

ABOLITION, AFRICANS, AND ABSTRACTION:  
THE INFLUENCE OF THE 'NOBLE SAVAGE' ON BRITISH AND FRENCH  
ANTISLAVERY THOUGHT, 1787-1807

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*To my parents, who many years ago encouraged me to pursue my love for history, even though there may not have been an obviously pragmatic reason for doing so.*

## Acknowledgements

Though I only started researching for this thesis in early 2020, I consider this project to be the culmination of years of undergraduate training. By this, I mean that when I began my freshman year at the University of Florida in August 2017, I had no idea that more than three years later, I would be completing a thesis linking together the Enlightenment with British and French antislavery thought. Yet, as luck had it, my first semester in college, I enrolled in a course on “Modern France” with Dr. Sheryl Kroen, who challenged me (or perhaps forced me?) to work harder than I had ever done before. Her continued support, encouragement, and enthusiasm instilled in me a love for the Enlightenment, and my two semesters working with her indelibly influenced my undergraduate years. It was also Dr. Kroen who first introduced me to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Discours*, and I found it fitting that I concluded my work on this thesis by writing on the ways in which this text interacted with Rousseau’s later *Du social contract*.

In addition, my time at the University of Florida granted me the privilege of working with Dr. David Geggus, who opened my eyes to the complexities of the Haitian Revolution. The conversations he has gifted me over the years have not only educated me on the field of history (well, at least *his* perspective on the field), but they have helped me make sense of my own intellectual interests. I should also mention that while I left Florida in mid-2018 and Dr. Geggus has since retired from teaching, he was still willing to speak with me as I conducted research for this project. His impact on this thesis should be clear: beyond recommending that I look into the life of Saint-Domingue’s Civil Commissioner Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, who I incorporated into Chapter Two of this thesis, Dr. Geggus’

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## Introduction

*“Nature speaks a more powerful language than philosophy, or interests. Already have two colonies of fugitive Negroes been established to whom treaties and power give a perfect security from your attempts. These are so many indications of the impending storm, and the Negroes only want a chief, sufficiently courageous, to lead them on to vengeance and slaughter.”*<sup>1</sup>

This vision of a Black Spartacus, imagined by the French Enlightenment thinker Denis Diderot in the 1770 *Histoire des Deux Indes*, is often considered prophetic of Toussaint Louverture’s leadership in the Haitian Revolution. While Diderot’s antislavery polemic highlights the gap between the western European Enlightenment’s promotion of ‘liberty’ and the reality of chattel slavery in the Atlantic world, this brief excerpt also foreshadows a growing trend that exploded among British and French antislavery<sup>2</sup> advocates in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Namely, those early campaigners for the abolition of the slave trade increasingly relied on abstract and humanitarian arguments which alluded to romantic representations of “primitive” people and the state of nature more broadly. In Diderot’s case, these themes shine through: not only does he suggest that justice is based on principles inherent to nature, but he implies that these conceptions would motivate an African,<sup>3</sup> forced in shackles, to rise up against his supposedly ‘civilized’ oppressors.

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<sup>1</sup> *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Lynn Hunt (Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996), 52.

<sup>2</sup> This thesis uses “abolition” and “antislavery” interchangeably to refer to the principal goal of British and French antislavery campaigners between 1787 and 1807: the termination of their respective country’s involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, rather than the absolute end of chattel slavery in the New World.

<sup>3</sup> Originating with Aphra Behn’s 1689 novella *Oroonoko*, the vengeful African who leads a slave revolt became, over the course of the long-eighteenth century, a stock character associated with idealized notions of primitivity. This theme will be investigated more in chapters one and three of this thesis.



Following Diderot's footsteps (though he too was influenced by his intellectual predecessors), British and French antislavery advocates, though still belonging to a minority intellectual movement at the turn of the century, produced a rich variety of texts between 1787 and 1807 belonging to either an abstract or humanitarian tradition of polemic. In general terms, nonfiction writers tended to publish rational pamphlets against the slave trade aimed at persuading European readers through logic and reason, while humanitarian campaigners encouraged the production of novels, theatrical productions, and slave narratives designed to establish empathy with the enslaved African on the part of the same people. Though distinct, both methods shared a common influence: that of the Noble Savage, or the idealized image employed by western European Enlightenment thinkers depicting "primitive" human as virtue and innocence personified. Appearing after the 'discovery' of the New World, western European writers used the Noble Savage, initially represented as the Native American, as a tool to critique or celebrate the impact of modernization on western societies. This fascination with "primitive" humans and the state of nature as imagined in the New World facilitated notions of the social contract. But between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the changing demographics in the American colonies gradually shifted the subject to which the Noble Savage ideal was applied from the Native American to the African slave.

Scholars of western European literature have been preoccupied with the evolution of the Noble Savage trope for almost a century. Hoxie Neale Fairchild's 1928 monograph *The Noble Savage; A Study in Romantic Naturalism*, for instance, provided a comprehensive account of the trope in the British context,<sup>4</sup> whereas Edward Derbyshire

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<sup>4</sup> Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928).

Seeber in 1938 evaluated the presence of the “Noble Negro” (i.e. the Noble Savage embodied as an African) in eighteenth-century French literature.<sup>5</sup> This interest in the Noble Savage extends well into the present day, with scholars like Stelio Cro<sup>6</sup> and Tzvetan Todorov<sup>7</sup> concentrating on the formation of the literary trope, as well as its implications for western European Enlightenment thought on commerce, imperialism, and property, among other subjects. Though varied, these scholarly texts collectively suggest that over the course of the eighteenth century, the Noble Savage – whether portrayed as a Native American, African slave, or even a Pacific Islander – provided Europeans with a cognitive reference point from which to receive other cultures, which in turn facilitated western political and economic theory.

Scholarly discourse on the British and French antislavery movements is arguably even more dynamic than that on the Noble Savage, with analysis centering not only on the strategies employed by the two main antislavery societies of the time – the British Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade and the French Société des Amis des Noirs – but also on the broader thematic reasons for why each national context did or did not enact permanent abolition. These thematic concerns mostly center on the respective impact of humanitarian and economic arguments, though scholars also express interest in understanding the role of each country’s distinctive political systems in determining the antislavery strategies of intellectuals in both contexts. These comprehensive studies of both

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Derbyshire Seeber, *Anti-slavery in France during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937).

<sup>6</sup> Stelio Cro. *The Noble Savage: Allegory and Freedom* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

countries' antislavery efforts provide a clear, albeit complex, perspective on the overarching factors that concerned antislavery campaigners between 1787 and 1807.

Despite this rich scholarship on both the Noble Savage and late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century antislavery, scholars often take for granted the connection between the two subjects. In fact, no extended study has yet focused on how Enlightenment notions of "primitive" people impacted and shaped the arguments prevalent in early British and French antislavery thought. In an effort to close this gap, this thesis will trace the shared influence of the concept of the Noble Savage on both abstract and humanitarian arguments between 1787 and 1807. This time period is chosen for its rich antislavery dialogue: the British Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade was founded in 1787, the French *Société des Amis des Noirs* operated from 1788 to 1793, and the British abolition of the slave trade occurred in 1807.

As this thesis hopes to make clear, the Enlightenment literary trope of the Noble Savage influenced British and French antislavery arguments between 1787 and 1807 in two ways. The first of these is through abstract arguments based on the social contract theory tradition. The second is by a humanitarian ethos that made empathetic identification with the 'enslaved African' possible. This is not to imply that all antislavery texts belong to one category or the other, however; instead, as we will see, there are a variety of antislavery texts, such as Olympe de Gouges' 1788 play *L'Esclavage des Noirs, ou L'Heureux Naufrage* and the narratives of formerly enslaved Africans, that draw on characteristics of both categories.

My thesis intends to illustrate these connections in three chapters. The first of these traces the history of the Noble Savage literary trope, including its racial and spatial

transformations, in an effort to comprehensively lay out the themes that will be picked up in chapters two and three. In particular, this chapter will investigate widely-read travel and missionary narratives, political treatises, and works of fiction that constructed and developed the trope over the early modern period. Indeed, almost immediately after Christopher Columbus' discovery of the New World, travelers and missionaries remarked that the Native American could be used as a rhetorical tool to compliment and critique certain aspects of contemporary European civilization. Basing their perceptions of Native Americans on narratives written by these travelers and missionaries, political theorists and social critics before and during the western European Enlightenment often described the Native American either as a "Noble Savage" – a representation of innocence found only in those territories relatively untouched by prevailing western customs – or as a barbaric, "Ignoble Savage" – a description which justified enslavement and colonization. Agreeing with the research of political scientist Sankar Muthu,<sup>8</sup> this chapter also aims to summarize the central contradiction of the Noble Savage: whereas the trope conceded the humanity of New World peoples, it simultaneously dehumanized Native Americans by portraying them as entirely dependent on natural instincts and lacking any form of developed social organization.

The second chapter will then draw connections between the Noble Savage, the social contract concepts then prevalent in political and social theory, and rational arguments against the trans-Atlantic slave trade made by antislavery advocates between 1787 and 1807. Though natural law and the concept of 'man in the state of nature' had been used to critique classical justifications of slavery as early as the seventeenth century,

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<sup>8</sup> Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's contributions in the mid-eighteenth century to the social contract theory, made possible by the indirect appearance of the Noble Savage in his 1755 *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, provided a new ideological basis for antislavery writing. Abstract antislavery arguments, particularly those based in the language of Rousseau, permeated the British and French abolitionist movements after the advent of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787 and the Société des Amis des Noirs in 1788. These arguments tended to situate slavery outside the social contract and posit the institution as contrary to Enlightened notions of natural law. This chapter will therefore emphasize the appearance of the primitive and the social contract theory in political treatises and parliamentary debates concerning the Atlantic slave trade to illuminate the indirect influence of the Noble Savage on the period's abstract antislavery arguments.

The third and final chapter will detail how antislavery arguments based in the language of humanitarianism employed the Noble African to create empathy among European audiences for enslaved Blacks. In contrast to abstract antislavery arguments based in social contract theory, arguments against slavery that depended upon empathetic identification with the enslaved African were more directly associated with the Noble Savage literary trope. In fact, the development of humanitarianism can be tied to the growing number of novels, theatrical productions, and poems, particularly between 1787 and 1807, that contained African main characters in the tradition of the Noble Savage trope. In effect, these works generally portrayed Africans as primitive representations of virtue and Europeans as Ignoble Savages. By doing so, antislavery campaigners hoped to

convince European audiences that abolition would liberate the inherent goodness of the African and allow western European societies to reap the benefits of free and loyal subjects.

While the primary goal of this thesis is to fill in a research gap by making clear the role of the Noble Savage in early abstract and humanitarian antislavery arguments, there is additional significance to this topic. For one, this project describes how both elites and popular movements contested political rights. By exploring each technique – appeals to empathy or reliance on rational arguments – we can better understand how both minorities and their advocates expressed agency in a developing democratic world. Furthermore, neither the British nor the French antislavery movements existed in isolation from one another, and this project serves as a case study for how early popular movements interacted with one another across national boundaries. Hence, as we proceed through the three chapters of this comparative work, which stretches across linguistic, national, and temporal boundaries, it may be worth considering how the themes shared by this thesis' many actors apply in a contemporary world where minority citizens and their allies continue to search out novel ways to fight for human rights for all peoples.

## Chapter 1 – A Savage Enslavement: An Overview of the Literary Trope

### Introduction

*“We reckon them Slaves in Comparison to us, and Intruders, as oft as they enter our Houses, or hunt near our Dwellings. But if we will admit Reason to be our Guide, she will inform us, that these Indians are the freest People in the World, and so far from being Intruders upon us, that we have abandon’d our own Native Soil to drive them out, and possess theirs.”*<sup>9</sup>

The English explorer John Lawson in his 1709 *A New Voyage to Carolina* provided European readers with ample commentary on the indigenous communities he encountered in North America. Yet, Lawson did not write this narrative for altruistic reasons; rather, his text encouraged colonization of the Americas, even as he portrayed Native Americans as noble beings. In this way, Lawson’s text exemplifies the early modern period’s travel narrative genre: beginning with Columbus’ ‘discovery’ of the New World, European travelers to the Americas – whether these be paid explorers, Christian missionaries, or *émigres* fleeing economic or religious difficulties in their home countries – often wrote of Native Americans in complimentary terms, either to justify conquest or to draw comparisons between civilized Europe and societies perceived as primitive.

As the travel genre exploded through the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, this association between Native Americans and primitiveness only strengthened in the minds of European readers. Consequently, many European writers, inspired by illustrations found in travel narratives, constructed the literary trope of the Noble Savage, which hailed the Native American as a representation of innocence found only in those territories relatively untouched by western customs. On the flipside, others regarded Native Americans as

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<sup>9</sup> John Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina* (London: 1709), 236.

Ignoble Savages whose supposed evil and barbaric nature justified their conquest. Political theorists and novelists quickly understood the value of the Native American as a means to comment on contemporary European society, and so the literary trope permeated literature by the end of the western European Enlightenment. The eagerness with which Europeans embraced the Noble/Ignoble Savage paradigm should not indicate that the trope was entirely novel, however; the trope's immediate popularity came out of a longstanding intellectual interest among Europeans in the primitive.

This chapter summarizes the history of the literary trope in an effort to lay out the critical vocabulary shared by those early modern European writers who interacted with the Noble/Ignoble Savage paradigm. Discourse on the Noble Savage previews the themes of the second and third chapters of this thesis; the Noble Savage, by facilitating discussions on natural law and the social contract, and by evolving into the Noble African as a result of changing demographics in the Americas, gifted late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century antislavery campaigners with a host of argumentative and rhetorical strategies. As much as the Noble Savage may have assisted antislavery advocates, however, the trope discredited the agency of non-European peoples by making them into mere caricatures that could be manipulated at the whim of European writers. With all this considered, this chapter will trace the evolution of the Noble Savage, with particular attention paid to the trope's appearance in travel narratives, political treatises, and works of fiction.



## Travel Narratives

The glorification of Native Americans<sup>10</sup> began as early as the first European explorers' encounters with the New World. Indeed, Christopher Columbus's *Journal*,<sup>11</sup> written nearly every evening during his six-and-a-half month journey to the Caribbean in 1492, provides decisive descriptions of the Native Americans he encountered, despite language differences preventing any real sort of mutual cultural understanding.<sup>12</sup> Enamored immediately by the Natives, Columbus remarks that those in the Caribbean are "very well made, with very handsome bodies, and very good countenances" (111)<sup>13</sup> before commenting on their general character. These character observations are also complimentary: although he describes the Natives as a "race of people very poor in everything" because of their lack of clothing (111), they are still "so free to give" and "anxious to let the Christians have all they wanted" (191). Paralleling this emphasis on the Natives' selflessness, however, are remarks on their stupidity and subservient nature: the Natives are pleased by even the most insignificant gifts (110-111) and are "good-hearted people" (191) who will be easy to convert and force into labor.

This duality between the Natives' beauty and innocence on one side and their stupidity and subservience on the other appears repeatedly in travelers' early descriptions of the New World. Columbus's more widely read 1493 letter to Spanish monarchs

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<sup>10</sup> I use the term "Native Americans" to refer to all Amerindians, rather than exclusively those indigenous to North America.

<sup>11</sup> "Journal of the First Voyage of Columbus: Document No. AJ-602" (Wisconsin Historical Society, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 17.

<sup>13</sup> While this thesis will employ footnotes for all secondary sources and the first instance in which a primary source is mentioned, in-text citations will be used if a primary source is mentioned several times, such as in the case of my analysis of Columbus' *Journal*.

Ferdinand and Isabella,<sup>14</sup> for example, highlights the motivations of many Atlantic explorers: he sees the New World as a tool to increase Spain's "profit and commerce" (7) and is pleased by the lack of "resistance" shown by the Natives in the Caribbean (4). Despite these sinister remarks, Columbus describes the Caribbean as a sort of paradise: the Natives are "neither lazy nor awkward" (6), which is notable considering the Natives' lack of "fixed government" (4) and private property (7). Alongside the pristine natural landscape of the islands (5), Columbus depicts the Natives as a representation of pure innocence: as in his *Journal*, Columbus remarks on their "naked appearance" but expands his analysis to include their "fearful and timid" nature (5). While he expresses fear that some Natives in the Caribbean may be cannibals in both his *Journal* (157) and his Letter (7), his repeated focus on the Natives' virtue and mild nature left a significant impression on his letter's thousands of readers.<sup>15</sup>

Although Columbus's idealistic representations of Native beauty and innocence could have been doubted had he been the only writer to paint such images, almost all successive travel narratives made similar remarks on the Natives, perhaps in imitation of his popular letter. Many of Amerigo Vespucci's words of the sixteenth century,<sup>16</sup> for example, echo those of Columbus: the Natives are "well proportioned," possess a "good-looking expression of countenance," and live naked "just as they came from their mothers' wombs." Interestingly, Vespucci is among the earliest to ever draw a direct connection between the Native Americans and the state of nature: the Natives, he claimed, "live

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<sup>14</sup> "Christopher Columbus' letter to Ferdinand and Isabella, 1493" (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC01427).

<sup>15</sup> Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, 41.

<sup>16</sup> "The Letters of Amerigo Vespucci and other documents illustrative of his career," translated by Clements R. Markham (Project Gutenberg: 2011).

according to nature,” practice “no commerce,” and prefer to share everything in common rather than have private property. These broad generalizations were also joined by criticisms: while he celebrates the Natives as “gentle and tractable,” Vespucci judges their “libidinous” women, their self-imposed facial “perforations,” and willingness to eat human flesh. On this latter point: whereas Columbus merely alludes to the possibility that some Natives are cannibals, Vespucci provides a terrifying example to illuminate the Natives’ savagery: “I knew a man who was properly credited to have eaten 300 human bodies,” he writes. This reference to cannibalism, in addition to his emphasis on Natives’ existence in the state of nature, foreshadow some of the critical vocabulary used by later political theorists who employed the Noble/Ignoble Savage paradigm.<sup>17</sup>

These examples should not suggest that primitivism, or a fascination with that which lacks the hallmarks of civilization,<sup>18</sup> emerged with the discovery of the New World, however. Rather, European discourse on savagery had existed since antiquity: Herodotus harshly critiqued Ancient Greece’s neighbors for lacking civility,<sup>19</sup> and imagery recalling the Golden Age of Adam and Eve appeared intermittently throughout regions with sizable Judeo-Christian populations. Yet, despite primitivism being well developed long before Columbus’s journey, the New World provided fresh material, with the sixteenth-century discovery of previously ‘unknown’ lands facilitating comparisons between the values of American ‘savages’ and those of western Europe’s earlier inhabitants.<sup>20</sup> The earliest

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<sup>17</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 267.

<sup>18</sup> In this context, of course, “civilization” is defined through a strictly Eurocentric lens. To understand how western Europeans defined “civilization,” pay close attention to those features emphasized by travelers and political theorists in order to distinguish Amerindian society from European ones.

<sup>19</sup> Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, 267.

writings of the New World show this: though Columbus and Vespucci's accounts were mostly descriptive, their analyses contained embedded value judgments designed to justify future exploitation of the Americas. Early accounts of Amerindians were so inquisitive for two reasons: (1) maritime exploration was a high-risk and mentally-taxing investment, and travelers<sup>21</sup> tended to justify their Atlantic sufferings with positive observations of their destination; and (2) many travelers explored because they were at least slightly dissatisfied with their home countries, providing reason to make critical comparisons between new lands and Europe.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, travelers viewed exploration as a means of changing the world: along these lines, any descriptions of new lands should be perceived skeptically for their propensity to embellish reality with romantic illustrations.<sup>23</sup>

Just as primitivism was not exclusive to the earliest explorers of the New World, neither were remarks on Native Americans restricted to navigators funded by the Iberian monarchies. In fact, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the English and the French, rather than the Spanish or Portuguese, provided the bulk of commentary on the Native American. This is, of course, due to changing dynamics in the Atlantic World: as the early modern period progressed, English and French colonial expeditions expanded each country's presence in the Americas. Still, there are important distinctions between the experiences of English and French settlers in North America: although both countries had similar colonial aspirations – that of “imperial expansion, religious conversion, and

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<sup>21</sup> I use the term “travelers” to refer to three main groups: explorers who were paid to conquer far off lands, clerics who aimed to convert those lands' indigenous people, or *émigres* who fled Europe to escape unfavorable economic or religious conditions.

<sup>22</sup> Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, 270.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 271.

economic exploitation”<sup>24</sup> – the English interacted with the Natives in North America less than the French. This was a strategic decision: fear of Native attack, particularly after the death of 347 English settlers at the hands of the Powhatan people at Jamestown in 1622, motivated the English to treat colonial outposts as fortresses protecting them from the wilderness.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, agriculture and a Puritan ethos of self-dependence defined the early English colonial experience in North America, meaning that British colonists were not inspired to establish significant communication with the Natives.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, the French under Samuel Champlain developed fewer settlements, choosing instead to engage in the fur trade, which necessitated taking advantage of the Natives’ well-established trading networks.<sup>27</sup> In the eyes of French fur traders, or the *coureurs de bois*, commercial success depended on a knowledge of Native cultures, and therefore added attention was paid to the habits and customs of Native Americans.<sup>28</sup>

These distinguishing features impacted the prevalence of English and French literature that incorporated descriptions of the Native American. Whereas the agriculturally-focused English colonists paid less attention to exploration and more to plants and landscapes,<sup>29</sup> the French, particularly their abundant Catholic missionaries,<sup>30</sup> wrote substantial tracts on Native Americans.<sup>31</sup> Among these French missionaries was Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre, whose four volume *Histoire générale des Antilles habitées par*

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<sup>24</sup> Gordon M. Sayre, *Les sauvages américains: Representations of Native Americans in French and English Colonial Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 15-16.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

*les Français*,<sup>32</sup> published between 1667 and 1671, provides one of the earliest instances of the Noble Savage trope. One of the most widely read French missionary narratives, Du Tertre's work inspired Enlightenment figures like Voltaire and Rousseau<sup>33</sup> and continued to build upon the dichotomy of savagery and innocence first laid out by Columbus and Vespucci.

Du Tertre in his *Histoire générale* makes clear the connection between the Natives and nature. In his section on "Des sauvages en général," Du Tertre explains that Native Americans are not true savages but rather representations of nature personified: "nos Sauvages ne soient Sauvages que de nom, ainsi que les plantes & les fruits que la nature produit" (356). Whether Du Tertre was conscious of it or not, he was a disciple of the primitive tradition pushed forward in the Americas by early explorers. Like Columbus, Du Tertre compliments the Natives' appearance<sup>34</sup>, and following the example of Vespucci, depicts the Natives as children of nature: "ils sont tels que la nature les a produits, c'est à dire, dans une grande simplicité & naïveté naturelle" (357). Unlike Columbus and Vespucci, however, Du Tertre is more emphatic in his comparisons between the Old World and the New: "Nos Sauvages sont plus ignorant que nous, qu'ils sont beaucoup moins vicieux" (358). He even depicts the Natives as living in an egalitarian utopia: "ils sont tous égaux...l'on connoisse presque aucune sorte de supériorité ni de servitude...Nul n'est plus riche, ni plus pauvre que son compagnon" (357). Du Tertre is not merely reporting through

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<sup>32</sup> Jean Baptiste Du Tertre, *Histoire Generale Des Antilles Habitées Par Les François: Tome II, Contenant L'histoire Naturelle* (A Paris: chez Thomas Iolly, au Palais, en la Salle des Merciers, à la Palme, & aux Armes d'Hollande, 1667).

<sup>33</sup> Madeleine Dobie, *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 132.

<sup>34</sup> Du Tertre writes of the Natives: "ils sont d'une belle taille, d'un corsage bien proportionné" (357) & "Ils sont d'un naturel benin, doux, affable, & compatissent bien souvent" (359).

these descriptions; his illustrations of Native peoples appear designed to encourage further missionary activity by sparking curiosity in the region's native peoples.

While these descriptions make the Native American appear as a sort of “bon sauvage,” Du Tertre at other points is harshly critical of Native traditions. After all, Du Tertre was a missionary who, like Columbus, was eager to justify the mass conversion of Natives. Though he viewed favorably the Natives for their simplicity and proximity to nature, at other points he criticized them for not cultivating land and expressed disappointment that the Natives did not wholly embrace Christianity.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, he celebrated French colonization of the Caribbean: though some violence perpetrated by the French was excessive, he writes, the French brought reason to the Native community.<sup>36</sup> This plays strangely with his comments on how the Natives possess wit even though they lack written language: “Ils ont le raisonnement bon & l'esprit autant subtil que le peuvent avoir des personnes, qui n'ont aucune teinture des lettres” (358).

Similar contradictions mark his other descriptions, such as those of African slaves in the Caribbean. While the number of enslaved Africans rose during his time in the Antilles,<sup>37</sup> Du Tertre rarely mentions African slavery in the Caribbean, beginning a period of continued ambivalence towards Black slavery by French writers. When he does describe African slavery, however, echoes of his earlier descriptions of Native Americans shine through: “Quand on les traite avec douceur, & qu'on les nourrit bien, ils s'estiment les plus heureuses gens du monde” (497). Because Du Tertre's work is among the most well-known Catholic missionary narratives written in the seventeenth century, the little attention he

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<sup>35</sup> Dobie, *Trading Places*, 134.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 134.

<sup>37</sup> Dobie, *Trading Places*, 133.

shows to Africans may signal that, since chattel slavery was still developing in the British and French colonies, European colonists and Catholic missionaries did not yet see Africans as a significant population in the Americas. Instead, although European colonization was quickly decimating Native populations, Europeans continued to prefer the Native American over the African when they selected a subject for the literary trope.

Perhaps even more influential than Du Tertre's *Histoire générale* for the development of the Noble Savage literary trope in the French context were the Baron de Lahontan's three travel narratives, all of which were published in 1703: *Nouveaux Voyages dans l'Amérique Septentrionale*, *Mémoires de l'Amérique Septentrionale*, and *Supplément aux Voyages ou Dialogues avec le sauvage Adario*. Unlike many of the other authors of American travel narratives, Lahontan possessed an unorthodox background for a French colonist: a petty noble, he served as a soldier in Canada but was expelled from service by his commanding officer.<sup>38</sup> He additionally had no reservations about sharing his anticlerical and deist beliefs, which ultimately resulted in his exile from France following the publication of these three volumes.<sup>39</sup> Though his writings could be perceived as unoriginal because many of his ideas borrowed from previous travel narratives, Lahontan's work is notable in that it brought together various stereotypes of Native Americans into a coherent narrative and was uncompromising in its stance.<sup>40</sup> As historian Tzvetan Todorov explains, Lahontan's writings can be described as "egalitarian and universalist," with Lahontan arguing that "there should be no Distinction or Superiority" among individuals.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Sayre, *Les sauvages américains*, 31.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>40</sup> Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, 272.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 272.



Lahontan conveyed his radical ideas by using the Native American as a rhetorical tool.<sup>42</sup> Living in a period when petty nobles like himself had lost much of their power under the bureaucratic consolidation of Louis XIV's reign, Lahontan designed a text that suggested the superiority of nature over dogma and questioned the legitimacy of absolute rule.<sup>43</sup> The Hurons that he described by employing what historian D.A. Harvey calls "symmetrical inversion" became a foil that could be used to expose the corruption Lahontan observed in early-eighteenth-century France.<sup>44</sup> According to Lahontan, the Hurons live without hierarchy<sup>45</sup> and live rationally by following natural law rather than written law.<sup>46</sup> Lahontan further contrasts France's indulgent luxury with the simplicity of the Americas by lauding Native Americans for their cooperative spirit<sup>47</sup> and ability to "limit themselves to what is necessary." Where the "bon sauvage," as described by Du Tertre, truly comes through, however, is in Lahontan's third work, where Adaro, a fictional Huron, converses with a fictional Lahontan.<sup>48</sup> In this conversation, Lahontan's own positions on religion, private property, and luxury are voiced through Adaro, who serves as one of the first instances of a literary "Noble Savage." Lahontan's ideas – which suggest that France could reap the benefits of adopting at home the Noble Savage's virtue – found widespread support during the Enlightenment, particularly among writers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau,

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<sup>42</sup> Lahontan describes the Native as having "le caractère du plus honnête homme du monde" before commenting:

"Puisqu'enfin c'est un fait incontestable, que les Nations qui n'ont point été corrompues par le voisinage des Européens, n'ont ni tien ni mien, ni loix, ni Juges."

<sup>43</sup> David Allen Harvey, "The Noble Savage and the Savage Noble: Philosophy and Ethnography in the "Voyages" of the Baron De Lahontan" (*French Colonial History* 11, 2010), 165.

<sup>44</sup> Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, 272.

<sup>45</sup> Dobie, *Trading Places*, 179.

<sup>46</sup> Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, 276.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 278.

<sup>48</sup> Sayre, *Les sauvages américains*, 38.

whose social contract facilitated the antislavery arguments analyzed in this thesis' second chapter.

While the Native American appeared more often in the French context and developed, at least in Lahontan's work, into the literary trope of the "Noble Savage" more quickly than the English case, many English travelers were still interested, albeit on a smaller scale, in the Native American as a rhetorical tool. The English explorer John Lawson's 1709 *A New Voyage to Carolina*<sup>49</sup> is among several English travel narratives of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that make reference to Native Americans. Lawson's text stands out among previous Iberian and French travel narratives in that he is comfortable enough to express his confusion with the Natives: "Their way of Living is so contrary to ours, that neither we nor they can fathom one anothers Designs and Methods" (232). Still, Lawson, like others, sees the Natives through the prism of religious conversion: the Natives "have some uncouth Ways in the Management and Course of Living" (231), and the English should therefore investigate how to "bring these People into the Bosom of the Church" (232). Among the Natives' flaws is, as Du Tertre emphasized, their lack of literacy; Lawson is disturbed by their "deficient" language (231) and implicitly defines written language as a characteristic of the civilized, an association that would prove relevant when antislavery advocates appropriated the literary trope almost a century later. On the other hand, Lawson uses the Natives to contrast Europe to the state of nature; whereas the Natives possess "natural endowments" like patience, loyalty, and selflessness, "the Europeans possess more Moral Deformities, and Evils than these Savages do" (235). By making such a remark, Lawson condemns contemporary European colonization: the

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<sup>49</sup> John Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina*.

Natives “have learnt several Vices of the *Europeans*,” (232) like swearing and drunkenness (236), and English colonists “ought to shew a Tenderness for these Heathens” (236). Hence, Lawson’s work, while ambivalent towards Native peoples, suggests that a milder and more inclusive relationship with Native Americans may be necessary if the English wanted their colonization project to succeed. This suggestion, just like his disdain for the Natives’ lack of literacy, would influence the arguments of later Black British antislavery advocates like Ottobah Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano, both of whom will be detailed in chapter three of this thesis.

Many European readers considered the travel narrative genre, though at times repetitive, a legitimate source of information during the early modern period. Based in the interplay between ethnography and exploration, these travel narratives quickly garnered the attention of European readers through their promotion of novel ideas and descriptions.<sup>50</sup> Although these texts could have been perceived as fantasies, their structure established credibility: day-by-day accounts suggested real time observations, and the attention paid to specific places made it possible for readers to track a traveler’s journey.<sup>51</sup> Earlier travel narratives – say, those of Columbus and Vespucci – also differed from those of later travelers, like Du Tertre, Lahontan, and Lawson; the latter three figures established a hybrid form, which separated illustrations of new lands from specific essays on Native life.<sup>52</sup> By doing so, they established control over knowledge of the Natives, at least in the sense that these authors acted as if they knew enough about the Natives to create a

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 121.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 79.

‘comprehensive’ account of indigenous customs.<sup>53</sup> Thus, even though these travel narratives were subjective, first-person narratives, readers across the Atlantic often took them as truth.<sup>54</sup>

### **The Noble Savage & Political Theory**

Inspired by these travelers’ illustrations of Native Americans, European political theorists used the Native American as a rhetorical tool to comment on natural law and governance. Politics had been intertwined with the European-Amerindian relationship since Columbus’s journey: Columbus enslaved Natives in the Caribbean shortly after his arrival, and by 1550-1551 the heated Valladolid debate in Spain over the legitimacy of enslaving Natives occurred between Bartolomé de las Casas, a Dominican friar who accompanied Columbus to the New World, and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, a prominent humanist scholar. Using Aristotelian justifications for slavery, which will be discussed further in chapter two, Sepúlveda supported the enslavement of Natives, arguing that they were “natural slaves” who could not properly rule themselves.<sup>55</sup> In Sepúlveda’s eyes, the Amerindians lacked comparable reason to the Europeans<sup>56</sup> and believed that slavery would be a civilizing force: “it would be a great good for those depraved, barbarous, and impious ones to obey those who are good.”<sup>57</sup> Although Sepúlveda never visited the Americas, he could make such claims precisely because of the existence of travel narratives. In fact,

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<sup>53</sup> The following is a nonexhaustive list of narratives that emulate this style of comprehensive Native societies: Robert Beverly’s *History of the Present State of Virginia*, Philip Amadas and Arthur Barlow’s *First Voyage Made to the Coast of Virginia*, Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, and Jonathan Carver’s *Travels Through the Interior Parts of North America*.

<sup>54</sup> Fairchild, *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism*, 30.

<sup>55</sup> María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo. *Indian Given: Racial Geographies across Mexico and the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 41.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

Sepúlveda repeatedly referred to the Caribs' cannibalism, reflecting the sixteenth-century notion that cannibalism was widespread among indigenous people in the New World.<sup>58</sup> While Las Casas ultimately claimed to have won the debate by basing his argument on the existence of "indigenous rationality"<sup>59</sup> and a "universal theory of humanity,"<sup>60</sup> Sepúlveda's arguments laid the foundations for a self-serving justification that enslavement would be beneficial to communities perceived as primitive.

Although travelers like Lahontan used the Native American to make pointed comparisons between European society and indigenous life, a growing chorus of voices who never traveled to the New World helped establish the notion of the indigenous American as living in a "Golden Age." Montaigne is one such example: his *Essais*, first published in 1580, provide among the earliest instances of the use of the Noble Savage in political thought. However, Montaigne, like every other figure discussed, was influenced by his predecessors. Namely, the Italian theologian Peter Martyr, in his 1516 *De Orbo Novo*, characterized the "islanders of Hispaniola" as living "in a true golden age...satisfied with the goods of nature, and without worries for the future."<sup>61</sup> By doing so, he set up a comparison between indigenous life and European civilization; in contrast to the Europeans, the Natives are happy because they do not need to deal with cash, corrupt judges, or misleading books.<sup>62</sup> Martyr was, according to historian Stelio Cro, "the first primitive historian" after the discovery of the New World,<sup>63</sup> and among the first to remark

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<sup>58</sup> Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, 14

<sup>59</sup> Saldaña-Portillo, *Indian Given*, 45.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>61</sup> Stelio Cro. *The Noble Savage: Allegory and Freedom* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990), 22.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

that “the natural state of naked men with no letters or laws”<sup>64</sup> is superior to the “total decadence” of European civilization.<sup>65</sup> This theme of the happier Native, based in evidence provided by travel narratives, would be appropriated throughout the Enlightenment, particularly by authors like Rousseau, who wrote his *Discours* using travelers’ descriptions of Venezuelan Caribs.<sup>66</sup>

Therefore, while Montaigne is often considered the first political thinker to make use of the Noble Savage myth, many of his descriptions were heavily influenced by Martyr, whose work is in turn based on travel narratives.<sup>67</sup> Like Martyr, Montaigne believed that the New World provided theorists with a concrete example from which “to base their concept of an ideal state.”<sup>68</sup> Montaigne did not take this discovery lightly: in his 1580 essay “Of Cannibals,”<sup>69</sup> he spends considerable time comparing Amerindian society “with which the poets have adorned the golden age, and all their inventions in feigning a happy state of man.” Like Du Tertre, who directly observed Natives in the Antilles more than 100 years later, Montaigne does not say it is fair to characterize the Natives as savages: “I find that there is nothing barbarous and savage in this nation, by anything that I can gather, excepting, that every one gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own country.” Instead, Montaigne turns the definition of savagery on its head. It is the European, rather than the Native, he argues, who is truly savage. Indeed, in contrast to the Native Americans, who “are savages at the same rate that we say fruits are wild,” European

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 31-32.

<sup>69</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays of Montaigne, Complete*, produced by David Widger (2006, Project Gutenberg, 2016), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3600/3600-h/3600-h.htm>

“artifice” has “helped to degenerate” the natural innocence of indigenous people. Montaigne’s reflection of the trope back onto Europeans would be imitated by those fighting for the rights of enslaved people in the late-eighteenth century.

Ironically, though, while Montaigne urges his readers to be skeptical of allowing cultural bias to overshadow their understanding of indigenous life, his work draws heavily in its construction on primitivism.<sup>70</sup> For instance, he characterizes the indigenous people of the Americas as evidence of the “original simplicity” of man, before describing them as existing in a Golden Age.<sup>71</sup> He writes that the Natives have “no manner of traffic, no knowledge of letters...no properties, no employments” – essentially none of the hallmarks of a developing commercial society; yet “the very words that signify lying, treachery, dissimulation, avarice, envy, detraction, pardon” are unheard of until the Europeans appear. The Natives are simple people: “all their ethics are comprised in these two articles, resolution in war, and affection to their wives,” and “they only covet so much as their natural necessities require.” While Montaigne appears a fan of indigenous primitivity, the title of this essay (“Of Cannibals”) is telling: the Natives, despite their virtue and innocence, have a taboo side. Montaigne highlights the Amerindians’ tendency to resort to cannibalism following war, though he makes clear that even this is less barbaric than the European custom of torturing under the guise of “piety and religion.” In other words, Montaigne’s “Of Cannibals” exemplifies a central pitfall of the Noble Savage: while he celebrates Native people’s values and habits in an effort to criticize European decadence, he still implicitly insists that Native Americans can be essentialized to their least civilized characteristic (cannibalism).

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<sup>70</sup> Fairchild, *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism*, 21.

<sup>71</sup> Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, 267.

Primitivism, particularly in the context of the Noble/Ignoble Savage paradigm, grew increasingly common in the decades preceding the Enlightenment, which is to say the latter half of the seventeenth century. After all, travel narratives, such as the ones discussed, provided ample evidence of indigenous customs, and the writings of thinkers like Martyr and Montaigne had long underscored how the Native American could be used as a rhetorical tool to comment on the weaknesses of European society. As early as 1651, Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* advocated for absolute rule by describing the “brutish” nature of man in the state of nature, which he situated imaginatively in the Americas. But while John Locke's 1689 *Two Treatises of Civil Government* followed Hobbes' lead in using the Americas as a fictive origin story of human beings – “in the beginning All the World was America,” he wrote in “Of Property” – he also painted a very different picture of this world as a land of natural freedom before detailing how the seizure and cultivation of land, especially in the American context, was justified by God.<sup>72</sup>

Though Hobbes and Locke made use of the state of nature and the Native American to support their diverging political philosophies, the political theorist most associated with the Noble Savage is Jean-Jacques Rousseau,<sup>73</sup> although he never explicitly uses this term in his 1755 *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*.<sup>74</sup> This text is critical because it uses notions of the primitive to construct a political argument

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<sup>72</sup> John Locke, “Of Patriarchy,” in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Thomas Hollis (London: A. Millar et al., 1764), §. 49.

<sup>73</sup> For a sampling of scholarly discourse on Rousseau's *Discours* and *Du contrat social*, see: Todorov, *On Human Diversity*; Fairchild, *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism*; Dobie, *Trading Places*; and Benjamin Gregg, “Might the Noble Savage have Joined the Earliest Cults of Rousseau?” in *Entre hétérogénéité et imagination. Pratiques de la réception de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, edited by Jesko Reiling and Daniel Tröhler (Genève: Éditions Slatkine (in the series Travaux sur la Suisse des Lumières), 2013), 347-366.

<sup>74</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men* (Boston, Bedford, 2011).



and sets up his 1762 *Du contrat social*, which, as we will see in chapter two of this thesis, invigorated later antislavery thought. In his *Discours*, Rousseau invites his audience to wonder “what humankind could have become if it had remained abandoned to itself” (43) before employing travel narratives to craft a theoretical state of nature. However, unlike prior travel writers, Rousseau’s state of nature is meant to exist in the abstract, and he does not assign moral judgments onto primitive people. Rather, he characterizes primitive people as “neither good nor bad” (60) and selects an amoral, nonspecific version of the primitive to support his argument.

Rousseau’s *Discours* rests on the idea that man in his natural state is distinguishable from all other beings. In the state of nature, he argues, humans are “the most advantageously organized of all” beings (45) because of their perfectibility and ability to act as a free agent. “Nature commands every animal, and the beast obeys,” Rousseau writes, but when “man experiences the same impression,” he realizes that “he is free to acquiesce or to resist” (51). Rousseau further celebrates primitive people for their single-minded focus on self-preservation: because survival is the primitive being’s only purpose, Rousseau claims that primitive humans possess “neither foresight nor curiosity” (53). But whereas Du Tertre criticized Native Americans for their lack of reason, Rousseau views this characteristic positively: in contrast to modern society, where Rousseau sees “almost only people who complain about their existence” (60), primitive humans remain content because they “[do] not have the mind to wonder at the greatest marvels” (53).

This does not mean that Rousseau views primitive people as similar to animals, however. Instead, he distinguishes humans from animals through humans’ ability to pity. The natural world is anarchic, and pity acts as a substitute for “laws, moeurs, and virtue”

(64) by moving an individual closer to reflection. Moreover, by producing generosity, clemency, humanity, benevolence, and friendship (63), Rousseau credits pity for playing a pivotal role in the “mutual preservation of the whole species” (64). Thus, pity acts as a sort of compromise between gratuitous rationality and absolute coldheartedness. Because Rousseau associated the first of these with modern Europeans and the second with animals, the primitive human occupied in his mind a middle ground between wild beasts and the decadence of European civilization.

Rousseau’s elaboration of pity and self-preservation facilitates further comparisons between ‘civilized’ humans and those who live in the state of nature. Expressing admiration for the Caribs of Venezuela, Rousseau claims that living in the state of nature permits one to “live in the most profound security and without the slightest inconvenience” (47). Human beings in their natural state are almost invincible, Rousseau argues, and “had [his fellow Europeans] preserved the simple, uniform, and solitary way of life prescribed by nature” (49), they would not face as many qualms as they do in the present. In fact, in contrast to hierarchical France, “inequality is barely perceptible in the state of nature” (68), leading Rousseau to conclude that “natural inequality must increase in the human species through instituted inequality” (67). Combined with his later discussion on civil society, in which he criticizes contemporary societies’ property laws and unequal division of labor, Rousseau’s idealized state of nature provides him with a comparative framework through which he evaluates the economic foundations of European civilization.

In effect, Rousseau’s *Discours* brings together ideas from prior writers, in addition to his own philosophy, into a concise imagining of the state of nature. For instance, Vespucci expressed astonishment at how the Natives live in common, and Montaigne

contrasted Native simplicity with European decadence. Both of these themes are alluded to in Rousseau's *Discours*, though his treatise focuses on a broad definition of primitive humans rather than a particular group of Native Americans. Yet, while his book humanizes primitive people by arguing that individuals in the state of nature are distinguishable from animals, Rousseau's portrayal of primitive people as "undifferentiated units," as political scientist Sankar Muthu puts it, discredits their individual identity and sense of moral agency.<sup>75</sup> And, as many European intellectuals in this time period associated the "primitive" with Native Americans, Rousseau's piece may have had a pernicious effect on how his readers perceived indigenous societies, even if he did not intend for this outcome.

Though Rousseau critiques civil society in his *Discours*, his *Du contrat social*<sup>76</sup> suggests that a civil society built upon a strong reciprocal relationship among its members can have advantages over the state of nature. In this sense, Rousseau's two most prominent treatises have dual aims: whereas his *Discours* celebrates primitive humans, his *Du contrat social* holds that civilization, under the right circumstances, improves the individual. Yet, as we will see, both works are intertwined, with his *Du contrat social* attempting to resolve issues described in his earlier *Discours*. His *Du contrat social* centers on two main themes: he endeavors to investigate whether there "can be any legitimate and sure principle of government" in political society while trying to make sense of which forces legitimize a reality in which humans, although "born free," are now "everywhere in chains" (49). Although this second quote seemingly alludes to slavery, Rousseau does not refer in his treatise to the reality of slavery in the Atlantic. Rather, he describes slavery in metaphorical

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<sup>75</sup> Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

<sup>76</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, translated and introduced by Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin Books, 1968).

terms in an effort to provide philosophical justification for the social contract. Namely, he refutes Aristotelian concepts of natural slavery and slavery by conquest: not only does he reject the notion that force can be used to justify enslavement (53), but he argues that no individual can give themselves up completely to another being's authority (54). Instead, only through "covenants" can "legitimate authority among men...be established" (53).

While Rousseau in his *Discours* valorized primitive humans for their focus on self-preservation and ability to pity, he acknowledges in his *Du contrat social* that individuals cannot reside in the state of nature forever. Instead, because "men reach a point where the obstacles to their preservation in a state of nature prove greater than the strength that each man has to preserve himself in that state" (59), humans organize into groups so that "their powers are directed by a single motive and act in concert" against any threats to their survival (59-60). Compared to his *Discours*, this claim might seem contradictory; although in the earlier text he blamed civil society for introducing "instituted inequality" and *amour-propre*, or the idea that one's self-esteem depends on the opinions of others, he concedes in his latter treatise that civil society is advantageous for humans' wellbeing. Rousseau, however, is nuanced rather than contradictory; his conception of the social contract, which would instill "freedom" and "equality" among individuals, addresses many of the flaws of civil society described in his *Discours*.

And indeed, Rousseau's social contract is designed to protect an individual. His theory relies on a "reciprocal commitment between society and the individual." In other words, once individuals join together in an "association," which would confer strength in numbers against perceived threats, they would be required to alienate themselves and their rights to the whole community. By doing so, Rousseau argues, each individual would feel

a responsibility to the other, because “no one can injure any one of the members without attacking the whole, still less injure the whole without each member feeling it” (63). In this sense, the property rights of the society’s members are protected; although “the state, *vis-à-vis* its own members, becomes master of all their goods by virtue of the social contract,” society’s recognition of each individual’s property “changes usurpation into valid right and mere enjoyment into legal ownership” (67-68). At the same time, civil society ensures equality among men; whereas physical inequality ruled the state of nature, the mutual responsibilities each individual owes one another in the social contract, in addition to a lack of distinctions made between humans in this state, instill “a moral and lawful equality” among a civil society’s members (68).

This social contract framework allows Rousseau to compare the state of nature and civil society. In contrast to the state of nature, where primitive beings are ruled by instinct, humans in civil society abide by the principle of justice. As a result, rather than thinking only of themselves, humans in civil society feel “compelled to act on other principles, and to consult [their] reason rather than study [their] inclinations” (64). Moral principles manifest themselves through laws, which, as Rousseau explains, protect the rights of individuals to their property and security (82-83). With this in mind, Rousseau clearly views civil society, at least when it follows the characteristics of his social contract, as superior to the state of nature: whereas “every man is inevitably at war and at the risk of his life” in the state of nature, humans who have entered civil society “have profitably exchanged an uncertain and precarious life for a better and more secure one” (77). Hence, notions of the primitive, which first entered political theory through the works of Peter Martyr and Montaigne, culminate in Rousseau’s *Du contrat social*, which, although it

mentions slavery merely in the abstract, posits a conception of civil society that would allow later antislavery thinkers to make rational arguments against the institution.

### **The Noble Savage and its Popularity**

Thus far, we have seen how numerous European figures – whether they had observed firsthand the Amerindians or merely read about them in travel narratives – used descriptions of Native American culture to remark on different aspects of European civilization. Before we proceed, though, we must ask ourselves why it is that European writers jumped so quickly on the opportunity to exploit the Native American for rhetorical purposes. Yes, primitivism existed before the discovery of the New World<sup>77</sup> and travelers often romanticized the Native American’s existence in an effort to promote inquiry into the Americas or at least establish the New World as an object of fascination.<sup>78</sup> Yet this does not explain why the Noble Savage, defined a century ago by Hoxie Fairchild as “any free and wild being who draws directly from nature virtues which raise doubts as to the value of civilization,”<sup>79</sup> exploded in popularity in Britain and France during the Enlightenment.

There are several possibilities, all of which compound on one another. Among the first is that the Noble Savage provided a sense of control to European writers, who were grappling with the inexplicable discovery of an entirely ‘new’ race of people.<sup>80</sup> Along these lines, the Native American seemed the most exotic type of human being known to Europeans at the time, and cultures that are mysterious to an ingroup are often the most easy to manipulate for the ingroup’s political purposes.<sup>81</sup> To some European thinkers, like

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<sup>77</sup> Fairchild, *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism*, 2.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>80</sup> Hayden White, “The Noble Savage Theme as Fetish,” in *Tropics of discourse: essays in cultural criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 122.

<sup>81</sup> Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, 264-266.

Montaigne, who viewed the Native American as the present incarnation of the primitive imagined by western thinkers for millenia, it was only logical to transform the Native American into the Noble Savage. A sinister contradiction, however, underlined all these thoughts: the Native American needed to be perceived in such a way that Europeans would feel inspired to improve themselves in the image of the Noble Savage's virtue while at the same time justify a colonial project that brought civility to the more 'barbaric' practices of indigenous cultures.

### **The Noble Savage (and increasingly, the Noble African) in Literature**

Whatever the reasons were for the prevalence of the Noble Savage in political thought, the trope soon found itself adopted by writers in very different media. In fact, an emerging literary culture in the long-eighteenth century interacted with the Noble Savage and produced a variety of works that employed the trope. Fiction writers during the Enlightenment in particular grew enamored by the Noble Savage,<sup>82</sup> and no sooner did the Noble Savage appear in literature than Early Romanticism emerged. Indeed, from about 1730 to 1790, a growing number of writers in both Great Britain and France idealized the primitive and viewed the Noble Savage as a tool to express nostalgia for a glorified pre-commercial past.<sup>83</sup> Positive explorations of the Native American further facilitated a humanitarian ethos: sentimental drama, much of which blamed the European's tyranny for the plight of the Amerindian, taught British and French readers to empathize with the colonized in America.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, English religious interest in the primitive, led by

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<sup>82</sup> Cro, *The Noble Savage: Allegory and Freedom*, 87.

<sup>83</sup> Fairchild, *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism*, 57.

<sup>84</sup> Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 356.

Anglican divines associated with the Latitudinarian movement, promoted a universal humanity that viewed Native Americans as worthy of fair treatment.<sup>85</sup>

As much as Enlightenment, Romantic, and Christian writers tried to focus on the Native American, however, the sudden influx of African slaves imported into the British<sup>86</sup> and French colonies,<sup>87</sup> in addition to British and French colonial expeditions on the Gold Coast of Africa, meant that the African became the most prominent member of the outgroup over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To some Europeans, this did not matter: as far as many French writers were concerned, what was significant about the “Noble Savage” was not his or her precise place of origin but whether the character could provide a contrast to life in commercial and absolutist France.<sup>88</sup> But because chattel slavery emerged as an inescapable reality of the British and French colonies during the long-eighteenth century, even those texts which employed the Native American as a Noble Savage often contained commentary on slavery, whether explicitly or indirectly.

Moreover, travel narratives, which, at least in the case of the Native American, previewed changing currents in political thought and literature, evolved over the course of the eighteenth century to incorporate descriptions of Africa and its inhabitants.<sup>89</sup> Though travelers to Africa were often affected by “mists of exotic fantasy,” as historian D.B. Davis puts it, they were surprisingly precise about other cultures’ customs.<sup>90</sup> At least in the African case, early anthropologists tried to avoid drawing broad generalizations and

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 351-352.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 454.

<sup>87</sup> Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 19-22.

<sup>88</sup> Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, 271.

<sup>89</sup> Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 464.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 464.



differentiated the “Koromantees” of the Gold Coast and the “Papaws” of Whidah, for example, in terms of habit and custom.<sup>91</sup> Others’ observations of Africans further reflected that they were not as primitive as Amerindian societies: eighteenth-century European travel narratives depicted many African communities as agricultural and engaged in trade.<sup>92</sup> Nonetheless, while texts like Michel Adanson’s 1757 *Histoire naturelle du Sénégal* registered favorable impressions of Africans,<sup>93</sup> the majority of European writers, like John Atkins, found African culture to be entirely alien.<sup>94</sup> This tendency to observe but not understand African culture led to the inevitable: Mungo Park’s 1799 *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*, for instance, falls back on the model of the Noble Savage, invented in discussions of Native Americans, to objectify the African subject.<sup>95</sup> Considering the abundance of this travel narrative literature, then, it should not be surprising that British and French fiction in the long-eighteenth century increasingly referenced African ‘savagery’ and slavery.<sup>96</sup>

Written in the midst of this demographic shift and surge in intellectual interest in Africa, Aphra Behn’s 1688 novella *Oroonoko*<sup>97</sup> was among the first works of fiction to deal with both the Noble Savage literary trope and the issue of colonial slavery. Set in the British colony of Suriname, Behn spends the first several pages of her work describing the inherent goodness of the colony’s indigenous people. Her descriptions continue what

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 464.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 465.

<sup>93</sup> Edward Derbyshire Seeber, *Anti-slavery in France during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 49.

<sup>94</sup> Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 466.

<sup>95</sup> Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928): 119.

<sup>96</sup> Lucy K. Hayden, “The Black Presence in Eighteenth-Century British Novels,” (*CLA Journal* 24, no. 3, 1981), 404.

<sup>97</sup> Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko*, edited and with an introduction by Janet Todd (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

should by now appear as a cliché: the Natives are “finely shaped” and have “pretty features,” though their “colour, which is a reddish yellow” prevents them from being considered entirely beautiful (11). Along similar lines, the Natives are living embodiments of the state of nature: “these people represented to me an absolute idea of the first state of innocence, before man knew how to sin,” and “like our first parents before the Fall, it seems as if they had no wishes” (11). Behn is content to celebrate the virtues of nature: “simple Nature...better instructs the world than all the inventions of man,” and it is only because of “the white men” that the Natives have learned of “vice or cunning” (11). No reference to enslavement or poor treatment is made; instead, Behn writes that the English in Suriname live “in perfect amity” with Amerindians, choosing to “caress them with all the brotherly and friendly affection in the world” (9).

What separates Behn’s novella from previous works is not her description of primitive life but rather that her Noble Savage protagonist is an African. This character, the titular Prince Oroonoko, is distinguished from the rest of his race: “his face was not of that brown, rusty black which most of that nation are, but a perfect ebony or polished jet” (15) and unlike the “great turned lips” and “flat” noses of Africans, “nothing in nature [was] more beautiful, agreeable, and handsome” than “the whole proportion and air of his face” (15). Much the same way that Sepúlveda utilized Aristotle’s theory of natural slavery, Behn employs Aristotle’s theory of natural aristocracy to valorize Oroonoko: not only is Oroonoko a man of good looks, he is also endowed with all the characteristics of a nobleman. Namely, Oroonoko possesses “real greatness of soul, those refined notions of true honour” (14) and “had nothing of barbarity in his nature” (15). Behn is quick to explain, however, that this personality was not naturally gifted to him; instead, he was

taught by a “Frenchman of wit and learning” and learned English by spending time with English slave traders on the coast (14).

And yet, while Oroonoko is depicted as a Noble African, Behn’s characterizations of other African characters are not positive. After falling in love with Imoinda, who is described as the “female to the noble male” (16), Oroonoko’s heart is shattered when the elderly king of Coramantien falls prey to his passions and forces Imoinda to marry him instead of Oroonoko (19-21). Whereas Imoinda is, like Oroonoko, a regal character distinguished by her loyalty to virtue (21), other African men are criticized by Behn for taking as many wives “as they can maintain” and having a tendency to “to abandon” their wives to “want, shame and misery” when they grow tired of them (17). Moreover, although the people of Coramantien, Oroonoko’s homeland, are described as “warlike and brave” (13), this sort of description echoes principles of just war used to validate the actions of European slave traders on the Gold Coast of Africa.

Behn’s treatment of slavery is also problematic, for she appears to have been ambivalent towards the institution itself. For instance, when the elderly king discovers that Oroonoko and Imoinda had held an illicit rendezvous with one another, he orders Imoinda to be sold, a punishment described by Behn as “worse than death” (31). Behn’s statement shortly after – that Africans “a thousand times prefer death” to slavery (32) – would presumably cause audience members to reflect on how the institution of slavery damaged the psyche of the enslaved. However, although Oroonoko is outraged when he is forcibly enslaved by an English captain whom he considered a friend (39), Oroonoko’s subsequent life as a slave in Suriname is not made out to be representative of the experiences of most slaves. Instead, because of his royal demeanor, he is “received more like a governor than a

slave” and “endured no more of the slave but the name” (44). Even more bizarre is that despite Oroonoko’s tragic status as an enslaved African taken from his homeland, Behn explains that Oroonoko was himself responsible for selling other Africans into slavery (44)

Surely, however, there must have been some reason why abolitionists in the late-eighteenth century employed *Oroonoko* to establish empathy with the enslaved. Oroonoko, after all, is a royal African who recalls regal images of nobility. The most important sections of the book to late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century antislavery discourse are those that occur after Oroonoko rediscovers Imoinda in Suriname: untrusting of his master’s promises that he and Imoinda will be freed soon, Oroonoko organizes slaves in an effort to escape from the plantation (61). This is a strange reaction, Behn appears to suggest, because Oroonoko “suffered only the name of the slave, and had nothing of the toil and labour of one” (50). Yet, Oroonoko lectures these slaves on “the miseries and ignominies of slavery,” telling them that they have unjustly “suffered the infamous whip” from the white man (61-62). Notably, Oroonoko turns the Ignoble Savage paradigm on its head: he characterizes the English as “below the wildest savages” and “a degenerate race” that has no “virtue left to distinguish them from the vilest creatures” (62). Again the hierarchy of preferred punishment is established: he tells the rebellious slaves that “if they died in the attempt it would be more brave than to live in perpetual slavery” (63).

Yet interpreting Behn’s novella as purely an anti-slavery tract would be misleading, for Oroonoko is both critical of European colonists *and* his fellow slaves. The slaves, for one, abandon Oroonoko as soon as the colonial militia appears, and Oroonoko himself admits that “he was ashamed...in endeavouring to make those free, who were by nature slaves” (66). Conversely, Oroonoko is no ally of the English: he has “no faith in the white

men” and condemns their dishonesty even as they preach the power of Christianity (66). When Oroonoko is captured, whipped by his fellow slaves, and tortured (67), he takes a scorched earth approach: both his fellow Africans and English masters are considered “rude,” “wild,” and “inhuman” (76). In sum, Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, although it provided popular audiences with an early image of the Noble African, remained limited in its antislavery potential through its demeaning characterizations of Africans and its ambivalent commentary on chattel slavery.

Only a few decades after *Oroonoko*, Daniel Defoe’s 1719 *Robinson Crusoe* then appeared,<sup>98</sup> yet another novel that employs the Noble Savage literary trope (albeit differently than *Oroonoko*) while referencing the emerging reality of Atlantic slavery. Stranded on an island as a result of a shipwreck, the titular character develops hallmarks of civilization through his labor and good luck.<sup>99</sup> Though he initially imagines himself alone on the island, his continued stay reveals that the island is already occupied by cannibals: he discovers “Skulls, Hands, Feet, and other Bones of human Bodies,” (185) which reminds him to be grateful that he “was distinguish’d from such dreadful Creatures” who eat human flesh (186). This description of the island’s “Creatures,” of course, reflects the prevailing stereotype, begun by Columbus, that Native Americans are cannibals. However, while Crusoe condemns “the unnatural Custom of that People of the Country” and remarks that these Natives “have no other Guide than that of their own abominable and vitiated

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<sup>98</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2010).

<sup>99</sup> This refers to the four stages theory of society, consisting of hunting, pasturage, agriculture, and commerce. Crusoe’s experiences on the island evolve through the first three stages, although they may not be perfectly chronological: his hunting experiences include capturing young pigeons for their “very good meat” (111); he experiments with pastoralism by attempting to “breed” (111) pigeons and goats to keep the “tame from the wild” (170); and his agricultural breakthrough consists of accidentally planting barley (112). See Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) for more information on the stadial theory of civilization.

Passions” (190), he tries to rationalize their cannibalism, just as Montaigne did: “They do not know it to be an Offence” and “were not Murtherers...any more than those Christians were Murtherers, who often put to Death the Prisoners taken in Battle” (191). Defoe’s commentary marks an extension of centuries-long Noble Savage discourse; it employs the Native American to comment on religious fanaticism in England, while establishing a hierarchy between a civilized Crusoe and the cannibal Natives. In this way, writers like Defoe continued to strip the Native American of any agency, even though the literary trope of the Noble Savage had by now existed for hundreds of years.

Defoe’s novel stands out, however, in that it is a work of fiction that uses a racially ambiguous Noble Savage to comment on slavery. Despite Crusoe’s rationalization of the cannibals on the island, he still prays that “no Savages would come to the Place to disturb me” and begins thinking of escape once he observes “nine naked Savages” (200) who had “eaten and devour’d” human flesh (201). Crusoe’s idea of escape relies on slavery: “I made this conclusion, that my only Way to go about an Attempt for an Escape, was, if possible, to get a Savage into my Possession” (214). Though it takes him about 18 months before he again comes across the island’s cannibals, he immediately takes advantage of his opportunity, using his gun to rescue a “poor Savage” who immediately pledges submission (218). This scene, where the “savage” promises to be Crusoe’s “Slave for ever” (218), appears to suggest that slavery is an inevitable outcome of conflict and hierarchy.

Subsequent scenes with this “savage” summarize many of the prevailing themes of Noble Savage literature. For one, this “savage,” like Oroonoko, is described as having all “the Sweetness and Softness of an *European* in his countenance” (219), continuing a trend seen in earlier works by figures like Du Tertre to forge links between Europeans and Native

Americans.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, this “savage,” renamed Friday, is distinguished from his ‘ugly’ race: “the Colour of his Skin was not quite black, but very tawny and yet not of an ugly yellow nauseous tawny, as the *Brasilians*, and *Virginians*, and other Natives of *America* are; but of a bright kind of a dun olive Colour” (220). This latter description, steeped in racial ambiguity, complicates Crusoe’s discussion of slavery, for eighteenth-century readers must have been unsure if Friday is Carib or Black. This ambiguity, however, provides insight into the mentality of its moment of composition: early-eighteenth-century British and French writers often referred to any group in the Americas that did not practice Christianity as “savages,”<sup>101</sup> and changing racial dynamics in the Atlantic World made it possible for English writers to blur the lines between Amerindian and Black slavery.<sup>102</sup>

Regardless of race, Crusoe’s relationship with Friday reflects a civilizing process steeped in a hierarchy based on labor dynamics. Crusoe uses force to enslave Friday, and not only is Crusoe perceived as a savior figure by Friday because he is rescued by Crusoe from cannibal islanders, but Crusoe also provides Friday with nourishment when Friday is “in great Distress” (219) and continues to use food as a means of establishing authority (225). Crusoe then begins the process of civilizing his inferior: Friday is taught to speak English (223-224), forced to reject his Cannibal proclivities (221), and taught “Knowledge of the true God” (228). Through this education, Crusoe confirms (following the logic of Du Tertre and Lawson) that language, rather than any naturally endowed facility, is the among the greatest hallmarks of civilization.<sup>103</sup> Friday is additionally an exceptional and

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<sup>100</sup> Du Tertre wrote in his narrative that “only skin color distinguishes them from us, for they have bronzed skin, the colour of olives.” Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 69.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>103</sup> Cro, *The Noble Savage: Allegory and Freedom*, 99.

natural learner: he becomes “a much better Scholar in the Scripture Knowledge” than even Crusoe (234) and follows tasks well, giving credence to Montaigne’s hope that with proper education even a Cannibal can abandon his barbaric habits.<sup>104</sup> While the Noble Savage trope shines through in Friday’s “Honest” and “Innocent” (236) nature, Crusoe’s enslavement of Friday provides evidence of how successful the civilizing process can be. After all, both Friday and Crusoe reap the (supposed) benefits of their hierarchical relationship: Friday is educated in Christianity and the English language, whereas Friday’s labor facilitates changes on the island that lead to Crusoe’s escape. Consequently, *Robinson Crusoe* shows how the trope of the Noble Savage, embodied through the character of Friday, could be used to both humanize the enslaved while justifying slavery for its civilizing effects.

The English were not the only ones to disguise commentary on slavery with the trope of the Noble Savage, and in other places too, this emblematic figure could work both to support and undermine slavery. Voltaire’s 1736 tragedy *Alzire*,<sup>105</sup> for instance, centers on an enslaved Incan prince, Zamor, whose true love is forced into marriage with his Spanish captor, Guzman. But *Alzire* is a peculiar drama: rather than criticize slavery outright, Voltaire never comments on the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Instead, he suggests instead that slavery – at least in the context of the Amerindians – should be made more humane.<sup>106</sup> Still, Voltaire’s play is worth analyzing because it displays once again how the Noble Savage could be used to suggest reform.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, its popularity among white

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>105</sup> Voltaire, *Alzire*, translation by William F. Fleming (New York: Start Publishing, 2012).

<sup>106</sup> Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle*, 73.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 73.



audiences in Saint-Domingue may have translated into reflections amongst those audience members on the colonial project and the institution of slavery.<sup>108</sup>

*Alzire* is foremost a story that perpetuates the Black Legend of Spanish tyranny in the Americas. Guzman, who receives power over Peru from his wise old father Alvarez, is considered a “barbarian” by the Natives, primarily because he believes “by chastisement alone” can the “savage people” of the Incan empire be “Made tame, and humble” (11). Though his father begs him to free his Incan slaves by explaining that “the laws we teach...instead of winning o’er These savages by gentle means, destroy them” (12), Guzman is uncompromising in his belief that the Incas must convert to Christianity if they desire emancipation (13). This contrast – between an obsessive Christian faith and the reality of tyranny – is used by Voltaire to detail the need for a more benevolent Christianity in the colonies: “a Christian badly instructed,” he writes in the preface, “has seldom much more humanity” than a barbarian who believes in human sacrifice (7). We have seen this message before: employers of the Noble Savage view the worst behaviors of the Native Americans as paling in comparison to Christian abuse while also suggesting that the uncivilized nature of the Natives justifies conversion.

Voltaire’s *Alzire*, like *Oroonoko* and *Robinson Crusoe*, connects the Noble Savage to slavery, with two central characters – the vengeful Zamor and his lover Alzire – representing the enslaved in Voltaire’s drama. Alzire, forced to marry the brutal Guzman, describes her sadness “at the thought Of such unnatural, such detested bonds” (20) whereas Zamor, who has lost his kingdom to the Spanish, characterizes slavery as worse than death (24). Other Noble Savage clichés appear through both characters: Alzire is “a savage

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 78-79.

beauty” who “suits the wildness of her native clime” (23), and Zamor is celebrated for saving the life of the old governor, Alvarez. Conversely, while the Natives are described as noble savages, so too is the old governor Alvarez: he is “the protector Of innocence oppressed” (27), and Zamor exclaims that “Amongst these vile barbarians” exists “one just man, Honest and true” (30). By doing so, Voltaire imagines the concept of the Noble Savage not solely as a European construction but rather a common reaction to cultural differences.

And yet Voltaire’s *Alzire*, even as it depicts slavery and Spanish rule as horrifying realities, makes clear, like Du Tertre and Daniel Defoe, that colonization (and the civilizing project more broadly) can be beneficial for all parties involved. For instance, while the Spaniards are condemned for their obsession with gold (32), Montezuma, the Incan leader, suggests that the Spanish will “teach [the Incas] arts unknown,” “the knowledge of mankind,” and how “to be happy” (34-35). Even if the young Zamor and Guzman condemn the other for their barbaric practices<sup>109</sup>, it is the words of the wise and elder statesmen Montezuma and Alvarez which are given legitimacy, with both figures seeing Spanish rule as mutually beneficial for the Natives and the Spaniards. Indeed, the advantages of cultural interaction are seen at the end of the play: so inspired is Guzman by the true love of Alzire and Zamor that he frees both characters and allows them to marry (79-80). At the same time, Guzman makes a point of showing that his religion is superior to that of the Incas: “Observe The difference, Zamor, ‘twixt thy God and mine: Thine teach thee to revenge an injury, Mine to forgive and pity thee” (80). Therefore, both characters, in a perverse way,

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<sup>109</sup> *Alzire* possesses one of the most forceful critiques of European colonization: “Is Europe only worthy of thy care? Art thou the partial parent of one world, And tyrant o’er another? All deserve Thy equal love, the victor and the vanquished Are all the work of they creating hand” (67).

are pushed away from their barbarity through the hand of colonization. In this way, the central contradiction of the literary trope of the Noble Savage – that it both humanizes non-European peoples while legitimizing the civilizing project – remained consistent across genres, whether it be travel narratives, novels, or theatrical productions published in the early modern period.

### **Conclusion**

The Noble Savage tradition, as we have seen, began with the Native American but ultimately incorporated other non-European peoples, including the West African Prince and the racially ambiguous Caribbean cannibal. Indeed, between 1748 and 1776, the Native American was increasingly supplanted by the “Noble African,”<sup>110</sup> a character whose innocent nature laid the foundations for later humanitarian reform. And countless plays in the eighteenth century were preoccupied with the question of African slavery,<sup>111</sup> as were novels like Mercier’s *L’An 2440 which* explicitly condemned the institution.<sup>112</sup> Yet, the language used by most writers employing the Noble Savage tradition to comment on slavery was at best avoidant, at least until the latter half of the eighteenth century, and political theorists like Rousseau often failed to discuss African slavery in the Atlantic at all. Only at the century’s close would their words inspire antislavery writers. The following two chapters will analyze these trends: namely, how abstract arguments grounded in social contract theory and the sentimental tale involving the “Noble African,” both genres rooted in the Noble Savage tradition, facilitated antislavery arguments between 1787 and 1807.

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<sup>110</sup> Seeber, *Anti-slavery in France during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century*, 52.

<sup>111</sup> Seeber’s work highlights a variety of plays that were performed in the decade preceding the French Revolution. Among these are Dorvigny’s 1780 *Le Nègre blanc*, Marignié’s 1781 *Zoraï ou les Insulaires de la Nouvelle Zélande*, Lachabeausière’s 1786 *Azémia*, and Radet and Barré’s 1787 *La Nègresse, ou le Pouvoir de la reconnaissance* (136).

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, 148.

## Chapter 2 – Rational Resistance & Organized Abolition: The Indirect Impact of the Noble Savage on Abstract Antislavery Arguments

### Introduction

*“How much rather ought you receivers to be considered as abandoned and execrable; who, when you usurp the dominion over those, who are as free and independent as yourselves, which break the first law of justice, which ordains, “that no person shall do harm to another, without a previous provocation”; who offend against of nature, which commands, “that no just man shall be given or received into slavery against his own consent”; and who violate the very laws of the empire that you assume, by consigning your subjects to misery.”<sup>113</sup>*

The British antislavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson’s *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, initially written in 1785 while he was a student at Cambridge University, was one of a variety of eighteenth-century tracts that relied on abstract philosophical rhetoric to argue against slavery. Although the passage above makes no direct reference to the literary trope of the Noble Savage, his essay consolidated natural law and the social contract theory – both of which, as described in chapter one of this thesis, drew upon notions of primitivity and the state of nature – into a concise critique against the traffic in human beings. Because Clarkson’s treatise emerged as a guide for the British Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade and the French Société des Amis des Noirs, the two antislavery organizations’ rational arguments share much in common with Clarkson’s essay. In particular, while political treatises and pamphlets published by both organizations between 1787 and 1807 did not always explicitly mention the “Noble Savage” or “Noble African,” they tended to build upon philosophical

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<sup>113</sup> Ottobah Cugoano and Thomas Clarkson, *Essays on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, Edited by Mary-Antoinette Smith (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2010), 146.

concepts, like the social contract, that were linked to the literary trope. In an effort to illuminate these indirect connections, this chapter will detail the histories of the British and French antislavery societies, paying particular attention to how conceptions of primitivity and the state of nature allowed abolitionists to craft novel arguments, based in natural law and the social contract, that refuted canonical proslavery texts.

### **Slavery & Natural Law before 1787**

Principally, understanding late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century thought on slavery necessitates a discussion of the foundational texts on the topic. This is because, as Christopher Brown explains, British and French abolitionists between 1787 and 1807 built upon arguments made by their antislavery predecessors while contesting thinkers who belonged to a centuries-long tradition of slavery apologists.<sup>114</sup> The 1550-1551 Valladolid Debate described in chapter one, for instance, reflects how pro-slavery arguments solidified even before the explosion of the trans-Atlantic slave trade: Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda justified colonial slavery, albeit of Native Americans, by citing Aristotelian arguments for slavery. In this section, then, we will trace the debate on slavery in an effort to provide context to the central arguments of the later British and French antislavery societies.

Though Aristotle's *Politics*,<sup>115</sup> written in the fourth century B.C.E., does not refer to chattel slavery based on a defined racial hierarchy, the book's justifications for a "natural" slavery played a defining role in the early modern period's debate on slavery. In

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<sup>114</sup> Christopher Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006): 40.

<sup>115</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics of Aristotle*, translated into English with introduction, marginal analysis, essays, notes and indices by B. Jowett, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1885. 2 vols. Vol. 1), [Online] available from <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/579>.

this book, Aristotle characterizes the relationship between “master and servant” as essential to the wellbeing of a state, for it preserves “the inferior class” in a state of submission. Interestingly, although Aristotle wrote many centuries before the discovery of the New World, many of his ideas foreshadow those of later Noble Savage and social contract thought: an individual separated from society is “the worst of animals,” he explains, but is “perfected by law and justice.” Similarly, what distinguishes human from beast is not only the presence of society but also “the faculty of speech” – a remark that parallels the preoccupation of European explorers with Native Americans’ lack of literacy.

Still, the more important aspect of Aristotle’s text for later antislavery thought was not necessarily his evaluation of what distinguished man from beast but rather his perspective on whether there exists “a slave by nature.” His answer is in the positive, as “from the hour of their birth some [humans] are intended to command, others to obey.” Indeed, “where, then, one class of men presents a marked inferiority to another, there slavery is justified” as a “beneficent” practice designed to ameliorate the condition of the lower class. It is unclear from Aristotle’s argument what defines “a marked inferiority to another,” but Aristotle’s vagueness appears deliberate: he explains that slavery is complicated because while “nature probably intended to make a visible distinction between freeman and slave...she has not always succeeded.” Though visible distinctions may not have been so clear in Ancient Greece, where humans were enslaved as a result of war and class difference, early modern pro-slavery thinkers would point to what they perceived as the Africans’ lack of civility and unattractive skin tone as visible justifications for their enslavement.

Indeed, very few pre-Enlightenment thinkers contested Aristotle's reasoning on slavery. In fact, as slavery expanded to the New World – where Africans quickly supplanted Native Americans as the primary source of labor – Renaissance and seventeenth-century theorists<sup>116</sup> continued to justify slavery by conquest.<sup>117</sup> Of course, some European writers criticized the trans-Atlantic slave trade,<sup>118</sup> but these arguments were overshadowed in the context of legal systems based in antiquity.<sup>119</sup> Moreover, though many English writers<sup>120</sup> in this period expressed opposition to slavery for religious reasons, virtually none attacked Aristotle's classical theory of slavery.<sup>121</sup>

So solidified were Aristotelian justifications for slavery that they even influenced Thomas Hobbes' 1651 *Leviathan* and John Locke's 1689 *Two Treatises of Government*. As we saw in chapter one, both texts drew upon ideas of primitivity as detailed by European explorers and elaborated distinct notions of modern governance. Yet, despite their differences, both Hobbes and Locke followed Aristotle's lead by defending slavery in abstract, nonracial terms and failing to take into account the reality of contemporary slavery.<sup>122</sup> Hobbes, for instance, justified slavery as long as it was established through a "Covenant" made by conquest, a statement John Locke did not contest.

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<sup>116</sup> Covarruvias, Cujas, Sanchez, Charron, Pufendorf, and Grotius are mentioned as examples of this in Wylie Sypher, "Hutcheson and the 'Classical' Theory of Slavery," *The Journal of Negro History*, volume 24 issue 3 (1939).

<sup>117</sup> Wylie Sypher, "Hutcheson and the 'Classical' Theory of Slavery," 2.

<sup>118</sup> Christopher Brown in *Moral Capital* mentions that "A Spanish theologian, Tomas de Mercado, condemned the brutality of the Middle Passage in 1569" and the "Jurist Bartolome de Albornoz asserted the natural right of enslaved Africans to liberty as early as 1573" (39).

<sup>119</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 38-39.

<sup>120</sup> Sypher on page 2 points to Sir Thomas Browne, Thomas Fuller, George Fox, and Morgan Godwyn as examples.

<sup>121</sup> Sypher, "Hutcheson and the 'Classical' Theory of Slavery," 2.

<sup>122</sup> Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848*, (New York: Verso, 1988), 42. It should be noted that Locke does, however, justify Black slavery in his Constitution of the Carolinas.

However, while Hobbes and Locke both justified slavery in the abstract, Locke's chapter in his *Treatise*, "Of Slavery,"<sup>123</sup> highlights a growing tension between 'Enlightened' values and a continued reliance on classical thinking on questions of enslavement. For instance, Locke explains that in the state of nature, "only the law of nature," and not "the will or legislative authority of man," rules man (§.22) and that as man enters society, "the liberty of man" is under only one power: that "by consent, in the common-wealth" as determined by the legislature (§.22). Locke appears to be fully in agreement with other social contract theorists who oppose abstract slavery: he even writes of the importance of "man's preservation" and that man "cannot, by compact, or his own consent, enslave himself to any one" (§.23). Yet, despite this, Locke *still* justifies slavery: man who has "by his fault forfeited his own life, by some act that deserves death," may be enslaved by his conqueror (§.23). While Locke views slavery as "directly opposite" to the values of post-Glorious-Revolution Great Britain, he repackages Aristotle's justifications of slavery by conquest as a "state of war continued" (§.24), even if it opposes his states of nature and civil society.<sup>124</sup>

The first signs of coherent opposition to slavery appeared during the Enlightenment. This does not mean that opposition to slavery or Aristotelian justifications were unheard of prior to the Enlightenment: the French jurist Jean Bodin's 1596 *Six Books of the Commonwealth* expressed skepticism towards slavery by conquest, and in chapter one of this thesis we saw how Aphra Behn expressed displeasure with the institution of slavery, even if her criticisms were joined together by demeaning characterizations of

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<sup>123</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Thomas Hollis (London: A. Millar et al., 1764). [Online] available from <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/222>.

<sup>124</sup> Sypher provides a terrific explanation of the tension inherent in Locke's arguments on page 3 of his article, "Hutcheson and the 'Classical' Theory of Slavery."



Africans.<sup>125</sup> Yet, despite the good intentions of these authors, these criticisms were inconsistent and appeared not in conversation but rather in temporal isolation from one another.<sup>126</sup> In contrast, antislavery writings during the Enlightenment built upon one another, even though these arguments were driven by ideology and not organized by a precise political group. The Chavelier de Jaucourt's forceful critique of slavery in his 1755 *Encyclopedie* article "Esclavage"<sup>127</sup> and 1765 article "Traite des nègres," for instance, were influenced by Montesquieu's 1750 *De L'Esprit des Loix* and George Wallace's 1760 *A System of the Principles of the Law of Scotland*, both of which contained critiques of slavery.<sup>128</sup>

Perhaps what is most impressive about the Enlightenment's antislavery arguments, however, is that they directly address the question of whether some are, as Aristotle argued, slaves by nature. Montesquieu's *Pensées*, in particular, describes slavery as unnatural because humans are born free: "l'esclavage est contre le Droit naturel, par lequel tous les hommes naissent libre & indépendans" & "en vain, les loix civiles forment des chaînes; la Loi naturelle les rompra toujours."<sup>129</sup> Such ideas are intrinsically intertwined with chapter one of this thesis's discussion of primitive man: Montesquieu and Jaucourt, among other writers, belong to a tradition of French political thought shared by Rousseau, whose *Du contrat social* posited that slavery is inimical to both the state of nature *and* civil society.

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<sup>125</sup> Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 43.

<sup>126</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 40.

<sup>127</sup> In this text, Jaucourt writes that slavery "damages the liberty of man," is "contrary to natural and civil law," "offends the structures of the best governments," and is "useless in and of itself."

<sup>128</sup> Montesquieu's *L'esprit des Loix* describes slavery as "neither useful to the master or the slave," and Wallace's *Principles* states, "Set the Nigers free, and in a few generations, this vast and fertile continent would be crowded with inhabitants." One can see the influence of these works on Jaucourt's "Traite des nègres:" he writes that "the arts and talents will flourish" in an America without slavery because "freedom" and "industry" would facilitate abundance.

<sup>129</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 404.

Moreover, French Physiocrats, such as Mirabeau, rejected slavery, basing their philosophy on what historian D.B. Davis calls the “primitivistic ideal as the land as the source of all goodness.”<sup>130</sup>

Two texts provide fascinating insight into how Enlightenment thinkers appropriated or manipulated social contract theory to posit arguments which provided foundations for later antislavery thought: Francis Hutcheson’s *System of Moral Philosophy*,<sup>131</sup> published posthumously in 1755, and the Abbé Raynal’s 1770 *Histoire des Deux Indes*. While Hutcheson speaks little about slavery, his work is, as Wylie Sypher explains, “radical” because Hutcheson adds “a benevolistic tone” to Locke’s notion of liberty and equality in the state of nature. Building upon the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury’s 1733 *Inquiry Concerning Virtue and Merit*, which promoted “the instinctive goodness of man,”<sup>132</sup> Hutcheson argues that individuals are guaranteed liberty in civil society by their “charitable instinct” alone.<sup>133</sup> Hutcheson then suggests that human’s inherent goodness means that no one is born inferior and that one’s “compassion and humanity” should convince him or her that enslaving captives is unjust.<sup>134</sup> Both these statements directly attack Aristotle’s justifications: the former implies that there is no “marked inferiority” among humans that would justify slavery, whereas the latter condemns slavery by conquest as inhumane. Less dependent on the notion of a compassionate human is the *Histoire des Deux Indes*, though this text also responds to Aristotelian thought by invoking the social contract theory. In contrast to Aristotle, who believes the master-servant relationship to be

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 427.

<sup>131</sup> Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 49-50

<sup>132</sup> Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928), 27.

<sup>133</sup> Sypher, “Hutcheson and the ‘Classical’ Theory of Slavery,” 5.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 5.

the bedrock of civil society, Raynal questions ancient tradition<sup>135</sup> and suggests that because “natural liberty” is, after reason, “the distinguishing characteristic of man,” slavery, which eliminates an individual’s liberty, prevents one from partaking in civil society by making him or her “inferior even to the dog.”<sup>136</sup>

Just as antislavery thought continued to develop during the western European Enlightenment, so too did legal challenges to slavery. Sue Peabody’s work<sup>137</sup> shows how the legal maxim that “there are no slaves in France” resulted in a variety of court cases litigated in the eighteenth century on behalf of African plaintiffs who protested against their enslavement in metropolitan France. As a consequence, the French monarchy moved progressively towards ending slavery in the metropole, though it continued to extend slavery in the empire. The British anti-slavery legal movement, on the other hand, was more successful in that the *Somerset* case, argued by Granville Sharp,<sup>138</sup> effectively abolished slavery in the metropole,<sup>139</sup> while the 1778 Joseph Knight case in Scotland banned slavery in the British Isles. Just like those in France, however, these rulings did not include colonial possessions, leaving the trans-Atlantic slave trade very much intact. Hence, while eighteenth-century lawyers and writers succeeded in a few isolated cases in introducing (both philosophically and legally) coherent antislavery arguments into the

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<sup>135</sup> The text questions: “what doth it signify to me, what other people in other ages have done? Are we to appeal to the customs of antient times, or to our conscience? Are we to listen to the suggestions of interest, of infatuation, and of barbarism, rather than to those of reason and of justice?” Quoted in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Lynn Hunt, (Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996), 52.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

<sup>137</sup> Sue Peabody, *“There Are No Slaves in France”*: *The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>138</sup> Granville Sharp at one point in his life wrote that “no gains, however great, are to be put in competition with the essential rights of man.” Quoted in David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 244

<sup>139</sup> Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 234.

public sphere, the reality was that in the New World little had changed. There, the number of African-born and African-descendent slaves was steadily increasing, with rising profits in the Americas limiting any serious opposition to the trade in human beings.<sup>140</sup>

Even though there was little reason to be optimistic about the effects of abolitionist arguments in the Americas for much of the eighteenth century, the period following 1760 facilitated the rise of the first organized abolitionist societies in Europe. While Srividhya Swaminathan suggests three factors that made western European thinkers more open-minded to reform (“Enlightenment philosophy, economic theory, and revolution”),<sup>141</sup> only the third of these was unique to the post-1760 world. Namely, the Seven Years’ War and the American Revolution were critical in motivating the British to reassess the labor practices employed in their overseas colonies. Prior to the Revolutionary period, opposition to slavery in Britain was, as we have seen, sparse but developing; in contrast to the country’s powerful colonial lobbies, antislavery advocates were unorganized and largely without tangible political power.<sup>142</sup> The American Revolution, however, changed the course of antislavery: not only did the American colonists challenge British superiority<sup>143</sup> by introducing novel questions about the rights of individuals in their Declaration of Independence, but the independence of the United States reduced British colonial holdings and its number of slaves.<sup>144</sup> Colonial reform became an urgent focus after the American Revolution, lest Great Britain was willing to risk the loss of other territories in its vast

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<sup>140</sup> Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 44.

<sup>141</sup> Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759-1815* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 16.

<sup>142</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 53-55.

<sup>143</sup> Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade*, 27.

<sup>144</sup> J.R. Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution: An International History of Anti-slavery, c. 1787-1820*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 14.

empire. The British antislavery movement borne out of these developments ultimately inspired abolitionist efforts in France, where antislavery ideology up to this point had mostly existed in the abstract. In an effort to delineate each national context's respective antislavery strategies, the British and French abolitionist movements between 1787 and 1807 will be taken up separately in the following sections.

### **The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1787-1793**

It was in this reform-minded climate that the British Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, which built upon the history of antislavery arguments discussed in the previous section, emerged. Civil society in Great Britain thrived in the closing decades of the eighteenth century; not only did literacy and print culture expand,<sup>145</sup> but political associations and representative institutions based in English common law enabled British citizens to contest perceived injustices.<sup>146</sup> Early organized British abolitionism reflected this reality. The London Meeting for Sufferings decided in 1783 to disseminate abolitionist texts, and its communication with antislavery thinkers like Thomas Clarkson birthed the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade.<sup>147</sup> Reflecting the ability of ordinary Britons to involve themselves in politics, this Society was middle-class in origins.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, the new antislavery society took advantage of Britain's civic culture by distributing antislavery tracts and fomenting a popular movement based on mass petitioning.<sup>149</sup> It is worth remarking that while the loss of the North American colonies forced British *intellectuals* to take notice of the slavery question, abolitionism reached

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<sup>145</sup> Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade*, 29.

<sup>146</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Abolitionism: A History of Slavery and Antislavery*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 208-209.

<sup>147</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution*, 16-17.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

popular audiences and the British Parliament precisely because the Society forced the average Briton to ask the following question: “How could the world’s most secure, free, religious, just, prosperous, and moral nation allow itself to remain the premier perpetrator of the world’s most deadly, brutal, unjust, immoral offenses to humanity?”<sup>150</sup>

Among the critical texts disseminated by both the London Meetings for Sufferings and its successor the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (SEAST) was Thomas Clarkson’s *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, written originally in 1785 and revised as a second edition in 1788.<sup>151</sup> In this text, which would define the arguments of the SEAST, Clarkson employed social contract rhetoric, based in conceptions of primitivity and the state of nature, to condemn slavery. For instance, he immediately defines the slavery debate on the basis of natural law: British antislavery campaigners, he explains, “endeavoured to restore to their fellow creatures the rights of nature, of which they had been unjustly deprived” (64), and their lack of success in achieving Parliamentary reform should be seen as a sign of British hypocrisy, considering that the country’s government is founded on “liberty” and not on “injustice” and “violence” (64). He further depicts himself as a defender of “the injured innocent” (70), a term that harkens back to descriptions of primitive people as representations of humans uncorrupted by the vices of western civilization. Ultimately, Clarkson’s treatise revolves around two central questions: whether “the commerce and slavery of the human species...revived, in great measure, on the principles of antiquity, are consistent with the laws of nature, or the common notions of equity, as established among men” (119).

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<sup>150</sup> Drescher, *Abolitionism*, 213.

<sup>151</sup> Ottobah Cugoano and Thomas Clarkson, *Essays on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*.

To answer these questions, Clarkson adopts a Rousseauian theory of the state of nature and civil society, though with important distinctions. For one, he explains that “mankind [was] originally free,” shared all in common, and possessed no relations outside the family structure (119). He terms this stage as “a state of disassociation and independence” (119) though he soon clarifies that because this stage exposed humans to the dangers of beasts and other self-interested beings, mankind organized into “a state of independent society” designed solely for defense (120). While this stage is not elaborated on by Rousseau, the following pages of Clarkson’s work echo much of Rousseau’s *Du contrat social*. Namely, from “want of subsistence” appeared agriculture and property (121), and government, based on consent rather than compulsion, emerged to protect the fruits of man’s labor and the weak from the brutish (121-122). As Clarkson writes, “government is a contract...voluntarily conferred on the one hand, and accepted on the other,” designed to promote “happiness” and protect the “liberty” of its members (124).

Clarkson’s descriptions of natural liberty and civil society provide the basis for his systematic critique of slavery. Because “all were originally free; as nature made every man’s body and mind his own; it is evident that no just man can be justly consigned to slavery, without his own consent” (124). His work can be read as a direct response to Aristotle’s theory of “marked inferiority” in his *Politics*, though Clarkson never mentions Aristotle by name. “What mark can be found in [the slave’s] nature, that can warrant a distinction?” (124) Clarkson asks, explaining that the slave is distinguished from his master only “by chance” and not due to any inherent inferiority (124). Moreover, to Clarkson, the arguments of slavery’s apologists are not compatible with “the laws of nature,” as much as those who adhere to the Aristotelian philosophy of slavery want to believe: “as nature made

every man's body and mind his own, so no just person can be reduced to slavery against his own consent" (136). Hence, any attempt to enslave another person "is contrary to the principles of law and government, the dictates of reason, the common maxims of equity, and the laws of nature, the admonitions of conscience, and, in short, the whole doctrine of natural religion" (146).

But while Enlightenment antislavery clearly influenced Clarkson, what distinguishes his work from that of previous writers, including Montesquieu, is that it is defined not merely in abstract terms but in direct relation to the African slave trade. Indeed, in successive parts of his text, Clarkson, using the social contract argument detailed above, provides a step-by-step rejection of popular justifications for the traffic in Africans. In response to those who argue that Africans may be enslaved through conquest, Clarkson explains that "the captors had no right to the lives of the captured" in the first place (as killing captives is not necessary) and therefore any notion that "service" can be substituted for "blood" is "contrary to the law of nature" (132). Moreover, because the right of conquest is unjust even "in the most equitable wars," there is absolutely no reason for why it would support trans-Atlantic slavery, which is based on "robbery" (140) and "foment[ed]" (144) by Europeans for "no other consideration, than that of procuring slaves" (135).

Clarkson, however, does not exclusively criticize Europeans for partaking in the slave trade; instead, he sees the participation of African princes as similarly contrary to the social contract. Because "subjects, though under the dominion, are not the property of the prince" (126), any effort of an African king on the Gold Coast to sell a fellow African – whether one of his subjects or one he received through conquest – would violate the consent



of the governed (126-127). Interestingly, Clarkson's arguments here are Eurocentric: he does not take into account African customs or whether African princes even believe in social contract theory. Nonetheless, he makes up for this potential shortcoming by extending this criticism over to European slave traders: "if kings then...are unable to invade the liberties of their harmless subjects, without the highest injustice, how can those private persons<sup>152</sup> be justified?" (127). Clarkson's rhetoric – which connects African princes and Europeans in a web of trafficking – effectively portrays the whole system as immoral. In fact, as much as African leaders and European slave traders want to portray slavery as a just punishment for criminals, slavery is "infinitely greater than the offence" (130) and comes "from no other motive, than that of gratifying the avarice" of the two actors (140). In this critique, we even see echoes of *Oroonoko*: Africans "have shown, by many and memorable instances, that even death is to be preferred" to slavery (129).

Because Clarkson was one of the founders of the SEAST and his text was a focal point of the organization's distribution efforts, his *Essay* became a reference point for the philosophy and rhetoric of the organization. Yet, despite his spirited attack on slavery, the SEAST decided not to argue for full-fledged emancipation and instead advocated for the abolition of the British Atlantic slave trade. The reasons for this were pragmatic: Thomas Clarkson and the society's leaders<sup>153</sup> felt that an emancipation debate would stir up too much opposition from the powerful British West Indies Lobby<sup>154</sup> and that minimizing the number of African slaves would force planters to treat their slaves more humanely in the

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<sup>152</sup> "Those private persons" refer to European merchants who purchased human beings on the Gold Coast of Africa.

<sup>153</sup> Granville Sharp, who won a successful verdict in the Somerset case, and William Wilberforce, a well-known Member of Parliament, were among the Society's most vocal leaders.

<sup>154</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution*, 77.

future.<sup>155</sup> Moreover, as powerful as Clarkson's position within the organization was, other British antislavery activists differed on whether abolition should be immediate or gradual.<sup>156</sup> And regardless of which policy SEAST endorsed, its members faced an uphill battle: British territory in the Caribbean expanded more than tenfold from 1775 to 1825, and the British trade in African slaves reached its peak in the same time frame.<sup>157</sup> Never before had slavery been so important to the British economy than at the exact time that the SEAST began organizing popular petitions and conducting research into the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Economic considerations were clearly important to the British slavery debate, and the SEAST's leaders were wise enough to know that establishing a popular movement and persuading the British Parliament to take notice of antislavery would require diverse methods.<sup>158</sup> Clarkson's abstract reasoning, for instance, was combined with appeals to readers' nationalism and religious fervor. In the Society's first meeting in 1787, members declared their intention to join "true Christian harmony in the cause of humanity and justice" that defined "the general sense of the [British] Nation."<sup>159</sup>

Peter Peckard, the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University at the time, reflects this intention in his 1788 sermon, *Justice and mercy recommended*.<sup>160</sup> Though he was not a leader of the SEAST, Peckard was responsible for inspiring Thomas Clarkson to write

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<sup>155</sup> Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 235.

<sup>156</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution*, 78-79.

<sup>157</sup> Drescher, *Abolitionism*, 205.

<sup>158</sup> Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 138-140.

<sup>159</sup> Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, *Society instituted in 1787, for the purpose of effecting the abolition of the slave trade*, [London: 1787], *Slavery and Anti-Slavery*, Gale, University of Pennsylvania Libraries, 1.

<sup>160</sup> Peter Peckard. *Justice and mercy recommended, particularly with reference to the slave trade : a sermon preached before the University of Cambridge*, (Cambridge, 1788), *Slavery and Anti-Slavery*, Gale, University of Pennsylvania Libraries.

his *Essay* as a student at Cambridge University. Peckard's sermon combines Anglican religious fervor and abstract political philosophy to argue against the Atlantic slave trade. His motivations are made clear early on in the sermon: not only is he encouraged by the creation of the SEAST (IV-V), but he is also inspired by the centennial of the Glorious Revolution – interpreted by him, as it surely was by John Locke, as a moment in which Britain received “the blessings of Liberty Civil and Religion” (IX). Peckard's speech parallels Hutcheson's belief in the innate goodness of man, although the former adds to this a more intense religious inflection: in the state of nature, primitive humans are gifted “Social Affections of Compassion and Love” (18) by God and know how to distinguish “Right and Wrong” (15). His subsequent statement that “in all acts of Cruelty [humans] seem to sin against Nature as much as against the Commands of God” (18) signifies that slavery (18), which overturns the “Original Constitution of Human Nature” by destroying “Social Affections” between man (18), is entirely unjustifiable (29).

While the crux of his argument focuses on how slavery is inimical to man's natural faculties, Peckard also spends considerable time detailing how slavery is detrimental to British civil society. Just like Rousseau and Clarkson, Peckard sees society as built upon a social contract that brought man out of the state of nature and into civil society: “men were formed to live in Society” (22) which guarantees “Honesty and Justice” to each member (23). Positive attributes characterize an individual's responsibility to society: “Society cannot subsist but by a reciprocal observation of Justice” (22), Peckard writes, and attached to the “absolute and indispensable duty” humans hold towards one another in a shared society is mercy towards others who possess imperfections (25). Slavery violates all these responsibilities. Not only is slavery an example of men acting “unjust towards each other,”

(21) Packard continues, but it also robs “God of his right,” for each individual “is already a Property belonging to a superior Lord” (29). The latter provides a religious spin on earlier antislavery arguments: rather than arguing that a human being cannot be sold because each individual possesses his or her own mind, Peckard implies that slavery is unacceptable because it interferes with an individual’s relationship with God. Furthermore, to this religious interpretation of the social contract is added a sense of national pride: he questions, just as the SEAST intended, how “the Legislature of a Nation...proud of Liberty Civil, Political and Religious, well acquainted with the Rights of Humanity...should yet give protection to such wicked men in such wicked practices ” (35).

The persistent efforts of the SEAST and its antislavery allies ultimately resulted in Parliamentary debate. Sir William Dolben in 1788 introduced a bill to limit the number of slaves allowed on slaving ships,<sup>161</sup> and the bill’s success indicated that popular petitions and evidence collection were working. Yet, the debate over this bill, as seen in antislavery advocate Henry Beaufoy’s June 1788 speech to Parliament, was not so much about the social contract as it was about humanitarian appeals.<sup>162</sup> Several factors facilitated the consideration of abolition in the British Parliament: William Wilberforce, one of the heads of the SEAST, was an active Member of Parliament with strong lobbying powers;<sup>163</sup> a growing antislavery current in France convinced British politicians that abolition would

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<sup>161</sup> Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 141.

<sup>162</sup> Henry Beaufoy. *The speech of Mr. Beaufoy, Tuesday, the 18th June, 1788 : in a committee of the whole House, on a bill for regulating the conveyance of negroes from Africa to the West-Indies : to which are added observations on the evidence adduced against the bill*, (London, 1789), *Slavery and Anti-Slavery*, Gale, University of Pennsylvania Libraries, 9.

<sup>163</sup> Drescher, *Abolitionism*, 235.

not necessarily disadvantage British commercial interests;<sup>164</sup> and a combination of religious<sup>165</sup> and popular fervor forced a representative Parliament to consider the question.

Still, abstract arguments based on the social contract theory, or at least in natural law, continued to appear from 1788 to 1792 as abolition was debated in Parliament. These arguments, however, appeared outside of, rather than in, Parliament: the Scottish branch of the SEAST, for instance, disseminated meeting minutes in February 1789<sup>166</sup> that described slavery as “inconsistent with the first principles of justice and humanity” (113) and “the British nation in particular” (114), and sent petitions to Parliament in 1790 denouncing slavery for infringing “upon the dearest rights of Man” (3). Moreover, an edited, published collection of the 1789 Parliamentary debates<sup>167</sup> reflects how Members of Parliament were driven by practical concerns at the same time that antislavery advocates outside of Parliament employed rhetoric which recalled the social contract theory. For example, in the preface, the author, presumably connected to the SEAST, writes that “the most enlightened nations of Europe” are “stifling alike the voice of nature, and the remonstrances of reason” (3) by practicing a trade that violates “the rights of mankind” (5), but in the transcripts of the debates that follow, ideas of “rights” and natural law do not appear. Instead, commercial interests, the deaths of British seamen involved in the Atlantic trade, the barbaric treatment of African slaves on cargo ships, and the high death rate of slaves in the Caribbean define the arguments of those fighting for antislavery in Parliament.

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<sup>164</sup> Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 145.

<sup>165</sup> Anglicans, Methodists, and Quakers inspired this religious fervor in Britain.

<sup>166</sup> Society established at Edinburgh, for effecting the Abolition of the African Slave Trade, *Two of the petitions from Scotland, which were presented to the last Parliament, praying the abolition of the African slave trade*, Edinburgh, M.DCC.XC. [1790], *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, Gale, University of Pennsylvania Libraries.

<sup>167</sup> *Speeches in Parliament, respecting the abolition of the African slave trade*, Edinburgh, M,DCC,LXXXIX, [1789], *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, Gale, University of Pennsylvania Libraries.

Ultimately, despite the SEAST's best efforts to stir popular fervor, the British Parliament failed to abolish the slave trade within a half-decade of the Society's founding. At the end of the day, abstract arguments could only do so much, especially when in competition with a trade that provided the backbone of the British colonial economy. Indeed, West Indian lobbyists succeeded in 1790 in rallying opposition to a gradual abolition bill,<sup>168</sup> and economic concerns continued to override any humanitarian cause through 1792. This does not mean the SEAST was an abject failure: the organization effectively brought the antislavery question to popular consciousness and built the intellectual groundwork for later British abolitionism. For the time being, however, abolition was off the table for an entirely different reason. Radical developments in France, and in particular the 1791 slave revolt in Saint-Domingue and the Jacobins' consolidation of power in 1793, meant that reform, particularly in the colonial sphere, would need to wait.<sup>169</sup>

### **The Société des Amis des Noirs, 1788-1793**

Though French antislavery thought had existed since at least Jean Bodin and had expanded during the Enlightenment, the birth of the nation's most prominent antislavery society, the Société des Amis des Noirs, was not necessarily a French-led process. In fact, as Lawrence C. Jennings explains, French abolitionism in the late eighteenth century was dependent on British funding and support,<sup>170</sup> with the Amis des Noirs modeled almost entirely on the SEAST.<sup>171</sup> Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, the founder of the Amis des

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<sup>168</sup> Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 143.

<sup>169</sup> Drescher, *Abolitionism*, 223.

<sup>170</sup> Lawrence C. Jennings, "The Interaction of French and British Antislavery, 1789-1848," *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* 15 (1992), 83.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

Noirs, even spent time in London in 1788, where he was encouraged by Thomas Clarkson<sup>172</sup> and other leading British abolitionists to form a similar society in France.<sup>173</sup> Moreover, just like the SEAST, the Amis des Noirs directed its attention to the abolition of the slave trade rather than to emancipation, and the organization distributed antislavery tracts, including a translated version of Clarkson's *Essay*,<sup>174</sup> in an attempt to garner public support.<sup>175</sup> Both organizations also consistently communicated with one another: not only were letters exchanged throughout the two organization's existence,<sup>176</sup> but British antislavery icons like Thomas Clarkson<sup>177</sup> and Granville Sharp<sup>178</sup> encouraged the Amis des Noirs to see themselves as part of a global intellectual trend in favor of natural rights.<sup>179</sup>

As much as the two organizations were intertwined, it is, though, important to note distinctions between the national contexts in which each abolitionist movement occurred. For one, creating popular fervor was significantly more difficult in pre-Revolutionary France; the French monarchy strictly regulated print material,<sup>180</sup> and France lacked a civic culture in which ordinary people consistently voiced their opinions.<sup>181</sup> Furthermore, whereas the SEAST was mostly middle-class, the Amis des Noirs was an elite group of individuals whose ties to government were prioritized over any effort to change public opinion towards slavery.<sup>182</sup> Prior to the Revolution, the only time that the Amis des Noirs

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<sup>172</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution*, 37.

<sup>173</sup> Lawrence C. Jennings, *French Anti-Slavery: The Movement for Abolition of Slavery in France, 1802-1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>174</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution*, 51.

<sup>175</sup> Jennings, *French Anti-Slavery*, 1-2.

<sup>176</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution*, 42.

<sup>177</sup> Jennings, "The Interaction of French and British Antislavery, 1789-1848," 82.

<sup>178</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution*, 20.

<sup>179</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution*, 19-20.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>181</sup> Drescher, *Abolitionism*, 154.

<sup>182</sup> Jennings, *French Anti-Slavery*, 2.

gained access to the general public was when well-connected abolitionists like Mirabeau and Condorcet helped the society publish materials in *L'Analyse des papiers anglais* and *Le Journal de Paris*.<sup>183</sup> Yet, despite facing obstacles in the form of poor communication infrastructure and opposition from the colonial lobby,<sup>184</sup> the Amis des Noirs was strangely ambitious: rather than view abolition of the slave trade as merely the first step towards gradual emancipation like many of the members of the SEAST, the members of this French organization characterized slaveholding as a crime that needed to be prohibited by metropolitan authorities, even while they prioritized abolition.<sup>185</sup>

The influence of the SEAST on the Amis des Noirs is clear in the organization's earliest published documents. In an anonymous pamphlet<sup>186</sup> published in February 1788 and now attributed to Brissot,<sup>187</sup> the Amis des Noirs credited the SEAST for inspiring the creation of the former: "Une Société respectable [à Londres]...nous invite à chercher, à rassembler en France des personnes zélées, & capables de répandre les lumières qui doivent y préparer & déterminent cette révolution" (2). Along the same lines, the Amis des Noirs express a desire not to disappoint their British role models: "La Société de Londres a dû croire qu'elle trouveroit en France un concours énergique à ses vues; nous osons en répondre, son espoir ne fera pas trompé" (15). What is interesting in this pamphlet is that although Britain and France were commercial and political rivals, the Amis des Noirs do not try to hide their connections to Britain, explaining that the fight against slavery forms

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<sup>183</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution*, 54.

<sup>184</sup> Jennings, "The Interaction of French and British Antislavery, 1789-1848," 85.

<sup>185</sup> Drescher, *Abolitionism*, 151-152.

<sup>186</sup> "Discourse sur la nécessité d'établir à Paris une Société pour concourir, avec celle de Londres, à l'abolition de la traite & de l'esclavage des Nègres. Prononcé le 19 fevrier 1788, dans une Société de quelques amis, rassembles a Paris, a la priere du Comite de Londres - (Paris), s.d. (1788)," in *La Révolution française et l'abolition de l'esclavage: Tome VI*, (Paris: Hachette Livre - Bibliothèque nationale de France), 2007.

<sup>187</sup> *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, 58.



“le rapport qui enlace l’Angleterre & la France l’une à l’autre” (16). Furthermore, Brissot confirms that the perspectives of the British are similar to those of the French: the abstract arguments of Clarkson, for instance, “peuvent donc commencer à dissiper les préjugés vulgaires contre l’affranchissement des Negres” (21-22) and should therefore be translated and disseminated in France.

This pamphlet also reflects how late-eighteenth century French antislavery thought built upon early Enlightenment texts. Following the trend of earlier antislavery writers, Brissot challenged the naïvety of those who believe Aristotle’s words: “on se persuade facilement, que cet esclavage étoit une Loi de la nature, qu'elle avoit condamne des hommes a servir d'autres hommes, commes des animaux domestiques, que sa volonte etoit suffisamment attestee par la difference des couleurs” (3-4). In reality, however, slavery is anti-Enlightenment<sup>188</sup> because it is “un nouveau prétexte à la tyrannie de l’intérêt personnel, & aux calomnies contre les politiques Philosophes” (6). Echoes of Rousseau’s *Du contrat social* appear, just as they did in Clarkson’s *Essay*: “De quel droit pouvoient-ils s'obstiner à rétenir dans l'esclavage d'autres hommes, ceux-la meme qui venoient de cimenter de leur sans cette verire eternelle: tous les homme sons nés libres & égaux?” (4). The abstract arguments of Brissot’s text should not be detached from the greater aims of the Amis des Noirs; after all, in the preamble to their 1789 guiding principles, the Amis des Noirs declared their intention to be an arbiter of natural law: “Il s’agit...de rendre à une partie du monde les droits sacrés que la nature lui a donnés.”<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> “La lumière générale, celle qui tend à la félicité publique, est...incompatible avec l’esprit de servitude.” (8)

<sup>189</sup> “Reglemens de la Société des Amis des Noirs – S.1. (Paris), s.d. (1789),” in *La Révolution française et l’abolition de l’esclavage: Tome VI*, (Paris: Hachette Livre - Bibliothèque nationale de France), 2007, 16.

Though Brissot wears his influences on his sleeve, he distinguishes himself in this pamphlet by arguing that granting liberty to the Africans would civilize them, much the same way as how the Enlightenment improved France.<sup>190</sup> The slave trade depresses the talents of Africans: “la captivité comprime la faculté de penser” (7) and hence “la masse d’un peuple esclave n’a ni temps, ni facultés, ni intérêts” (8). In contrast, liberty allows man to be governed by universal reason and aspire to perfectibility: “dans une Société libre, l’homme est entraîné par son intérêt personnel à développer ses facultés au plus haut degré” (6). His argument therefore follows a clear logical pattern, with him ultimately concluding that emancipation would allow Africans to receive the benefits of Enlightenment: “Rendez les hommes libres, & ils deviendront nécessairement & rapidement éclairés, & ils seront nécessairement meilleurs” (7). In response to those who view slavery as a civilizing process in itself, the Amis des Noirs in their founding guidelines explain that the French are not providing a good example to the Africans through their abusive behavior and need to reform: “notre commerce auroit pu adoucir leurs mœurs, si notre intérêt ne nous avoit fait entretenir leurs vices.”<sup>191</sup> Though these are abstract arguments, Brissot and the Amis des Noirs pledge<sup>192</sup> to be active participants in this struggle: because “la paix universelle n’existera jamais, que lorsque toutes les Sociétés seront libres” (6), he promises that the Amis des Noirs will remain preoccupied (15) with the cause until “la liberté de nos frères” (29) is guaranteed.

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<sup>190</sup> “Discourse sur la nécessité d’établir à Paris une Société pour concourir, avec celle de Londres, à l’abolition de la traite & de l’esclavage des Nègres.”

<sup>191</sup> “Reglemens de la Société des Amis des Noirs – S.1. (Paris), s.d. (1789),” 3.

<sup>192</sup> “Discourse sur la nécessité d’établir à Paris une Société pour concourir, avec celle de Londres, à l’abolition de la traite & de l’esclavage des Nègres.”

Brissot's text appeared around the same time as several other French antislavery works clearly influenced by the western European Enlightenment.<sup>193</sup> Benjamin-Sigismond Frossard's 1788 *La Cause des esclaves nègres*,<sup>194</sup> in particular, follows the lead of Rousseau, Clarkson, and Peckard in situating slavery outside the social contract: since "la Nature a créé tous les hommes égaux" (73), slavery is an unnatural violation of an individual's right to live without distinction and enjoy the benefits of society (75). By now, such reasoning should sound repetitive, but we can infer from this text that French antislavery activists, at least before 1789, were both overtly preoccupied with abstract arguments and stuck in an echo chamber where they appealed to one another with little regard for novel arguments that might appeal to those who were still unconvinced that abolition was necessary.

The French Revolution, however, provided a startling opportunity for the Amis des Noirs to translate their abstract pronouncements into concrete efforts. Louis XIV's request for *cahiers de doléances* from the three Estates and the subsequent meeting of the Estates-General in May 1789 were two potential avenues to bring the slavery question to the forefront of France's burgeoning political revolution. Nonetheless, while Jacques Necker even mentioned the sufferings of black slaves in his opening speech to the Estates-General, only 50 of the 600 general *cahiers* that reached the Estates-General referred to slavery,

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<sup>193</sup> Condorcet's *Réflexions sur l'esclavage des Nègres*, for instance, first written in 1781 but republished in 1788 by the Amis des Noirs, contains an unusual letter written to African slaves. In it, he, like Brissot, Peckard and Rousseau before him, holds that all men are born equal: "nature formed [Africans] with the same spirit, the same reason, the same virtues as whites." Nature is again emphasized: acts of enslavement are unjust because "take from the slave, not only all forms of property but also...everything that nature has given him to maintain his life and satisfy his needs." While the text was originally written before Brissot's pamphlet, it is part of a long line of texts emphasizing how slavery falls outside the social contract. See *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, 56.

<sup>194</sup> Benjamin-Sigismond Frossard, *La cause des esclaves nègres et des habitans de la Guinée, portée au tribunal de la justice, de la religion, de la politique, ou Histoire de la traite & de l'esclavage des nègres*, (de l'impr. d'A. de La Roche (Lyon), 1789).

which was about the same degree of attention paid by these lists to the less urgent issue of French convicts in the Mediterranean.<sup>195</sup> Clearly then, antislavery agitation prior to the French Revolution had failed to instill itself in popular consciousness. Yet, despite this failure, the French Revolution still provided openings for future success: the 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, though it did not mention chattel slavery, was framed in terms of universal human rights,<sup>196</sup> and the new guarantee of freedom of press meant that Brissot was able to found *Le Patriote Français*, a revolutionary newspaper that his fellow abolitionists were invited to publish in.<sup>197</sup>

Indeed, the Amis des Noirs, particularly those in the new National Assembly, tried hard to plead their case to their fellow deputies during the early years of the Revolution. Thomas Clarkson, the leader of the British abolitionist movement who inspired the Amis des Noirs, was even invited to speak to the National Assembly in 1789, where he repackaged his *Essay* into a lecture<sup>198</sup> that appealed to the French deputies' reformist sentiments. Instead of denouncing slavery as antithetical to the social contract, Clarkson suggests gradual abolition of the slave trade, explaining that this would permit France to protect its economy and fulfill the idea that "liberty should only be hampered by chains that [men] give themselves voluntarily" (102). In Clarkson's compromised stance one can see how legislative debate differs from abstract, textual discourse: in the National Assembly, antislavery advocates were opposed by the Club Massiac, the powerful colonial

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<sup>195</sup> Drescher, *Abolitionism*, 152.

<sup>196</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution*, 21.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

<sup>198</sup> Thomas Clarkson, "The Abolition of Negro Slavery or Means of Ameliorating their Lot," in *The French Revolution and Human Rights*.

lobby, and thus could not expect to end up victorious if they restricted their arguments to abstract notions of liberty and equality.<sup>199</sup>

Yet, this is largely what the Amis des Noirs did. A letter by the Amis des Noirs to Jacques Necker as the Estates General met in 1789<sup>200</sup> focused on the rights of humanity, arguing that slavery was incompatible with the values of “une Nation éclairée” (6). Similarly, when Brissot on the behalf of the Amis des Noirs addressed the National Assembly in 1790,<sup>201</sup> he focused on the hypocrisy of deputies who declared that all men were born free and equal by law (2) while sanctioning slavery: “Les peuples libres d'autres fois ont déshonoré la liberté en consacrant l'esclavage” (21) & “Il est digne de la première Assemblée libre de la France, de consacrer le principe de philanthropie, qui ne fait du genre humaine qu'une seule famille” (21). A second address to the National Assembly,<sup>202</sup> delivered by Petion and Brissot in that same year, made almost identical arguments: “Le résultat infaillible...[de] l'abolition de la traite...c'est de régénérer les deux mondes; c'est de perfectionner l'espèce humaine; c'est, enfin, de provoquer cette confraternité universelle” (3). Interestingly, despite their failure to make persuasive arguments based on economics,<sup>203</sup> the Amis des Noirs were aware of opposition from the Club Massiac.

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<sup>199</sup> This doesn't mean Crawford ignored abstract arguments. In 1790, he argued in a letter published by *Le Journal de Paris* that “le devoir d'un Peuple éclairé...seroit de leur apprendre qu'ils sont dans l'erreur, de les amener à la civilisation; mais au lieu de cette conduite, vous continuez criminellement un Commerce, qui est un obstacle insurmontable à leur civilisation, puisque, s'il existe des coutumes barbares chez eux, il en assure & encourage la continuation” (3).

<sup>200</sup> “Lettre de la Société des Amis des Noirs à M. Necker, avec la Réponse de ce Ministre - S.1. (Paris), s.d. (1789)” in *La Révolution française et l'abolition de l'esclavage: Tome VII*, (Paris: Hachette Livre - Bibliothèque nationale de France), 2007.

<sup>201</sup> “Adresse à l'Assemblée Nationale, pour l'abolition de la Traite des Noirs. Par la Société des Amis des Noirs de Paris. Février 1790. - Paris, Imprimerie de Potier de Lille, 1790,” in *La Révolution française et l'abolition de l'esclavage: Tome VII*.

<sup>202</sup> “Seconde Adresse à l'Assemblée Nationale, par la Société des Amis des Noirs, établie à Paris. - (Paris), Imprimerie du Patriote François, s.d. (9 avril 1790),” in *La Révolution française et l'abolition de l'esclavage: Tome VII*.

<sup>203</sup> Daniel P. Resnick, “The Societe des Amis des Noirs and the Abolition of Slavery,” *French Historical Studies*, vol. 7, no. 4 (Autumn 1972), 563-564.

Unfortunately, this awareness was limited, as rather than change their methods, they again defended themselves in terms of abstract terms: “Ils ne peuvent nous defendre de prouver que la traite et l’esclavage ne sont pas seulement des attentats a tous les droits, mais d’inutiles et fatales barbaries” (6).

Adding to the Amis des Noirs’ errors was the fact that they became distracted by a new development: the debate over whether free *gens de couleur* in French Saint-Domingue deserved voting rights.<sup>204</sup> The Amis’ decision to involve themselves in this debate was not entirely unexpected: the organization was unique among late-eighteenth-century antislavery societies in that among its members were free people of color.<sup>205</sup> Hence, when Julien Raimond, a Saint-Dominguen planter who himself was opposed to abolition, responded negatively in 1790 to white planters’ demand for more representation in the National Assembly, the Amis des Noirs quickly supported his efforts.<sup>206</sup> The Amis’ support of Raimond, in addition to the creation of the *Société des Colons Américains* by Raimond and fellow free person of color Vincent Ogé,<sup>207</sup> meant that the issue took precedence over the slave trade. In the subsequent debate, the Abbé Grégoire, a member of the Amis des Noirs, used the social contract theory to argue for the citizenship rights of tax-paying free people of color while simultaneously arguing that free people of color were important allies in “containing the slaves” in Saint-Domingue.<sup>208</sup>

The legacy of the Amis des Noirs is difficult to assess, as their goals were often unclear and their tactics largely ineffective in garnering support for abolition. Their efforts

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<sup>204</sup> Valerie Quinney. “Decisions on Slavery, the Slave-Trade and Civil Rights for Negroes in the Early French Revolution,” *The Journal of Negro History* 55, no. 2 (1970), 125.

<sup>205</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution*, 18.

<sup>206</sup> Drescher, *Abolitionism*, 156.

<sup>207</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolition in the Age of Revolution*, 88.

<sup>208</sup> *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, 106.

to secure citizenship rights for free people of color certainly helped elevate the cause, but the National Assembly decided in 1791 to leave the question up to the Colonial Assembly of Saint-Domingue, which subsequently excluded “all men of African ancestry from full citizenship.”<sup>209</sup> Only when Vincent Ogé launched a failed rebellion resulting in his brutal execution did the National Assembly decide to concede citizenship rights to free people of color.<sup>210</sup> Furthermore, though Brissot and Petion spoke early in the Revolution on the topic of abolition, the reality was that most members of the Amis des Noirs were politically interested in other topics, unlike Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp, who were almost entirely devoted to abolition. In fact, during the Revolution, attendance at the Amis’ meetings sharply declined as its members, associated with the moderate Girondin faction, argued for other metropolitan reforms.<sup>211</sup> In the wake of the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue in 1791, all discussions of abolition were put on hold, with the radical Jacobin faction blaming the Amis des Noirs for stirring up dissent in the colonies.<sup>212</sup> The final end for the Amis des Noirs came in 1793, when many of its members, including Brissot, Clavière, and Condorcet, died as a result of persecution following the seizure of power by Robespierre and the Jacobins.<sup>213</sup>

Still, it would be shortsighted to characterize the Amis des Noirs as a complete failure. While it is true that the Law of 16 Pluviöse – which nominally abolished slavery in the French Empire – was passed only because the French found themselves unable to

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<sup>209</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolition in the Age of Revolution*, 94.

<sup>210</sup> Drescher, *Abolitionism*, 158.

<sup>211</sup> Jennings, *French Anti-Slavery*, 2-3.

<sup>212</sup> Drescher, *Abolitionism*, 161.

<sup>213</sup> Jennings, *French Anti-Slavery*, 3.

control the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue, scholars like Lawrence C. Jennings<sup>214</sup> and Seymour Drescher<sup>215</sup> underappreciate the role of the Amis des Noirs in the events that led up to the decree. Yes, the Amis' abstract arguments often appeared detached from reality, but the organization indirectly contributed to the abolition of slavery by influencing the career of Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, the man responsible for emancipating Saint-Domingue's slaves during his tenure as Civil Commissioner. Sonthonax was a lawyer in Paris early on in the Revolution<sup>216</sup> and wrote for the radical newspaper *Révolutions de Paris* from mid-1789 until 25 July 1791.<sup>217</sup> Through his involvement with this newspaper and with the Jacobin Club, Sonthonax was appointed to the National Assembly's correspondence committee concerning colonial affairs with Brissot de Warville, the founder of the Amis des Noirs.<sup>218</sup> Though Sonthonax never joined the Amis des Noirs, it is worth noting that as early as September 1790 he wrote a piece on slavery in *Les Révolutions de Paris*<sup>219</sup> which sounds remarkably similar to other antislavery tracts discussed in this chapter. In this piece, Sonthonax declares "as for the slave trade and the slavery of Negroes, the European governments will find it useless to oppose the cries of

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<sup>214</sup> "If France abolished slavery in 1794, it was due to developments in Saint-Domingue rather than to the efforts of the British or the discredited and by then defunct Amis des Noirs" (83)

<sup>215</sup> "As of the summer of 1791, French Revolutionary ideology had created some openings for antislavery agitation in France and a potent vocabulary for conflict in the colonies, but little real change. It was from the Caribbean, and from the slaves themselves, that revolutionary action was to have its greatest impact on the progress of emancipation" (159)

<sup>216</sup> Robert Stein, "The Revolution of 1789 and the Abolition of Slavery," *Canadian Journal of History*, volume 17 issue 3 (1982), 452.

<sup>217</sup> Robert L. Stein, *Léger Félicité Sonthonax: The Lost Sentinel of the French Republic*, (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985), 21.

<sup>218</sup> Stein, *Léger Félicité Sonthonax*, 23.

<sup>219</sup> David Geggus, "Racial Equality, Slavery, and Colonial Secession during the Constituent Assembly," *The American Historical Review* 94, no. 5 (1989), 1305.



philosophy and the principles of universal liberty that germinate and spread throughout the nations.”<sup>220</sup>

Just as Sonthonax’s philosophy can be tied to the Amis des Noirs, so too can his career in Saint-Domingue be credited to the organization. By 1791, the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue was in full swing, facilitated by disputes between (largely absentee) white planters, free people of color, and white colonists. As the highly profitable sugar colony devolved into chaos, Sonthonax was appointed in mid-1792 as one of three new civil commissioners responsible for establishing order in the colony and enforcing the “Law of April 4” 1792 that granted full citizenship rights to free people of color.<sup>221</sup> Notably, he was appointed on the recommendation of Brissot,<sup>222</sup> who, as we have seen, believed that slavery was inimical to natural law and the values of the French nation. While Sonthonax upon arriving in Saint-Domingue spoke in favor of slavery in an effort to ensure adherence to the Law of April 4,<sup>223</sup> the continued instability of the colony, compounded by the threat of British and Spanish interference, convinced him to change his tune.<sup>224</sup> As early as Fall 1792 he began considering emancipation, writing in a February 1793 letter that “it is essential that [the National Convention] hasten to fix the lot of the slaves.”<sup>225</sup> In successive months, he improved the treatment of slaves, before declaring on August 29, 1793 the abolition of slavery in the territories he directly oversaw. As with many other antislavery

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<sup>220</sup> Les Révolutions de Paris, no. 63 (5 September 1790), 523-24, Excerpted in *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*, edited by Jack R. Censer and Lynn Hunt, (American Social History Productions, 2001). This excerpt is also well known for Sonthonax’s prophetic proclamation that “the time will come, and that day is not far off, when you will see a frizzy-haired African, with no other recommendation than his good sense and his virtues, come and participate in the legislative process at the heart of our national assemblies.”

<sup>221</sup> Stein, *Léger Félicité Sonthonax*, 24.

<sup>222</sup> Stein, “The Revolution of 1789 and the Abolition of Slavery,” 452.

<sup>223</sup> Stein, *Léger Félicité Sonthonax*, 47.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

tracts, Sonthonax echoed the words of Rousseau in his emancipation decree: “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights.”<sup>226</sup>

Sonthonax’s emancipation decree in Saint-Domingue carried over to France, where revolutionaries realized that saving the colony (and perhaps other colonies as well) would require the abolition of slavery. The debate in France, therefore, was urgent, with slavery being abolished and citizenship rights being extended to the formerly enslaved in the Law of 16 Pluviöse. While to contemporary readers this decree may be interpreted as a milestone, it is worth noting that it was far from anything the now-defunct Amis des Noirs had wanted.<sup>227</sup> Namely, in contrast to their demands to abolish the slave trade, which would limit economic damage and provide a means towards gradual emancipation, the Law of 16 Pluviöse declared that all slaves were free. The Abbé Grégoire, one of the more prominent antislavery members of the Convention and a former member of the Amis, commented that the decree was “the political equivalent of a volcano,” though after the decree was passed he staunchly opposed any attempt to overturn it.<sup>228</sup> While Brissot, Condorcet, and many other leading members of the Amis were tragically not alive to see the Law of 16 Pluviöse (though they may have responded similarly to the Abbé Grégoire), the legacy of abstractions rooted in the notion of primitiveness continued: Pierre Chaumette, an official in the Paris Commune, celebrated abolition for reviving in humans the best characteristics found in the state of nature.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>227</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 363.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid, 365.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid, 370.

### **British Abolition, French Regression**

Strangely then, by 1804, abolition had occurred in France, where the antislavery movement was led by a group of elites dependent on abstract arguments, and not in Britain, where antislavery had expanded into a popular movement. This should not imply, however, that the Amis des Noirs were more successful than the SEAST; instead, the reality of 1794 should represent how complicated the issue of slavery was at the time. Antislavery in France unsurprisingly slowed following the disbanding of the Amis in 1793 and the Law of 16 Pluviöse in 1794. Only the Société des Amis des Noirs et des Colonies, run by the Abbé Grégoire from 1796 to 1799, listed abolition as among its main concerns, though it spent more time theorizing how to improve racial tensions in the colonies than working for transnational antislavery.<sup>230</sup> In Britain, antislavery also saw a lull: war with France during the French Revolution drew attention away from radical reform,<sup>231</sup> and the vicious slave revolt in Saint-Domingue scared many British politicians from the idea of abolition.<sup>232</sup>

Fortunes for each nation's antislavery movement reversed, however, as Napoleon rose to power in France. Hoping to reconquer Saint-Domingue after Black revolutionary Toussaint Louverture established control in the colony, Napoleon in December 1801 ordered a force of 12,000 men under General Charles Leclerc to crush opposition forces.<sup>233</sup> Moreover, Napoleon on 20 May 1802 revoked the Law of 16 Pluviöse, effectively reinstating slavery in the French colonies.<sup>234</sup> Public opposition to this decree was almost

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<sup>230</sup> Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall. *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution: The Making of Modern Universalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 150-152.

<sup>231</sup> Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 147-148.

<sup>232</sup> Stephen Farrell, "'Contrary to the Principles of Justice, Humanity and Sound Policy': The Slave Trade, Parliamentary Politics and the Abolition Act, 1807" in *The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament and People*. Edited by Stephen Farrell, Melanie Unwin, and James Walvin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 147.

<sup>233</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution*, 165.

<sup>234</sup> Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution*, 161.

nonexistent, for figures like Abbé Grégoire would have been censored had they spoken out. From the British perspective, Napoleon's invasion of Saint-Domingue and aggressive foreign policy reinvigorated the slavery debate in Britain: figures like James Stephen and Henry Brougham viewed French aggression as a threat to the British West Indian colonies<sup>235</sup> and saw abolition as a tool to limit the threat of future slave revolts. In addition, Napoleon's suppression of the Jacobins abated fears of Jacobinism in Britain, making reform once again a possibility.<sup>236</sup> Thus, even though Napoleon's forces were defeated in Saint-Domingue in November 1803 and Haitian independence was declared on January 1, 1804,<sup>237</sup> the British felt compelled to debate slavery, with William Wilberforce reviving the SEAST in May 1804<sup>238</sup> after seven years of inactivity.<sup>239</sup>

The methods of the renewed SEAST shifted, with economic, humanitarian, and national security arguments taking priority over popular petitioning and writings that alluded to social contract theory. James Stephen and Zachary Macaulay, two men with actual experience in the Caribbean, were brought into the organization,<sup>240</sup> while William Wilberforce promoted Henry Brougham's pragmatic *Concise Statement* in an effort to make abolition, as J.R. Oldfield writes, "a 'political' rather than a 'popular' issue."<sup>241</sup> Unlike the French case, the new SEAST continued to collect evidence and launched a propaganda campaign based on eliciting empathy with the enslaved African.<sup>242</sup> Ultimately,

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<sup>235</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution*, 167.

<sup>236</sup> Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 299.

<sup>237</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution*, 167.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>239</sup> Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 150.

<sup>240</sup> Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution*, 170.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

brilliant political maneuvering in the British Parliament,<sup>243</sup> in addition to a concerted effort to portray abolition as a patriotic endeavor designed to defend British colonial interests,<sup>244</sup> resulted in the total abolition of the British slave trade in 1807.<sup>245</sup>

## Conclusion

Clearly then, while abstract arguments provided the foundations of antislavery, more pragmatic concerns resulted in abolition in both the British and French contexts. In France, abolition was temporarily accomplished as a result of the valiant struggles of slaves in Saint-Domingue, whereas in Britain the slave trade was abolished as a defensive maneuver in response to French aggression in the Caribbean. As much as arguments based on natural law and social contract theory appeared ineffective, however, they remained at the back of the minds of antislavery advocates even after victory. Indeed, William Wilberforce's 1807 *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*,<sup>246</sup> published after the abolition of the British Atlantic slave trade, denounced slavery as "a contradiction of the Law of Nature" (104), while the British Commons and Lords united upon abolition in proclaiming that the British slave trade was "contrary to the principles of justice, humanity, and sound policy."<sup>247</sup> Hence, while abolition was defined by a complicated lobbying process, it was never fully detached from abstractions which were connected, albeit indirectly, to concepts of primitivity evaluated in chapter one.

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<sup>243</sup> It should be noted that the trade of slaves to foreign countries was abolished before the entire British trade, reflecting anxieties that trading slaves strengthened other nations' economies.

<sup>244</sup> Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 303.

<sup>245</sup> Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 236.

<sup>246</sup> William Wilberforce, *A letter on the abolition of the slave trade; addressed to the freeholders and other inhabitants of Yorkshire*, (London, Printed by L. Hansard & sons, for T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1807), *The Making of the Modern World*, Gale, University of Pennsylvania libraries.

<sup>247</sup> Stephen Farrell, "'Contrary to the Principles of Justice, Humanity and Sound Policy,'" 141.

## Chapter 3 – Fiction, Fetters & Feelings: The Noble African in Empathetic Antislavery Literature

### Introduction

*“For millions feel what Oronoko felt:  
Fir’d by no single wrongs, the countless host  
I mourn, by rapine dragg’d from Afric’s coast.  
Perish th’ illiberal thought which wou’d debase  
The native genius of the sable race!”<sup>248</sup>*

Though a century had passed since the publishing of Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, Hannah More’s allusion to the novella’s titular character in her 1788 “Slavery: A Poem,” quoted above, reflected the lasting impact of Behn’s use of the Noble African literary trope on antislavery consciousness. Indeed, between 1787 and 1807, or the period in which antislavery thought in Britain and France solidified through the founding of abolitionist societies, the trope of the Noble African rapidly expanded in prevalence. Buoyed by religious and philosophical movements, in addition to the rise of the sentimental novel as a model, antislavery advocates realized that this figure could be used to establish empathy with enslaved Africans and to help foster a sort of mass consciousness in favor of abolition. This chapter will therefore look at how a variety of writers in both national contexts built upon the rise of humanitarianism by portraying enslaved Africans as Noble Savages who needed to be freed and European slave-traders as Ignoble Savages who needed to be civilized themselves.

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<sup>248</sup> Hannah More, “Slavery. A Poem” in *Essays on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, Edited by Mary-Antoinette Smith (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2010), 399.

## The rise of humanitarianism

Just as natural law philosophers influenced abstract antislavery arguments, so too did social contract theorists facilitate the rise of humanitarianism<sup>249</sup> in the early modern period. Thomas Hobbes, evaluated in chapters one and two of this thesis, again makes an appearance: as historian D.B. Davis explains, Hobbes' depiction of man as innately corrupt angered some Protestants, who had only recently rebelled against John Calvin's belief that man's sinful nature justified strict guidance.<sup>250</sup> These Protestants, most of whom were in Britain, regarded Hobbes as a secular apologist for despotic governance, and hence refuted him with the same forcefulness as they did Calvin. Their opposition rested on two principles: (1) humans were not entirely driven by self-interest; and (2) humans did not need a coercive force (i.e. a strong central government) to unify them.<sup>251</sup> In pursuing this aim, religious figures used descriptions of primitive humans that should by now seem familiar: Protestants like Knightly Chetwood wrote that "Nature has endu'd us with the tenderest Passions,"<sup>252</sup> while Benjamin Whichcote held that primitive people possessed an elevated moral sense.<sup>253</sup> Collectively, their arguments suggested that life centered on virtue and benevolence was superior to that of Calvinist severity.<sup>254</sup>

While these Protestants were not exclusively motivated by opposition to Hobbes (they were also driven also by resistance to Calvinism), their arguments did rely on

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<sup>249</sup> Though social contract theorists did not explicitly use this term in their writings, the term "humanitarianism" refers to an interest in the welfare of others, which in this time period expanded to include even those who belonged to different racial groups (i.e. African slaves in the Americas).

<sup>250</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 355.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid, 355.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid, 355.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid, 351.

<sup>254</sup> Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 49.

promoting an alternative to Hobbes' imagining of the state of nature. Instead, these Protestants, who came to be known as Latitudinarians, held that the state of nature represented perfection<sup>255</sup> and that primitive societies provided useful comparative examples to contest the decadence of Restoration England.<sup>256</sup> Moreover, in the Latitudinarians' eyes, human's capability for feeling was strongest in the state of nature, suggesting that civilization corrupted humans and that studying primitivity could allow humans to improve. Along these lines, Latitudinarians promoted human relationships based on empathy and emotion, which they believed to be present in the state of nature, as the best means of avoiding sin.<sup>257</sup> This religious challenge should not be understated: by contesting conventional Christian beliefs on sin and human nature, the Latitudinarians opened the door for the Quakers and Methodists, who disproportionately influenced the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century British and French antislavery movements.<sup>258</sup>

Thomas Hobbes' role in the rise of humanitarianism was not limited to the religious reform inspired in opposition to his theory. Rather, growing *philosophical* opposition to Hobbes' ideas also supported the notion that humans should feel for others. The 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury proposed a social contract theory in which the success of civil society relied on each citizen's moral sense and obligation to one another,<sup>259</sup> and the Scottish Enlightenment thinker Francis Hutcheson argued in his 1755 *System of Moral Philosophy*

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<sup>255</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 350.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>258</sup> Edward Derbyshire Seeber, *Anti-slavery in France during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 83.

<sup>259</sup> Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928), 27.



that humans' inherent benevolence guaranteed happiness in society.<sup>260</sup> Paralleling the work of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers was an emerging movement in French-speaking territories based on the concept of a shared *humanité*: Emer de Vattel, a Swiss jurist, wrote that humans owe "mutual assistance and duties" to "one another as social beings" if they hope to "live according to their nature" and ensure "their self-preservation and happiness."<sup>261</sup> By linking empathy with human nature and describing the state of nature as superior to contemporary, civilized society, both religious reformers and philosophical theorists promoted the idea that humans must feel for one another to facilitate societal progress.

The appearance of sentimental literature in both Britain and France accompanied these religious and philosophical developments. This new genre reflected divisions between Hobbesian/Calvinist thought and that of the new religious and philosophic reformers: historian D.B. Davis writes that sentimental literature juxtaposed a "world of sin...wholly preoccupied with luxury and power" with a "world of virtue" based on "human relationships of sympathy and genuine emotion."<sup>262</sup> Yet, sentimental literature did more than merely describe the split between these different perspectives; it actively endorsed the latter, arguing that society would improve if humans employed once again the moral faculties they had previously possessed in the state of nature.<sup>263</sup>

The sentimental novel, or even the novel more broadly, also played a critical role in developing empathy during the eighteenth century. Historian Lynn Hunt explains that

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<sup>260</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 376.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

<sup>262</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 357.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid*, 357.

empathy can only take form through identification and social interaction with others,<sup>264</sup> and the novel's narrative form provided readers with insight into the sentiments of a range of characters who were otherwise inaccessible to the general public.<sup>265</sup> Whereas class distinctions in practice prevented frequent communication among those of different stations in life, the novel's focus on a varied cast of characters allowed the reader to feel "a sense of equality and empathy" with those of varied backgrounds.<sup>266</sup> Furthermore, sentimental novels emphasized the innermost feelings of characters and their struggle for personal autonomy,<sup>267</sup> and the reader subsequently could understand others "as like them, as having the same kinds of inner emotions."<sup>268</sup> This psychological association with fictional characters facilitated compassion,<sup>269</sup> and the fact that protagonists and readers shared "interiority" meant, according to Hunt, that "all selves were in some sense equal."<sup>270</sup> Following Hunt's argument, from 1720 until the end of the eighteenth century, sentimental novels like *Pamela*, *Clarissa*, and *La nouvelle Héloïse* touched readers' hearts while providing poignant commentary on their respective society's many inequities.<sup>271</sup>

### **Humanitarianism & Slavery**

The growth of the Atlantic Slave Trade paralleled the emergence of both Latitudinarianism and sensibility. In fact, from 1680 to 1786, the British colonies imported more than 2 million slaves, or over 20,000 a year, from Africa. And just as sensibility in literature saw its peak occur around 1750 with the publication of novels like *Clarissa*, the

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<sup>264</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 39 and 55.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>271</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 411.

rate of slaves entering the French and British colonies rapidly increased in the second-half of the eighteenth century.<sup>272</sup> Though the slave trade presumably could have been ignored by many people in metropolitan Britain and France since its cargo was destined for the Americas, the presence of about 20,000 Africans in London (in addition to the apparent influence of slavery on port cities like Bristol) meant that slavery maintained a visible presence even in the British Isles.<sup>273</sup> This was less the case in France; the efforts of French officials to ensure the maxim that “there are no slaves in France” meant that by the 1770s, only four to five thousand Blacks lived among France’s population of 28 million people. This contrast influenced antislavery in both national contexts: whereas humanitarian advocates like Granville Sharp in Britain publicized the plight of slaves within Britain,<sup>274</sup> antislavery in France remained defined in terms of the colonies and not the metropole.

Still, a tradition of sentimental literature with African characters developed in both Britain and France throughout the eighteenth century, perhaps stimulated by the presence of travel narratives which posited Africans as either a Noble or Ignoble Savage. Whereas British travelers like John Atkins perceived Africans as wholly distinguished from Europeans in their customs,<sup>275</sup> others like Michael Adanson recalled how the African embodied universal notions of man’s simplicity in the state of nature.<sup>276</sup> And while those critical of Africans focused on their supposed idleness, poor agricultural methods,<sup>277</sup> and

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<sup>272</sup> Lucy K. Hayden, “The Black Presence in Eighteenth-Century British Novels.” *CLA Journal* 24, no. 3 (1981): 401-402.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

<sup>274</sup> Christopher Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006): 93-95.

<sup>275</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 466.

<sup>276</sup> Anthony J. Barker, *The African Link; British Attitudes to the Negro in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1550-1807*, (London: F. Cass, 1978), 103.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

lack of written language,<sup>278</sup> those writers belonging to the religious and philosophic tradition of sensibility viewed slavery as inhumane because it restricted and punished “innocent nature.”<sup>279</sup> To this latter point: the developing culture of sympathy, stimulated by Latitudinarians, the sentimental novel, and philosophers like Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, made it, as historian Christopher Brown explains, “increasingly fashionable” in the latter half of the eighteenth century to “romanticize enslaved Africans as exemplars of wounded innocence.”<sup>280</sup>

To a generation steeped in sensibility, empathizing with the African slave came to be seen as a test of authenticity in one’s commitment to the movement.<sup>281</sup> Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* and Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, discussed in chapter one of this thesis, foreshadowed this trend; both authors portrayed Africans as Noble Savages who represented innocence and virtue personified. However, as much as Behn and Defoe’s books humanized characters of other cultures, neither book condemned slavery as an institution, and neither admitted that *all* members of the outgroup were equally human. While this trend continued in the eighteenth century, with many writers incorporating African characters without forcefully critiquing the institution of Atlantic slavery, the rise of a humanitarian ethos did encourage depictions of Africans as Noble Savages who needed to be freed from their enslavement for the betterment of British and French society. In France alone we can see this transition: whereas Pierre Marivaux’s 1725 comedy *L’Ile des esclaves* employed racially ambiguous characters to discuss slavery in abstract terms, Jean-François de Saint-Lambert’s 1769 novel *Ziméo* and Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s 1771 *L’An*

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>279</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 363.

<sup>280</sup> Christopher Brown, *Moral Capital*, 48.

<sup>281</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 411-412.

2440 predicted a world in which a Noble African would rise to power in France through revolution.

Such narratives – whether fictional or nonfictional – then laid the foundation for the development of human rights, or *les droits de l’homme*, in the Age of Revolution. Human rights flourish when others are seen as moral equals, and eighteenth-century readers learned to feel this kind of equality partially through identification with literary characters.<sup>282</sup> Early abolitionists saw the value of literary identification: they encouraged former slaves to write novelistic autobiographies, and the antislavery movement reached popular audiences through the spread of sympathy and sensibility.<sup>283</sup> Moreover, as historian D.B. Davis writes, sentimental novels that took up the issue of slavery allowed people across borders to “share hopes and emotions, and feel united in an ennobling cause.”<sup>284</sup>

Hence, by the time the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (SEAST) appeared in London in 1787, a humanitarian tradition already existed that depended upon depicting the African man and woman in empathetic terms. Yet, while the Noble African theme existed prior to the founding of the SEAST, it grew in part because SEAST organizers like Thomas Clarkson encouraged art and literature glorifying the “injur’d Afric.” This should not be surprising: almost all of the SEAST’s founding members were Methodists and Quakers influenced by Latitudinarian conceptions of man’s innate virtue and responsibility to one another.<sup>285</sup> These same founders also adhered to a tradition of social contract thought opposed to Thomas Hobbes’ pessimistic perspective on

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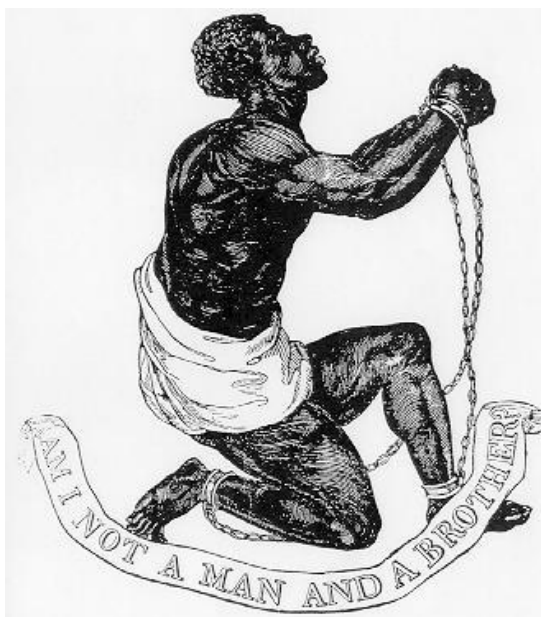
<sup>282</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 58.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>284</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, 363.

<sup>285</sup> Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 57.

human nature. In this context, humanitarian appeals thrived. The SEAST's embrace of an anti-slavery emblem that displayed a chained African on his knees with the caption "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" is only one such example.<sup>286</sup> Humanitarian appeals were so popular that the SEAST launched a mass propaganda campaign: Josiah Wedgwood's revolutionary methods of ceramic production meant that the emblem could be incorporated into fashionable dishes,<sup>287</sup> and the SEAST encouraged artists and writers to produce works that could be easily disseminated as part of an effort to bring slavery to the forefront of national consciousness.<sup>288</sup>



### **British Anti-Slavery Poetry**

Supported by the SEAST, a number of British poets thus produced antislavery poems designed to garner sympathy for the enslaved African. Logic could only go so far

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<sup>286</sup> J.R. Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution: An International History of Anti-slavery, c. 1787-1820*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 59.

<sup>287</sup> Marcus Wood, "Packaging Liberty and Marketing the Gift of Freedom: 1807 and the Legacy of Clarkson's Chest" in *The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament and People*. Edited by Stephen Farrell, Melanie Unwin, and James Walvin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 209.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid*, 207.

in persuading the public to invest themselves in antislavery works<sup>289</sup> and literary works emerged as an alternative to the abstract and rational tracts discussed in chapter two.<sup>290</sup> The Romantic movement, led by poets like William Wordsworth, inspired some of this poetry, with themes of liberation and captivity appealing to the movement's Protestant impulses.<sup>291</sup> Collectively, the poets involved in antislavery agitation between 1787 and 1807 focused on producing, as literary historian Srividhya Swaminathan explains, "sensationalized images"<sup>292</sup> of African suffering that often utilized one of two tropes: "the noble being who resisted the constraint of his natural liberty" or "the poor creature who bowed down under the weight of enslavement."<sup>293</sup> While the former is more connected to the Noble African literary trope, the second tended to take up the civilized/savage dichotomy in a different way: in portraying the British enslaver as no better than a savage in the most pernicious sense. For this reason, poetry involving both tropes will be analyzed, with special attention shown to those works which, although written by white authors, employed an imagined African perspective to juxtapose African innocence with white brutality.

Hannah More's 1788 "Slavery. A Poem"<sup>294</sup> was among the most widely read poems written during the SEAST's existence. In it, More questions how Britain can claim to be a defender of liberty while subjugating Africans to chattel slavery. After drawing a comparison between liberty and the sun's rays, More asks "While Britain basks in thy full blaze of light, / Why lies sad Afric quench'd in total night?" (398). In contrast to this tragic,

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<sup>289</sup> Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759-1815* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 101.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>291</sup> Helena Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 84.

<sup>292</sup> Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade*, 101.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>294</sup> Hannah More, "Slavery. A Poem."

unfree African slave, “Th’ unconquer’d Savage” who escapes slavery “laughs at pain and toil, / Basking in Freedom’s beams which gild his native soil” (400). By juxtaposing the Noble African living in tranquility with the enslaved African suffering in slavery, More effectively discredits the proslavery claim that Africans’ lives improved under slavery.

In addition to detailing the detrimental effects of slavery on the African’s body and mind, More condemns British participants in the slave trade for their inhumanity. Just as “horrors of deepest, deadliest guilt arise” when she looks towards “Afric’s shores” (399), so too is she enraged by the behavior of the “WHITE SAVAGE” (402), who puts innocent Africans in bondage. In her eyes, these “white savages” cannot civilize Africans because they themselves are not civilized. In contrast to the Noble African who possess “strong, but luxuriant virtues” (399), British slaveholders “are *not* Christians” (401) and use a “ruthless hand” (400) to treat their slaves. More begs for the British to return to the natural innocence found in the state of nature: “In every nature, every clime the same; / In all, these feelings equal sway maintain; / In all the love of HOME and FREEDOM reign” (400). Instead, she despairs that Britain finds itself far from any natural state, with some Britons not even admitting that Africans “have heads to think, and hearts to feel, / And souls to act, with firm, tho’ erring, zeal” (399).

Hannah More’s poetry belongs to a tradition that employs an authentic European voice to defend the struggle of enslaved Africans. Another poem in this category is Helen Maria Williams’ 1789 “A Poem on the Bill Lately Passed for Regulating the Slave Trade,”<sup>295</sup> which attempts to establish empathy with the African through emotional appeals

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<sup>295</sup> Helen Maria Williams, “A Poem on the Bill Lately Passed for Regulating the Slave Trade” in *Essays on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, Edited by Mary-Antoinette Smith (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2010).



to the reader's sentiments: "Poor wretch! on whose despairing eyes / His cherish'd home shall never rise" (406), she writes, drawing attention to the pathetic appearance of the suffering slave as he longingly thinks of his previous existence in the state of nature. William Wordsworth's 1803 sonnet eulogizing the Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture adopts a similar approach: Louverture's death is tragic and "miserable," but Wordsworth claims his spirit will not die. He narrates, "Though fallen thyself, never to rise again, / Live, and take comfort. Thou hast left behind / Powers that will work for thee." In effect, Wordsworth believes that although Louverture has died, his powerful image as a virtue-embodying Noble African would inspire future antislavery efforts throughout the Atlantic world.

As effective as these poems may have been in garnering sympathy for the plight of slaves, perhaps more impactful were those that took on the perspective of the African. This is because the distance separating the poet and the subject disappears when they appear to be one and the same person. William Cowper's 1788 *The Negro's Complaint*, for instance, adopts the voice of an African slave to criticize colonists who hold Africans to be uncivilized even as those same colonists behave inhumanely towards their slaves: "Deem our nation brutes no longer," the fictional African narrator exclaims, before demanding that the British slaver must "Prove that you have human feelings, / Ere you proudly question ours!" While Cowper's portrayal of the colonists as less capable of feeling than the Noble African reflected a growing tendency among antislavery writers to question the nobility of the colonists' sensibility, the fact that Cowper's name was attached to the poem meant that any reader would be able to tell that the poem's African voice was not authentic.

Anonymous poems, like “The African’s Complaint On-Board a Slave Ship,”<sup>296</sup> however, might have seemed more legitimate, even if they were probably written by white authors. Employing Afro-English diction, the poem details how life in Africa was superior to that found in the colonies: “Here in chains poor black man lying / Put so tick dey on us stand, / Ah! With heat and smells we’re dying / ‘Twas not dus in Negro lands” (410). In contrast to Africa, where Africans have “room and air and freedom,” in the Americas “de white man beat de black man, / ‘Till he’s sick and cannot stand” (410). This contrast – between a comforting home nostalgically yearned for and the reality of abuse in the colonies – defined poets’ attempts to portray slavery as inimical to the nature of the Noble African or his homeland.

### **Black British writers**

In addition to poetry, the SEAST also supported formerly enslaved Africans in their own quest to advocate for abolition. As we have seen, sentimental literature exploded in popularity over the course of the long-eighteenth century, with novels like Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* selling extremely well in both Britain and France.<sup>297</sup> Yet, nonwhite authors were notably absent from the century’s bestsellers list, particularly because opportunities for African writers were limited. The American Revolution changed this to a certain degree: as Christopher Brown explains, the fighting of many free Blacks on behalf of the British Empire during the American Revolution convinced many Africans and people of African descent that they would be better off identifying as subjects of the British Crown.<sup>298</sup> Consequently, some free Blacks in Great Britain began to see themselves as an “interest

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<sup>296</sup> “The African’s Complaint On-Board a Slave Ship” in *Essays on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, Edited by Mary-Antoinette Smith (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2010).

<sup>297</sup> Lucy K. Hayden, “The Black Presence in Eighteenth-Century British Novels,” 404.

<sup>298</sup> Christopher Brown, *Moral Capital*, 294.

group” and decided to fight for the same rights as white British subjects.<sup>299</sup> Here a notable difference arises between the British and French cases: free Blacks were a more populous social group in eighteenth-century Great Britain than in eighteenth-century France, and so the SEAST’s decision to encourage the writing and publication of narratives by African writers made logistical sense. Moreover, Africans steeped in European literary culture could appropriate the Noble African theme and use it to their own ends; Black writers like Phillis Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho, among others, impressed readers with their diction and life stories, while being docile enough not to hurt white sentiment.<sup>300</sup> Nevertheless, as the eighteenth century progressed and free Blacks sensed greater opportunities to speak within the antislavery movement, formerly enslaved Africans like Ottobah Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano published autobiographies that included intense critiques of European civilization and chattel slavery.<sup>301</sup>

Ottobah Cugoano<sup>302</sup> was the first formerly enslaved African to write an antislavery tract without the direct assistance of a white intermediary. This is all the more impressive considering that one of the hallmarks of “savagery” was indigenous communities’ perceived lack of a written language that would have spoiled the ‘naturalness’ of primitive modes of communication. While Cugoano never addresses the existence of a written

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid, 295.

<sup>300</sup> Stefan M. Wheelock. *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique: Black Antislavery Writers, Religion, and the Slaveholding Atlantic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 16.

<sup>301</sup> Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade*, 120.

<sup>302</sup> For a comprehensive overview of African slave narratives written in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, see: Helena Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759-1815* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), *Barbaric Culture and Black Critique: Black Antislavery Writers, Religion, and the Slaveholding Atlantic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), and Christopher Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

language in Africa in his 1787 *Thoughts and Sentiments*,<sup>303</sup> he does portray his homeland in terms steeped in the dialogue of those who embraced the Noble Savage trope: Africa, he describes, is a land of “peace and tranquility” (30) where “the poorest amongst us are never in distress for want” (318) since they share in common the abundance of the country’s agriculture. Similarly, he explains that as much as European slave-holders want to justify their enslavement of Africans on the existence of slavery within Africa, reality shows that slavery is only practiced among “very few nations,” with the large majority of kingdoms “maintained by their free subjects” (243).

Cugoano’s text then reflects the Noble Savage trope back onto the European colonist: rather than accept that his fellow Africans should be criticized for their ‘uncivilized’ ways, he portrays Europeans as barbarians who fail to uphold their own ideals. The theme of cannibalism associated with savagery, as discussed in chapter one of this thesis, reappears, except that now the Europeans are feared for being cannibals; when he is kidnapped and brought to the Gold Coast of Africa, he immediately expresses concern that the “white people” he encounters “would eat” him (232), presumably because he cannot see any other reason for why Europeans would need to pack so many Africans on a single slave ship. Moreover, in contrast to the “state of innocence and freedom” he belonged to in Africa, his journey through the Middle Passage transports him to “a state of horror” (233) previously unheard of in Africa. The brutality of the Middle Passage is indescribably worse than even his worst experience in Africa: the same countrymen with whom he once lived in tranquility now suffer “under the heavy load of oppression and calamities inflicted upon them” (233) by “the brutish baseness and barbarity” of the

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<sup>303</sup> Ottobah Cugoano and Thomas Clarkson, *Essays on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, Edited by Mary-Antoinette Smith (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2010).

European slave-traders (234). The dreaded passage, where he witnesses whippings and attempted suicides, makes him remark, like Oroonoko, that “death was more preferable than life” in slavery (232).

Indeed, just as European slave-traders are viewed by Cugoano as barbarians, so too are they blamed for worsening the conditions of Africans transported to the Americas. He expresses skepticism towards all those who claim slavery is meant to civilize: “it is not the intention of those who bring [slaves] away to make them better by it,” he writes, explaining that Africans are viewed by European colonists merely as a labor supply (241). Because those engaged in the slave trade “are meaner and baser than the African slaves” (240), who, he admits are heathens and illiterate, Africans do not improve under slavery but rather become “more corrupt in their morals” (241). Thus, even if some European writers depicted Native Americans and Africans as Noble Savages whose enslavement would civilize them, Cugoano holds that “there can be no ignorance, dispersion, or unsociableness” among the Noble Savage “which can be made better” by lowering them from the state of nature to “a state of degree equal to that of a cow or horse” (241).

Though he is critical of chattel slavery, Cugoano still posits himself as an example of how far the African person can make progress towards (a western European conception of) civilization as long as humane treatment is guaranteed. In this regard, Cugoano embraces the superiority of Europeans, though it is difficult to know if this is sincere or a clever literary strategy; for example, he thanks “the good people of England for learning and principles unknown to the people of my native country” (235). Indeed, after being sold to a master who takes him to London, Cugoano converts to Christianity and learns how to read and write English (234). Yet, it is only because Cugoano is armed with literacy and

western knowledge that he is able to refute the claim that Africans are inferior on account of their race. As much as racist Europeans want to hold that “an African is not entitled to any competent degree of knowledge” (229), Cugoano’s very work embodies how a Noble African can outgrow illiteracy and heathenism if treated well. But while Cugoano makes himself a model and lets his existence as a literate and formerly enslaved African speak for itself, he also uses his pen to again turn the question of race back on the European: “it does not alter the nature and quality of a man, whether he wears a black or white coat, whether he puts it on or strips it off, he is still the same man” (258).

Cugoano’s intelligence is signaled by his awareness of history and religion, which is exemplified in the in-depth analysis he provides of the history of the slave trade. Summarizing much of the evolution described in chapter one of this thesis, Cugoano writes that the Spanish, immediately after colonizing the Americas, enslaved and abused Native Americans on account of differences in civilization, a trend continued by the British and French in the African context (288). His allusions to Spanish abuse recall works like Voltaire’s *Alzire*, except that he does not view Christianity as an acceptable justification for enslavement. Instead, he is harshly critical of colonization justified on perceptions of civility: he writes that “the learned, the civilized, and even the enlightened nations are become as truly barbarous and brutish as the unlearned” (289), implying that Europeans through their tyranny are transformed into worse humans than the Ignoble Savage they hope to improve. In his discussion of history, we see the effect of humanitarianism: he claims that “no man of sensibility and feeling can read the history without pity and resentment” (279), asserting that opposition to slavery is required if one claims to follow the reformist beliefs detailed in the early pages of this chapter.

Among the most powerful sections in Cugoano's narrative is his religious diatribe against slavery. Whereas employers of the Noble Savage trope condemned Native Americans and Africans as heathens, Cugoano argues that Europeans who engage in slavery are not true Christians either. After all, "Christianity is the system of benignity and love" (283) which contradicts "the barbarity and cruelty of the tortures and murders" (228) promulgated by the Atlantic slave trade. He contrasts real Christian practice from the reality of the eighteenth century: whereas one would expect "the flourishing growth of every virtue" in a Christian nation, the British colonies instead support "luxuriance in wickedness" (243). With this logic, Cugoano goes so far as to suggest that Europeans engaged in the slave trade are *worse* than the heathens they enslave: because their profession violates Divine Law, they "can never be Christians" and should be seen as "the Antichrist" (283).

Cugoano himself occupies a space between the boundaries of the Noble African and the civilized subject, but he chooses to advocate as the latter as he fights for the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. This should make sense: though Cugoano appropriates the Noble African trope by highlighting his own innocent, virtuous nature, the considerable time he spent in Britain made him, at least in his eyes, as British as any white person. Cugoano appears disappointed in the British nation for not living up to its ideals: he characterizes slavery as contrary to "all law, civilization, reason" (267) and expresses sadness that the British have "left their own laws of civilization" by promoting slavery (303). Abolition, however, would redeem Britain: if the country claims to be Christian and Enlightened, he argues, it must abolish the slave trade (300) and encourage free labor (307). Here Cugoano echoes the arguments of Enlightenment figures like Jaucourt who believed

free labor would produce more commercial goods than slavery. He notes that not only would “the free and voluntary labour of many...soon yield...many greater advantages than any thing that slavery can produce” (307), but freedom would inspire in the African a desire for industry, democracy, and Enlightenment (315). And of course, Cugoano is proof of this: a literate, Christian African, Cugoano turns himself into a representation of the best result of a mutually beneficial Africa-Britain connection.

Published soon after Cugoano’s narrative, Olaudah Equiano’s 1789 *The Interesting Narratives*<sup>304</sup> is similarly the story of a formerly enslaved African who has appropriated the Noble African literary trope in an effort to critique the institution of slavery. However, what distinguishes Equiano’s narrative is that it is much more autobiographical and sentimental in nature, with vivid descriptions of his upbringing in Africa supplementing his abolitionist message. For instance, whereas Cugoano addresses his upbringing in Africa only briefly, Equiano spends considerable time detailing how his home in Guinea represents many of the beneficent characteristics described by travelers in chapter one of this thesis. His village of Eboe is “remote,” giving it all the features of a land untouched by civilization; there, life is defined by simplicity rather than luxury (34), communities work in common to build and provide subsistence (36), and idleness is unheard of because of the good spirits and health of its people (38). Moreover, Eboe represents a stage of civilization prior to commerce, with the community based on agriculture (38) rather than on any advanced trade with outside nations. Also impressive is that Equiano’s village does not fall prey to many of the pitfalls associated with the Ignoble Savage; he defines the

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<sup>304</sup> Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003).



village language as more polite than that of the Europeans (41), and he highlights how immoral behavior is punished appropriately (33).

Yet, as pure in virtue as his village may be, Equiano's experience in Africa results in his enslavement, just as it did in Cugoano's case. He and his sister are kidnapped by African slave-traders, but unlike Cugoano's case, Equiano plays on emotions in a manner that recalls the sentimental novels of the mid-eighteenth century. That is, he illustrates in heart-wrenching detail how his sister was ripped from his arms, ending his happiness and leading to an endless flow of tears (48). Still, while moments like this remind the reader of the cruel effects of slavery on family ties, Equiano otherwise describes African slavery as mild by comparison; he is soon sold to a family who "used [him] extremely well" (48) and later finds himself in the hands of a widow, whose kind treatment makes him "forget that [he] was a slave" altogether (53). Nonetheless, interspersed with these great moments are instances of forced migration, which remind Equiano of his misery (53).

Equiano's ambiguous analysis of slavery in Africa may appear unhelpful, but his subsequent experience with chattel slavery in the Atlantic confirms that European slave-traders are much more inhumane than those indigenous to Africa. Equiano, like Cugoano, flips the Noble/Ignoble Savage paradigm on his head when he first encounters Europeans: horrified by the appearance and language of European slave-traders, Equiano immediately grows concerned that the Europeans are cannibals desirous of eating Africans (55). Just as some European travelers depicted Africans in unpleasant physical terms, Equiano is disturbed by the Europeans' "horrible looks, red faces, and long hair" (55). Hence, Equiano reflects European conceptions of Africans back onto Europeans, going so far as to characterize their behavior as "savage" (56). By doing so, he both exposes the irrationality

of broad generalizations about other cultures, while simultaneously portraying himself as more civilized than the European traders on the Gold Coast of Africa.

Depictions of Europeans as barbarians do not stop here, however, as Equiano's life experiences portray many Europeans as lacking moral character. The Middle Passage, in particular, is a journey of nightmares, with "dejection and sorrow" defining the faces of Africans who are forced to travel in overcrowded and unsanitary spaces (55). In contrast to his experience of enslavement in Africa, Equiano finds "the horror" of the Atlantic slave trade to be "inconceivable," even writing that he "had never experienced any thing of this kind before" (56). This comment, implying that the Africans treat their slaves better than the 'civilized' Europeans do, was clearly intended to call into question the validity of many English readers' belief that they possessed a higher moral standing than Africans. Furthermore, dumbfounded by the horrors of the Middle Passage and the subsequent separation of family members on the coast of North America, Equiano works to put himself on equal footing with the white reader by rejecting the European's perceived superiority: "Let the polished and haughty European recollect that *his* ancestors were once, like the Africans, uncivilized, and even barbarous. Did Nature make *them* inferior to their sons? And should *they too* have been made slaves? Every rational mind answers, No" (45).

The Middle Passage is, of course, only the beginning of the horrors of slavery, and Equiano's extensive time as a slave gives him an advantage over Cugoano in that he can elaborate more extensively the Europeans' barbarity. Again he translates the concept of the Ignoble Savage onto the European, remarking how the unbridled passions of the European lead to sexual violence against Black women (104). Equiano throws in a tongue-in-cheek remark to satirize the perspective of those who critique Africans for being uncivilized; the

behavior of the slave overseers is so barbaric that it would even “shock the morality and common sense of a Samaanite or a Hottentot” (109). Not only this, but slavery is an *uncivilizing* process: “when you make men slaves,” Equiano says to the reader, “you deprive them of half their virtue” and “keep them in a state of ignorance” that prevents them from being “honest or faithful” (112).

As critical as Equiano is towards those Europeans who engage in slavery, he follows Cugoano’s footsteps by showing gratitude towards Great Britain for improving him. Purchased by a merchant ship captain and sent to England, Equiano befriends a young man named Richard Baker who teaches him English. From this moment on, Equiano’s journey towards becoming a civilized Briton begins. However, Equiano does not credit slavery for this process; rather, he explains that he only changes his perception of white people because figures like Richard Baker are willing to put aside prejudice and befriend “one who was ignorant, a stranger, of a different complexion” (65). In this statement, Equiano proposes that a humanitarian feeling for Africans would be more effective in bettering the slave than any sort of forced bondage. Additionally, although he spends considerable time detailing how slavery in continental Africa is more humane than Atlantic slavery, Equiano remarks that those in London are “happier than we Africans” because they do not “sell one another, as we did” (68). This is a strange statement, but it distinguishes white people in the colony from those in the metropole. In effect, his message to British readers is that as long as Africans are treated with respect, they will learn that Britons possess a “superior” culture that is worth imitating (78).

Indeed, Equiano, like Cugoano, portrays himself as an example of what freedom can do to an African. Even before he gains freedom, Equiano learns how to read and write

English, shattering the belief that Africans lack the ability to understand written language. In addition, Equiano embraces western mores; he is baptized and labors until he acquires freedom. Moreover, while Equiano implies through his behavior that Africans can gain from tutelage under Europeans, he still maintains that African culture is virtuous; when being instructed in the Christian faith, he remarks that “the laws and rules of [his] country” parallel those described in the Bible (92). Though his may seem contradictory, Equiano’s portrayal of Africans as innocent but needing of improvement was an attempt to play to European sympathies: it effectively humanized his race while providing a convincing case for how liberation would help the British state meet its ‘Enlightened’ values.

Equiano’s adoption of the Noble African literary trope and belief that he too belongs to the British nation meet in the last section of the book, where his comments culminate in a full-pronged attack on slavery. He remarks that in Philadelphia, he noticed that Black people were educated and made “useful members of the community,” which inspires him to ask Caribbean and North American planters to do the same (224). Moreover, like Cugoano, Equiano sees abolition as a necessary step if Britain wanted to be seen by the rest of the world as an Enlightened nation: he begs the British people to be “the dispersers of light, liberty, and science” (233) by ending the Atlantic slave trade and establishing an economy based on free labor. Equiano clearly sees continued British participation as a potential boon for Africa: “if a system of commerce was established in Africa” where Africans could reside and work, “the native inhabitants would insensibly adopt” British values while contributing to the British economy (233). Therefore, Equiano’s *The Interesting Narratives*, like Cugoano’s *Thoughts and Sentiments*, suggests

that both the European and the African can be civilized if a more humane relationship is founded between the two.

### **French Women Writers & Anti-Slavery**

Because free Blacks were few in number in metropolitan France, the French antislavery movement had to resort to printing translated versions of these African slave narratives. Even with this obstacle, the French movement still witnessed the publication of a substantial collection of French-language humanitarian texts, though these were all written by white authors. Fiction appeared to be a preference of the French in an effort to combat slavery; following the appearance of the Noble African in Jean-François de Saint-Lambert's 1769 novel *Ziméo*, which was influenced by Aphra Behn's even more popular *Oroonoko*,<sup>305</sup> novels like Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's 1788 *Paul et Virginie*,<sup>306</sup> Joseph La Vallée's 1789 *Le Nègre comme il y a peu de blancs*,<sup>307</sup> and Jean-Bernard Lecointe-Marsillac's 1789 *Le More-Lack* contained passages that lifted the African to a sort of noble status. In addition, a variety of French poetry<sup>308</sup> and theatre productions<sup>309</sup> that espoused antislavery views were created in the decade preceding the French Revolution. While French humanitarian arguments floundered due to a lack of African writers and the overall effects of the French Revolution on fiction, two works by female authors – Olympe de Gouges' 1788 play *L'Esclavage des Noirs, ou l'heureux naufrage* and Germaine de Staël's

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<sup>305</sup> Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 103.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid*, 105.

<sup>307</sup> Edward Derbyshire Seeber, *Anti-slavery in France during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century*, 176.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid*, 128.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid*, 136.

1795 short story “Mirza” – exemplify the role of humanitarianism and the Noble Savage in French antislavery efforts from 1787 to 1807.

Olympe de Gouges’ *L’Esclavage des Noirs*, in particular, helps explain how French antislavery campaigners sought (and struggled) to establish empathy with the enslaved through the literary trope of the Noble African. Initially written in 1784 as *Zamore et Mirza; ou l’heureux naufrage* and republished under its final title in 1788,<sup>310</sup> Gouges’ play follows two fugitive slaves – Zamore and his lover Mirza – as they are pursued after Zamore’s murder of a plantation overseer. This murder, however, is justified as self-defense by Gouges, for the overseer is, as Equiano would have described him, a “barbarian” whose “unbridled passions” convince him he can force himself onto Mirza (97). European colonists are roundly criticized: Zamore details how colonists slaughtered the Native Islanders, who he characterizes as “noble victims” (97). Along the same lines, Zamore and Mirza are depicted as Noble Savages: “Nature” is the only protector of their “innocence” (97), especially as the island’s “barbaric masters” behave “with a cruelty that makes Nature shudder” (98). There is little ambiguity about how the enslaved Zamore feels about the European colonists; while he acknowledges that the governor educated him, he is disgusted that other slaveholders “care not to instruct us” and have “reduced” slaves to an even worse state than they held previously in the state of nature (98). For this reason, it is the “Tyrants” (i.e. the colonists) who need to be civilized rather than the slaves.

While hiding on a deserted island, the two slaves save Valère and Sophie, a young French couple in search of Sophie’s absent father, from a shipwreck. This scene provides

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<sup>310</sup> Olympe de Gouges, *Black Slavery, or the Happy Shipwreck*, translated by Maryann DeJulio, in *Translating Slavery Volume 1: Gender and Race in French Abolitionist Writing, 1780-1830*, edited by Doris Y. Kadish and Françoise Massardier-Kenney (Kent: Kent University Press, 2009).

yet another example of the slaves' virtuous nature; Zamore credits "only the voice of [his] heart" for why he saves the couple, and the rescued French couple cannot help but comment on the appealing appearance, language, and manners of the slave couple (100-101). Here too we see an entirely positive embrace of the Noble Savage; Valère proclaims that Zamore is "not a Savage" because he does not possess any of those unappealing characteristics that early travelers used to justify enslavement. Inspired by the slaves' beneficence, Valère and Sophie promise to persuade M. De Saint-Frémont, the governor of the colony, to pardon the two slaves, but before this happens, a group of fellow slaves, led by an Indian leader, arrive and arrest Zamore and Mirza. Whereas the Indian leader argues that Zamore and Mirza are "born to be savages and tamed like animals" and must be executed to "set an example for the Colony" (104), Valère and Sophie represent an Enlightened French perspective. Sophie exclaims that "Nature did not make them Slaves" (104), which, combined with Zamore and Mirza's capture, inspires the band of slaves to revolt.

The ensuing slave revolt provides Olympe de Gouges with an opportunity to contrast tyrannical slaveowners with those who share a humanitarian perspective. M. De Saint-Frémont, the governor of the island and Zamore's beneficent master, struggles to justify their execution: though he knows he must execute them to maintain stability on the island, he remarks that "honesty and virtue distinguished [Zamore] in the bosom of slavery" and that it would be a tragedy to punish such a good-hearted man (111). Though Saint-Frémont is a colonial governor, he resembles an Enlightened outsider, much like Valère and Sophie, a connection that reveals itself to be relevant when Sophie discovers that Saint-Frémont is her long-lost father. All the features of a sentimental drama appear in the play's closing scenes: only minutes from their deaths, Zamore and Mirza are rescued

by a chance encounter between a daughter and her governor father who agree that the slave couple is innocent and deserve to marry. The conclusion also confirms the slaves' noble nature. M. de Saint-Frémont celebrates Zamore and Mirza and believes them to be examples of how "civilized men" are not "superior to Slaves," since slaves when given freedom quickly become "the most generous mortals" (121).

Unfortunately, although the play was originally written in 1784, a time in which antislavery works were viewed as an "expanding market,"<sup>311</sup> production of Gouges' play was delayed due to a combination of misogyny within the Comédie-Française and Gouges' "propensity to become involved in impolitic quarrels."<sup>312</sup> While the rise of the abolitionist Société des Amis des Noirs in the late 1780s may have helped her revised play, *L'Esclavage des Noirs, ou l'heureux naufrage*,<sup>313</sup> be performed, the conflict between the Société and the powerful pro-colonial Club Massiac guaranteed the play's doom. The Club Massiac lobbied against any work that discussed slavery publicly<sup>314</sup> and was particularly offended by the play's exoneration of a Black character who killed a plantation overseer.<sup>315</sup> To this end, the Club Massiac even defamed Gouges' public image in an attempt to silence her. The opposition of both the Comédie-Française and Club Massiac ultimately ensured that the play would be performed only three times.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Doris Y. Kadish, "Translation in Context," in *Translating Slavery Volume 1: Gender and Race in French Abolitionist Writing, 1780-1830*, edited by Doris Y. Kadish and Françoise Massardier-Kenney, (Kent: Kent University Press, 2009): 51

<sup>312</sup> Madeleine Dobie, *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 271.

<sup>313</sup> The main difference between the revised play and the original is that whereas the original was set in the East Indies, the revised play was situated in the French Caribbean, making it clear that the main characters were Black.

<sup>314</sup> Le Hir, "Olympe de Gouges, Feminism, Theater, Race: *L'esclavage des noirs*," in *Translating Slavery*, 84.

<sup>315</sup> Kadish, "Translation in Context," in *Translating Slavery*, 33.

<sup>316</sup> Le Hir, "Olympe de Gouges, Feminism, Theater, Race: *L'esclavage des noirs*," in *Translating Slavery*, 87.



In response to the Club Massiac's obstruction and the revolution in Saint-Domingue, Gouges printed her play and added a preface in 1792.<sup>317</sup> In this preface, she directly calls out the Club Massiac for interfering in the production of her play and accuses its members of misinterpreting her aim. She asks, "Is my work inflammatory? No. Is it insurgent? No. Does it have a moral? Yes," (94) before contrasting her "philanthropic work" (93) with the "inhumanity" of the colonists (94). However, she goes on to concede that her play was designed "to preserve [the Club Massiac's] properties and their most cherished interests" (94). Though the Club Massiac would not have agreed with this statement, Gouges argues here, just as she does in her play, that treating slaves better would benefit colonists in that it would limit slave insurrections.

Perhaps the most revealing part of the preface is her address to slave rebels. Gouges was well aware of those who accused her of inspiring the slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue; she writes that while her play "is the faithful tableau of the current situation in America," she "did not participate except to prophesy its occurrence" (93). She compares herself to Rousseau to absolve herself: "imitations of Jean-Jacques are defaced" in France, proof that "the most learned and the most wise do not establish their doctrines without producing all kinds of troubles" (95). Nonetheless, the horror she feels in response to the Haitian Revolution pushes her to condemn the rebel slaves even if those slaves saw their revolt as necessary to achieve liberty. This condemnation parallels the criticisms she levies on leaders of the French Revolution, namely those who she thinks have used the vocabulary of freedom to disguise their tyranny.<sup>318</sup> Therefore, just as her moderate, monarchist beliefs

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<sup>317</sup> Dobie, *Trading Places*, 278.

<sup>318</sup> This relates back to the introductory quote, in which Gouges criticizes the "so-called defenders of Liberty...who preach equality and liberty with all the authority and ferocity of Despots."

provided a basis for her disdain of violence against the *Ancien Régime*, so too did she oppose the actions of Haitian revolutionaries as they fought against chattel slavery.

This combination of moderate political beliefs<sup>319</sup> and intense denunciation of rebel slaves might appear to be contradictory when juxtaposed with her play's defense of mistreated slaves and support for free labor. For one, she characterizes most slave-owners in Saint-Domingue as "humane and charitable" and criticizes rebel slaves for failing to "distinguish between innocent victims and [their] persecutors" (94). Additionally, slavery is described by her in gentle terms: "the enlightened man" (in this case, the French) took Africans "from the midst of a primitively horrible situation where men not only sold one another, but where they still ate each other" (95) and gave them "rights that [they] never had" in the state of nature (94). Not only does she manipulate the social contract to justify slavery,<sup>320</sup> but she even subverts Rousseau's famous quote in *Du contrat social*: "men were not born in irons, and now you prove them necessary" (94). Whether Gouges was genuine in these statements is open to interpretation, but if her advocacy for the re-enslavement of Haitian rebels is taken at face value, one may begin to see the effects of the Haitian Revolution on the minds of French writers, and particularly on those who felt complicit in the violence occurring across the Atlantic. In any case, her preface, through its appropriation of Rousseau's *Du contrat social*, indicates that the Noble Savage tradition could support proslavery arguments as much as they did humanitarian antislavery ones.

Olympe de Gouges was not the only woman writer in France to deal with slavery through fiction; in fact, her play may have inspired Germaine de Staël's short story

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<sup>319</sup> By this I mean that Olympe de Gouges disdained violent and/or sudden change, preferring instead to advocate for gradual change, at least in the case of slave emancipation.

<sup>320</sup> She argues that if slaves fail to "recognize these gentle laws" that protect "the "colonial commonweal" and "social order," those slaves, which she compares to savages, are "made for irons" (94).

“Mirza,” which shares its name with the enslaved female protagonist in Gouges’ *L’Esclavage des Noirs*. First published in 1795 but apparently written prior to the French Revolution, “Mirza” is a prominent example of sentimental literature that made use of the trope of the Noble African to establish empathy with slaves, even if it was, like Gouges’ play, seemingly less consequential in changing popular opinion than the British works detailed in this chapter. Whereas Gouges’ characters were at times racially ambiguous, however, with only the 1788 version clearly dealing with Black slaves, “Mirza” was set firmly in the context of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, with her character and setting descriptions based on travel narratives widely accessible at the time.<sup>321</sup> Moreover, unlike Gouges, whose work suffered from poor timing (her book was published at the height of the Club Massiac’s power), Staël’s text was not silenced.<sup>322</sup> Yet, while “Mirza” is a thoroughly sentimental short story that establishes empathy with African characters, Staël is even less direct in her criticism of slavery than is Gouges in her work, at least if we do not take into account the harsh preface Gouges added to her play in 1792.

Staël is among a long line of writers who, as we have seen throughout this chapter, employed the Noble African theme to draw admiration for African characters. However, just as Aphra Behn in *Oroonoko* distinguished the titular character’s appearance from those of his own race, so too does Staël use Eurocentric terms to celebrate her protagonist’s physical features. Ximeo, a free Black man in Africa, is compared in stature to the *Apollo Belvedere*, and according to Stael, “his features had none of the defects of the men of his color” (155). Hence, just like Oroonoko, Ximeo is appealing because he possesses the facial features of European men from antiquity. Staël is not particularly positive towards

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<sup>321</sup> Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle*, 147.

<sup>322</sup> Françoise Massardier-Kenney, “Germaine de Staël, Translation, and Race,” in *Translating Slavery*, 144.

Africans in general; she faults them for being entirely “incapable of thinking about generations to come” (154). However, Ximeo, her handsome protagonist, is unlike these other uncivilized Africans: he is “sharp witted and articulate” and single-handedly runs an experimental plantation designed by Europeans as an alternative to chattel slavery (154).

Though Staël expresses admiration for Ximeo and the success of his plantation, where “the happy blacks” are more productive than those under slavery in Saint Domingue (156), her story does not exclusively focus on the issue of slavery. Instead, much of Staël’s work centers on Ximeo’s recollection of a tragic love story in which he grows enamored with Mirza, a woman of the enemy Jolof tribe, even though he is otherwise happily married. What draws him to this woman is that she too is a Noble African; just like Ximeo, she possesses a “noble and regular stature” (157) and recites poetry in French: “the love of freedom and the horror of slavery were the subjects of the noble hymns” that she spoke aloud in this foreign language (157). As in Cugoano and Equiano’s works, the ability to speak a ‘civilized’ language differentiates Mirza from the rest of her race. Yet, although she credits a Frenchman for teaching her the French language, she is intelligent enough to know that cross-cultural communication has mixed results. Indeed, she characterizes European knowledge and philosophy as “worthwhile” to Africans but poorly followed by the Europeans themselves (157).

“Mirza” contains critical passages about European culture, although they are embedded in a sentimental novella that appears more focused on entertaining than educating the reader. In later parts of the story, Ximeo admits that he has never loved Mirza, which leads the sensible Mirza to appear as “if the end of her happiness had been the end of her life” (160). The tangible effect of this revelation on both characters, however, reveals

itself only after Ximeo is captured in battle by the enemy Jolof tribe and sold to European slave-traders. Unlike Cugoano and Equiano, who are disappointed in African slave traders but blame European influence for their behavior, Staël does not mince words. Through the voice of Ximeo, she characterizes Africans as equally culpable as Europeans for the trans-Atlantic slave trade since they are “cowardly barbarians” who “serve [their] common enemies” (161). Here again we notice derogatory generalizations about Africans, though Mirza’s miraculous appearance as Ximeo prepares to be shipped off provides another example of the usefulness of the model of the Noble African. Speaking directly to the European slave-traders, she offers to be enslaved in Ximeo’s place, which, just as in Gouges’ play, convinces a humanitarian governor to reward the selflessness of the Noble African. In the end, the governor refuses to enslave either Ximeo and Mirza because he is impressed by their “nobility of soul” (163). In this regard, only *some* Africans appear deserving of freedom, and even those who gain their freedom, like Ximeo, still end up laboring for Europeans on a plantation. Hence, while “Mirza” connects the reader emotionally to the plight of Africans in familiar ways, it grants only a qualified endorsement of emancipation.

### **Conclusion**

The Noble Savage literary trope, which evolved from being applied to a generic Native American to being applied to a generic African over the course of the early modern period, was translated frequently into humanitarian antislavery arguments at the close of the eighteenth century and the start of the nineteenth. Inspired by religious reform and the rise of the culture of sensibility, European writers like Hannah More and Olympe de Gouges portrayed the Noble African as a sympathetic character, a depiction sometimes

embodied in the autobiographical narratives of formerly enslaved Africans themselves. Equally important, the negative characteristics long used to justify the enslavement of indigenous and Black people were turned back onto Europeans; Ottobah Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano, among other writers, described European slave-traders as 'savages' and suggested that both the African and European could be civilized only if the Atlantic slave trade were abolished. Though more practical concerns ultimately affected the success of the abolition movement in the British and French contexts, the contributions of these authors in establishing empathy with enslaved Africans resulted, as seen in Chapter Two, in British and French legislators taking antislavery arguments more seriously than at any prior time. Hence, the Noble/Ignoble Savage paradigm, once used to justify enslavement, became between 1787 and 1807 a common tool to fight against the traffic in human beings.

## Conclusion

*“As for the slave trade and the slavery of Negroes, the European governments will find it useless to oppose the cries of philosophy and the principles of universal liberty that germinate and spread throughout the nations. Let them learn that it is never in vain for people to be shown the truth.”*<sup>323</sup>

After the reader has made their way through the history of antislavery detailed in this thesis, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax’s words in the French Revolutionary newspaper *Les Révolutions de Paris*, which appeared on 5 September 1790, four years before the abolition of the slave trade in France and 17 years before the same in Great Britain, should appear prophetic. Sonthonax’s language reflects the critical themes of the British and French abolitionist movements: antislavery relied both on philosophical arguments and the ability of ordinary citizens (i.e. “the people”) to recognize that slavery violated shared principles of human rights. But Sonthonax’s pertinent commentary does not stop here: later in his article, he predicts that British and French legislators would soon, as a result of abolition, be joined in Parliament by “a frizzy-haired African, with no other recommendation than his good sense and his virtues.” Combined with his claim that slavery is inimical to western notions of “liberty,” this humanizing illustration of a Noble African in Parliament suggests that Europeans and Africans would meet the lofty requirements of ‘civilization’ only if antislavery efforts succeeded.

Though British and French antislavery advocates differed in the extent to which they employed philosophical as compared to humanitarian arguments,

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<sup>323</sup> “Les Révolutions de Paris, no. 63 (5 September 1790), 523-24,” in *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*, edited by Jack R. Censer and Lynn Hunt, (American Social History Productions, 2001).

Sonthonax's words reflect how British and French antislavery figures alike understood the significance of both of these strategies to their cause by the end of the eighteenth century. While historians with expertise on trans-Atlantic antislavery have elaborated this division, what has not been extensively studied is how the literary trope of the Noble Savage, represented by Sonthonax's vision of a "frizzy-haired African" with "good sense" and "virtues," influenced and ultimately linked these different kinds of arguments. To fill in this gap, this thesis' three chapters have attempted to delineate the impact of the Noble Savage (and illustrations of primitive humans more broadly) on British and French antislavery arguments between 1787 and 1807. A brief summary of these three chapters follows.

Principally, the first chapter of this thesis traced the history of the literary trope of Noble Savage from Columbus' 'discovery' of the New World until well into the western European Enlightenment. As we have seen, European travelers to the New World immediately interpreted indigenous cultures through the lens of European customs: Christopher Columbus' 1492 *Journal* and 1493 letter to Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella complimented the appearance of Native Americans while suggesting that their selfless and subservient nature made them candidates for conversion to Christianity. Furthermore, both Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci remarked that the Natives' lack of fixed government and reliance on common land differed markedly from European conceptions of private property. Perhaps the most important aspect of these first travel narratives is that they appeared to hold conflicting perspectives on Native culture: whereas Vespucci viewed Natives as Noble Savages who exist in the state of nature, he also saw them as Ignoble Savages



whose liberal sexuality, cannibalism, and self-mutilation justified a European-led civilizing project in the Americas.

While similar attitudes toward primitive culture had existed since antiquity with prior writers recalling the Golden Age of Adam & Eve to critique the supposed decadence of their own societies, the discovery of the New World provided fresh material to European writers who were eager to comment on early modern European society. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these writers were increasingly English and French, rather than Iberian, as England and France expanded their reach into the Americas. The attention paid to Native Americans by writers of each national context differed, however, with the French colonizers more incentivized to create accurate illustrations of Native American culture by their economic reliance on North American fur and desire to convert Natives to Catholicism. Hence, although British figures like John Lawson in his 1709 *A New Voyage to Carolina* commented on the Natives' lack of literacy and the European colonists' corrupt nature in the Americas, arguably more indicative of Noble Savage discourse were Jean Baptiste Du Tertre's 1667-1671 *Histoire générale des Antilles habitées par les Français* and the Baron de Lahontan's 1703 trio of works on the American colonies. Collectively, these texts portrayed the Natives as innocence personified, though Du Tertre, like Columbus and Vespucci before him, still argued that Natives can only gain 'reason' through colonization and religious conversion.

The efforts of travelers like Vespucci and Du Tertre facilitated a tradition of political thought which would prove especially useful to antislavery campaigners between 1787 and 1807. The history of European-Amerindian encounters is

intrinsically connected to that of slavery; negative depictions of the Natives' purported heathen and cannibal nature allowed European colonists to justify their enslavement, and the 1550-1551 Valladolid debate between Las Casas and Sépulveda highlighted how legal challenges to slavery rested on the perceived humanity of the indigenous people. This divide in thinking remained in place until at least the abolition of slavery, though an emerging social contract tradition gifted a useful tool to antislavery writers. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1755 *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, for instance, proposed an idealized image of primitive man, a notion that laid the foundations for his 1762 *Du contrat social*. This latter text, as we saw in chapter two, supplied ammunition to antislavery arguments by labeling slavery as opposed to civil government, even if Rousseau makes no direct reference to the reality of chattel slavery in the Atlantic.

Alongside this developing philosophical tradition emerged too an interest among fiction writers in the Noble Savage as a literary stock character. Aphra Behn's 1688 *Oroonoko* continued the trend of European authors favorably describing Amerindians' appearance while criticizing Europeans for introducing sin to indigenous societies. Where Behn's piece diverges from earlier writings, however, is that her Noble Savage is a princely African. Yet, Behn does not confer her complimentary words on all Africans; she makes clear that Oroonoko is distinguished from other Africans in appearance and intellect, and that most Africans' parochial nature prevents them from gaining freedom on their own accord. Daniel Defoe's 1719 *Robinson Crusoe*, on the other hand, provides an even more confusing case, as the most prominent indigenous character, Friday, is described in

racially ambiguous terms. Still, Friday fits the Noble Savage stereotype, as he is a heathen cannibal who embraces Christianity (a hallmark of civilization) as a result of his enslavement. Behn and Defoe's fictions are emblematic of the ambivalence of the British case for antislavery at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries, though similar literature existed in France, with plays like Voltaire's 1736 *Alzire* celebrating the Natives for their innocence while also portraying Christianity as a civilizing moral force. In sum, this first chapter laid out the literary trope's contradictory effect: while depictions of Native Americans and Africans in travel narratives and works of fiction acknowledged these groups' humanity, both groups were, by being limited in relevance to a rhetorical device, largely stripped of their agency.

Chapter one's analysis of how the Noble Savage made its way into political theory and Romantic literature provided the backbone for chapters two and three of this thesis, respectively. Though chapter two traced the overall narrative of the British and French antislavery societies between 1787-1807, its main focus was on how theories of natural law and the social contract theory, which drew upon notions of primitive man and the state of nature, appeared in the abstract antislavery arguments employed by these same organizations between 1787 and 1807. In contrast to Aristotle's 4th century B.C.E. justification of slavery by conquest and natural distinction, for instance, antislavery campaigners like Thomas Clarkson in his *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* utilized social contract theory to fight for abolition. Because Clarkson led the British Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade and inspired the creation of the French Société des

Amis des Noirs, later antislavery campaigns echoed much of his work, though they at times interpreted Lockean and Rousseauian concepts of the state of nature in different ways. Cumulatively, chapter two explains how conceptions of natural law and the social contract consistently remained in the minds of antislavery campaigners, even as humanitarian, economic, and national security concerns all played important roles in enacting change in Great Britain and France.

Just as the second chapter built upon the first chapter in its focus on abstract antislavery arguments, the third chapter centered on how British and French antislavery advocates used humanitarian arguments grounded in the Noble Savage tradition. In the British case, Thomas Clarkson and the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade encouraged poetry, much of which focused on establishing empathy with enslaved Africans. Furthermore, some of this poetry, particularly those works which took on the perspective of the enslaved, portrayed Africans as Noble Savages and Europeans as Ignoble Savages, both of whom deteriorated in moral character as a result of the master-slave relationship. Moreover, the British case benefited from the presence of formerly enslaved Africans, such as Ottobah Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano, who were encouraged to write and publish antislavery tracts. Their texts were intended to serve as authentic testaments of the African experience, which meant (perhaps ironically) that each man followed the current antislavery rhetoric, depicting Africa in terms that recalled the state of nature and the European colonies as places of unparalleled barbarity. Moreover, by portraying themselves as Noble Africans who are inherently virtuous but who had gained new advantages from exposure to western society, Cugoano and Equiano

made the case that abolition would benefit the British state; it would increase the number of Black subjects who were, like themselves, loyal to the British nation. While the French humanitarian movement lacked African writers, similar themes appeared: Olympe de Gouges' 1789 play *L'Esclavage des Noirs, ou L'Heureux Naufrage* and Germaine de Staël's 1795 short story "Mirza" are two examples of sentimental fiction which used the Noble Savage theme to draw sympathetic portrayals of enslaved Africans, even if they did not wholeheartedly condemn slavery as an institution. Hence, though the literary trope of the Noble Savage tended to discredit the agency of indigenous peoples, it ultimately contributed to abstract and humanitarian arguments that helped free Africans from bondage.

Although this thesis has concentrated on early modern discourse on the Noble Savage and antislavery, its themes of savagery, social contract theory, and humanitarianism are still relevant, especially as transnational struggles for racial equality continue in our contemporary world. Notions of 'savagery' explicitly impacted the perspectives of Black activists well into the twentieth century; just as Ottobah Cugoana and Olaudah Equiano appropriated the Noble Savage to their advantage in the late 1700s, W.E.B. Du Bois in his 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk* demanded that Black Americans be better supported in their educational pursuits by the American government because doing so would "scatter civilization among a people whose ignorance was not simply of letters, but of life itself."<sup>324</sup> A preoccupation with savagery and civilization continued to exist even amongst those openly critical of white oppression: Frantz Fanon in his 1952 *Peau noire, masques*

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<sup>324</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 69.

*blancs* emphasized how conceptions of “Black savagery” and “white civilization” harmed the psyche of Black subjects by instilling in them an insatiable desire to be accepted into white society, even if this entailed rejecting one’s own Blackness,<sup>325</sup> and James Baldwin, like many of the writers discussed in chapter three of this thesis, turned conceptions of savagery back onto white Americans, criticizing them in his 1963 *The Fire Next Time* for conflating ‘civility’ with Europeanness.<sup>326</sup> Taking into account the perspectives of Fanon and Baldwin then, it may be fair to say that the civilized/savage dichotomy, even if it played a role in supporting British and French antislavery arguments, has proven to be a persistent roadblock in the way of racial equality, particularly on a psychological level.

Furthermore, while some late Black writers, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, appealed to white Americans by arguing that rights would ‘improve’ the character of Black people, the two centuries of racial injustice following the British and French antislavery movements has convinced others that appealing to white authority is not an effective enough strategy in dismantling the legacy of slavery. The digital age, in particular, has disseminated graphic videos of police brutality in the United States and Europe which – as embodied in the barbaric image of a Minneapolis police officer stepping on the neck of George Floyd – has stimulated a pressing discourse about human rights in much the same way that poems and illustrations showing the brutality of the Atlantic slave trade affected the sentiments of British and French people over two centuries ago. Moreover, just as Thomas Clarkson fought against

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<sup>325</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated from the French by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008).

<sup>326</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 93.

slavery by pointing to how it violated the social contract, a growing chorus of voices, enraged by police brutality, now expresses skepticism towards the western world's social contract, arguing that democratic institutions fail to represent minority citizens and must be reformed.<sup>327</sup> Progress since the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 has been slow, for as James Baldwin in his 1963 *The Fire Next Time* wrote:

White Americans find it as difficult as white people elsewhere do to divest themselves of the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic value that black people need, or want. And this assumption – which, for example, makes the solution to the Negro problem depend on the speed with which Negroes accept and adopt white standards – is revealed in all kinds of striking ways...It is the Negro, of course, who is presumed to have become equal – an achievement that not only proves the comforting fact that perseverance has no color but also overwhelmingly corroborates the white man's sense of his own value.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> For examples of those questioning the United States' social contract, particularly after the murder of George Floyd, see: Ryu Spaeth, "America's Social Contract is Broken," *The New Republic*, 31 May 2020 and Eduardo Porter, "America's Social Contract Is Still Built on Racial Hostility," *Foreign Policy*, 8 June 2020. In addition, *The Daily Show* host Trevor Noah in a Twitter video posted on 31 May 2020 aptly commented, "Black Americans watch time and time again how the contract that they have signed with society is not being honored by the society that has forced them to sign it with them."

<sup>328</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 94.

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