis added)
Here Mrs. Croft’s reconfigures “reasonable,” alluding to a new generation of women who, like herself, would consider it reasonable to act in the social sphere (represented as a naval vessel at sea). This is validated through Anne’s approval of Mrs. Croft’s opinion, although Anne herself will not be accompanying Wentworth everywhere he goes.

22 In *Persuasion*, such intention of the author is most vividly expressed through vain Sir Walter (with whom the readers are evidently expected to disagree): as Sir Walter evokes popular notions of blackness as a racial marker of inferiority by denouncing the navy officers’ “black” physical features, the readers are instead encouraged to consider blackness as a positive signifier associated with the navy’s creditable moral principles.

23 This is also reflected in the difference of character between Fanny and Anne. Fanny is a spectator who, instead of directly participating in any of the major events of the novel, watches the events on the peripheries: she remains a spectator in the rehearsal of *Lovers’ Vows*; on “exile” at Portsmouth, Fanny is again relegated to the role of a passive viewer during the trials of *Mansfield Park* ensuing Henry and Maria’s elopement. Finally, as Susan Fraiman rightfully observes, the end of *Mansfield Park* sees Fanny established yet again in the periphery of *Mansfield Park* (811). Unlike Fanny, Anne not only seeks active participation in the social sphere, but also actively participates in all major events of *Persuasion* (most notably the leadership she takes on at Lyme.)
Chapter 2: Aestheticizing Blackness in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Abolitionist Poetry

24 I refer to the Donaldson edition (2010) in all subsequent quotations from EBB’s poems.

25 On the debate regarding the issue of EBB’s racial origin, see Markus, Kennedy and Phelan. For a questioning of the biographical emphasis of EBB scholarship and a call for a historical and intertextual reading of “The Runaway Slave” focused on transatlantic abolitionist networks, see Stone’s “Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Garrisonians.” For an argument on EBB’s poems as embodying radical feminist ideals, see Brophy.

26 Despite her support for abolition, EBB received an inheritance of approximately £8,000 from her grandmother Elizabeth Moulton and uncle Samuel Moulton Barrett, an inheritance that had its roots in colonial slavery (Stone and Taylor 10).

27 Quoting Nancy Stepan, Catherine Hall argues that “it was emancipation which provoked the rise of new ways of categorizing racial difference, for it raised the spectre of black peoples as free and equal” (48).

28 The lyric speaker’s reference to the hummingbird that “sucks the soul of the flower” (161) further evokes “Jamaican slavery and the island’s influence on the poem’s imagery” (Donaldson 1: 410).
There is at least a year’s gap between stanza XV and XVI following the rape, during which the speaker experiences a total loss of agency: she “could not rest” yet do nothing more than moan. It is the resolution to murder her rape-begotten child that empowers the speaker with a will to plot and execute her escape, discursively confirming the correlation between the murder and the speaker’s journey to Pilgrim’s Point, the founding site of American history.

Gen. 3.15: “I will put enmity / between you [the serpent] and the woman, / and between your offspring / and hers; / he will crush your head, / and you will strike his heel.”

Here EBB writes:

“No help for women, sobbing out of sight
Because men made the laws? no brothel-lure
Burnt out by popular lightnings?—Has thou found
No remedy, my England, for such woes?
No outlet, Austria, for the scourged and bound,
No entrance for the exiled? no repose,
Russia, for knouted Poles working underground,
And gentle ladies bleached among the snows?—
No mercy for the slave, America?—
No hope for Rome, free France, chivalric France?
Alas, great nations have great shames, I say.” (2. 638-48)
While denying such accusations, EBB nonetheless acknowledged to a friend in writing that some of the stanzas “do ‘fit’ England ‘as if they were made for her,’ which they were not though” (qtd. in Stone and Taylor 280).

Stone has initially argued that “Barrett Browning was strictly accurate when she maintained in one of her letters that she did not curse any nation in the poem. [. . .] ‘the poem only pointed out how the curse was involved in the action of slave-holding’ (Kenyon 2: 367)” (“Cursing” 169). Slinn elaborates this view when he argues “the nation has brought the curse upon itself. The angel himself merely acts as an agent for the nation, mediating the consequences of its actions and instructing the poet to record them. As Marjorie Stone has pointed out, the curse is not the poet’s curse at all, but the curse induced by and therefore potentially inherent in the very cultural processes which produce oppressive action” (Tradition 49). The recently published Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Selected Poems sees a slight change in this view as the editors (Stone and Taylor) argue that although EBB claimed that the curse was neither directed at England nor America but at the institution of slavery itself, the revisions she made in the Liberty Bell edition of the poem for reprint in Poems before Congress suggest her critical attitude toward England’s apathy to the Italian Risorgimento (279-80). My point is that EBB calls attention to social injustices in all nations in their different forms rather than those of select western countries.

EBB would certainly have had the British and American middle-class audience in mind, as they made the largest body of her readership.
In addition to the plights of English factory workers and children, EBB would have been aware of the issues pertaining to the homeless girls in London through her sister Arabella (Stone and Taylor 281). Moreover, EBB might well have been conscious of her West Indian family legacy, part of which she inherited.

Chapter 3: From the Black Sea to the Black Atlantic: Blackness and Performativity in *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*

I refer to the Schomburg Library edition (1988) in all subsequent quotations from *Wonderful Adventures*.

For detailed discussions on this issue, see Paquet, Robinson (Amy), Cooper, Gikandi, McKenna, Paravisini-Gebert, Salih, Fluhr, and Howell.

William L. Andrews offers a good summary of Seacole’s social position in Britain after the Crimean War: “many men who felt indebted to her ministrations in the Crimea visited her apartment in London’s West End, and she was decorated by the French, Turkish, and probably the English governments for her service during the war. During the 1870s she cultivated a friendship with the Princess of Wales, for whom she evidently worked as a masseuse. Mary Seacole died in prosperous circumstances on May 14, 1881, and was buried in St. Mary’s Catholic cemetery in London” (Introduction, xxxiii).
For example, Jane Robinson’s carefully researched biography of Seacole is titled *Mary Seacole: The Most Famous Black Woman of the Victorian Age.* In 1988, when *Wonderful Adventures* was republished under *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*, the first sentence of the volume’s introduction, while acknowledging the complex nature of Seacole’s identity, defines her as African-American: “No autobiography by an Afro-American woman of the nineteenth century defies classification more than *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857)” (xxvii). Sandra Paquet discusses Seacole’s identity-building project in the British Empire as part of the African-American literary tradition in the *African American Review*.

The 1830s marked the height of British abolitionist dreams, with the fulfillment of the abolition of the slave trade (1807) and slavery itself (1833-38). The abolitionists then sought to develop Jamaica into an ideal “free-labour economy with black labour,” but later disappointments having shattered their dreams, Jamaica “increasingly appeared in the British imagination as a place of disappointment and decay, its black population lazy, its planter class decadent and archaic” (Hall 24). By the 1850s, disillusion had changed the sympathetic attitude of the British public towards black potential to a racist belief in black difference and inferiority, an attitude aggravated by racist publications like Thomas Carlyle’s “The Negro Question” from 1849, republished in 1853 with the more inflammatory title “The Nigger Question.”

As Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee note, traditional Creole medicine had its origin in Africa (13-14).
42 The Bible depicts God as a refiner, associating fire as a familiar metaphor for divine judgment: “For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver” (Mal. 3.2-3); “Is not my word like fire,” declares the Lord, ‘and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?’” (Jer. 23.29).

43 Seacole would have been well-informed of an outbreak of myalism in Jamaica that threatened to compromise religious black communities, an issue of serious concern to the Baptist missionaries on the island. For a detailed discussion of myalism and Christianity, see Hall 151-52.

44 For the same reason, Seacole condemns the Spanish-speaking natives of Cruces as “poor cowards” when she sees them incapable of making any realistic effort to fight cholera (26-27).

45 According to Fluhr, there is a strong possibility that Seacole’s young maid, whom Alexis Soyer called “Miss Sally Seacole,” was actually her own daughter. Jane Robinson, however, dismisses that possibility.

46 For example, Seacole quotes a “General B” who acknowledges her service and promises to protect her property from thieves (120-21).

47 Seacole’s awareness of British racism in the 1850s may explain why she distanced herself from the antislavery debate, unlike other contemporary black writers of her time such as Frederick Douglass, Mary Prince, and Nancy Prince. Yet her antagonism against the
slaveholding Americans and her approval of the free ex-slaves of New Granada suggest her support of abolition. In fact, Evelyn Hawthorne argues that the opening of Seacole’s narrative evokes the norms of slave narratives instead of those of war memoirs and unsettles the very norms it reproduces in a way that “disrupts the ‘master narratives’ of both the literary and imperial authority” (315-16).

48 For example, Seacole professes her infinite affinity to her British “sons” over the “quarrelsome Americans and treacherous Spaniards” (75).

49 The Americans whom Seacole held in contempt most likely came from the proslavery South, and she seems to have held a higher regard for those from the antislavery North—“the Government of the United States.” Such an attitude towards the slaveholding South differs from the pro-South sentiment prevalent in England despite its anti-slavery stance, largely due to the country’s dissatisfaction with the North’s blockade that prevented England from getting cotton from the South.

50 Hall’s account of the correspondence between a Jamaican Baptist missionary Walter Dendy and Edward Bean Underhill (Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society) regarding a wayward missionary “Brother Hands” shows that the concept of “usefulness” was indeed an intrinsic element of the Victorian middle-class mores: “Brother Hands [. . .] had ‘greatly injured the cause of Christ . . . and destroyed his own usefulness’ by drinking and dancing” (207; emphasis added).
It was also from her mother that Seacole learned the art of managing a Jamaican-style boardinghouse that would foreground the success of the British Hotel, a feat that starkly contrasts with the mismanagement of the British authorities at the onset of the Crimean War. Born into such a household as her mother’s, Seacole writes that “Providence evidently made me to be useful, and I can’t help it” (48).

Therefore, whereas Gikandi would assert that Seacole’s “self-portrait tends to leave the source of her [medical] expertise amorphous” (127), the source of Seacole’s medicine is not amorphous insofar as it is tangibly rooted in the cultural traditions of both the West Indies and Britain.

Seacole’s distinctively favorable account of the American runaway slaves in New Granada also attributes their superiority to a determined will to attain and retain freedom with no reference to race. The New Granada ex-slaves perform blackness as resistance to oppression expressed in various forms of anti-racial, anti-slavery, and anti-American hostility. This further testifies to Seacole’s recognition of the multilateral possibilities of blackness performed beyond the assumptions of racial prejudice.

Chapter 4: “The fire that lights those big black eyes of his is not an easy fire”: (Ir)rationalizing Blackness in Armadale, Miss or Mrs?, and The Guilty River

As Catherine Hall points out, belief in racial hierarchies consolidated in mid-Victorian England following the series of colonial rebellions such as the Indian Rebellion and the Morant
Bay rebellion: “By the 1860s, a form of racial thinking which assumed hierarchy and inequality, […] had become commonplace” (436).

Lisa Niles offers a stimulating account on the mobility of Lydia’s identity in which her body disrupts conventional notions of aging and unsettles Victorian social norms.

As Nathan Hensley suggests, Armadale’s representations of Jane Blanchard evoke tropes of slavery as “the docile Blanchard was passed back and forth between men like an object” (619).

As Goodlad suggests, Armadale’s attention to excavating the buried histories of Atlantic slavery anticipates William Boelhower’s call to adopt an archeological approach in Atlantic studies. Boelhower maintains that such a posture is informed by a “desire to make mute or fragmented things speak […] to make the scattered shards say what they do not say of their own accord” (94).

Goodlad’s reading complicates Lilian Nayder’s view of Midwinter as representing Collins’s marginalized characters who “most clearly perceive troubling social truths and bring to light certain facts that undermine the status quo”; especially so as Nayder’s discussion of the “troubling social truths” lacks a historical perspective and merely (and briefly) touches on the issue of class conflict in which “wealthy English squires may well be objects of resentment among their social inferiors” (Unequal Partners 85).
Armada"les effort to redeem Midwinter from his past by presenting him as an emerging writer further undercuts the novel’s conflicted desire to uncover history, as Midwinter’s empowerment devitalizes Lydia’s writing that is informed by her vivid Atlantic memories. As Alison A. Case argues, Lydia’s love for Midwinter eventually overwhelms her self-interest, and Midwinter’s “gradual empowerment as a writer and a man” occurs alongside Lydia’s “gradual incapacitation as a plotter” (141). This, according to Case, ultimately shows that Collins found it necessary “both to begin undermining Gwilt’s powers and to link her decline to Midwinter’s more positive process of resolving his own vexed relationship to fate and destiny. That is to say, it is a point at which the ideological needs of Collins’s use of gendered relations to plotting and narrative exceed his ability to provide adequate textual motivations for them” (142).

Michael Tondre’s argument about narrative delay may partially contribute to understanding the issue of Armada’s failure to exhume history. Drawing on mid-Victorian efforts to reconceptualize sensation in terms of anticipation and delay, Tondre argues that Armada strategically uses “prolonged patterns of postponement” that work on the sensitivities of both its characters and its readers. Within a plot unwilling to offer “satisfactory explanation of events,” the neurotic Midwinter and Lydia struggle to make sense of “the truth or facts of their experience” (586-87). From Tondre’s viewpoint, Armada’s attention to the “interplay between the novel’s lagging sensitive subjects and the impulses of a plot that perversely withholds a single source of truth” (587) presents the novel as a perplexed site in which any attempt to recuperate history must suffer a perpetual state of delay.
Alternatively, Nayder maintains that *Armadale* “erases the color line separating master from slave, colonizers from colonized, calls into question polarized conceptions of racial difference” by discursively associating Fergus Ingleby (whom she calls “Felix Ingleby”) first with Celts and then with African slaves (*Wilkie Collins* 107).

The novel portrays young Lydia as desperately seeking a sympathetic friend. After Jane Blanchard abandons her, Lydia lives a destitute life in Europe until she meets a Russian “baroness” leading a group of cardsharps. While Lydia’s assertion of her total ignorance of the baroness’s true identity cannot be immediately taken for granted, the fact that Lydia and the baroness “liked each other at their first introduction” (524)—as confirmed by the competent private eye James Bashwood—suggests that Lydia’s yearning for sympathy made her attach to the baroness “for the simple reason that the baroness was a hearty good friend to her from first to last” (525).

For example, Collins’s former friend Henry Chorley spewed invectives at Lydia in the *Athenaeum*, calling her “one of the most hardened female villains whose devices and desires have ever blackened literature.” The *Spectator* denounced Lydia as “a woman fouler than the refuse of the streets” (qtd. in Sutherland xix).

Other critics have also examined *Armadale*’s representations of Lydia’s racial otherness. In *Wilkie Collins*, for example, Lillian Nayder discusses *Armadale*’s analogy between race and gender which associates Lydia with unruly black slaves. Building on Nayder’s argument,
Monica M. Young-Zook looks into how Lydia is also racialized by her class. In turn, Piya Pal-Lapinski focuses on Lydia’s racial hybridity associated with her use of poison and her socially marginalized status.

65 Piya Pal-Lapinski maintains that Lydia is sexually attracted to Midwinter because of her “deep sympathy” for his otherness which she also feels in herself (113). As I argue, however, it is Lydia’s “deep sympathy” itself which, like Midwinter’s, conditions her otherness.

66 It might then be even possible to see similarities between Lydia’s life and the lives of the African diaspora, as she is continually made to assume different identities during her recurrent transatlantic and trans-European relocations—quack’s assistant, maid, forger, student, nun, musician, swindler’s companion, Mrs. Waldron, murderess, Mrs. Manuel, governess, piano teacher, Mrs. Midwinter, and, before her death, Mrs. Armadale. Despite her variable identity, the end of the novel sees Lydia’s grave as unidentifiable, marked only with an “L” and her date of death. Such irony may well illustrate the impossibility of containing Lydia identity within a single, stable index.

67 While critics such as Hensley refer to Thorpe-Ambrose as “classically English” (622), it is only so in appearance. As Goodlad points out, Armadale represents the mansion as deeply implicated in West Indian slavery, making it “a species of Atlantic artifact” (34).
Here Collins dissuades his readers from relating Natalie’s submissiveness to her blackness by associating passivity with height: “But who ever met with a tall woman who had a will of her own?” (38).

The trajectory of the Lodger’s social life also contrasts with Midwinter’s, as the Lodger begins as a member of mainstream English society and leaves it on his own accord.

Gerard, whose disposition by no means conforms to that of a typical Englishman, rejects English binarism obsessed with class divisions: “On that evening, my meeting with the daughter of the lord. On the next morning, my meeting with the daughter of the miller. Lady Lena at dinner; Cristel before breakfast. If Mrs. Roylake found out that social contrast, what would she say? I was a merry young fool; I burst out laughing” (296; emphasis original).

This period is short-lived, as the Lodger’s agreeability quickly escalates to a “delirium of high spirits” that soon makes him relapse into his former self with “horrid shudderings” that “shook him without mercy” (320). Here Collins shows that the force of binarism that possesses the Lodger is such that even his mood can only shift between low and high.

The Lodger’s depiction of the English as a mongrel race evokes Daniel Defoe’s *The true-born English-man, a satyr*, a work that defines the “well-extracted Blood of Englishmen” as a product of their having “Receiv’d all Nations with Promiscuous Lust” (15).
Conclusion

That a scholar is criticized as insular for not undertaking the largely impossible task of covering vast geographical regions beyond his field of expertise isn’t something one often sees in established fields like postcolonial studies.
Bibliography


Carens, Timothy L. Bachman and Cox 239-65.

Case, Alison A. “Femininity and Omniscience: Female Narrators in Bleak House and Armadale.”


Goodlad, Lauren M. E. *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience*. (Forthcoming)


Salih, Sara. “‘A gallant heart to the empire.’ Autoethnography and Imperial Identity in Mary Seacole’s Wonderful Adventures.” Philological Quarterly 83.2 (Spring 2004): 171-95.


Stauffer, Andrew M. “Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s (Re)Visions of Slavery.” English Language Notes 34.4 (June 1997): 29-48.


Trumpener, Katie. *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire.* Princeton:

