Transnationalism and Performance in 'Biyi Bandele's *Oroonoko*

ELIZABETH KOWALESKI WALLACE

IN 1999, AFTER A CONSIDERABLE ABSENCE FROM THE ENGLISH stage, *Oroonoko* returned, in an adaptation for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) by the Nigerian-born, London-based playwright 'Biyi Bandele.[1] In the foreword to the playscript, Bandele cites a Yoruban proverb: "It is said of Eshu, the Yoruba trickster-God, who is the ubiquitous reverse hero of *Oroonoko*, that 'he threw a rock today, and killed a bird yesterday.'" Bandele explains, "The present, says this paradox, is defined by the future. Eshu, and his metaphor of transcendence[,] has inspired this feast-of-a-war—which is to say jam session between a myth and two myth makers situated three hundred years apart" (5). Unlike the pre-twentieth-century versions of the play *Oroonoko*, which almost always used white actors, Bandele's 1999 production featured a large black cast. The leading role was performed by Nicholas Monu, who was also born in Nigeria. According to Monu's publicity Web page, the actor "is actually a prince." "We all feel very honoured to be in this," said Monu. "Probably it means as much to us to be in this as it would to Jewish actors being given the chance to tell the story of the Holocaust. I think it's a wonderfully written play. It isn't just a case of good black people on one side and evil white people on the other, it makes clear that there was good and bad on both sides" (Monu).

Bandele's lyrical foreword and Monu's cheerful endorsement of the Oroonoko story are bound to surprise and challenge a number of twentieth-century academic critics who have responded to an "African" story that was first told in English in the late seventeenth century. Wylie Sypher, for example, argues that the Oroonoko character belongs to the "noble-Negro tradition" (108–21), while Srinivas Aravamudan has more recently exposed the "pet logic" at work in Aphra Behn's novel

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Oroonoko (29–70). Additionally, a range of feminist critics have debated the nature of Behn's authority, especially in relation to her character's putative origins. But the two Nigerian-born men are noteworthy for their status as cosmopolitans, subjects whose transnational experiences place them in a complicated relation to their native and their adopted cultures.[2] For Bandele and Monu, the play illuminates an important aspect of Nigerian history. No doubt theirs is a problematic position: Bandele's comment obscures both the colonial context that generated the original story and the postcolonial context that leads to his writing in English. He seems to ignore as well the role of the RSC as the purveyor of powerful cultural forms. Monu's comment initially seems naive: how could a highly contrived fiction first written down by a seventeenth-century white woman writer possibly convey the authentic story of the African holocaust?

I will argue that there are three good reasons to take the comments of Bandele and Monu seriously and to explore the Oroonoko story on their terms. First, their statements lead us toward what can be construed as a global humanism, a position of transcultural recognition and identification, that, as Julie Stone Peters has recently argued, "is not necessarily complicit with an overwhelming hegemonic order" (207). Bandele's adaptation of Behn's text, especially as a response to eighteenth-century versions of the Oroonoko story, cannot be dismissed as the result of an "oppressive political and cultural assertion of metropolitan dominance, of centre over margin" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 11). Rather, Bandele's *Oroonoko* belongs to what Paul Gilroy has called the black Atlantic—"an ex-centric, unstable, and asymmetrical cultural ensemble that cannot be apprehended through the manichean logic of binary coding" (198). Indeed, Bandele's foreword suggests that the playwright seeks to release the Oroonoko story and its variations from a simple causal chain of events moving inexorably in one direction. By using a Yoruban proverb, he disrupts the idea that First World culture is always already present. In addition, by evoking a theological grounding for the story of Oroonoko, he tellingly situates his play neither in opposition to Behn's text nor as a corrective to her work. Instead, he places himself and Behn in a "jam session," a musical dialogue with a mythic version of Oroonoko: his reference to jazz turns his version of the story and Behn's into improvisations—hybrid works that are something quite other.

Just as a jazz riff belongs neither to the originator of the tune nor to the musician through whom it passes in its moment of transformation, so neither Bandele nor Behn can be said to possess the story of the African prince. Bandele implicitly argues that seminal narratives can travel freely across national, racial, and ethnic boundaries the same way fragments of melody do. Thus, his foreword redirects the debate over the Oroonoko story as intellectual property—a debate that often stalls on questions of race and gender—toward a more fluid understanding of cultural forms. Or, as Peters reminds us, nobody "owns" a culture: "when one inherits, one inherits a global collective web . . . which one is meant, indeed bound, to reweave. The point is to recognize the ways in which the documents of history may be documents of barbarism, and to repossess them differently" (210).

Second, following Monu's lead, we can consider how the Oroonoko narrative embeds a circum-Atlantic story—a story of the "diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of the culture of modernity" (Roach 4). Bandele's novel returns us to the diasporic underpinnings of the Oroonoko story. Despite everything that has been written about the story, for Bandele it remains a tale of violent dispersal, of trauma, and of suffering. In the play's best moments—especially in its keen attention to issues of gender politics and language—his *Oroonoko* accomplishes what is arguably the highest purpose of diasporic art: to move its audience first through and then beyond human suffering to a place that

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makes possible the identification and connection with those who have suffered a historical wrong.[3] As I will argue later, Bandele's play is only one example of many similar attempts to present the history of the African holocaust to a broad popular audience in England at the end of the twentieth century. As such, it exemplifies a moral inclination that functions under consumerist pressure. Thus, Bandele's *Oroonoko* foregrounds issues that arise when one attempts to "sell" a story of human atrocity.

Third, the staging of the Oroonoko story at the turn of the twenty-first century provides a bridge between eighteenth-century expressions of transnationalism and later versions of the phenomenon, especially under the burgeoning pressures of globalization. Transnationality is scarcely new (Waters; Jay). Aihwa Ong's recent definition of it as "the condition of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space" (4) coincides neatly with Gilroy's definition of the black Atlantic as it began to manifest itself during the eighteenth century. We still struggle with the consequences of an eighteenth-century form of global capitalist expansion.[4] Recent scholarship on eighteenth-century art reminds us of historical attempts to negotiate racial and transnational differences and points out the limits and the possibilities of such art (Roach; Tobin). At stake in the discussion of an Anglo-Nigerian Oroonoko story is the question of what it means to perform early modern diasporic experience, especially in the light of a late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century stage history that returns to shadow Bandele's late-twentieth-century production.

In this essay I am interested in questions of appropriation and revision from a transnational perspective. Bandele's attempt to recuperate a theatrical history of racial impersonation occurs at a moment when eighteenth-century conceptions of race are again being scrutinized. Most notably, Roxann Wheeler has recently argued that "eighteenth-century Britons' understanding of complexion, the body, and identity was far more fluid than ours is today" and that "the assurance that skin color was the primary signifier of human difference was not a dominant conception until the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and even then individuals responded variously to nonwhite skin color" (5–6, 7). How, then, did eighteenth-century actors understand the task of embodying a black African? How did the audience receive the representation of blackness in an age that had not yet codified race into binary categories?[5] In view of such unanswered questions, it seems premature to assume that eighteenth-century racial impersonation necessarily perpetuated racist stereotypes.

We cannot know how race was represented on the eighteenth-century stage because the production history of eighteenth-century blackface—unlike nineteenth-century minstrelsy—remains undocumented. We can easily imagine the application of burnt cork (as brilliantly recreated in the opening scenes of Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*), but we know little of the accompanying particularities: Did physical gestures coincide with or signify black (or African) embodiment? Were there characteristic postures or poses of blackness?[6] In short, how was blackness overlaid on white bodies engaged in eighteenth-century dramatic practices, practices commonly acknowledged to have been consciously theatrical to begin with (Wasserman; West)? Moreover, in theaters lit by chandeliers, performance spaces that encouraged interaction between actor and audience and that never aimed to immerse the audiences in a silent, specular appreciation of an illusory reality, how was the impression of race presented and sustained (Stallybrass and White)?

Before examining what it means to present the Oroonoko story on the eighteenth- and late-twentieth-century stages, this essay will briefly review the publication and production history of that story. It will relate Bandele's text to Behn's and Southerne's, and it will then explore three issues of special importance to a transnational reading of the play: the use of an "African" setting for the prequel as a strategy for counteracting

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an abstract universalism; the place of anachronism, especially in the representation of gender relations; and Bandele's use of English as a means of conveying Yoruban culture. Last, I will turn to the question of what it means to sell Oroonoko to a wide audience at this historical juncture. How does Bandele's *Oroonoko* participate in broad cultural trends of commodifying the experience of the eighteenth-century transatlantic slave trade?

The Oroonoko story followed two paths, one as a novel and the other as a dramatic text. By now, Behn's fictional account of an African prince who is taken in slavery, originally published in 1688, has a secure place in the canon. Between 1997 and 1999, at least four major paperback editions of the novel—two of those critical editions—were made available for classroom use (Lipking; Gallagher, *Oroonoko*). Meanwhile, an ever-expanding bibliography of criticism has accompanied the circulation of the novel. Perhaps it was inevitable that interest in the dramatic versions of Behn's story would follow (both critical editions include excerpts from dramatic texts). Once available only in a single paperback edition (Southerne), the dramatic version of the Oroonoko story currently appears in anthologies of eighteenth-century drama (Canfield). The play as first written by Thomas Southerne in 1695 included several important alterations to Behn's fiction, among them an added comic subplot concerning the fate of two unmarried sisters. Southerne also rewrote the origin of Imoinda, Oroonoko's wife, giving her a white heritage—thereby allowing English actresses to play the part without blackface. In addition, Southerne omitted the spectacular scenes of Oroonoko's dismemberment, as well as other violent acts. When John Hawkesworth (together with David Garrick) revised Southerne's dramatic script in 1759, he excised the comic subplot—by then deemed inappropriate and of questionable taste. A subsequent dramatic adaptation by Francis Gentleman appeared in 1760, followed by an abolitionist version (*The Prince of Angola*) by John Ferriar in 1788. After the first production of Southerne's version in 1695, the play appeared on the boards at least once every season in London until 1801, often in stagings of Hawkesworth's revised text.[7]

This complicated history of reproduction and production demonstrates that the Oroonoko story was, long before Bandele's recent consideration, already an improvised text, one that saw major transformations in form and content. Southerne was the first to raise the question of whether the Oroonoko figure properly belonged to the page or the stage. In his dedicatory preface, Southerne puzzles why Behn, who "had a great command of the stage," buried "her hero in a novel when she might have revived him in the scene." He opines:

> She thought either that no actor could represent him, or she could not bear him represented. And I believe the last when I heard from a friend of hers, that she always told his story more feelingly than she writ it. Whatever happened to him at Surinam, he has mended his condition in England. He was born here under [the duke of Devonshire's] influence and that has carried his fortune farther into the world than all the poetical stars I could have solicited for all success. (4)

In a gesture simultaneously deferential and aggressive, Southerne implicitly steals Oroonoko away from Behn and situates him on English soil. Yet Southerne's retelling of Behn's story also becomes a different kind of political statement, one that foregoes a specific colonial history of violence and mutilation "in favor of a much more assimilable account of great human, that is, transcultural, tragedy," as Suvir Kaul contends (89).

By the same token, several feminist critics have been troubled by the ease with which Southerne and the later, eighteenth-century male playwrights were able to appropriate the female playwright's creation. Jane Spencer, for one, notes how on the eighteenth-century stage

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the Oroonoko play gradually evolved into a "vehicle for anti-slavery sentiment" but one that unfortunately coincided with "a tendency to play down the significance of Behn as narrator and author" (237, 233). For other feminist critics, any discussion of the Oroonoko story must address the gender of Behn's narrator, since this persona raises crucial questions concerning the narrator's and author's complicity with colonialist ideology, their attitudes toward slavery, their erotic inclinations toward Oroonoko, and their intentions toward Oroonoko's wife, Imoinda (Ferguson; Brown; Gallagher, "Background"; Andrade; Sussman).

These issues do not cease to matter when the Oroonoko story moves from novel to drama. Indeed, they may well be intensified by Southerne's decision to leave out the female narrator and to create instead a white Imoinda, a heroine who facilitates "the erasure of African women from *Oroonoko* and colonial cultures deeply troubled by the sexual implications of white men's supremacy for the social welfare of white women" (MacDonald 75). Nonetheless, it must be noted that to rewrite and then stage the Oroonoko story without Behn's autobiographical female narrator is to give the tale a different thematic center, one that focuses above all on the story of the male African protagonist. Though this gesture may initially trouble those interested in the gender politics of the story, it can also—as I will argue shortly—effectively serve a feminist purpose. In addition, to rewrite a fictional romance as a dramatic tragedy is to place the story in other hands—those of the actors who interpret the characters, as well as those of their live audiences.

For the most part, then, Bandele's version of the Oroonoko story belongs to an eighteenth-century theatrical tradition, despite his direct references to Behn in his foreword: his most immediate source is Hawkesworth's 1759 dramatic text, with some important alterations.[8] To begin, the action that occurs over five acts in Hawkesworth is collapsed into just two acts, resulting in a more economic unfolding of the plot. Bandele writes a significant "prequel" (his word), a new act that explores Oroonoko's formative years and obviates the need for lengthy exposition. He alters and cuts the white roles that predominated in the eighteenth-century production, and he returns Imoinda to her blackness. He also collapses two white roles—the governor and Stanmore—into one character, Byam, while renaming two others. In addition, Bandele's version alters Hawkesworth's cultural allusions and returns to the characters their indigenous beliefs. Instead of praying to the sun, Oroonoko evokes Eshu. In another scene, Aboan and other slaves evoke Shango, god of thunder, justice, and fair play.

With an eighteenth-century dramatic text as his immediate source, why does Bandele conjure up the ghost of Aphra Behn in his foreword? His gesture introduces several important points of comparison between himself and Behn, as well as some possible points of identification. In her novel Behn situates herself—not unlike Bandele—between two cultures, in her case England and colonial Surinam (Chibka). Her narrative persona identifies herself as a gentlewoman who is left without a dowry when her father dies en route to Surinam. In Surinam, her social status remains ambiguous. Lacking the power enjoyed by elite colonial men, she nonetheless experiences a form of authority over her fictional creation. Later that authority is challenged and contested. Bandele, too, is perceived as an outsider, and as a purveyor of cultural forms he remains open to challenge and contestation, as some reviews of his play in the conservative English press suggest. By identifying with Behn, Bandele signals his awareness of an ongoing attempt to mark him as a peripheral figure, despite his commission at the RSC. At the same time, his identification with Behn eclipses the accomplishments of successful white male dramatists, even while it suggests a desire to share in their success.

However, despite Bandele's apparent desire to align himself with Behn the novelist, the nature of his dramatic accomplishment is best seen

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in the light of a stage history that unfolds for the most part in the eighteenth century, since that stage history is the one his play most closely recreates. What, then, accounted for the extraordinary popularity of the dramatic version of the Oroonoko story during the eighteenth century? And what does it mean for it to reappear at the turn of the twenty-first century? Eighteenth-century scholars have several explanations for the successful stage history of the "royal captive." For example, in an age that preceded the introduction of naturalist acting styles, Southerne's drama, as well as Hawkesworth's adaptation, is thought to have been a vehicle for the large-scale, exaggerated theatrical gestures popular on the contemporary stage (Nichols; West). The stage version of *Oroonoko* subtly manipulated the possibilities of spectacle and invited tragic actors to exhibit their thespian spirits. Stated simply, it appears that "the play rose and fell on the talents of the [eighteenth-century] actor" (Nichols 190).

Thus, the play Bandele takes up has always showcased the performer. In his version, the story provides multiple opportunities for a theatricality that invokes African—in particular, Yoruban—performance history. For example, in scene 2, a "teenage" Oroonoko is exhorted by his peers to "play the old sage"—in other words, to display his talents as an actor and mime, despite the fact that their task is to engage in militaristic exercises. As Oroonoko imitates the actions of an infirm wise old sage, he invokes Yoruban ritualistic play. Accompanied by drumming and the chants of his friends, the imitation evolves into a spirited dance, an entertaining distraction from their work:

> ALL. You danced, Old Sage,
> You definitely danced!
> OROONOKO. Look at my feet,
> I can hardly walk!
> ALL. You danced, you danced!
> You definitely danced! (21)[9]

With its display of Yoruban performance traditions, Bandele's work expands on possibilities set in motion by Behn's telling of the Oroonoko story. We have already seen how, coming to London via Nigeria, Bandele places Behn's Englishness under a Yoruban proverb. He thereby not only deracinates her but also resituates himself in relation to Western tradition. What matters in his foreword is not the race or national identity of the authors but their synchronic connection. For Bandele, the geographic indeterminacy of the Oroonoko story—an indeterminacy resulting from slavery and colonialism—is not an obstacle but rather testimony to a cosmopolitan impulse. In this way, Bandele dissipates geographic boundaries and imagines himself and Behn in the same metaphoric space. The eighteenth-century place known as Coramantien may have existed in Ghana, writes Bandele in his foreword, but "Behn's Coramantien is a notional one." Claiming that the names of Behn's characters may have been recognizably Yoruban, Bandele sets his play in what is now known as Nigeria. He adds, "Ultimately, though, Coramantien, our fabled kingdom, is born of a distilled evocation of a metaphorical megalopolis of intersecting universal dreams" (5).

Yet, though he initially resists a binary opposition between African and Western artistic forms, Bandele provides an African prequel to Behn's European narrative. Where Behn covers Oroonoko's early years, his romance with and aborted marriage to Imoinda—in effect, his formative experiences as a young warrior and husband—in relatively few pages, Bandele uses nearly half of a two-hour-forty-minute play to present the same material. He offers his audience an Africa simultaneously mythical and culturally precise, historically specific and deliberately anachronistic. As the stage lights come up, the audience finds itself in the main court of the palace of Kabiyesi, king of the Coramantiens. In the opening scene, a series of diplomatic negotiations quickly lead to the offstage decapitation of Ibn Sule, an ambassador sent to exact obedience from the Coramantiens.

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The first scene leaves the viewer with several impressions: Coramantien is neither a pastoral paradise nor a primitive tribal society but a developed military culture in which ruthlessness and political shrewdness prevail. Bandele's playscript carefully instructs the costume designer to make certain the audience understands the conflict between the different west African cultures represented here: the visitors, Ibn Saeed and Ibn Sule, wear turbans and "other accoutrements of the desert farer," while the people of Coramantien are "dressed in the coastal Yoruba style of 'agbada' and 'dashiki' " (15). Such visual clues deessentialize the category of "Africa" by reminding the audience that important geographic and cultural differences preceded the creation of national boundaries. Bandele's changes are especially significant because they inject a cultural specificity into a dramatic text that, as several critics have noted, previously worked to render the Oroonoko story as a timeless tale.

Yet what, then, is the historical reality to which Bandele refers, especially since his source is an eighteenth-century adaptation of a late-seventeenth-century English text? On the one hand, he seems to take seriously Catherine Gallagher's claim that Behn was "the first English author who attempted to render the life lived by sub-Saharan African characters on their own continent" ("Background" 15)—that is, he appears to accept the original, novelistic account as a valuable historical record. On the other hand, Bandele necessarily comes to Behn's sources from a late-twentieth-century vantage point. Thus, his play text contains at least two levels of mimesis: a late-seventeenth-century reflection of an African reality and a modern, cosmopolitan reflection of a Nigerian reality. In production, deliberate anachronisms puncture the illusion that the audience has been transported back to a genuine historical, African past. For example, in act 2 Orombo jokes about a new invention called soap, claiming that his wives "swear by it" (27). In the RSC production, Gregory Doran's direction further emphasized this double consciousness through gestures and blocking—a soldier snapping to attention like a modern American marine, for example (Cribb 174). Thus, the illusion of a past historical context coexists with a consciousness of modernity. The effect is paradoxical: Bandele succeeds in demonstrating how Afrocentric constructions of Africa are real constructions. That is, they are fictions rooted in specific geopolitical circumstances, and they have real, concrete dimensions. In this way, Bandele counteracts a pseudouniversalism, a Eurocentric representation disguised as universal, in favor of a more precise understanding of how Africa represents itself in the face of Western representation.[10]

This linkage of historical rendering and modern awareness is especially apparent in Bandele's treatment of Imoinda. Feminist critics have long debated how to interpret Imoinda in Behn's novel, as well as how to decipher the woman narrator's conflicted relation to her African woman creation. Previous arguments have centered on a range of issues, from Imoinda's bodily status as an "enormously powerful erotic figure" and a "disposable possession" (Sussman) to her silencing as an "inarticulate hysteric" (Ballaster 293). As mentioned earlier, Southerne rewrote Imoinda's origins to give her a white patrilineage. According to Joyce MacDonald, this eighteenth-century, white, Desdemona-like Imoinda triggered the construction of a European female subjectivity (82). Restored to her blackness, Bandele's Imoinda resembles Behn's heroine more than Southerne's or Hawkesworth's. Yet Bandele gives his Nigerian Imoinda powers of self-articulation beyond those possessed by the original, as well as greater agency. His character offers a significant occasion for an actress to express a native African identity, one that struggles dramatically against patriarchal abuse.

Having been given the "royal veil of invitation" by the lecherous yet impotent King Kabiyesi, Imoinda finds herself in the bath with him, coerced to perform fellatio. She responds by slashing his penis with a mirror, an act that brings

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dire consequences: shortly afterward, she is brutally raped (offstage) by the palace guards. Even then her victimhood is carefully balanced by her fierce determination to resist her oppressors. In the next scene, she contemplates taking her own life but is thwarted by Orombo, adviser to the king, who tells her that if she wants to kill herself, "have the decency / To wait until the white man has paid / For you" (67). If this Imoinda's physical strength and endurance can be traced back to Behn's heroine, her expression is entirely original to Bandele's reworking, as becomes apparent at the celebration of her betrothal to Oroonoko, just before Kabiyesi's unwanted invitation.

Whereas Behn and Southerne gave Imoinda a patrilineage but no significant matrilineage, Bandele gives her the powerful Lady Onola. Loosely based on Behn's creation Onahal, Bandele's Lady Onola serves as Imoinda's mother figure and mentor. On the eve of her engagement to Oroonoko, Imoinda celebrates her upbringing:

> Let everybody thank my mother:
> She did not allow me to borrow dresses
> From those who would turn around and abuse me.
> She dressed me in clothes so rich
> I could confuse a god. (53)

Onola as fairy godmother not only clothes Imoinda but empowers her to speak on her own behalf. Here Imoinda speaks of her marriage to Oroonoko as an opportunity to regain what has been lost to her:

> I look right, and left,
> I look behind and in front of me.
> But I see nobody
> Who resembles my other parents,
> The ones who birthed me.
> What kind of god created me
> In a sickly world
> To make my mother die like rotten yam?
> What kind of god created me
> In a violent world
> To make my father die in war?
>
> If luck is not against me
> I shall have them back with me
> In my husband's house.
> If luck is not against me
> They shall reenter the world
> Through me. (53–54)

In this way, Imoinda hopes to retain possession of her body and to direct the course of her life. She hopes as well to reinstitute familial lines and to further the generations of an African family.

However, the unfolding of patriarchal power relations thwarts her efforts to protect herself. When Imoinda reappears as a slave in the second part of the play, her power has been curtailed. Yet even then her enslaved body is afforded much dignity in Bandele's text. In the original version of the story, Behn describes Imoinda as having a spectacularly tattooed, erotic body, which is later ritualistically dismembered by Oroonoko.[11] In Southerne's play, eighteenth-century actresses played the death scene in wigs and hoopskirts at center stage: in this version, Imoinda stabs herself in a dramatic, suicidal gesture. In Bandele's production, Imoinda's death is staged simply and intimately but nonetheless elicits a gasp of horror from the audience. Bandele's stage directions indicate, "As [Imoinda] makes to stab herself, OROONOKO stays her hand, takes the dagger away, and grabs her in a tight embrace. They hold on to each other as if for dear life. Then, in one swift movement, OROONOKO breaks her neck" (103). The scene is unbearably sad, testimony to a deep and abiding affection whose only recourse against slavery is self-destruction: the allusions here are closer to *Beloved* than to *Othello*.

Thus, while gender politics are inevitably altered by the excision of the female narrator from the story, and while Bandele's play has no white women characters (Spencer 233n27), the work offers a sustained critique of African political relations that takes a decidedly feminist turn. Here traditional African patriarchy is exposed for its obsessive focus on phallic power, a power that is ironically impotent. In act 2, the king's entrance is heralded with the verbal play of the court drummer, who celebrates the ruler's procreative power:

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His Highness—long may he reign—
Fathered a child in Liverpool
While emptying his testicles
In Coramantien! (29)

The tragedy of a phallic power that spawns slaves in England seems to be lost on Orombo, the king's chief adviser, who remains invested in the idea of the king's potency. The drummers continue their salacious celebration of the king's sexual dalliances:

2ND ROYAL DRUMMER. He entered deeply, deeply.
He touched the base of his cock—
1ST ROYAL DRUMMER. —Was it asleep? Was it fatigued?
2ND ROYAL DRUMMER. He found that his cock, the fearless
Rogue, was not fatigued.
1ST ROYAL DRUMMER. It was thrusting, thrusting. . . . (29)

While this sort of salacious language might be seen as deriving from racist perceptions of black prowess, here it works differently, participating in a playful expression of sexuality that characterizes many folk traditions, including that of the trickster. More important, it contributes to an explicit attack on the phallocentric nature of Coramantien monarchy expressed by Lady Onola, who criticizes the king for his obsessive pursuit of sex at the expense of his other royal duties.

I did not come here to listen to the
Idle prattle of jesters and eunuchs. As for
The King—if you want my opinion—
The problem with His Highness is that
His brain is in his penis. More's
The pity, since he has no penis. (30)

The king's sexual behavior eclipses his other manly activities. In Lady Onola's account, the king's only efficacy lies in his sexual performance, and his inability to copulate becomes a metaphor for his inability to rule over Coramantien.

Her arch feminist commentary on political relations in Coramantien accomplishes two purposes. First, it returns the viewer to the theme of African complicity. The king's exclusive focus on his sexual pleasure prevents him from thinking about his kingdom's best interests: oblivious to the fate of his offspring, he fathers a child in Liverpool by emptying his testicles in Coramantien. Another construction of paternity might have rendered him responsible and accountable for his children and prevented African collusion with the slave traders. Second, through Lady Onola, Bandele critiques phallocentrism itself, implying that the roots of human oppression can be traced back to deleterious gender constructs. On this point, he seems to return to Behn's text, since Behn's narrator similarly hints that oppressive colonial politics must be traced in part to distorted understandings of male privilege and authority.[12] Yet neither Behn nor Bandele asserts an essential "female" to counter the weight of oppressive patriarchal power. To the contrary, both suggest that men and women alike would benefit from an understanding of gender wherein masculinity ceases to be defined by aggressively phallic acts.[13]

Bandele's anachronistic, feminist depiction of gender politics depends on his full access to English as his means of expression. On the surface, his choice to write in English seems ironic, a former colonial subject's resort to the language of the colonial oppressor. His play (indeed, all his works) appears to support a polemic against a powerful globalizing impulse that deprives native cultures of their indigenous tongues and cultural expression and forces them to tell their stories in words at once alien to and alienated from their formative experiences (Ngũgĩ). However, instead of abrogating English as a language of colonial oppression, Bandele adapts and expands its linguistic potential, infusing it with the rhythms of his indigenous speech. Discussing the difficulty he faced finding a language for the play, he explains that he wrote the additional speeches for parts 1 and 2 in poetry because "I imagined the conversations happening in Yoruba, a highly rhetorical language. I felt the best way to capture the poetry when translating it into English was to

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keep it as poetry" (Kingston). Instead of sublimating his Yoruban linguistic origins, Bandele calls attention to them. He aims to preserve in English powerful traces of his originary language. While not an explicit critique of linguistic domination, the language he produces for the RSC realistically expresses how one culture negotiates another—how it seeks to make itself resonant and to signal its differences—and foregrounds additional possibilities within English. The play, then, participates in a movement to resist "English" by offering a counterexample of one of many "englishes" (Achebe). Moreover, by offering his audience a "creolized" English that moves from a culturally peripheral to a central position, Bandele implicitly demonstrates how the confrontation between black and white societies "was cruel, but it was also creative" (Brathwaite 307). His text further reminds the audience that English has always responded to new vocabularies and new modes of expression. On this point, he returns to Behn's version of the story, since for her also contact with a new culture means expanding English vocabulary and expression (Lipking 8–10; Gallagher, *Oroonoko* 38–40).

A good example of this linguistic positioning occurs in part 1, where Lady Onola celebrates Oroonoko's return from his brave military exploits. As T. J. Cribb points out, Bandele borrows a selection from Ulli Beier's *Yoruban Poetry*, giving the lines to Onola to allow her to celebrate the moment (Cribb 176). Spoken in context, her words suggest the Yoruba linguistic conventions that permeate important social contacts, but they also demonstrate how the possibilities of English can be extended:

> Ladies. My friends and workers.
> Sisters, Let me present to you the
> Mighty Oroonoko, in praise of
> Whose patron God, Eshu, the God
> Of fate, it has been said that:
>
> When he stands up
> Even a day-old suckling
> Beggars him in height.
> But when he lies down, the world
> Clambers mountains to catch
> Sight of his face.
>
> Eshu slept in the house—
> But the house was too
> Small for him.
>
> Eshu slept out in the open—
> But the open was too
> Small for him.
>
> Eshu slept in a nut—
> At last he could stretch himself out. (35–36)

Here the god Eshu confounds calculation: how do you measure a god who is so small when he is so big? As Cribb further explains, the paradoxes express "the impossibility of enclosing Eshu within logic of whatever kind. . . . Eshu is unpredictable, not to be defined by whatever state of affairs or beliefs happen to be current. He is the most unpredictable of the gods and in that sense a sort of degree zero of divinity" (176). Eshu thus defies logical measurement and implicitly critiques rational, Westernized accounts of his power. Yoruban ideas are translated in a way that preserves and simulates their paradoxical structure.[14]

In return, Oroonoko answers Lady Onola with another series of metaphors that celebrate her power as maternal principle:

> We thank you, our mother.
> You are—
> The thorn in the rhino's foot.
> The pebble that breaks the leopard's tooth.
> The rope that drags the elephant along.
> The back that carries its brother.
> The leaf that is bigger than a forest.
> The hare that climbs a mountain running.
> The sea that cannot be emptied.
> The flood that struts through fire.
> The silence that births a song.
> We salute you, mothers of our land. (36–37)

Oroonoko's metaphors implicitly encourage native speakers of English to reflect on how meaning can be conveyed through indirection and ceremonial circumlocution as precisely as

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through direct expression. The passage initiates reflection on the workings of normative, contemporary English and reminds native speakers how often English is circumscribed in its expressions of gratitude and hospitality. If English elocution once included the ceremonial possibilities demonstrated here, it possesses them anew through contact with the Yoruban rhetorical tradition.

While part 1 of Bandele's *Oroonoko* offers a distinct construction of Africa, part 2 evokes nowhere in particular. Though the action is set at "a portside slave-hold in Surinam" and later at two nameless plantations, no effort is made to evoke the geographic specificity of the British seventeenth-century slave system. Only the costumes of the actors—in Dorman's production the foppish duds of a cavalier for the whites, head rags and breeches for the slaves—situate the action historically. The suggestion is that Surinam could have been any number of colonial locations, over a wide span of time. This sense of spatial and temporal dislocation is appropriate in a drama where the action unfolds as if through the eyes of those who have been taken from their native culture. But it is also part of Bandele's technique for decentralizing the play's European roots. Whereas for Behn Surinam is an important location in the struggle for colonial dominance in the region, for Bandele Surinam is merely the backdrop of his character's tragedy.

But why stay so close to an eighteenth-century text popular when Britain was expanding its colonial holdings? The answer lies, as I suggested earlier, in the diasporic underpinnings of the play, which can be exposed when we remember that a script is always only an occasion for an interpretation, for a particular live performance that occurs at a distinct historical moment on a specific historical stage. As performance theorists remind us, a full understanding of any production history depends on our access to important physical details (Sofer). Yet because we have no access to the characteristic gestures or the blocking that marked racial difference on the eighteenth-century stage, it is difficult for us to theorize *Oroonoko*'s interconnected histories of performance and racialized experience, as Mita Chodhury points out (162). We have brief yet suggestive narratives of actors who achieved various results in playing the part of Oroonoko. David Garrick, for instance, made his debut as an actor in a provincial production of *Oroonoko* in 1741, yet he later failed in the starring role in a 1759 London production. As Thomas Davies records, "[T]he lustre of his eye was lost in the shade of the black color; nor was his voice so finely adapted to the melting and passionate addresses of the lover as to the more violent emotions of the heart" (qtd. in Nichols 174–75). In contrast, the African American actor Ira Aldridge was apparently successful in an early-nineteenth-century English production. His biographers cite Southerne's language as important to Aldridge's portrayal: though the blank verse was "stilted and artificial," it allowed for "moments of passion and protest." Moreover, unlike in later melodramas, in Aldridge's production "neither Oroonoko nor any of the Negroes spoke in any accent or phraseology of the West Indies or U.S.A." Yet the black actor Ignatius Sancho had had no luck with the same play in the 1760s, apparently because he lisped (Marshall and Stock 54–55).

Production details like these are suggestive, but they cannot reveal what the audience saw on a particular night, nor can they tell us how live spectators received a particular performance, how they internalized or perhaps resisted a play's complicated messages.[15] Once again, Peters is helpful, for she reminds us that "each performance has its own valences: each engages its own terms, its own representations, its own versions of power relations" (201). Yet do we imagine such valences? Even if we could gain access to eighteenth-century histories of spectatorship (not likely), we still lack appropriate theoretical models for interpreting a history of performance. Here reader-response theory might be useful. For example, Wolfgang Iser's concept of the implied reader can be amended to the

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concept of an implied viewer, which allows us to hypothesize how the texts of Southerne, Hawkesworth, and Bandele create different subject positions for their spectators. We might then imagine how real viewers accepted or rejected their implied subject positions.[16] However, the more immediate point is that in this elusive stage history we can hypothesize a range of connections between actors and their audiences.

Bandele may leave the eighteenth-century script largely intact because he recognizes in it the potential for performing an ennobled response to a diasporic experience. Indeed, Bandele makes only those changes in the eighteenth-century text that facilitate actors' full engagement with the themes of forced removal. He omits the aspects that diminish Oroonoko's reason for rebellion, while he preserves and focuses on speeches that reveal Oroonoko's motivations. Though this Oroonoko is still recognizably elite, he only reluctantly embraces his leadership role: where Southerne and Hawkesworth had Oroonoko galvanized by the thought that he might lose Imoinda to the governor's salacious advances, Bandele's Oroonoko dwells neither on this thought nor on the thought that his unborn son will be born into slavery. Instead, he responds to Aboan's reminder that he was "born for the good of other men" (92).

Bandele also changes Oroonoko's motivation from personal to political. In part 2 he excises the *Othello* allusions that permeate the eighteenth-century text. By distinguishing Oroonoko from the "noble Moor" and by freeing him from a representational tradition that freezes him as a tragic, misguided husband, Bandele emphasizes the idea of Oroonoko as agent. In the RSC production, Monu's carriage, as well as his phrasing, transformed the traditional Oroonoko into a character not only more modern but also more complexly motivated. When Aboan taunts him with his captivity, Oroonoko replies in the same words that he had in the eighteenth century:

> Remember this, Aboan, if we are
> Slaves, these planters did not make us slaves.
> They were not to know of Stanmore's treachery.
> They bought us in an honest way of trade
> As we have done before them, bought
> And sold many a wretch and never
> Thought it wrong. They paid our price
> For us and we are now their property. (92)

Initially these words appear to contribute to the theme of Oroonoko as the "royal captive," a man so motivated by "honor" that he is not able to save himself or anyone else. However, in the RSC production (as captured on a videotape in the Theatre Museum in London [Doran, *Oroonoko*]), Monu's emphasis of the word *if* undermined the apologetic tone of the passage: the phrasing suggested that Oroonoko's captivity is only provisional, that his mental capacities and understanding allow him to transcend his physical circumstances. In addition, on the RSC stage Monu was blocked and backlit in a way that isolated him as a leader. Monu's performance was an important reminder of the power of an actor to alter in performance what seems problematically rendered in theatrical tradition or the playscript.

At the conclusion of part 2, Bandele chooses irony over sentimentality: immediately after Oroonoko breaks Imoinda's neck, Trefry, a white colonist who has been Oroonoko's advocate throughout the play, arrives to announce that Oroonoko has been freed by the newly arrived lord governor. Oroonoko attempts to kill himself, and when Trefry tries to prevent him, Oroonoko's rush toward Trefry forces the colonist to shoot him. Instead of leaving viewers with the sad vision of Oroonoko's dead body, Bandele confronts them with the possibility of their own involvement. Trefry may not have wanted to kill Oroonoko, and—like the white members of the audience—he may have seen himself as Oroonoko's supporter. However, he kills Oroonoko because it is ultimately impossible for him to befriend the black man in a world where the economic business of slavery has made them inimical. Despite its Nigerian opening and its initial decentering of a Western framework for the story, Bandele's *Oroonoko* closes with a white

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frame, for the play ends as the largely white audience of the RSC contemplates Trefry, who, according to Bandele's stage directions, "remains standing in the same spot, looking suddenly very tired" (105). This final gesture reflects the white audience back to itself, in a framing that simultaneously reintroduces the theme of white complicity and ironically forecloses the question of white, liberal intervention.

The ending of Bandele's *Oroonoko* reminds us of the institutional pressures that "whiten" the story of the African holocaust and make it a salable commodity: arguably, the spectacle of Oroonoko's dead body eclipses themes of African agency and resistance and sells the story to white viewers who must see the story in terms of its direct relevance to them.[17] However, the commodification of black diasporic experience for a white audience is a complicated endeavor and can provoke several possible responses. On the one hand, we return to the connection between Bandele and Behn. Bandele's recourse to a text by a seventeenth-century white woman—his willingness to engage in a dialogue with her, despite profound differences in their subject positions—suggests that the playwright is not merely selling a product to a white audience but positioning himself in relation to white literary tradition in a way that denies its primacy: this may be a Western-generated myth of blackness, but it can be reclaimed under a Yoruban literary tradition. In this view, Bandele's *Oroonoko* suggests how the acknowledgment of cross-cultural similarities may "produce conversations that grow into a multi-vocal, political agenda . . . allowing [those who are committed to change] to move beyond the boundaries of a single insular neighborhood" (Peters 207). Despite the colonial history of the text—and despite the obvious situating of the story in the nationalistic, institutional frame of the RSC—Bandele successfully adapts the play as a prelude to interracial dialogue.

On the other hand, there is no small irony in the fact that the experience of the transatlantic slave trade now sells readily, much as black bodies once did. In the United Kingdom in particular, a large, proportionally white audience appears eager to receive a commodified version of slavery in the form of plays like this one, novels like Philippa Gregory's *A Respectable Trade* (made into a film for the BBC), movies like *Amistad* or *Mansfield Park*, television shows such as Channel 4's *Telling the Untold*, museum exhibits, commemorative sites, and historical trails of the kind now to be found in Liverpool and Bristol.

In the United States, one of the more ironic—yet instructive—expressions of this commodifying of the African holocaust was a "heritage tour" to historical slave ports in Senegal and Gambia, sponsored by McDonald's, which ninety-six United States citizens (eighty-nine of whom were African American) won as a prize in 1994. After participating in the tour, Paulla Ebron provides an intricate, complex, and instructive response to it. She concludes that the contest winners appeared to have had meaningful experiences as African Americans, even in the structure of a commodified event: how did McDonald's become an enabler of minority cultural identities? Resisting a binary opposition between a real self and a less authentic, commodified identity, Ebron claims that deeply felt personal identities and commercial campaigns are not oppositional but mutually constitutive (912). She argues that, for better or worse, "oppositional identities no longer appear to be autonomous from global commerce, even to their most radically passionate adherents; instead they are inescapably intertwined" (928). Ebron's observations imply that both a black audience in search of a heritage and a white audience eager to make amends will find it counterproductive to seek representations of diasporic experience outside commodification. Though we may dream of achieving social justice beyond the reaches of global capitalism, we can better initiate meaningful change by mobilizing the transnational community created by globalism. As Ebron suggests, we do best to focus on those moments when diasporic culture

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successfully taps familiar images, symbols, and narratives and creates transformative personal experiences, which can then become the basis for a shared project of political restitution.

When Bandele as a playwright lauds the potential of the Oroonoko story and when Monu as an actor celebrates its diasporic nature, their positions are worth weighing seriously. Bandele's weaving of the Oroonoko story into a modern, cosmopolitan narrative of the African holocaust need not be viewed as a capitulation or as a sign of his cultural bad faith. Instead, his investment in Oroonoko can be considered an important step toward interracial conversation. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown has recently spoken of the need for just such a conversation:

> Somehow we need to break away from the foolish idea that we are all forever fated to remain disconnected; to shout across ravines and canyons at one another or gripe amongst ourselves about those on the other side. Maybe one day we will find the courage and wisdom not to deny, in face of all truth and evidence, that our lives overlap, and that they share most of what it means to be human. (17)

Though a legacy of unequal power might appear to make black and white dialogue impossible, writers like Alibhai-Brown urge us to move beyond our current political impasse. In this essay, I have argued that the Oroonoko story—because it first appeared when binaristic race categories were not yet fixed and immutable— is a crucial text for any interracial conversation. Looking closer at its production history, we discover possibilities of transnational connection and identification, some of which may have been in place in the eighteenth century. Last, Bandele's *Oroonoko* warrants our consideration not as an adaptation or a retelling of an old story but as a creative and important meditation on diasporic experience, on performance history, and on the history and future of transcultural contact.

Notes

[1] *Aphra Behn's Oroonoko*, a new adaptation by 'Biyi Bandele, was premiered by the Royal Shakespeare Company under the direction of Gregory Doran at the Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon, on 7 Apr. 1999. It opened at the Barbican, in the Pit, on 15 Dec. 1999.

[2] Monu was schooled in England and in the United States (at American University), was trained at Webber Douglas Academy, and has appeared on the stage in London, Manchester, Liverpool, Nigeria, and Berlin. After attending the University of Ife in Nigeria, Bandele was invited to the United Kingdom for the National Student Drama Festival in 1990 and was subsequently supported by Stephen Jeffreys and Alan Ayckbourn (see Kingston). For a relevant discussion of cosmopolitanism, see Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots."

[3] I am inspired here by Vivian Patraka's recent work on a "holocaust performative." Patraka suggests an approach for evaluating artistic renderings of that which seems to defy representation. In particular, she identifies plays and performances of the Holocaust that "push against the limits of language to open up a new space for representing experience, despite the recognition that . . . rewriting any set of tropes will obscure as much as it reveals" (34).

[4] For example, in England, the 1999 report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-ethnic Britain urged a national reconsideration of intercultural contact like that brought on by the eighteenth-century transatlantic slave trade.

[5] As Wheeler further explains, "There was an uneven, not a cumulative, development of racial ideology. Moreover, skin color, even in the case of black Africans, was not the primary issue when the British considered human differences in the first half of the eighteenth century. Racial ideology forms mainly around English responses to certain customs, dress, religion, and trading—in short, around a concept of civility. It was through these means that early eighteenth-century ideology encouraged a keen sense of the visibility of differences, both of the British themselves and of others. Early eighteenth-century British narratives about Africa did not tend to link slavery to skin color" (92). Though she does not pinpoint the beginning of a binary black-white understanding, she intimates that it originates in the second half of the eighteenth century. See also Stepan.

[6] Scholars of the production of *Othello*—concerned though they may be with the presentation of race on the early modern stage—have had little to say about the performance of race. Vaughan comments on the recorded oddness of James Quin's "magpye" appearance as Othello (95), and she, like other scholars, notes Francis Hayman's 1743–44 engraving of Othello and Desdemona, which depicts Othello in fringed breeches and feathered hat. Yet it is not clear from the engraving that this Othello resorts to special gestures or postures to indicate his racial otherness. Barthelemy is useful on the theme of blackness on the English stage, yet he too provides little concrete evidence—perhaps because it is elu-

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sive—about how blackness was signified to an eighteenth-century audience. See also Ellison 48–73.

[7] On the dating of Southerne's *Oroonoko*, see Dodds 128. Dodds also surveys the performance history of the play. Though *Oroonoko* has only recently become part of the literary canon, "[h]istorians of slavery have never neglected *Oroonoko*," as Laura Brown points out ("Romance" 42).

[8] In his preface to the play text, Gregory Doran refers to the Hawkesworth text as the Garrick version.

[9] On Yoruba performance, see Drewal. For a full exploration of the Yoruban worldview in the works of several African playwrights, including Ama Ata Aidoo and Wole Soyinka, see Ibitokum.

[10] Or, as Appiah writes, "recent historiography has stressed again and again the ways in which the 'national heritage' is constructed through the invention of traditions; the careful filtering of the rough torrent of historical event into the fine stream of official narrative; the creation of a homogeneous legacy of values and experience" ("Topologies" 951).

[11] Several feminist critics have analyzed this scene as having crucial importance for the gender politics of the fiction. Margaret Ferguson, e.g., argues that "Behn as author uses Imoinda's death scene to inscribe the authority and the agency of the *white woman writer*, figured in the narrator, as a function of a set of finely calibrated *differences* from the female 'other' embodied in Imoinda" (181).

[12] Through the subplot involving the two sisters Charlotte and Lucy Welldon, Southerne also sets in motion such potentially feminist themes as the injustices of the marriage market for women. However, when Hawkesworth omitted the subplot from his adaptation, that aspect of the story disappeared.

[13] Similarly, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, much of the unfolding tragedy in precolonial Africa can be traced to how Okonkwo feels compelled to express his manhood: e.g., the murder of Ikemefuma, necessitated by patriarchal law, runs contrary to the deep affection that Okonkwo feels for the surrogate son. At the same time, patriarchal obsessions prevent the father from recognizing the superior strengths and virtues in his daughter Ezinma (see Osei-Nyame). A similar critique of African phallocentrism occurs in *A Harlot's Progress*, by David Dabydeen (see Wallace).

[14] For a different attempt to bring to English the Yoruban "relationship between the dynamics of speech and the dynamics of action," see Philip 201–23.

[15] One commonly cited incident places the African prince of Annamaboe—as Sypher notes, "he has no other name"—at a production of Southerne's *Oroonoko* in 1749, where he apparently wept at the tragedy (167). See also Brown, *Fables*, ch. 5.

[16] I am thinking, e.g., of how Henry Crabb Robinson is reported to have responded to Edmund Kean's portrayal of Oroonoko. Though Robinson appreciated the actor's performance, he was nonetheless offended and disgusted by the sight of "a whole stage filled with blacks." About Kean's performance William Hazlitt similarly wrote, "[T]he negroes in it (we could wish them out of it, but then there would be no play) are *ugly customers* upon the stage" (qtd. in Nichols 187–88). Kenneth Krauss has recently tried to integrate reader-response theory into performance studies. The work of phenomenologists such as Bert States and Bruce Wilshire is also promising in this direction.

[17] Behn and Bandele both seem especially alert to the power of the marketplace over the outcomes of their stories. As Ferguson writes, "[I]n *Oroonoko* Behn constructs an ambiguous reflection on the role of intellectual producers and consumers in [a late-seventeenth-century] international market" (176).

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