

TRACES OF HAITI: SILENCE, HISTORY, AND  
AN ETHICS OF READING IN FRANCES BURNEY'S *THE WANDERER*

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Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

August, 2013

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

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In the preface to her sprawling novel *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties* (1814), Frances Burney engages in discussion of the purpose of the novel. By doing so, she responds to eighteenth-century critical debates on the value of novel-reading as action, a discussion intimately woven within considerations of standards of novelistic realism (what she calls the “natural and probable”) and of an ethics of reading.<sup>1</sup> The preface lays out two questions: first, what impact should reading produce in the life and mind of the reader? And, second, in order to accomplish this effect, on what subject matter should the narrative focus? Burney chooses to answer the first question by emphasizing the narrative potential inherent in the genre as storehouse of life experience, which, through the act of reading, is transferred to the reader:

Divest, for a moment, the title of Novel from its stationary standard of insignificance, and say! What is the species of writing that offers fairer opportunities for conveying useful precepts? It is, or it ought to be, a picture of supposed, but natural and probable human existence. It holds, therefore, in its hands our best affections; it exercises our imagination; it points out the path of honour; and gives to juvenile

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<sup>1</sup> Burney's recourse to terms like “natural” and “probable” is certainly not accidental. In the recent collection *This is Enlightenment* (eds. Clifford Siskin and William Warner), John Bender and Michael McKeon both address the means through which eighteenth-century fictions mediate scientific discursive conventions and ways of meaning-making. Bender analyzes the prefaces of Henry Fielding, who also used the word “probable” to describe “the proper realm of action for the novel” (286). Although Bender primarily addresses early eighteenth-century novels, his examination of Fielding could seamlessly apply to Burney as well, steeped as she was in the tradition of eighteenth-century novelistic production. McKeon investigates the parallel development of scientific inquiry and aesthetic judgment, and argues: “It was by imitating the emergent method and value system of the natural sciences that the arts learned their own distinctive, aesthetic mode of being” (385). Burney thus imagines reading in terms of what Michael McKeon explores as a particularly close relationship between reading and the experimental epistemology of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

credulity knowledge of the world, without ruin, or repentance; and the lessons of experience, without its tears. (7)

Burney's choice to leverage the aesthetic work of the novel around depicting "supposed, but natural and probable human existence" becomes a complicated theoretical decision given the way Juliet Granville's shifting and unstable self-performance appear unusually resistant to coherent interpretations. The reader comes to knowledge of Juliet gradually – her first name is revealed halfway through the lengthy novel, and fragments of her life history are doled out to different characters only late in the narrative.

Burney also narrates the challenges characters face attempting to "read" Juliet through other outward signs, such as clothing and skin color. Juliet first appears in the novel disguised in blackface, and, significantly, is read by other characters as black in the beginning of the novel. Her black skin functions as an uncomplicated indicator of identity for these characters, as Dror Wahrman has noted: "From the 1770s onward . . . race was gradually and haltingly reconceptualized as an essential and immutable category, stamped on the individual" (127). While Juliet's skin transforms from black to white early in the novel, and destabilizes these characters' initial reading of her, she is haunted by her early association with blackness. Given Burney's attention to certain standards of novelistic realism in the preface, is her decision to represent her heroine as an unstable presence in the novel is implicitly presented as "natural and probable human existence"? If novels provide readers with "lessons of experience," furthermore, what are readers supposed to learn from Juliet's initial self-presentation as a black woman?

In this essay, I wish to study how this guiding aesthetic principle illuminates the novel's consideration of history and of an ethics of reading. I argue that Burney's

imagining of history and reading is encoded within her representation of Juliet's shifting racial presence in the novel.<sup>2</sup> By invoking an "ethics of reading," I want to suggest that however permeable and changeable Juliet's skin color becomes in the text, her initial representation in blackface becomes a site from which readers could encounter and respond to migrant figures circulating the Atlantic world. In this sense, I am using "reading" in perhaps its broadest sense, as an activity encompassing a wide range of perceptual and interpretive responses to Juliet's presence in the novel. Concerning the obligations Juliet demands of readers, Scott Juengel argues that Juliet bears "an inexpressible vulnerability and an unutterable secret," and urges that the heroine's refusal to form attachments to the community "strain[s] the limits of our ethical imagination" because the novel "narrativize[s] resoluteness without resolution, obliging the reader to tarry with the stranger in the discomforts of the time" (64, 68).

Ultimately, I argue that the "discomforts of the time" Juengel invokes would seem to include the emergence of the first black republic, Haiti, in 1804 at the conclusion of the slave revolution in the French colony of St. Domingue, an event Juliet's entrance appears to obliquely dwell on. Although Haiti is never explicitly referenced in the novel, Juliet's entrance as (apparently) a French-speaking black woman would have had particular resonance for the novel's first readers, and is only the first of a series of scenes about

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<sup>2</sup> Sara Salih published one of the first articles examining blackness in *The Wanderer* in 1999. She argued, however, that Burney really did not address race as a problem at all, but used the representation of what she called "negrophobia" to slip the real object of her satire, which she identified as francophobia, past her readers' attention. Judy Ann Olsen's 1992 dissertation, for instance, addresses blackness in *The Wanderer* in the context of wider structures of power oppressing the heroine. Kimberly Lutz, in a dissertation completed in 2000, contended that *The Wanderer* participated in an eighteenth-century tradition of early feminist writing which appropriated the image of colonial slavery to describe the plight of the Englishwoman, who lived in virtual slavery. Lutz's argument will be considered in more detail later in this paper. Finally, Tara Elizabeth Czechowski in a recent dissertation examined the association of blackness with crime in eighteenth-century writing. She argues that Juliet's early representation as black taints most of the characters ensuing attempts to make sense of her, even after Juliet is revealed to be white.

slavery, race, and history which erupt at key moments in this long novel. By imagining the work of the novel reciprocally enacted through “probable human existence” and represented within the text through deferred revelation, Burney’s aesthetic decisions are an attempt to construct meaningful and coherent narratives of history in England during and following the revolutionary conflicts of the 1790s.

In some ways, nevertheless, my attempt to frame Juliet’s presence in blackface against the backdrop of Haiti is an impossible reading, for how can a seemingly incidental blackface performance reorient our understanding of a character who remains white for the remainder of the novel? Indeed, *The Wanderer* is a nine-hundred page work which begins “in the dire reign of the terrific Robespierre,” reminding us at every turn that it is “about” the impact of French Revolutionary excess deep within England, and refuses at every turn to be “about” the Haitian Revolution. Yet, Juliet’s blackface *is* anomalous and resists “probability” because of its very conspicuousness. Although Burney begins *The Wanderer* with the question of Juliet’s identity, the rest of the novel never completely answers the question of why *this* disguise. A resolution to the problematic of “about” perhaps lies in the preface of the novel. There, Burney theorizes an agonistic vision of history through what she calls “traces,” fragments of events that cannot quite be integrated into the broader scope of “history” as such, but which leave behind profound affective reminders. These traces are not yet part of collective history – and indeed may not even be part of the history explicitly told in *The Wanderer* – but they are capable of unsettling the world Juliet finds herself in ways that are unaccountable.

In the pages that follow, I will be addressing the moments in *The Wanderer* where these unaccountable traces appear to erupt into the narrative, but I will also pay close

attention to a network of texts and rhetorical registers clustered around *The Wanderer*'s composition and reception. This network includes letters between Burney and her husband, Alexandre D'Arblay, Thomas Babington Macaulay's long review of Burney's oeuvre, Elinor's attempt to absorb Juliet's story within the rhetoric of eighteenth century feminism, and (of course) the preface to *The Wanderer*. These clustered texts share a characteristic in that they exhibit a compulsive substitutionary habit that occurs when these traces disrupt history and reading. As we will see, D'Arblay replaces the conflict between France and Britain with St. Domingue and Macaulay reimagines Burney's English style for a degraded Jamaican creole. As with Juliet's transformation from black to white, these substitutions become a recursive event that, by re-concealing fragments of an unaccountable history, end by suggesting the contours of their muted existence.

### I. Burney's Agonistic History and the Vulnerable Body

In *The Wanderer*'s preface, Burney's theorizes a specific vision of history, politics, and realistic fiction, which encodes certain implications for acknowledging Haiti's covert presence within the novel. Writing out of the politically tumultuous debates surrounding the French Revolution, she carefully separates this historical vision from the vagaries of "party politics" and "rival sentiments" (5). She represents politics as a "stormy sea ... whose waves, for ever either receding or encroaching, with difficulty can be stemmed, and never can be trusted," deploying an image to describe political maneuvering and expression, which suggests that she believed them the least grounded in the realities of "general life" (4). Given her antipathy to the shifting nature of political rhetoric, Burney approaches the French Revolution as an "event" carefully, and argues

that its occurrence in the distant past precludes any attempt to read it as the expression of a singular political ideology in her contemporary moment:

I have chosen, with respect to what, in these volumes, has any reference to the French Revolution, a period which, completely past, can excite no rival sentiments, nor awaken any party spirit; yet of which the stupendous iniquity and cruelty, though already historical, have left traces, that, handed down, even but traditionally, will be sought with curiosity, though reverted to with horror, from generation to generation.

(5)

Although Burney's attempt in 1814 to relegate the French Revolution to the distant past savors of a kind of heavy-handed historical revisionism, it this (perhaps artificial) construction of temporal distance between her preface and the French Revolution which grounds her contention that historical events on the scale of the French Revolution endure as "traces" with the potential to excite powerful affective responses. I have called it an agonistic vision of history because Burney imbeds this first iteration of historical "traces" within the contentious passions she imagines for those who remember, rather than in discrete, bodiless texts. In this sense, the afterlives of past events persist deep within the bodies of those who recall them, moving from within the self outward to create collective historical narratives. Burney, furthermore, links this agonistic history to the aesthetic demands of novelistic realism. In perhaps her most provocative statement in the preface, she urged that to forget the "traces" of the French Revolution would be tantamount to refusing to construct genuine and accurate narratives:

To attempt to delineate ... any picture of actual human life, without reference to the French Revolution, would be as little possible, as to give an idea of the English

government, without reference to our own: for not more unavoidably is the last blended with the history of our own nation, than the first. (6)

Burney, again, emphasizes the quotidian, and encloses the massive scale of historical revolutions within a “picture of actual human life” – not even “lives,” but within a singular life. Nevertheless, if Burney can be said to be committed to portraying Juliet’s “actual human life” at all it is not through depictions of her *interiority*. The reader is rarely privileged with access to Juliet’s interior thoughts and she is noticeably silent in many of the private conversations and public settings Burney places her in. This technical decision allowed Burney to explore the process of narrating a protagonist almost entirely through other characters’ public interpretations of her. Indeed, Juliet’s silence provokes other characters’ to pay almost obsessive attention to her body, and it is the shifting nature of Juliet’s performances that reveal the muted presence of St. Domingue. The revolutionary energy of St. Domingue exists within the indifference, cruelty, horror, snobbery that other characters display, and the agony they provoke in Juliet.

We begin the unaccountable history at the beginning: *The Wanderer* opens in 1794, during “the dire reign of the terrific Robespierre,” but also the early years of the Haitian Slave Revolution (1791-1804). By 1789, Saint Domingue, occupying the western half of the island of Hispaniola, was France’s most prosperous colony, a wealth founded principally through the export of sugar. Provoked in part by the ideals articulated in “The Rights of Man and Citizen,” slaves across the northern plains revolted in August 1791.<sup>3</sup> The conflict continued until black independence was achieved in 1804, due in part to the

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<sup>3</sup> C.L.R. James, in his seminal study of the Haitian Revolution *The Black Jacobins*, argued that the slave revolutionaries drew heavily from rights discourse arising from the American and French Revolutions. Doris Garraway, expanding on James’s thesis, contended that the Haitian revolutionaries severed revolutionary rights discourse from its nationalist context, and transformed it into a conceptual framework which could achieve universal reach (see “Légitime Défense” 65-67).



shrewd political and military acumen of black leaders such as Toussaint L'Ouverture. During and after the war in St. Domingue, black agency associated itself with human rights discourse, but the insurgency also appeared as "phantasma and nightmare" in white imaginings across the Atlantic world (Fischer 5).<sup>4</sup> By focusing on characters' reactions to Juliet's shifting self-presentation and radical silence regarding her origins while in blackface, Burney appears to shift the revolutionary energy Juliet represents onto the human body, which becomes defined by the phantasms of transformation as much as St. Domingue came to signify the nightmare of black insurgency.<sup>5</sup> When Mr. Ireton encounters the black Juliet for a second time, he depicts Juliet as vermin and her presence as an infestation: "What, is that black insect buzzing about us still?" (27). Burney's attempts to dilute the terrors and narrate the nightmares of Juliet's racial instability become precisely those sites where the insurrectionary energy of St. Domingue erupts into *The Wanderer*.

Throughout *The Wanderer*, these sites become closely associated with Juliet's speech and body. As Juliet enters the novel, she pleads "in the French language" for

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<sup>4</sup> Critical scholarship on Haiti and the Haitian Revolution has expanded rapidly in the past three decades, so while I cannot provide an exhaustive list of works which address the presences and absences of Haiti in both the imagination of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world and the recent critical scholarship on revolutionary discourse, a few works which admirably take up this question are C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins*, Susan Buck-Morss's *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, Sibylle Fischer's *Modernity Disavowed*, Nick Nesbitt's *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment*, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past*.

<sup>5</sup> Moira Ferguson has argued that attempts to lobby for the emancipation of slaves disappeared in England after the slave revolution began in St. Domingue (4). Ferguson may over-simplify the absence of abolitionist dissent after the slave revolt began – writers such as Thomas Clarkson, for example, certainly registered their critiques of the colonial project. Clarkson, in his "The True State of the Case, Respecting the Insurrection at St. Domingo," argues that it is the nature of the slave trade to provoke its own destruction: "For we cannot keep people in a state of subjection to us, who acknowledge no obligation whatever to serve us, but by breaking their spirits and treating them as creatures of another species" (3). However, it does appear that public opinion was more inclined to agree with Albert Willoughby, Earl of Abingdon, whose speech advocating the postponement of any consideration to abolish the slave trade reveals acute unease over the events in Saint Domingue: "Look at the state of the Colony of St. Domingo, and see what Liberty and Equality, see what the Rights of Man, have done there" (9).

passage to England from France on board a vessel filled with other English refugees (11). Because Juliet will give no name for herself and appears to speak only French, she is discussed and dissected by the nosey (and often hostile) English passengers. Burney then reveals parts of Juliet's body through the tatters of her disguise: "Just then the stranger, having taken off her gloves, to arrange an old shawl, in which she was wrapt, exhibited hands and arms of so dark a colour, that they might rather be styled black than brown" (19). Once her skin color is disclosed, the stranger clearly unnerves other passengers onboard ship. Mr. Ireton anxiously asks her, "What part of the world might you come from? The settlements in the West Indies? or somewhere off the coast of Africa?" (19). Mr. Ireton's question associates Juliet with the triangular slave trade, and his assumption that she might be from "somewhere off the coast of Africa" indicates that he is probably inquiring where Juliet was born, since it is unlikely, given the practices of the slave trade, that a slave could have traveled directly to France from Africa.<sup>6</sup> A francophone black stranger would almost certainly have come from the "West Indies." The stranger, however, ignores his question – "She drew on her gloves, without seeming to hear him" – precluding any resolution to the anxiety she has caused since her skin color was revealed (19). The tension escalates further when it appears that the black stranger could be associated with the revolutionary upheavals in the Atlantic world, and that she also bears the traces of that past on her body: "The wind just then blowing back the prominent borders of a French night-cap, which had almost concealed all her features, displayed a

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<sup>6</sup> Christopher Miller explains in *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade*: "There were no slaves in France.' It was a risky proposition to bring a slave to France; consequently, few Africans ever saw the metropole that controlled the Atlantic triangle ... Africans did not circulate freely around the French Atlantic triangle ... There was no large African population in France in the eighteenth century: only some number between one thousand and five thousand were likely present at any one time" (59).

large black patch, that covered half her left cheek, and a broad black ribbon, which bound a bandage of cloth over the right side of her forehead” (20). Mr. Ireton attempts to restrict the meaning of the black stranger’s bandages, and belittle the significance of her possible wounds by exclaiming: “Why I am afraid the demoiselle has been in the wars! ... Why, Mistress, have you been trying your skill at fisty cuffs for the good of your nation? or only playing with kittens for your private diversion?” (20). It is not immediately clear which “nation” Mr. Ireton is referencing, but that the novel refuses to specify might allow space for St. Domingue to be present during this moment, at least for Mr. Ireton and for other characters in the novel.

While Mr. Ireton’s refusal to seriously consider the possibilities Juliet’s skin color and bandages could represent, or to overtly reference the revolutionary events in St. Domingue, as readers we might ask ourselves what other responses are possible given Burney’s initial representation of Juliet as a potential refugee from St. Domingue. We could say that Juliet’s bandages are suggestive because they serve as material reminders for the way the possibilities of her history is both painfully present while also hidden or covered. As Mr. Ireton imagines wounds beneath the bandages, we imagine multiple possible narratives for the black stranger in the absence of any real depiction of her interior life or revelation of her past history in this opening scene. Indeed, the continual process of narrative deferral, a deferral which isolates Juliet even as it highlights her unusual position as the only character who possesses knowledge apart from the reader, as an anticipation for the way narratives of Haiti circulated in the Atlantic world in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Present in both history and journalism, as well as in the imagination of the period, Haiti is also at times curiously absent, and *The*

*Wanderer* offers its own critical imagining of this tension between the overwhelming rupture of the slave revolt on St. Domingue and attempts to contain, silence, or mitigate that energy through the unnamed and unacknowledged anxiety provoked by the brief presence of the apparently French-speaking, black heroine.<sup>7</sup>

My reading of the “unaccountable” traces of Haiti between the pages of *The Wanderer* draws on recent theorizations of the Haitian Revolution as it appeared (vulnerable, shifting and transformed) in the European imagination. Haitian anthropologist Michel Rolph-Trouillot offered an early and influential meditation on attempts to confront the Haitian Revolution in an essay collection *Silencing the Past*. He argued that the Haitian Revolution as an event challenged nearly every epistemological framework available to Western observers, especially assumptions regarding the intellectual and political capacities of black slaves: “The Haitian Revolution ... entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened” (73). The transformation of Haiti into a black republic became a “non-event,” its “unthinkability” one of its defining characteristics, and “silencing” the event the habitual interpretive maneuver into the twentieth century. More recently, scholars have reinterpreted elements of Trouillot’s “unthinkability” thesis, and suggested that, while contemporary spectators struggled to narrate and to engage with the possibility of black insurgency in the Caribbean, “if there was a silencing of the Haitian Revolution,” as Jeremy Popkin argues, “it occurred only after the consolidation of black rule on the island”

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<sup>7</sup> In my reading of these tensions between presence and silence, I am influenced by Edward Said’s examination of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*. *Mansfield Park* was another great novel of 1814, which also to some extent elided representations of colonialism, imperialism, and the slave trade. In an emblematic episode in the novel, Fanny Price asks her uncle Bertram, who has just returned from his plantation in Antigua, about the slave trade, only to be met with “a dead silence” (155). Said essentially provides a way of theorizing the selective presence of non-European geographical spaces in *Mansfield Parks*, and argues that Fanny’s “conscious connections are to some people and to some places, but the novel reveals other connections of which she has faint glimmerings that nevertheless demand her presence and service” (354).

(3). Susan Buck-Morss, furthermore, in *Haiti, Hegel, and Universal History*, has elegantly analyzed Hegel's development of his theory of the master-slave dialectic against the backdrop of the Haitian Revolution. She scrupulously addresses the presence of the Haitian Revolution in eighteenth-century journalism and examines what Hegel would have read about the conflict, concluding: "Eighteenth-century Europeans *were* thinking about the Haitian Revolution precisely because it challenged the racism of many of their preconceptions. One need not have been a supporter of the slave revolution to recognize its central significance to the political discourse" (51).<sup>8</sup> Whatever challenges Haiti presented to European frameworks, it is clear that Western spectators were *aware* of the magnitude of the event occurring in the Caribbean, a historical consciousness that transformed the imagination of observers (such as Hegel) in ways we are only now beginning to identify and trace.

It is clear that Burney herself was profoundly attentive to the slave revolution in St. Domingue and to its significance. In 1802, Burney's husband Alexandre D'Arblay returned to France in order to try and recover some of his property and gain a paid position in the French army (for the first ten years of their marriage, the couple had relied on the money Burney earned as a novelist). This attempt to join French army placed

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<sup>8</sup> After analyzing what Hegel would have been reading and what information was available to him on the events in the Caribbean during the early years of the nineteenth century, Buck-Morss concludes, "We are left with only two alternatives. Either Hegel was the blindest of all the blind philosophers of freedom in Enlightenment Europe, surpassing Locke and Rousseau by far in his ability to block out reality right in front of his nose (the *print* right in front of his face at the breakfast table); or Hegel knew – knew about real slaves revolting successfully against real masters, and he elaborated his dialectic of lordship and bondage deliberately within this contemporary context" (50). The presence of the Haitian Revolution in the media and print culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has become a productive avenue of investigation recently for scholars. Deborah Jenson argues that the Haitian slave revolt became a media event, "an epochal eruption of black Atlantic consciousness into the print cultural environment of Euro-American readers" (46). Other texts which address Haiti's presence in the media and journalism of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world include David Geggus's "Print Culture and the Haitian Revolution: The Written and the Spoken Word," Edward Baptist's "Hidden in Plain View: Evasions, Invasions, and Invisible Nations," and Jeremy Popkin's anthology of first-hand accounts of the Revolution, *Facing Racial Revolution*.

D'Arblay in an untenable position, as he respectfully refused to bear arms against the British out of respect for his wife's heritage, but indicated his willingness to fight against the slave uprising in St. Domingue instead.<sup>9</sup> D'Arblay instrumentalized St. Domingue as the solution to his vocational difficulties, an attempt which ultimately proved futile as his request was denied. In a limited sense, D'Arblay thus substituted one revolution for another, but this substitution only works because the slave revolt is emptied of political resonance for D'Arblay:

My friend, believe that I have not ceased thinking for a moment as you do, that the first of all goods is independence – to speak freely in our brief moment of life ... But agree that we need a little more ease. On my side, I dare say that if I were more content to fight, I could cope with the circumstances ... However, I give myself more readily to this idea, in contrast to your fears and the anxiety that these fears have given me, because the expedition to St. Domingue has been approved by your Government, which must concern itself in its success (January 2, 1802; my translation from the French).

For D'Arblay, St. Domingue becomes a space out of which the D'Arblays can achieve financial "ease." D'Arblay also evinces an inability to perceive that independence, "the first of all goods," deeply imbedded in the rhetoric of the slaves in St. Domingue.

Although Burney rarely comments explicitly on the events occurring in the Caribbean, we catch glimpses that she may read D'Arblay's attempt to substitute one revolution for another quite differently. It certainly seems clear that she was profoundly attentive to the conflict in the Caribbean, and refused to substitute one for the other, as suggested by the

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<sup>9</sup> For the complete story of D'Arblay's attempts to join the expedition to St. Domingue and Burney's anxiety over that decision, see the letters spanning December 1801-March 1802 in *The Journals and Letters*.

ampersand: “All the rest of my time are given to *France & St. Domingo*” (157; italics original). The few times she does mention St. Domingue, Burney’s anxiety focuses on the fragility of the (white) human body encountering what she perceived as the unhealthy and violent environment, especially “that pestilential climate” (177). Indeed, in one letter, she reveals her desire to go to St. Domingo with her husband, but recognizes that if she did so, she would almost undoubtedly leave her son an orphan: “Would I not have left even *HIM* – to have followed You & your fate even to St. Domingo? ‘Tis well, however, you did not listen to me, for that poor susceptible soul could not, as yet, lose both of us at once, & be preserved himself” (176). Burney’s conviction that if she accompanied D’Arbly to St. Domingue illustrates the extent to which St. Domingue during the war years was imagined as a graveyard for French and British soldiers. The scale of mortality in St. Domingue paralleled lives lost in battles fought almost contemporaneously in Europe, as Trouillot explains: “Napoleon lost nineteen French generals in Saint-Domingue, including his brother-in-law. France lost more men in Saint-Domingue than at Waterloo – as did England” (99). Burney’s vision of St. Domingue is not one of substitution, but of loss. While this imagining focuses on the lost lives of French soldiers (and of herself), Burney’s urge to place herself within the landscape of St. Domingue indicates her capacity to conceive of St. Domingue as a real world encompassing real histories – rather than an abstract space with no claim on the ideal of “independence.”

In the end, Burney took this anxiety over the vulnerability of the body to disease and climate in the Caribbean and re-narrated this phantasma into characters’ responses to Juliet’s shifting skin color. Rather than narrating the fragility of the body when exposed to disease, Burney concentrates on the upheavals provoked in the social body by the

introduction of a character embodying multiple racial significations. Thus, while I would resist going so far as to frame the Haitian Revolution as “unthinkable” or impossible to conceive, given its presence in journalism – and in Burney’s preoccupation with “*France & St. Domingo*” – I have called Juliet’s racial presence in *The Wanderer* “unaccountable” because the novel cannot overtly address this contemporary revolutionary moment. Haiti is instead relegated to a subterranean imaginary, and appears only in Juliet’s vanishing black skin and in other characters’ persistent harassment of her. And although this is perhaps the most tenuous of speculations, for such a bland character, Harleigh’s relatively impassioned defense of the black stranger at the beginning of the novel is a rejoinder to D’Arblay’s musings on “the first of all goods”: “Nothing so uncontrollably excites resistance than mistreatment of the unoffending” (13).

## II. Reading and Misreading Juliet

The “traces” of the past she examines and the agonistic historical resonance of Juliet’s narrative have become a kind of political rhetoric, if one partly stripped of the negative connotations of “rival sentiments.” The aesthetic problem Burney explores in *The Wanderer* is in finding a way to infuse specificity into her portraits of “general life, manners, and characters” without it becoming “party spirit” (4, 5). We might say that Burney is not trying to make a political “statement” at all in *The Wanderer*, but rather attempting to elicit a specific response from her reader – to recall something, some trace, about the past – a response which necessitates a reader be engaged with history.<sup>10</sup> In this

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<sup>10</sup> I am deeply influenced by Scott Juengel’s analysis of the preface to *The Wanderer* in his recent article, “The Novel of Universal Peace.” He suggested that “Burney’s evasion of *politics* – at times bordering on a generic reflex – actually clears programmatic space for the advent of the political” (68). Daryl Jones has also argued of *The Wanderer*: “*The Wanderer* quite deliberately makes no such ideological claims – makes,



way, the changing markers of Juliet's identity, when framed against the revolutionary traumas of the 1790s, require a certain flexibility of response from readers, and thus serve to encode the ethics of reading Burney frames in her preface. For Burney, this reading ethic has everything to do with the means through which novels engage in the work of imagining the past within the internally coherent worlds of realistic fiction.

Not every reader engaged with Burney on these terms, however, as suggested by Thomas Babington Macaulay's appraisal of *The Wanderer*. Although Macaulay reviewed *The Wanderer* in the 1830s, or over fifteen years after its publication, his distance from the original publication date allowed him to remark on the trajectory of Burney's career as a whole.<sup>11</sup> He asserted that the language of *The Wanderer* regressed from Burney's earlier style in *Evelina* and *Cecelia*. The specific terms of his comparison, however, highlight the extent to which *The Wanderer* touched a nerve for readers deeply concerned with maintaining a sanitized version of Britain's colonial past, even for readers fifteen years after *The Wanderer*'s publication:

Madame D'Arblay had carried a bad style to France. She brought back a style which we are really at a loss to describe. It is a sort of broken Johnsonese, a barbarous patois, bearing the same relation to the language of Rasselas, which the gibberish of the Negroes of Jamaica bears to the English of the House of Lords. (Crump 374)

Macaulay substitutes Burney's voice with a Jamaican slave dialect, in effect imagining a kind of reverse-minstrelsy at work in the language and style of *The Wanderer*, an

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indeed, no explicit ideological claims at all – but offers similar patterns. Burney's last novel seems to me paradigmatic both of the unavoidability of direct political content in Romantic fiction, and of its confusion, and of the impossibility of ascribing to these political novels a single, uniform politics" (5-6).

<sup>11</sup> For further information on the critical response to *The Wanderer*, see Justine Crump's anthology *A Known Scribbler: Frances Burney on Literary Life*, which includes several of the most famous reviews of Burney's last novel, and also discusses responses to Burney's fiction and non-fiction in the introduction.

interesting charge given the remarkably small amount of time Juliet spends in blackface and how little she speaks in the novel. Despite these details of plot and pacing, Macaulay's review suggests that Juliet continued to be associated with race and slavery throughout the novel. Against this imagined national style, Macaulay questions if *The Wanderer*'s "degraded" language can even contain meaning or effect change within the reader.

Through her entrance in blackface, Juliet is represented as a potential casualty of slavery and slave revolt, racial prejudice, and revolutionary energy and violence. Her inchoate racial and national identity, her inscrutability, and her poverty would have made her a profoundly difficult character to "experience" because of the way characters "read" her in a certain way, only to have those readings subsequently upturned. Juliet's volatile representation in the novel appears to demand an ideal reader who could be flexible in response to her fluid self-presentation. Burney sets up her novelistic world by depicting both the ineffectualness of sympathetic readers, who often "read" Juliet correctly but fail to effect any change in the way others read her, and the tyranny of hostile readers, who powerfully control interpretations of Juliet. If novels themselves somehow function as embodiments of indirect experience, and if those experiences serve to encode the "traces" of history to its readers, then *The Wanderer*, despite its optimistic preface, is perhaps Burney's most challenging work of fiction because it questions the extent to which readers are capable of engaging with the transformational impact of the novel, its "lessons of experience" at all.

Macaulay's judgment thus seems to pick up on the significance placed on reading within the world of the novel by characters. These readings often take the form of

critiquing Juliet's seemingly inauthentic personas and "masks," and obsessively dwell on her (changing) skin color. Mrs. Ireton's description of the effect of Juliet's transformation, for instance, highlights the difficulty of accounting for an authentic representation of Juliet's identity. After the revelation of Juliet's white skin, Mrs. Ireton cynically pretends that Juliet still wears make-up, and that she has merely substituted blackface for whiteface and rouge: "If I did not fear being impertinent, I should be tempted to ask how many coats of white and red you were obliged to lay on, before you could cover over all that black" (44). Mrs. Maple, furthermore, uses Juliet's anonymity and brief racial presence to pass a negative judgment of her character: "I was all along sure she was an adventurer and an imposter; with her blacks, and her whites, and her double face!" (251). That Juliet specifically takes on these disguises in order to escape the revolutionary violence of France does not negate the variety of interpretations of her appearance that are available to characters (and to first readers of the novel) until the contours of Juliet's history are revealed. Indeed, Burney's project in playing with both structure and characterization in *The Wanderer* seems to interrogate the capacity of the novel to depict a self fragmented by historical upheaval.<sup>12</sup>

Given this context, we can trace the way Burney gestures towards the ethical obligations Juliet demands in the ways her presence upends an array of frameworks

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<sup>12</sup> Ruth Mack argues in *Literary Historicity* that eighteenth-century novels often dwelled on the kinds of readers demanded by certain works of historical fiction: "If the novel is the genre of modernity – and many in eighteenth-century Britain thought that it was – my study shows a wide range of authors thinking critically about that modernity: about the possibility that it might not include an easy means of understanding its own relation to the past, and about the problems of historical consciousness more generally. These authors investigate to whom such consciousness is available, and under what conditions it is possible" (2). By placing stress on these moments of what we might call generic instability, I hope to follow the methodological path that Mack traced in *Literary Historicity* as an alternative way to confront form: "to offer form as an object of study by acknowledging that those employing it, in a historical context, have some awareness of its ability to critique, as well as to participate in, any society's ideological workings" (22).

regarding race, slavery, and history through representation of her shifting and vulnerable body. Even after Juliet's "dazzling" white skin is revealed, Mrs. Ireton sardonically questions the limits of her bodily boundaries, especially her present embodiment as a (white) woman:

You have been bruised and beaten; and dirty and clean; and ragged and whole; and wounded and healed; and a European and a Creole, in less than a week. I suppose, next, you will dwindle into a dwarf; and then, perhaps, find some surprising contrivance to shoot up into a giantess. There is nothing that cannot be too much to expect from so great an adept in metamorphosis. (46)

While Mrs. Ireton sarcastically predicts that Juliet's next transformation will involve her height, other characters continue to frame Juliet's presence as a slave, which quickly becomes complicated as they attempt to absorb her story within a history of British white feminism, where women named themselves slaves to highlight the real material conditions which hampered female independence and freedom of movement in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Burney's investigation of this feminist rhetorical move, what Kimberly Lutz calls the "woman-as-slave" metaphor, becomes all the more challenging because of how this metaphor functioned in early modern white feminist texts.<sup>13</sup> One initial example of this metaphor is in Judith Drake's *Essay in Defense of the Female Sex* (1696), where Drake deliberately invokes slavery to imagine female experience in England: "Women, like our Negroes in our Western Plantations, are born

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<sup>13</sup> Kimberly Lutz contends that for Burney blackness parallels the position of white females in patriarchal England, that when Juliet "temporarily embodies that African slave," then for a moment "woman as slave" metaphor also acts a form of blackface" (46-7). Connecting the rhetorical impact of Juliet's visual blackface to early feminist writings, and what she calls the "woman as slave" metaphor, Lutz believes Juliet's black skin recalls white feminist liberty narratives. She concludes that Juliet fails in her attempt to embody the woman-as-slave metaphor (71).

slaves, and live Prisoners all their Lives” (31). Of course, Drake’s use of the possessive “our” to refer to black African slaves reveals that white women, although “like” slaves, may still participate – at least in the imagination – in the possession of black bodies, a rhetorical slip paralleled by other characters in *The Wanderer*.

Elinor, Juliet’s theatrical, rebellious, occasional friend, most often appropriates the woman-as-slave metaphor not in order to “explain” Juliet but to represent what she perceives is her own constricted position in England. Elinor certainly has some of the most vivid and memorable lines critiquing the female condition in *The Wanderer*. Elinor is particularly astute in pinpointing cultural structures of oppression which perpetuate the limits set on female self-determination and -representation. She tells Juliet:

By the oppression of their own statutes and institutions, they render us insignificant; and then speak of us as if we were so born! But what have we tried, in which we have been foiled? They dare not trust us with their own education, and their own opportunities for distinction ... Woman is left out in the scales of human merit, only because they dare not weigh her! (399)

Lutz suggests that while Juliet visually represents the metaphor, Elinor gives voice to her oppression, a reiteration of Julia Epstein’s contention that “Elinor ... can be read as speaking for [Juliet] and expressing her resentment” (188). The close association between the two characters is evident when Juliet in desperation takes a job as a companion to the splenetic Mrs. Ireton, Elinor wonders why Juliet would choose “submit to such slavery.” Elinor also predicts that Juliet’s employment will be defined by “bolts, bars, dungeons, towers, and bastilles,” closely associating colonial slavery with recent events in France, and the destruction of the Bastille (474, 475). Despite Elinor’s shrewd understanding that

the gender divisions in British culture are constructed, she surprisingly passes perhaps the harshest judgment on Juliet's use of blackface, indicating that Juliet, to some extent, remains "unaccountable" even within a culture willing to read slavery and women's condition as analogous (and substitutable) positions. Elinor says to Harleigh (in front of Juliet): "Oh, Harleigh! how is it you thus can love all you were wont to scorn? double dealing, false appearances, and lurking disguise! without a family she dare claim, without a story she dare tell, without a name she dare avow!" (181).<sup>14</sup>

The only defense of Juliet's position in the novel which makes use of the metaphor of "slavery" without subsequent judgment would be Mr. Giles's vindication of Juliet's status as a human subject under the humiliating care of her employer, Mrs. Ireton. In *The Wanderer*, only Mr. Giles seems to possess the sympathetic imagination necessary to perceive the cost of oppression in whatever form it manifests. He tells Mrs. Ireton that in treating Juliet the way she does while under her employ, she is guilty of creating a "toad-eater," or "a person who would swallow any thing, bad or good; and do whatever he was bid, right or wrong; for the sake of a little pay" (520). Mrs. Ireton predictably protests: "I thought, on the contrary, I had engaged a young person, who would never think of taking a liberty as to give her opinion; but who would do, as she ought, with respect and submission, whatever I should indicate" (524). In response, Mr. Giles redefines Juliet's status from "toad-eater" to "slave."

Why that would be leading the life of a slave! And that, I supposed, is what they meant, all this time, by a toad-eater. However, don't look so ashamed, my pretty dear,

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<sup>14</sup> In Juliet's only direct reference to slavery and abolition, she imagines her rescue from her marriage to the brutal French commissioner she spends most of the novel attempting to escape as "the abolition of my shackles" (862). This oblique reference could be more evidence of Juliet's habitual silence and taciturn nature, but it might also indicate her unwillingness to transpose an word describing a real economic and social reality onto her own situation.

for a toad-eater-maker is still worse! ... What can rich people be thinking of, to lay out their money in buying their fellow-creatures' liberty of speech and thought! (524)

If anyone can be said to come close to understanding the narrative possibilities available to Juliet, and be able to “speak ... her resentment,” it is Mr. Giles and not Elinor Joddrel. Mr. Giles’s egalitarianism conceivably spans to include all oppressed groups. He says, “Nobody is born to be trampled upon,” and his words include more than just the white European women represented in the woman-as-slave metaphor Lutz invokes (522). Throughout the novel, Mr. Giles’s concern for the indigent resituates Juliet’s disguises and her degrading employments along a spectrum of deeply repressed histories without attempting to absorb or substitute them into other narratives. Mr. Giles pointedly calls for his listeners to feel with and for workers and slaves pushed to the periphery of remembrance and imagination, and in so doing, seems to embody Burney’s vision of agonistic history. Nevertheless, Mr. Giles, perhaps because he is a kindly, naïve old man, is an ineffective force in the world of the novel. His rebuke to Mrs. Ireton and support for Juliet effect few real gains. He may call for a kind of sympathy which can imaginatively inhabit the position of another – become a “lesson of experience,” in other words – but his words do not result, by and large, in more tolerant, sympathetic readers in the characters in *The Wanderer*.

### III. “The wonderful work of antiquity”: Making History Without Readers

Juliet’s encounter with the ancient monuments at Stonehenge near the end of *The Wanderer* appears to inhabit in a singular place within Burney’s vision of history.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In this final section, I am indebted to Margaret Anne Doody’s reading of Juliet’s encounter with Stonehenge in *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works* (364-68).

While there, Juliet confronts a human structure situated in history, but also, in a sense, outside of history, since knowledge of what the structure supposedly represented has been lost. Juliet describes Stonehenge at first in terms that explicitly contrast it with the upper class society she encountered in other parts of the novel, in this case, Mrs. Ireton's Wilton Manor:

In a state of mind so utterly deplorable as that of Juliet, this grand, uncouth monument of ancient days had a certain sad, indefinable attraction, more congenial to her distress, than all the polish, taste, and delicacy of modern skill. The beauties of Wilton seemed appendages of luxury, as well as of refinement; and appeared to require not only sentiment, but happiness for their complete enjoyment: while the nearly savage, however wonderful work of antiquity, in which she was now rambling; placed in this abandoned spot, far from the intercourse, or even view of mankind, with no prospect but of heath and sky; blunted, for the moment, her sensibility, by removing her wide from all the objects with which it was in contact; and insensibly calmed her spirits; though not by dissipating her reverie (765-6).

The monument's isolated position outside the boundaries of "culture" gives Juliet the freedom to separate herself, at least for a moment, from the weight of the totalizing, homogenizing notions of the self she has encountered, which are profoundly nationalist and racist. In other words, the "savage" monument here functions as an avenue for accessing an authentic account of human history prior to the development of artificial structures of behavior and thought which gird social relationships. However, in one of the few places where we, as readers, glimpse any interior life for Juliet, Burney takes care to emphasize the impenetrability of that interiority. Burney accomplishes this through her



carefully balanced descriptions of Juliet's separation from both local spaces and feelings, but she still hints that Juliet's consciousness is not completely separated from the landscape – it is merely focused on a singular object and is engaged in a kind of dream-like contemplation of that object – what Burney calls a “reverie.” Her contemplation of Stonehenge is an action, however, which has the potential to propel Juliet into madness, suggested to her by Iago's lines in *Othello*<sup>16</sup>: “Here ... was room for ‘meditation even to madness’; nothing distracted the sight, nothing broke in upon attention, nor varied the ideas. Thought, uninterrupted and uncontrolled, was master of the mind” (766). Juliet's thoughts, provoked by the monument, encourage what we might call a political coup in her affective life by retracing the boundary between freedom and madness. Juliet can remove herself from the artificial social hierarchies of Wilton, and engage in a dream of personal, authentic acts of contemplation and interpretation which foster free subjectivities. The possibility of this kind of contemplation results in a radical break from a community, history, and local environment.

If these reveries can remain sane, then Stonehenge, through its cultivation of unformed contemplation, works to authorize individual histories within a network of stories of pain and struggle. These narratives are, in a sense, sanctioned because they remain, along with Stonehenge, apart from the hierarchies of interpretation Juliet has encountered, as Margaret Anne Doody argues: “History is the constant story of the nameless ‘I’ in the unintelligible world, whose form, like that of mysterious Stonehenge, ‘might still be traced’ but whose meaning and true name can never be known” (368).

These histories are also authorized because they remain in a sense beyond interpretation

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<sup>16</sup> “Practice upon his peace and quiet, / Even to madness” (II.i.305-6). By invoking the complicated villain of the play, who famously gives no clear reason for what provoked his machinations against Othello and Desdemona, Burney presents a complicated portrait of a contemplative consciousness beyond explanation.

and accessibility, a concern for Burney given the weaknesses of the interpretive community she depicts in Mrs. Ireton, Mr. Ireton, and even Harleigh and Giles Arbe. At this moment in the novel Burney complicates the argument she set out to make in her preface: that some “lessons of experience” can be transferred to the reader. We see at Stonehenge that in order to render an authentic, free narrative, Juliet has to remove herself completely from the community of hostile or weak readers she has encountered over and over again in the novel. The radically isolated mental state Burney describes for Juliet, however, is in some ways accessible to the reader of the novel, but because it walks the line between sanity and madness we only catch traces of her unaccountable history, because as soon as we attempt interpretation of it, we impose our own reading of Juliet’s identity, and in a sense become part of the community of readers she is for a moment finally separated from.

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