Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and the Middle Passage Effect

Abstract *This paper examines Aphra Behn's* Oroonoko *within the context of the novella's use of transitional states of existence. By refusing to classify the protagonist, Oroonoko, within any concrete categories during his Middle Passage voyage, Aphra Behn and her narrator stress the complexities of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This paper argues that these paradoxical positions can be understood through Behn's description of the Middle Passage itself; hence, the Middle Passage becomes a metaphor for transition and incomplete border crossings. In this way, the "Middle Passage effect," which appears throughout the novella, allows the narrator and the protagonist to move between categories, collectively serving as an allegory of New World slavery and its complicating effects for both the colonizers and the colonized.*

Points of intersection involve not only distinct locations and particular positions in which such intersections occur; rather, their very natures are often defined by their blurred boundaries and borders. Such is the case for Aphra Behn and her 1688 novella, *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave*, in which the author, the text's protagonist, and the text itself cross multiple boundaries, thus illustrating the significance (and popularity) of intersections during the seventeenth century. Behn, herself one of the first female writers to make a living from her craft, wrote a series of plays and poetry, turning to novels only during her last years of life. Indeed, when *Oroonoko* was published a year before the author's death, it was one of the earliest English novels.

The context in which Aphra Behn wrote her novella is important to understand in order to comprehend the blurred boundaries that characterize the intersections in her text. In fact, Behn's own life comprised similar intersections. Like many other Restoration writers, Behn often wrote about romance and sex, yet her representation of such subjects from a woman's perspective caused both controversy and novelty to arise from her works. Ruth Perry explains, "One of the few authors to create libertine women on the stage, her plays help us historicize the later Victorianization of women."[1]

Nonetheless, gender politics is not the only muddled border that characterizes Aphra Behn and the context in which she wrote *Oroonoko*. Indeed, Behn, herself a late seventeenth-century Tory supporter during an age of expanding capitalist ideals, used her work to embody the transition that would have characterized the temporal period in which she lived. The year *Oroonoko* was published, Behn's political preference for Catholicism in England was crushed by the Glorious Revolution; Behn herself became a member of the downtrodden, discriminated political group, much like her African protagonist. Ultimately, these political and social factors combine in Behn's text, in which the author grapples with her changing world—where merchant capitalism slowly encroached on global trade and finance and in which Behn herself represented the minority in multiple public categories—through the border crossings that encompass her text and constantly face her narrator and protagonist.

The literal space of the Middle Passage in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* explains the existence of border crossings within the novella. The movement between categories of identity can be seen in the narrator's story, in which she describes a romance between two slaves, Oroonoko and Imoinda. While the narrator does not actually participate in the Middle Passage, she describes Oroonoko's trans-Atlantic journey as that which redefines Oroonoko in terms of his social status, as well as his role in colonialist slave trafficking. However, she refuses to classify the protagonist within any concrete categories in her Middle Passage depiction; the Prince remains neither conqueror nor conquered, neither free nor slave. Instead, he lingers in an intermediate, transitional state that resonates throughout the text. Using the literal Middle Passage, the narrator introduces the reader to a metaphorical equivalent that can be termed the "Middle Passage effect." This phenomenon resonates throughout the novella; the narrator crosses the codes of commerce and romance, as well as those of slavery and freedom, to

comment upon slavery's complicating effects for both the colonizers and the colonized.

In order to discuss the Middle Passage's metaphorical role and to emphasize the late seventeenth century's blurred boundaries and countless transitions, it is important to define and examine this literal space. Historically, this crossing refers to the trans-Atlantic transportation of slaves from Africa to the New World. The slaves who boarded the ships had no knowledge of what was in store, nor could they predict. These Africans experienced terrible voyages on slave ships, and many preferred death to their unknown fates that left them vulnerable to countless abuses. However, the slaves were valuable commercial commodities, and so the ships' crews tried to control suicide attempts. Those who survived their journeys faced long lives on plantations, where they performed hard labor, risked death daily, and were treated as inferiors. Yet, the Middle Passage remained a place in which the Africans still had hope; they lived in a period of transition between African freedom and colonial slavery. It was only upon arrival in the New World, at the Middle Passage's conclusion, that understanding of their new roles finally resolved their in-between identities.

More specifically, *Oroonoko*'s Middle Passage can be defined as the Prince and his kinsmen's transportation on a slave ship from Coramantien to Surinam. Oroonoko faces enslavement, yet he originally boards the ship as an honored guest; only after the captain gives the Prince a royal feast is he deceived and held captive. Yet, the narrator's depiction of the Middle Passage illustrates the protagonist's transitional state—in other words, though Oroonoko heads toward New World slavery, he maintains a position of perceived power on the ship.

In fact, the Prince retains control of certain aspects of his journey. Even while Oronooko is in chains, he ultimately possesses power over his life and the lives of his kinsmen. His right to commit suicide, to which he refers as his "eternal liberty," is one that the ship's captain cannot control.[2] For this reason, after the slaves resolve to starve themselves, the captain "dismissed [Oroonoko's] irons, and brought him to his own cabin".[3] The Prince's release from chains cause the slaves to become "pleased with their captivity" due to the restoration of Oroonoko's honor.[4] Throughout the Middle Passage's remainder, the narrator mentions that Oroonoko is treated "with all the respect due to his birth."[5] Nevertheless, the Prince naïvely forgives the captain after he receives profuse apologies, which confirms for the reader that Oroonoko maintains a perception of blurred boundaries; he comprehends himself as having control over his situation, despite the fact that he unknowingly sails toward New World chattel slavery.

This paradox becomes characteristic of Behn's entire work, throughout which the characters cannot be classified into concrete categories. Instead, they hover between extremes, in the same way that the Middle Passage maps a transitional position between Africans' freedom and slavery. In this way, the literal Middle Passage within *Oroonoko* stresses the text's paradoxical nature and the Middle Passage effect's prevalence on both sides of the Atlantic.

One such paradox, which points to the complicated relationships caused by British colonialism, appears in the narrator's confused depiction of the commercial and romantic spheres. While she claims that her literary intention is "to make [Oroonoko's] glorious name… survive to all ages," her language often crosses the boundary between the heroic, emotion-evoking realm of romance and the code of colonial commercialism.[6] While the narrator presents Oroonoko as a noble, valiant figure found within the romance genre, she makes allusions that suggest her perception of the protagonist as a commodity that she herself uses for monetary benefit. For instance, she refers to her involvement in commercial artistic endeavors by associating herself with the King's Theatre, to which she donates authentic feathered Indian clothes upon her return from Surinam. Her purposeful mention of this detail, along with its early positioning within the novella, suggests the New World's commercial importance through the image of the tribal gift being transformed into an English stage spectacle. This inclusion is even more suggestive due to the fact that the narrator's theatrical references reemerge throughout the text in order to honor certain characters for their ethical treatment of Oroonoko. Her depiction of Colonel Martin exemplifies the theater's importance to the narrator, as well as her use of it as a tool to provoke and manipulate her reader toward her point of view. She states that she writes a "new comedy" to celebrate him after their introduction and adventure in Surinam, during which he shows respect toward her and her slave friend.[7]

However, the narrator's connection to the colony as a place of commercial and political importance is most apparent through her description of her deceased father, who "never arrived to possess the honour was designed him (which was lieutenant-general of… [the] islands, besides the continent of Surinam), nor the advantages he hoped to reap by them."[8] The narrator's departure, upon learning of her father's death, suggests her sentiments and her family's involvement in colonial enterprise. As a matter of fact, when she refers to Coromantien, she describes it as a place in which "our great traders in [slaves] trafficked."[9] Accordingly, it becomes apparent that the narrator even associates herself with the slave trade, despite her claim that she writes to remember the two ruined slave lovers. These references to the narrator's commercialism cause the reader to question her authorial intentions when writing about the Prince. More specifically, she introduces herself as an author during a period of increasing appreciation of print culture, which suggests that while her story claims to focus on Oroonoko and Imoinda, she may have her own profit motive. Thus, the text enters the realm of commercial enterprise.

The novella's confused Middle Passage effect can also be seen in the narrator's blurred descriptions of Oroonoko himself. In fact, her label for the African Prince, which she first introduces in her title, is "The Royal Slave."[10] This paradox simultaneously makes reference to the romance and commercial codes. Oroonoko's title combines the heroic, noble ideals invoked by the word "royal" with the profit motives associated with a "slave." However, the reader's uncertainty only increases as the work progresses; while the narrator describes Oroonoko using the laudable language of courtly romance (she describes him as being a Prince who is capable of "the highest degree of love"), she often slips into depictions of Oroonoko as a

commercial commodity.[11] She calls him "the chief actor in this history," which equates the African protagonist's survival as being dependent upon the theater that she creates, her marketable novella.[12] The narrator explicitly expresses her feeling of ownership over Oroonoko when she refers to him as "our black hero."[13] In a sense, she feels as if she possesses the African Prince, implying her own blurred view of Oroonoko's status in the colonial context.

During the Middle Passage, Oroonoko is unsure of his position and authority; this uncertainty, the Middle Passage's effect, is translated throughout the text into the narrator's inability to distinctly categorize him. She clearly states that she considers him to be a "great man [who has] greatness of courage and mind, a [solid] judgment… [and a quick] wit."[14] However, her descriptions of Oroonoko's physical features counter her sketches of his character. She calls Oroonoko a "prize," disjointedly depicting his corporeal qualities in a kind of colonialist blazon.[15] By reducing his physicality into individual body parts, the narrator forces the reader to inspect Oroonoko as if he is being priced for slave auction. While she mentions that he has "the figure of a man," she does not describe him as one.[16] Instead, she separates his face, nose, eyes, teeth, lips, and hair, saying, "he was beautiful even to those who knew not his quality."[17] This disconnection leads the reader to question the narrator's portrayal of her African protagonist, and whether she perceives him as a heroic figure or a commercial commodity. The reader experiences the Middle Passage effect, in which the narrator causes confusion in regard to Oroonoko's identity by purposefully not guiding the reader in any particular direction, just as she does when describing Oroonoko's kidnapping before his literal journey across the Middle Passage. She says, "I will spare my sense of it, and leave it to my reader to judge as he pleases."[18]

The narrator's blurring of boundaries also fails to firmly place Oroonoko within either the category of slave or free. She realizes his status prior to his Surinam arrival, yet she cannot remove him from the colonial context in which they meet. So, while the literal Middle Passage presents indefiniteness for all slaves, the narrator's Middle Passage effect forces Oroonoko's transitional state to continue throughout the novella. In turn, even the narrator experiences a lack of certainty during her encounters with the Prince, which she describes as "diversions we entertained him with, or rather he us."[19] The narrator fears him, which is why these diversions are planned; she describes the situation as one in which "[she] neither thought it convenient to trust him much out of [the British] view, nor did the country who feared him."[20] Yet, at the same time, the narrator's activities with Oroonoko lead to her admiration of him. When he kills a tiger, she calls him "the conqueror," which is later confusingly paralleled when Oroonoko himself is being chased through the woods by his English pursuers.[21] Thus, despite the fact that the Prince exhibits courtly qualities and honorable ideals throughout the novella, the narrator remains unclear about how to view him in his new colonial world, of which she is a part.

When examining the Middle Passage effect with respect to the indefinite categories of Oroonoko's slavery and freedom, it is also important to examine the narrator's use of his slave name throughout her history's second half. While she knows that his African name is Oroonoko, she tells her readers, "I must call Oroonoko Caesar, since by that name only was he known in our western world, and by that name he was received on shore… where he was destined a slave."[22] In this way, the narrator matter-of-factly complies with the slave trade's practice of Anglicizing its goods by giving them European names. The fact that she refers to the protagonist as Caesar throughout the latter half of her text suggests that she, too, perceives Oroonoko as a slave, rather than a free man.

Contrastingly, however, the narrator points out that Oroonoko only complies with his plantation name while he maintains his illusion of freedom. She mentions, "He suffered only the name of a slave, and had nothing of the toil and labor of one."[23] Oroonoko's reaction to his own slavery exemplifies the Middle Passage effect that exists throughout the novella and causes confusion between the colonizers and their human chattel. Oroonoko himself partakes in the commercial trafficking of slaves while he lives in Coramantien, and most of the slaves whom he meets in Surinam are men whom he has sold into slavery. Upon Oroonoko's arrival in the New World, the narrator mentions his inquiry about the other slaves, to which Trefry replies "that [the Prince] should have an account of them."[24] The narrator's use of the word "account" stresses the Middle Passage effect's existence even after Oroonoko reaches Surinam; while he travels toward his master's plantation, he remains involved in the language of commerce and in the role of trader, thus suggesting his maintenance of power. However, Oroonoko's renaming represents his transition into slavery and, in turn, his loss of authority. This shift explains Oroonoko's loss of patience that begins when Imoinda becomes pregnant; while his white masters promise him his freedom upon the next ship's arrival, his unborn child will become his mater's property if it is born in the New World. The Prince attempts escape, for he no longer will tolerate his humiliation, and the narrator describes Oroonoko as saying, "Oroonoko scorns to live with the indignity that was put on Caesar."[25] Nevertheless, he fails, and he is reduced to a common slave through the lashings that he receives.

This point in the novella further blurs the boundaries between freedom and slavery. The narrator tells of Oroonoko's white masters overcoming him, allowing the other slaves to whip him. While Oroonoko cannot return to his position as a Prince, he is never fully treated like the rest of the slaves within the work until the narrator describes him being "whipped like a common slave."[26] However, even at this point, Oroonoko owns his honor and his life, thus suggesting his maintenance of freedom. Even when Oroonoko is whipped, the narrator describes him as "not [being] perceived to make any moan, or to alter his face… But he pronounced a woe and revenge from his eyes."[27]

While the narrator depicts Oroonoko as a heroic figure, she constantly sets herself apart from the "Other" figure of the Prince by making reference to her position within British culture. Yet, she can still relate to his subjugation due to her womanly lack of authority. This association suggests the narrator's perception of the Prince as being somewhat equal to herself. She says, "But his misfortune was to fall in an obscure world,

that afforded only a female pen to celebrate his fame."[28] In this way, the narrator admits that she, too, is a member of an obscure societal group. By using the word "afforded," she suggests that Oroonoko essentially "hires" her, and therefore, she is working for him. However, it also refers the reader back to the idea of the blurred lines between commercialism and romance, in which a slave would be only rich enough to hire a woman author to write his love story.

Hence, the complicated relationships created by British colonialism and the internal colonization of women cause the narrator to refuse Oroonoko's clear classification into categories. While she claims to be writing about two noble African lovers who are stolen into slavery, she blurs the boundaries between her novella's codes of romance and commerce, as well as between her portrayal of the Prince as a slave and a free man. In turn, the reader also remains uncertain. Through her story, the narrator illustrates the Middle Passage effect of British colonialism and slavery, in which the interactions between the colonizers and the slaves—who originate from African positions of power and freedom—result in the muddling of national and racial identities. More specifically, in both the novella and the world that it describes, it is never entirely clear who is, or is not, free. This confusing fusion of people's identities complicates their relationships, thus rendering discrete definitions, or singular definitions of self, impossible. By examining *Oroonoko*, the reader actually experiences the anxious muddle felt by the slaves during the Middle Passage, as well as by the narrator in the novella; the reader's viewpoint becomes blurred, bringing into question the reader's own role as a potential colonizer, or "consumer," of the spectacle of slavery. In this way, Behn brings the colonialist effects of the New World directly to her readers, rather than allowing them to remain across the Atlantic and historically contained in the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

ENDNOTES

1 Ruth Perry, "Review: The Oldest Professional," *The Women's Review of Books* 15.7 (1998): 14.
2 Aphra Behn, "Oroonoko, or The Royal Slave, A True History," in *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, ed. David Damrosch, 2nd ed., vol. 1C (Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers Inc., 2003), 2261.
3 *Ibid*, 2254.
4 *Ibid*, 2255.
5 *Ibid*.
6 *Ibid*, 2277.
7 *Ibid*, 2272.
8 *Ibid*, 2261.
9 *Ibid*, 2239.
10 *Ibid*, 2236.
11 *Ibid*, 2240.
12 *Ibid*, 2236.
13 *Ibid*, 2267.
14 *Ibid*, 2260.
15 *Ibid*, 2253.
16 *Ibid*, 2240.
17 *Ibid*, 2239.
18 *Ibid*, 2253.
19 *Ibid*, 2261.
20 *Ibid*.
21 *Ibid*, 2264.
22 *Ibid*, 2257.
23 *Ibid*, 2261.
24 *Ibid*, 2256.
25 *Ibid*, 2273.
26 *Ibid*, 2272.
27 *Ibid*, 2271.
28 *Ibid*, 2257.