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Chapter 1

*“Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder”:
Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the
Gendering of Racial Ideology*

Prior to their entry onto the stage of New World conquests, women of African descent lived in bodies unmarked by what would emerge as Europe's preoccupation with physiognomy—skin color, hair texture, and facial features presumed to be evidence of cultural deficiency. Not until the gaze of European travelers fell upon them would African women see themselves, or indeed one another, as defined by “racial” characteristics. In a sense, European racial ideology developed in isolation from those who became the objects of racial scrutiny, but ideologies about race would soon come to be as important to the victims of racial violence as it was to the perpetrators. For English slaveowners in the Americas, neither the decision to embrace the system of slavery nor the racialized notion of perpetual hereditary slavery was natural. During the decades after European arrival to the Americas, as various nations gained and lost footholds, followed fairy-tale rivers of gold, traded with and decimated Native inhabitants, and ignored and mobilized Christian notions of conversion and just wars, English settlers constructed an elaborate edifice of forced labor on the foundation of emerging categories of race and reproduction. The process of calling blackness into being and causing it to become inextricable from brute labor took place in legislative acts, laws, wills, bills of sale, and plantation inventories just as it did in journals and adventurers' tales of travels. Indeed, the gap between intimate experience (the Africans with whom one lived and worked) and ideology (monstrous, barely human savages) would be bridged in the hearts and minds of prosaic settlers rather than in the tales of worldly adventurers.¹ It was the settlers whose ideas and praxis African women and men would have to scrutinize and navigate in order to survive. Nonetheless, I turn here to travel narratives to explore developing categories of race and racial slavery and to provide a grounding for the dis-

cussion of behaviors and materialities that follow. The process by which “Africans” became “blacks” who became “slaves” was initiated—on the European side at least—through a series of encounters made manifest in literary descriptions and only later expanded by the quotidian dimensions of slaveownership and settlement. The publication of images fueled the imaginations of settlers and would-be colonists alike and constituted an essential component of the ideological arsenal that European settlers brought to bear against African laborers.

The connections between forced labor and race became increasingly important during the life of the transatlantic slave trade as the enormity of the changes wrought by the settlement of the Americas and the mass enslavement of Africans slowly came into focus for Europeans. Despite real contemporary issues of race and racism, however, the link between what race has come to mean and the wide range of emerging ideas about difference in the early modern period must not be overdetermined. A concept of “race” rooted firmly in biology is primarily a late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century phenomenon.² Nonetheless, the fact that a biologically driven explanation for differences borne on the body owes considerable debt to the science of the Enlightenment should not erase the connection between the body and socially inscribed categories of difference in the early modern period. As travelers and men of letters thought through the thorny entanglements of skin color, complexion, features, and hair texture, they constructed weighty notions of civility, nationhood, citizenship, and manliness on the foundation of the amalgam of nature and culture. Given the ways in which appearance became a trope for civility and morality, it is no surprise to find gender located at the heart of Europeans’ encounter with and musings over the connection between bodies and Atlantic economies.

In June 1647, Englishman Richard Ligon left London on the ship *Achilles* to establish himself as a planter in the newly settled colony of Barbados. En route, Ligon’s ship stopped in the Cape Verde islands for provisions and trade. There Ligon saw a black woman for the first time. He recorded the encounter in his *True and Exact History of Barbadoes*: she was a “Negro of the greatest beauty and majesty together: that ever I saw in one woman. Her stature large, and excellently shap’d, well favour’d, full eye’d, and admirably grac’d . . . [I] awaited her coming out, which was with far greater Majesty and gracefulness, than I have seen Queen Anne, descend from the Chaire of State.”³ Ligon’s rhetoric must have surprised his English readers, for seventeenth-century images of black women did not usually evoke the monarchy as the referent.

Early modern English writers did, however, conventionally set the black female figure against one that was white—and thus beautiful. Scholars of early modern England have noted the discursive place of black women: Peter Erickson calls the image of the black woman a trope for disrupted harmony; Lynda Boose sees black women in early modern English writing as symbolically “unrepresentable,” embodying a deep threat to patriarchy; Kim Hall finds early modern English literature and material culture fully involved with a gendered racial discourse committed to constructing stable categories of whiteness and blackness.⁴ As these and other scholars have shown, male travelers to Africa and the Americas contributed to a European discourse about women that was already fully active by the time Barbados became England’s first colony wholly committed to slave labor in the mid-seventeenth century. While descriptions of naked native females evoked desire, travelers depicted black women as simultaneously unwomanly and marked by a reproductive value that was both dependent on their sex and evidence of their lack of femininity. Writers mobilized femaleness alongside an unwillingness to allow African women to embody “proper” female space, which in turn produced a focus for the notion of racial difference. And thus, over the course of his journey, Richard Ligon came to another view of black women. He wrote that their breasts “hang down below their Navels, so that when they stoop at their common work of weeding, they hang almost to the ground, that at a distance you would think they had six legs.” In this context, black women’s monstrous bodies symbolized their sole utility—the ability to produce both crops and other laborers.⁵ It is this dual value, sometimes explicit and sometimes lurking in the background of slaveowners’ decision-making processes, that would come to define women’s experience of enslavement most critically.

Seemingly because of his appraisal of beauty on Cape Verde, Ligon’s attitude toward the enslaved has been characterized by modern historians as “more liberal and humane than [that] of the generality of planters.”⁶ Nevertheless, his text indicates the kind of symbolic work required of black women in early modern English discourse. As Ligon penned his manuscript while in debtors prison in 1653, he constructed a layered narrative in which the discovery of African women’s monstrosity helped to assure the work’s success. Taking the female body as a symbol of the deceptive beauty and ultimate savagery of blackness, Ligon allowed his readers to dally with him among beautiful black women, only to seductively disclose their monstrosity over the course of the narrative. Ligon’s narrative is a microcosm of a much larger ideological maneuver that juxtaposed the familiar with the

unfamiliar—the beautiful woman who is also the monstrous laboring beast. As the tenacious and historically deep roots of racist ideology become more evident, it becomes clear also that, through the rubric of monstrously “raced” African women, Europeans found a way to articulate shifting perceptions of themselves as religiously, culturally, and phenotypically superior to the black or brown persons they sought to define. In the discourse used to justify the slave trade, Ligon’s beautiful Negro woman was as important as her “six-legged” counterpart. Both imaginary women marked a gendered and, as Kim Hall has argued, a stabilized whiteness on which European colonial expansionism depended.⁷

Well before the mid-seventeenth-century publication of Ligon’s work, New World and African narratives had been published in England and Europe that used gender to convey an emerging notion of racialized difference. By the time English colonists arrived in the Americas, they already possessed the ethno-historiographical tradition of depicting imaginary “natives” in which Ligon’s account is firmly situated.⁸ Travel accounts, which had proved their popularity by the time Ligon’s *History of Barbados* appeared, relied on gendered notions of European social order to project African cultural disorder. Gender did not operate as a more profound category of difference than race; instead racist discourse was deeply imbued with ideas about gender and sexual difference that, indeed, became manifest only in contact with each other. White men who laid the discursive groundwork on which the “theft of bodies” could be justified relied on mutually constitutive ideologies of race and gender to affirm Europe’s legitimate access to African labor.⁹

Travel accounts produced in Europe and available in England provided a corpus from which subsequent writers borrowed freely, reproducing images of Native American and African women that resonated with readers. Over the course of the second half of the seventeenth century, some eighteen new collections with descriptions of Africa and the West Indies were published and reissued in England; by the eighteenth century, more than fifty new synthetic works, reissued again and again, found audiences in England.¹⁰ Both the writers and the readers of these texts learned to dismiss the idea that women in the Americas and Africa might be innocuous or unremarkable. Rather, indigenous women bore an enormous symbolic burden, as writers from Walter Raleigh to Edward Long used them to mark metaphorically the symbiotic boundaries of European national identities and white supremacy. The conflict between perceptions of beauty and assertions of monstrosity such as Ligon’s exemplified a much larger process

through which the familiar became unfamiliar as beauty became beastliness and mothers became monstrous, all of which ultimately buttressed racial distinctions. Writers who articulated religious and moral justifications for the slave trade simultaneously grappled with the character of a contradictory female African body—a body both desirable and repulsive, available and untouchable, productive and reproductive, beautiful and black. By the time an eighteenth-century Carolina slaveowner could look at an African woman with the detached gaze of an investor, travelers and philosophers had already subjected her to a host of taxonomic calculations. The meanings attached to the female African body were inscribed well before the establishment of England's colonial American plantations, and the intellectual work necessary to naturalize African enslavement—that is, the development of racist discourse—was deeply implicated by gendered notions of difference and human hierarchy.

Europe had a long tradition of identifying Others through the monstrous physiognomy or sexual behavior of women. Armchair adventurers might shelf Pliny the Elder's ancient collection of monstrous races, *Historia Naturalis*, which catalogued the long-breasted wild woman, alongside Herodotus's *History*, in which Indian and Ethiopian tribal women bore only one child in a lifetime.¹¹ They may have read Julian's arguments with Augustine in which he wrote that "barbarian and nomadic women give birth with ease, scarcely interrupting their travels to bear children," or have pondered over Aristotle's belief that Egyptian women had too many children and were therefore inclined to give birth to monsters.¹² Images of female devils included sagging breasts as part of the iconography of danger and monstrosity. The medieval wild woman, whose breasts dragged on the ground when she walked and could be thrown over her shoulder, was believed to disguise herself with youth and beauty in order to enact seductions that would satisfy her "obsessed . . . craving for the love of mortal men."¹³ The shape of her body marked her deviant sexuality and both shape and sexuality evidenced her savagery.

Writers commonly looked to socio-sexual deviance to indicate savagery in Europe and easily applied similar modifiers to Others in Africa and the Americas in order to mark European boundaries. According to *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, "in Ethiopia and in many other countries [in Africa] the folk lie all naked . . . and the women have no shame of the men." Furthermore, "they wed there no wives, for all the women there be common . . . and when [women] have children they may give them to what man they will that hath companied with them."¹⁴ Deviant sexual behavior

reflected the breakdown of natural laws—the absence of shame, the inability to identify lines of heredity and descent. This concern with deviant sexuality, articulated almost always through descriptions of women, is a constant theme in the travel writings of early modern Europe. Explorers and travelers to the New World and Africa brought expectations of distended breasts and dangerous sexuality with them. Indeed, Columbus used his reliance on the female body to articulate the colonial venture at the very outset of his voyage when he wrote that the earth was shaped like a breast with the Indies composing the nipple; his urge for discovery of new lands was inextricable from the language of sexual conquest.¹⁵

Richard Eden's 1553 English translation of Sebastian Münster's *A Treatise of the Newe India* presented Amerigo Vespucci's 1502 voyage to English readers for the first time. Vespucci did not use color to mark the difference of the people he encountered; rather, he described them in terms of their lack of social institutions ("they fight not for the enlarging of theyr dominion for asmuch as they have no Magistrates") and social niceties ("at theyr meate they use rude and barberous fashions, lying on the ground without any table clothe or coverlet"). Nonetheless, his descriptions are not without positive attributes, and when he turned his attention to women his language bristled with illuminating contradiction:

Theyr bodies are verye smothe and clene by reason of theyr often washinge. They are in other thinges fylthy and withoute shame. Thei use no lawful coniunccion of mariage, and but every one hath as many women as him liketh, and leaveth them agayn at his pleasure. The women are very fruiteful, and refuse no laboure al the whyle they are with childe. They travayle in maner withoute payne, so that the nexte day they are cherefull and able to walke. Neyther have they theyr bellies wimpeled or loose, and hanginge pappes, by reason of bearinge manye chyldren.¹⁶

The passage conveys admiration for indigenous women's strength in pregnancy and their ability to maintain aesthetically pleasing bodies, but it also illustrates the conflict at the heart of European discourse on gender and difference. It hinges on both a veiled critique of European female weakness and a dismissal of Amerindian women's pain. Once English men and women were firmly settled in New World colonies, they too would struggle with the notion of female weakness; they needed both white and black women for hard manual labor, but they also needed to preserve a notion of white gentlewomen's unsuitability for physical labor.

Vespucci's familiarity with icons of difference led him to expect American women whose hanging breasts, along with their efficient labors, would

mark their difference; thus, he registers surprise that women's bodies and breasts were neither "wimpeled" nor "hanginge." And indeed the icon of sagging breasts is mobilized incompletely in relation to Native American women who, ultimately, escaped an iconographical association designed to cement female bodies with manual labor. This does not preclude Vespucci's impulse to linger over the notion of savage women's pain-free childbearing, and his surprise at Native women's pert breasts is inextricable from his description of their reproductive labors, which in turn became a central component of descriptions of Africa and Africans. Vespucci presented a preliminary, ambiguously laudatory account of Amerindian women. Sixteenth-century European writers had not arrived at any kind of consensus about the significance of Amerindian difference. Potentially either Christian or heathen, Native Americans would for some time present something of a conundrum to the European imagination. Vespucci, then, offered an analysis of Native culture that depended on female physiognomy to chart the way toward clear cultural categories. He mobilized the place of women in society as a cultural referent that evoked the "fylth" and shamelessness of all indigenous people. Thus the passage exposes early modern English readers' sometimes-ambivalent encounters with narratives that used women's behavior and physiognomy to mark European national identities and inscribe racial hierarchy.¹⁷

That ambivalence is conveyed in Münster's narration of Columbus's voyage, where he situated women both as intermediaries between the intrusive and indigenous peoples and as animal-like reproductive units.¹⁸ On arriving at Hispaniola, Columbus's men "pursewing [the women and men who had come down to the shore] toke a womanne whom they brought to theyr shyppe . . . fyllinge her with delicate meates and wyne, and clothing her in fayre apparel, & so let her depart . . . to her companie."¹⁹ This woman figured as a pliable emissary who could be returned to her people as a sign of Spanish generosity (in the form of food and wine) and civility (in the form of clothes). She could be improved by the experience. Indeed, her ability to receive European goods—to be made familiar through European intervention—served as evidence of her own people's savagery, disorder, and distance from civility.²⁰ In a passage that closely follows, Münster considered another role for indigenous women and children, one whose contradiction evokes the complicated assessment of Native women and their bodies. Describing the behavior of so-called cannibals, Münster avowed that "such children as they take, they geld to make them fat as we doo cocke chikyns and younge hogges. . . . Such younge women as they take, they

keepe for increase, as we doo hennes to laye egges.”²¹ The metaphor of domesticated livestock introduced a notion that became a recurrent theme concerning indigenous and enslaved women’s twofold value to the European project of expansion and extraction. This metaphor, however, did not fully encompass the complexity of dangers indigenous women presented for Europe. Despite his respect for female reproductive hardiness, at the end of the volume Vespucci fixed the indigenous woman as a dangerous cannibal:

There came sodeynly a woman downe from a mountayne, bringing with her secretly a great stake with which she [killed a Spaniard.] The other wommene foorthwith toke him by the legges, and drewe him to the mountayne. . . . The women also which had slayne the yong man, cut him in pieces even in the sight of the Spaniardes, shewing them the pieces, and roasting them at a greate fyre.²²

Vespucci later made manifest the latent sexualized danger inherent in the man-slaying woman in a letter in which he wrote of women biting off the penises of their sexual partners, thus linking cannibalism—an absolute indicator of savagery and distance from European norms—to female sexual insatiability.²³

The label “savage” was not uniformly applied to Amerindian people. Indeed, in the context of European national rivalries, the indigenous woman became somewhat less savage. In the mid to late sixteenth century, the bodies of women figured at the borders of national identities more often than at the edges of a larger European identity. The Italian traveler Girolamo Benzoni, in his *History of the New World* (a 1572 narrative that appeared in multiple translations), used sexualized indigenous women both as markers of difference and indicators of Spanish immorality. His first description of a person in the Americas (in Venezuela in 1541) occurs at the very beginning of his story:

Then came an Indian woman . . . such a woman as I have never before nor since seen the like of; so that my eyes could not be satisfied with looking at her for wonder. . . . She was quite naked, except where modesty forbids, such being the custom throughout all this country; she was old, and painted black, with long hair down to her waist, and her ear-rings had so weighed her ears down, as to make them reach her shoulders, a thing wonderful to see . . . her teeth were black, her mouth large, and she had a ring in her nostrils . . . so that she appeared like a monster to us, rather than a human being.²⁴

Benzoni’s description draws upon a sizable catalogue of cultural distance packed with meaning made visible by early modern conventions of gen-

dered difference. His inability to satisfy his gaze speaks to an obfuscation Ligon enacted 100 years later and one that Stephen Greenblatt argues is the defining metaphor of the colonial encounter. His “wonder” created distance.²⁵ In the context of a society concerned with the deception of cosmetics, as Hall argues, her black-faced body was both cause for alarm and evidence of a dangerous inversion of norms. Her nakedness, her ears, and her nose—all oddities that were accentuated by willful adornment—irrevocably placed her outside the realm of the familiar. Her blackened teeth and large mouth evoked a sexualized danger that, as Benzoni himself explicitly states, linked her and, by implication, her people to an inhuman monstrosity.²⁶

In evoking this singular woman—the like of whom he had never seen—Benzoni departed from his contemporaries. He used his description of her to open his narrative and, through her, placed his reader in the realm of the exotic. This “wonderful” woman alerted readers to the distance Benzoni had traveled, but he deployed another, more familiar set of female images to level a sustained critique of Spanish colonial expansion and thereby to insist on the indigenous woman’s connection, or nearness, to a familiar European femininity.

Capt. Pedro de Calize arrived with upwards of 4000 slaves. . . . It was really a most distressing thing to see the way in which these wretched creatures naked, tired, and lame were treated [by the Spaniards]; exhausted with hunger, sick, and despairing. The *unfortunate mothers*, with two or three children on their shoulders or clinging round their necks, [were] overwhelmed with tears and grief, all tied with cords or with iron chains. . . . Nor was there a girl but had been violated by the depredators; wherefore, from too much indulgence, many Spaniards entirely lost their health.²⁷

Benzoni used the pathetic figures of the fecund mother and the sexually violated young girl to condemn the Spaniards. Such a move was common in the aftermath of Las Casas’s *In Defense of the Indians* (circa 1550) and amid the intensified resentment among European nations about Spain’s control of access to the Americas. In “Discoverie of the . . . Empire of Guiana” (1598), Raleigh stated that he “suffered not any man to . . . touch any of [the natives’] wives or daughters: which course so contrary to the Spaniards (who tyrannize over them in all things) drewe them to admire her [English] majestie.”²⁸ Although he permitted himself and his men to gaze upon naked Indian women, Raleigh accentuated the restraint they exercised. In doing so, he used the untouched bodies of Native American women to mark national boundaries and signal the civility and superiority of English

colonizers in contrast to the sexually violent Spaniards. Moreover, in linking the eroticism of indigenous women to the sexual attention of Spanish men, Raleigh signaled the Spaniards' "lapse into savagery."²⁹ Benzoni, too, inscribed the negative consequences of too-close associations with indigenous women. For him, sexual proximity to local women depleted Spanish strength. As he prepared to abandon the topic of Indian slavery for a lengthy discussion of Columbus's travels, he again invoked motherhood to prove Spanish depravity: "All the slaves that the Spaniards catch in these provinces are sent [to the Caribbean] . . . and even when *some of the Indian women are pregnant by these same Spaniards*, they sell them without any consciences."³⁰

This rhetorical flourish, through female bodies, highlighted the contradictions of the familiar and unfamiliar in the Americas. Because of her nakedness and her monstrous adornments, the woman who opened Benzoni's narrative could not be familiar to conquistadors and colonizers, yet in her role as mother, sexual victim, or even sexually arousing female she evoked the familiar. Benzoni sidestepped the tension inherent in the savage and violated mother by using her to publicize Spanish atrocity. In effect, the "Black Legend" created (among other things) this confusing figure of pathos—the nurturing savage. In order to facilitate the ultimate roles of extractors and extracted, the indigenous woman's familiarity had to be neutralized. Thus the pathos of raped mothers ultimately could be laid at Europe's door, where it signified disdain for the Spanish and disregard for ultimately monstrous women.³¹

The monstrosity of the native mother had an important visual corollary. A mid-sixteenth-century Portuguese artist, for example, depicted the devil wearing a Brazilian headdress and rendered his demonic female companions with long, sagging breasts.³² Toward the end of the century, a multivolume collection of travel accounts published in Latin and German augmented the evolving discourse of European civility with visual images of overseas encounters.³³ As Bernadette Bucher has shown, the early volumes of Theodor de Bry's *Grand Voyages* (1590) depicted the Algonkians of Virginia and the Timucuas of Florida as classical Europeans: Amerindian bodies mirrored ancient Greek and Roman statuary, modest virgins covered their breasts, and infants suckled at the high, small breasts of young attractive women (see Figures 1, 2, and 3). As Joyce Chaplin has illustrated, the English encounter with Native American bodies would ultimately "gesture towards racial identification of the body" as English settlers compared themselves favorably to Native Americans whom they saw as weak.³⁴ None-



Figure 1. Young virgin covering her breast. From Thomas Hariot, *A brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, in Theodor de Bry, *Grand Voyages*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main, 1590), plate 6. Courtesy of the John Work Garrett Library, Johns Hopkins University.

theless, even years before the English arrived in the colonies, visual and literary images were laying the groundwork for an ideology of European superiority. Thus the visual depictions of Native women were always in flux. In the third de Bry volume, *Voyages to Brazil*, published in 1592, the Indian was portrayed as aggressive and savage, and the representation of women's bodies changed. The new woman is a cannibal with breasts that fell below her waist. She licks the juices of grilled human flesh from her fingers and adorns the frontispiece of the map of Tierra del Fuego (see Figures 4 and 5). Bucher argues that the absence of a suckling child in these depictions is essential to the image's symbolic weight.³⁵ Their childlessness signified the women's cannibalism—they consumed rather than produced. Although women alone did not exemplify cannibalism, women with long breasts came to mark such savagery in Native Americans for English readers. As depictions of Native Americans traversed the gamut of savage to noble, the long-breasted woman became a clear signpost of savagery in con-



Figure 2. Woman suckling child. From *Eurom Quae in Florida . . .*, in Theodor de Bry, *Grand Voyages*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main, 1591), plate 20. Courtesy of the John Work Garrett Library, Johns Hopkins University.

trast to her high-breasted counterpart. Other images of monstrous races, such as the headless Euaipanonomia, the one-footed Sciopods, and the Astomi who lived on the aroma of apples, slowly vanished from Europe's imagined America and Africa. Once Europeans reached Africa, however, the place of motherhood in the complex of savagery and race became central to the figure of the black woman. Unlike other monstrosities, the long-breasted woman—who, when depicted with her child, carried the full weight of productive savagery—maintained her place in the lexicon of conquest and exploration.

As he described one of the first slaving voyages made by Europeans



Figure 3. Native American woman with her child, two views. From Thomas Hariot, *A brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, in Theodor de Bry, *Grand Voyages*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main, 1590), plate 10. Courtesy of the John Work Garrett Library, Johns Hopkins University.

into West Africa, the Portuguese trader Gomes Azurara pinpoints the precise location of African women for European slave traders and settlers in the economy of production and control:

But rather they returned to their ship and on the next day landed a little way distant from there, where they espied some of the wives of those Guineas walking. And it seemeth that they were going nigh to a creek collecting shellfish, and they captured one of them, who would be as much as thirty years of age, with a son of hers who would be of about two, and also a young girl of fourteen years, who had well-formed limbs and also a favorable presence for a Guinea; but the strength of the woman was much to be marvelled at, for not one of the three men who came upon her but would have had a great labour in attempting to get her to the boat. And so one of our men, seeing the delay they were making, during which it might be that some of the dwellers of the land would come upon them, conceived it well to take her son from her and to carry him to the boat; and love of the child compelled the mother to follow after it, without great pressure on the part of the two who were bringing her.³⁶



Figure 4. Woman (at left) holding leg. From *Memorable Provinciae Brasiliae . . .*, in Theodor de Bry, *Grand Voyages*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main, 1592), 179. Courtesy of the John Work Garrett Library, Johns Hopkins University.

Those who would capture African women to exploit their labors in the Americas would have to grapple with, and harness, those women's dual identity as workers and parents; once having done so they would inaugurate a language of race and racial hierarchy in which that dualism was reduced to denigration and mobilized as evidence of European distinction.

English travelers to West Africa drew on American narrative traditions as they too worked to establish a clearly demarcated line that would ultimately define them. Richard Hakluyt's collection of travel narratives, *Principal Navigations* (1589), brought Africa into the purview of English readers. *Principal Navigations* portrayed Africa and Africans in both positive and negative terms. The authors' shifting assessments of Africa and Africans "produc[ed] an Africa which is familiar and unfamiliar, civil and savage, full of promise and full of threat." Sixteenth-century ambivalence about



Figure 5. Women on map of Tierra del Fuego. From *Vera et Accurate Descriptio eorum omnius Quae Accliderunt Quinque navibus, anno 1598*, in Theodor de Bry, *Grand Voyages*, vol. 9 (Frankfurt am Main, 1602), 56. Courtesy of the John Work Garrett Library, Johns Hopkins University.

England's role in overseas expansion required a forceful antidote. In response, Hakluyt presented texts that, through an often-conflicted depiction of African peoples, ultimately differentiated between Africa and England and erected a boundary that made English expansion in the face of confused and uncivilized peoples reasonable, profitable, and moral.³⁷

The bodies of women on the West African coast, like those of their New World counterparts, symbolized the parameters of the colonizing venture. But because England's contact with West Africa took place in a historical moment marked by a determination to "plant" valuable American colonies with equally valuable workers, the imagined African woman's body in English writings was more rigidly deployed and thus far less likely to appear as an object of lust or even potential beauty. English writers regularly directed readers' attention to the topic of African women's physiognomy and reproductive experience. In doing so, they drew attention to the complex interstices of desire and repulsion that shaped European men's appraisal of Amerindian and African women. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers conveyed a sexual grotesquerie that ultimately made African women indispensable, because it showed the gendered ways of putting African savagery to productive use. Although titillation was certainly a compo-

nent of these accounts, to write of sex was also to define and expand the boundaries of profit through productive and reproductive labor.

The symbolic weight of indigenous women's sexual, childbearing, and childrearing practices moved from the Americas to Africa and continued to be brought to bear on England's literary imagination in ways that rallied familiar notions of gendered difference for English readers. John Lok's account of his 1554 voyage to Guinea, published forty years later in Hakluyt's collection, reinscribed Africans' place in the human hierarchy. Borrowing verbatim from Richard Eden's 1555 translation of Peter Martyr's description of the "New Worlde," Lok described all Africans as "people of beastly living." He located the proof of this in *women's* behavior: among the Garamantes, women "are common: for they contract no matrimonie, neither have respect to chastitie."³⁸ This description of the Garamantes first appeared in Pliny, was reproduced again by Iulius Solinus's sixth century *Polyhistor* and can be found in travel accounts through the Middle Ages and into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³⁹ As he struggled to situate his new expertise on Brazil, sixteenth-century writer André Thevet noted that he was not surprised by the easy dissolution of family ties among native Brazilians because this was also the case among the "ancient Egyptians . . . before they had any laws."⁴⁰ Traders to the New Worlds of Africa and the Americas did their homework before departure and grew adept at mobilizing symbols that resonated with their readers. Eden's Martyr has a long descriptive passage on African oddities; its reference to Garamante women's absence of "chastity" is followed by one to a tribe who "have no speeche, but rather a grynnyng and chatterynge. There are also people without heades cauled Blemines, havyinge their eyes and mouth in theyr breast."⁴¹ Because he did not reproduce the entire paragraph, Lok suggested that, by the end of the sixteenth century, the oddities of Africa could be consolidated into the particular symbol of women's sexual availability.

William Towrson's narrative of his 1555 voyage to Guinea, also published by Hakluyt in 1589, further exhibits this kind of distillation. Towrson depicted women and men as largely indistinguishable. They "goe so alike, that one cannot know a man from a woman but by their breastes, which in the most part be very foule and long, hanging downe low like the udder of a goate."⁴² This was, perhaps, the first time an Englishman in Africa explicitly used breasts as an identifying trait of beastliness and difference. He went on to maintain that "diverse of the women have such exceeding long breasts, that some of them will lay the same upon the ground and lie downe by them."⁴³ Lok and Towrson represented African women's bodies and sex-

ual behavior in order to distinguish Africa from Europe. Towrson in particular gave readers only two analogies through which to view and understand African women—beasts and monsters.

Some thirty years after the original Hakluyt collections were published, other writers continued to mobilize African women to do complex symbolic work. In 1622, Richard Jobson's *The Golden Trade* appeared in London, chronicling his 1620–1621 trading ventures up the Gambia River.⁴⁴ Jobson described strong and noble people on the one hand and barbarous and bestial people on the other, and African women personified his nation's struggle with the familiar and unfamiliar African—a struggle that can also be located along the axis of desire and repulsion. Jobson's association with the "Fulbie" and "Maudingo" people furnishes evidence of this struggle. He described Fulbie men as beastlike, "seemingly more senseless, than our Country beasts," a state he attributed to their close association with the livestock they raised.⁴⁵ Unlike many of his contemporaries, Jobson regarded African women with admiration. In contrast to Fulbie men, the women were "excellently well bodied, having very good features, with a long blacke haire."⁴⁶ He maintained that the discovery of a "mote or haire" in milk would cause these dairywomen to "blush, in defence of her cleanly meaning."⁴⁷ This experience of shame encapsulated a morality and civility to which only women had access. Among the "Maudingos" of Cassan, newly married women "observ[e] herein a shamefast modestie, not to be looked for, *among such a kinde of blacke or barbarous people*."⁴⁸

Despite his well-meaning description of African women, Jobson recorded their civil behavior only when it deviated from what he and his readers expected. His appreciation of "Fulbie" women and "Maudingo" people was predicated on their ability to exceed his expectations. This kind of appreciation of the exceptional is a rhetorical move that would recur again and again in the language of slaveowners and legislators. Exceptional African women were rewarded only insofar as they reinforced white female behavioral norms. To Jobson, African women proved the precarious nature of African civility. His narrative, even at its most laudatory, always rested on the inferiority of African peoples. Although he described the history of kingship and the great importance of ancestral honor among the Maudingos, Jobson still contended that "from the King to the slave, they are all perpetuall beggers from us." His "wonder" at women's modesty alerted his readers to the culture's abnormality and, implicitly, to its larger absence of civility. Even as he depicted them positively, women became part of the

demonstration that, despite kings and history, these Africans were barbarous and ripe for exploitation.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Jobson leveled his open-eyed gaze primarily at male African sexuality. In a unique twist on the consequences of the curse of Ham, Jobson maintained that African men carried the mark of the curse in the size of their sexual organs: they “are furnisht with such members as are after a sort burthensome unto them, whereby their women being once conceived with child . . . accompanies the man no longer, because he shall not destroy what is conceived.” Jobson’s interpretation of the penis corresponded to others’ ideas about women’s breasts. Both sexual organs were seen as pendulous and distended, somehow disembodied from their owner, and physically burdensome. Subsequently he returned to the subject of women only in terms of their subjugation to men, certain that “there is no other woman [that] can be under more servitude.”⁴⁹

Other English publications continued to locate evidence of savagery and legitimate exploitation in women. After Hakluyt died, Samuel Purchas took up the mantle of editor and published twenty additional volumes in Hakluyt’s series beginning in 1624.⁵⁰ In his translation of a fourteenth-century narrative by Leo Africanus, Purchas presented a West Africa sharply delineated from the civilized. Discussion of “the Land of Negros,” for example, is preceded by, and thus set apart from, a long section on North Africa. “Negros,” unlike their northern neighbors, lived “a brutish and savage life, without any King, Governour, Common-wealth, or knowledge of Husbandry.” To confirm this savagery, Leo Africanus asserted that they were “clad in skinnies of beasts, neither had they any peculiar wives . . . and when night came they resorted . . . both men and women into one Cottage together . . . and each man choosing his [woman] which hee had most fanciee unto.”⁵¹ This indictment opened the descriptive passages on “Ghinea,” thereby making women’s sexual availability the defining metaphor of colonial accessibility and black African savagery. The nudity of African and Native American women was not incidental to their savagery. Nakedness was an essential part of most descriptions of native peoples in this period and became the precursor to discussions of women’s physical and reproductive anomalies.⁵²

In the next volume, Purchas published Andrew Battell’s *Strange Adventures*.⁵³ Battell spent seventeen years in Angola, from 1590 to 1607, some as captive, some as escapee, and some in service to King James. For sixteen months, Battell stayed near “Dongo” with the “Gaga” people, “the greatest Canibals and man-eaters that bee in the World.”⁵⁴ Like sixteenth-

century observers in Brazil, he highlighted women's unnatural reproductive behavior. This "tribe" of fighters and cannibals rejected motherhood. According to Battell, "the women are very fruitfull, but they enjoy none of their children: for as soon as the woman is delivered of her Childe, it is presently buried quicke [alive]; So that there is not one Childe brought up."⁵⁵ Battell positioned his discussion of this unnatural behavior in such a way as to close the debate on African savagery. Savagery began, in his account, with cannibalism and ended with mothers who consented to the killing of the children they bore.

Purchas also published a translation of Pieter de Marees's *A description and historicall declaration of the golden Kingedome of Guinea*. This narrative was first published in Dutch in 1602, was translated into German and Latin for the de Bry volumes (1603–1634), and appeared in French in 1605. Plagiarism by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers gave it still wider circulation.⁵⁶ Here, too, black women embody African savagery. De Marees began by describing the people at Sierra Leone as "very greedie eaters, and no lesse drinkers, and very lecherous, and theevish, and much addicted to uncleannesse; one man hath as many wives as hee is able to keepe and maintaine. The women also are much addicted to leacherie, specially, with strange Countrey people . . . [and] are also great Lyers, and not to be credited."⁵⁷ As did most of his contemporaries, de Marees invoked women's sexuality to castigate the incivility of both men and women. Women's savagery does not stand apart. Rather, it indicts the whole: all Africans were savage. The passage displays African males' savagery alongside their access to multiple women. Similarly, de Marees located evidence of African women's savagery in their sexual desire. Given the association of unrestricted sexuality with native savagery, black female sexuality alone might have been enough to implicate the entire continent. But de Marees further castigated West African women: they delivered children surrounded by men, women, and youngsters "in most shamelesse manner . . . before them all."⁵⁸ This absence of shame (evoked explicitly, as here, or implicitly in the constant references to nakedness in other narratives) worked to establish distance. Readers, titillated by the topics discussed and thus tacitly shamed, found themselves further distanced from the shameless subject of the narrative. De Marees dwelled on the brute nature of shameless African women. He marveled that "when the child is borne [the mother] goes to the water to wash and make cleane her selfe, not once dreaming of a moneths lying-in . . . as women here with us use to doe; they use no Nurses to helpe them when they lie in child-bed, neither seeke to lie dainty and soft. . . . The

next day after, they goe abroad in the streets, to doe their businesse.”⁵⁹ This testimony to African women’s physical strength and emotional indifference is even more emphatic in the original Dutch. In the most recent translation from the Dutch, the passage continues: “This shows that the women here are of a cruder nature and stronger posture than the Females in our Lands in Europe.”⁶⁰

De Marees goes on to inscribe an image of women’s reproductive identity whose influence persisted long after his original publication. “When [the child] is two or three monethes old, the mother ties the childe with a peece of cloth at her backe. . . . When the child crieth to sucke, the mother casteth one of her duges backward over her shoulder, and so the child suckes it as it hangs.”⁶¹ Frontispieces for the de Marees narrative and the African narratives in de Bry approximate the over-the-shoulder breast-feeding de Marees described, thereby creating an image that could symbolize the continent (see Figures 6 and 7). In 1634, Thomas Herbert drew the image of a female Hottentot “as a sort of she-devil nursing a child over her shoulder.”⁶² Herbert wrote a lengthy “description of the Savage Inhabitants” of the South African cape, in which he treated men and women as identical. They were together uniformly marked—by nature or by culture—as surprisingly different from Europeans. Their hair “rather like wooll than haire, tis blacke and knotty” and “their eares are long and made longer by pondrous bables.”⁶³ The only descriptions that distinguished women from men referred to an alchemy of the bodies and behaviors of savagery that simultaneously marked the boundaries of English civility.

They are very ceremonious in thanksgivings, for wanting requitals, if you give a woman a piece of bread, she will immediately pull by her [loincloth] flap and discover her *pudenda*. A courtesie commended them, I suppose, by some *Dutch*-ill-bred Saylor, for taught it they are, they say, by Christians. And English men, I know, have greater modestie.

While this detail was produced in service of English gentility and the titillation of readers, the easy and willing display of genitalia in exchange for bread spoke both to Hottentot immodesty and a relative state of undress. A brief note about their cannibalism was shortly followed by the illustration and a short descriptive paragraph that noted that “the women give their Infants sucke as they hang at their backes, the uberous dugge stretched over her shoulder” (see Figure 8).⁶⁴ Herbert’s image is remarkable for the monstrous posture of the suckling child who apparently hangs from its mother’s

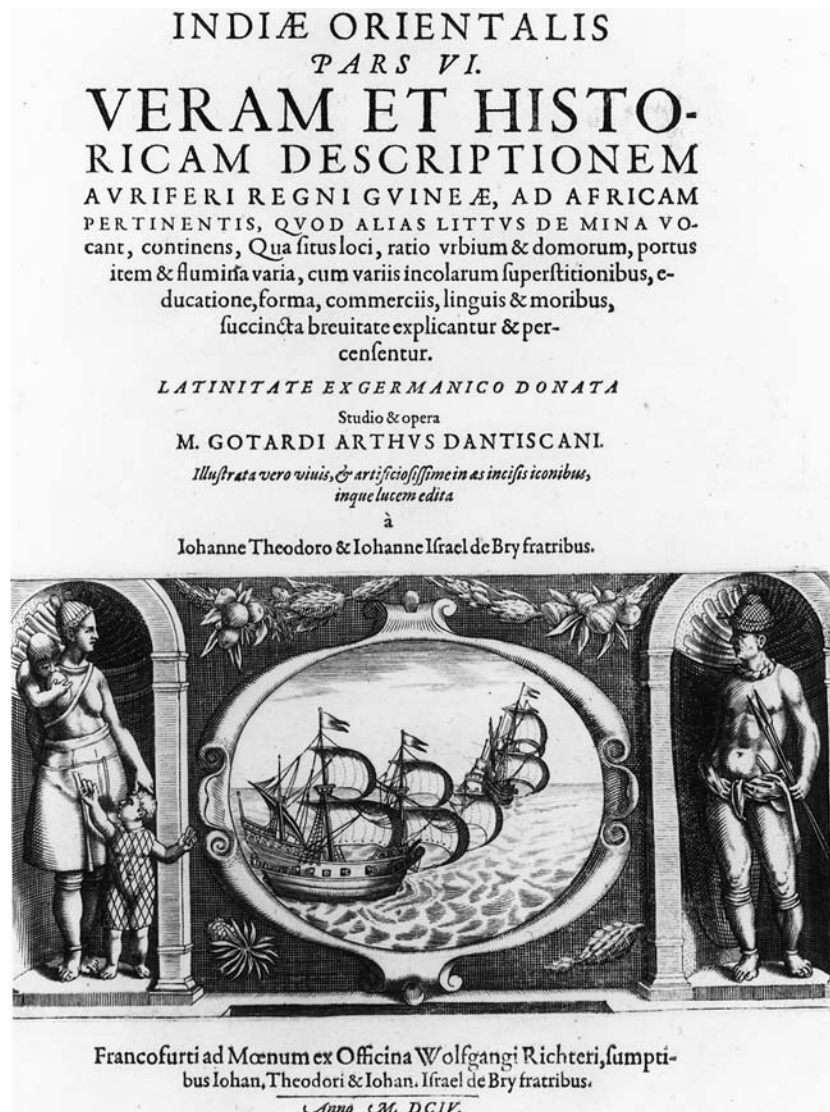


Figure 6. Woman breastfeeding over her shoulder. Title page from *Verum et Historicam Descriptionem Avriferi Regni Guineae*, in Theodor de Bry, *Small Voyages*, vol. 6 (Frankfurt am Main, 1604). Note the contrast between this later depiction and the early representation of a Native American woman in Figure 7. Courtesy of the John Work Garrett Library, Johns Hopkins University.



Figure 7. Women in Africa. From *Verum et Historicam Descriptionem Avriferi Regni Guineaa*, in Theodor de Bry, *Small Voyages*, vol. 6 (Frankfurt am Main, 1604), 3. Courtesy of the John Work Garrett Library, Johns Hopkins University.

back with an almost insect-like tenacity while holding the “uberous dugge” between its teeth. Among the visual depictions of over-the-shoulder breast-feeding, this is undoubtedly the most violent.

The image, in more or less extreme form, remained a compelling one, offering in a single narrative-visual moment evidence that black women’s difference was both cultural (in this strange *habit*) and physical (in this strange *ability*). The word “dug,” which by the early seventeenth century meant both a woman’s breasts and an animal’s teats, connoted a brute animality that de Marees reinforced through his description of small children “lying downe in their house, like Dogges, [and] rooting in the ground like Hogges” and of “boyes and girles [that] goe starke naked as they were borne, with their privie members all open, without any shame or civilitie.”⁶⁵ Herbert too elicited the animal connection by drawing the Hottentot woman clutching entrails in her hand while her child latched on with the intensity of a parasitic arthropod.

As Englishmen traversed the uncertain ground of nature and culture,



Figure 8. Hottentot woman suckling over her shoulder. From Thomas Herbert, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile Begunne Anno 1626* (London, 1634), 17. Courtesy of Harvard University.

African women became a touchstone for physical and behavioral curiosity both within Africa and in the Americas and Europe. Fynes Moryson wrote of Irish women in 1617 that they “have very great Dugges, some so big as they give their children suck over their Shoulders.” But it is important that he connects this to being “not laced at all,” or to the lack of corsetry.⁶⁶ While nudity—a state in which the absence of corsetry is certainly implicit—is constantly at play in descriptions of African women, the over-

whelming physicality of the image is disaggregated from culture and instead becomes part of African female nature; something no amount of corsetry would set right. It is perhaps indicative of his national insularity in matters of the slave trade, that the Swiss physician Felix Spoeri commented on the length of enslaved women's breasts in seventeenth-century Barbados and explained it with an amalgam of nature and culture: "By nature slave women have very long breasts because they go about naked all the time."⁶⁷ In his 1670 publication on Africa, Nicolas Villaut suggested that the shape of African noses similarly resulted from the bad behavior of African mothers, "whose children sleeping many times whilst the mother is walking or at work, knock their noses against their shoulders and so in time they become flat; if they cry out for the teat, they throw their breasts over their shoulder and let them suck."⁶⁸ Drawing on Villaut, Robert Burton reproduced this speculation noting that

they give them the breast over their shoulders, and this may be the reason of the flatness of their Noses by their knocking them continually against the Back and Shoulders of the Mother . . . for it is observed that the children of their Gentry whose Mothers do not labour nor carry their Infants about them; have very comely Noses.⁶⁹

Burton's addendum about class is quite important because it reflects the very real way in which the discursive landscape of appearance was disrupted by competing notions of class and sovereignty—the biological markers of racial difference that legitimate enslavement can here be interrupted by the behavior of the Gentry whose autonomy and freedom from enslavement might thus be assured. The confluence of mothers' abnormal bodies and their ability to inscribe racial characteristics on their children had long currency. Writing in the late eighteenth century, Johann Blumenbach also speculated that the pounding of a child's face on its mother's back shaped facial features. He claimed that the fact that such features could be seen on aborted fetuses was the result of a "natural degeneration" over time that meant that the artificial shaping of the nose had become natural.⁷⁰ And thus, again, the African woman embodied the behavioral and physical characteristics that degraded an entire race of people.

When John Ogilby compiled *America* in 1671, his more-than-600-page volume became the first comprehensive English introduction to the continent. His detailed and well-illustrated account of the Americas included the Columbus and Vespucci narratives (among many others) that I have dis-

cussed above. The reader learns of women in Hispañola who “destroy’d the Infants in their Wombs, that they might not bear slaves for the Spaniards,” and is again reminded of the ease with which women in the Caribbee give birth, an ease reinforced by the inversion of men taking to their beds for an extended celebratory “Lying-In” upon the birth of their first son. The illustrations, while replete with nudity, cannibalism, and warfare, are almost uniformly of well-proportioned women: the sagging breasts of the fifteenth century have all but disappeared (see Figure 9). However, in the last quarter of the text, the reader’s visual sense of Indian women is altered. Suddenly the women on the maps of Granada and Guiana tell a familiar tale with their breasts; a tale explicated in his appendix on Chile, where Ogilby explains that “some of them have such great breasts, that throwing them over their shoulders they suckle their Children.”⁷¹ These scattered images of sagging breasts in the late seventeenth century can only be read as distinct from the sixteenth century evocations of Amerindian women’s bodies. For Ogilby, the breasts seem to signify a set of concerns with Granada, Guiana, and Chile, perhaps as a means of situating them as distinct from other parts of the Americas. Just as African women’s physiognomy became shorthand for savagery, the shifting image of America also became home to such physically inscribed differences (see Figures 10, 11, and 12). But the enduring connection between African women’s sexuality and difference at this point spoke specifically to the increasingly apparent needs of the English market for slaves and the inevitability that African women and men would satisfy that need.

African women’s Africanness became contingent on the linkages between sexuality and a savagery that fitted them for both productive and reproductive labor. Women enslaved in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries did not give birth to many children, but descriptions of African women in the Americas almost always highlighted their fecundity along with their capacity for manual labor.⁷² Erroneous observations about African women’s propensity for easy birth and breast-feeding reassured colonizers that these women could easily perform hard labor in the Americas; at the same time, such observations erected a barrier of difference between Africa and England. Seventeenth-century English medical writers, both men and women, equated breast-feeding and tending to children with difficult work, and the practice of wealthy women forgoing breastfeeding in favor of sending their children to wet nurses was widespread.⁷³ English women and men anticipated pregnancy and childbirth with extreme uneasiness and fear of death, but they knew that the experience of pain in child-



Figure 9. Frontispiece. From John Ogilby, *America* (London, 1671). Courtesy of New York Public Library.



Figure 10. Native American woman suckling over her shoulder on map of Granada. From John Ogilby, *America* (London, 1671), 316. Courtesy of New York Public Library.



Figure 11. Native American woman with sagging breasts on map of Guiana. From John Ogilby, *America* (London, 1671), 341. Courtesy of New York Public Library.



Figure 12. Native American woman suckling over her shoulder in Chile. From John Ogilby, *America* (London, 1671), 360. Courtesy of New York Public Library.

birth marked women as members of a Christian community.⁷⁴ As Saidiya Hartman argues, the absence of pain—either in childbirth or at the receiving end of the lash or branding iron—becomes “absolutely essential to the spectacle of contented subjugation” and to the notion that Africans are in fact improved by slavery.⁷⁵ Pain-free and disinterested delivery of children could only strike the contemporary English reader as a matter of astonishment and wonder. Upon further reflection, the connection between African women’s reproductive lives and their suitability for hard manual labor would link their status with their bodies in a way distinct from but related to the biology of race. Roxann Wheeler has recently argued that “the performance of labor is a more reliable index of status than other activities or physical attributes.”⁷⁶ But the double meaning of the terms labor and travail, as well as the need to articulate a social space for Africans in the context of emerging socioeconomic ideologies of difference, biology, and lifelong forced labor, collapsed the performance of work into the bodies of African women.

African women entered the developing discourse of national resources through an emphasis on what Europeans perceived to be their mechanical and meaningless childbearing. Initially, metaphors of domestic livestock and sexually located cannibalism touched on notions of reproduction for consumption. Neither Native American women and men, nor the children they produced—“fattened like capons”—added anything to English coffers. By about the turn of the seventeenth century, however, as England joined in the transatlantic slave trade, assertions of African savagery began to be predicated less on consumption and cannibalism and more on production and reproduction. African women came into the conversation in the context of England’s need for productivity. Descriptions of these women that highlighted the apparent ease and indifference of their reproductive lives created a mechanistic image that ultimately became located within the national economy. Whereas English women’s reproductive work took place solely in the domestic economy, African women’s reproductive work embodied the developing discourses of extraction and forced labor at the heart of England’s design for the Americas. By the eighteenth century, the contrasting connection between the “inscrutable and sexually polymorphous” African woman and the “chaste maternal” English woman together offered the continent up to English consumption.⁷⁷

By the eighteenth century, English writers rarely used black women’s breasts or behavior for anything but concrete evidence of barbarism in Africa. In *A Description of the Coasts of North and South-Guinea*, begun in

the 1680s and completed and published almost forty years later, John Barbot “admired the quietness of the poor babes, so carr’d about at their mothers’ backs . . . and how freely they suck the breasts, which are always full of milk, over their mothers’ shoulders, and sleep soundly in that odd posture.”⁷⁸ William Snelgrave introduced his *New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-trade* with an anecdote designed to illustrate the benevolence of the trade. He described himself rescuing an infant from human sacrifice and reuniting the child with its mother, who “had much Milk in her Breasts.” He accented the barbarism of those who had attempted to sacrifice the child and claimed that the reunion cemented his goodwill in the eyes of the enslaved, who, thus convinced of the “good notion of White Men,” caused no problems during the voyage to Antigua.⁷⁹ Having used the figure of the breastfeeding woman to legitimize his slaving endeavor, Snelgrave went on to describe the roots of Whydah involvement in the slave trade and its defeat in war at the hands of the Kingdom of Dahomey (both coastal cities in present-day Ghana). “Custom of the Country allows Polygamy to an excessive degree . . . whereby the land was become so stocked with people” that the slave trade flourished. Moreover, the wealth generated by the trade made the beneficiaries so “proud, effeminate and luxurious” that they were easily conquered by the more disciplined (read masculine) nation of Dahomey.⁸⁰ Polygamy and the abundance of women “unclaimed for monogamy,” always an important trope of difference in travel accounts to Africa, signaled an unambiguous distance between Europe and Africa. Thus women’s fecundity undermined African society from without and within as it provided a constant stream of potential slaves and depleted the manhood of potentially dangerous adversaries.⁸¹

Eighteenth-century abolitionist John Atkins similarly adopted the icon of black female bodies in his writings on Guinea. “Childing, and their Breasts always pendulous, stretches them to so unseemly a length and Bigness that some . . . could suckle over their shoulder.”⁸² Atkins then considered the idea of African women copulating with apes. He noted that “at some places the Negroes have been suspected of Bestiality” and, while maintaining the ruse of scholarly distance, suggested that evidence “would tempt one to suspect the Fact.” The evidence lay mostly in apes’ resemblance to humans but was bolstered by “the Ignorance and Stupidity [of black women unable] to guide or controll lust.”⁸³ Abolitionists and anti-abolitionists alike accepted the connections between race and black women’s monstrous and fecund bodies. African women bridged other important

differences between Atkins and Snelgrave. Snelgrave, although he was an avid slave trader, believed that Africans and Europeans shared a single origin, while Atkins the abolitionist was convinced that the two were separate species.⁸⁴ It is particularly noteworthy then, that both men mobilized women's corporeal traits to further their quite different intellectual and political agendas.

The visual shorthand of the sagging-breasted African savage held sway for decades. In Peter Kolb's 1731 narrative of the Cape of Good Hope, the "Hottentot" woman sits smoking marijuana while her nursing child peers over her shoulder. The image, quite distinct from Herbert's monstrous "Hottentot" a century earlier, at first glance embodies a lethargy that might disrupt the notion of African women as constant workers. But she sits as if only for a moment, staff in hand, strong legs ready to be once again on the move; a woman not part of any discernable family or social group whose pipe, physique, and childrearing are clearly outside the realm of European femininity (see Figure 13).⁸⁵ In the 1745 edition of Ansham and John Churchill's *Collection of Voyages* (originally published in 1732 and reprinted three times by 1752), an illustration titled "A Description of the Habits of Most Countries in the World" prefaces a discussion of clothing (see Figure 14). The bottom half of the taxonomic illustration groups various semi-nude savages alongside Spaniards and Scots highlanders, thus ensuring that readers understand the connection between savagery and civility. Outside of complexion, the single most significant index of racial difference is to be found in the pendulous breasts of Hottentot and Negro women. Mexican, Virginian, and Floridian women appear nude, but they have the high unused breasts that identify them as outside the category of perpetual laborer. Even the female Moor suffers from the dangers of proximity to Negro women (both in geography and on the page); for peering out from beneath her veil she appears to be burdened with breasts determined to slope downward.

The distortion of African women's bodies then, became a given for eighteenth century writers. Whether the connection forged by earlier travelers and philosophers was used to critique European woman, as a weak gesture of cultural relativism, or to cement the role of Africans as necessary slaves, it is a ubiquitous part of Europe's critique of and encounter with Africa. When William Smith embarked on a voyage to map the Gold Coast for the Royal Africa Company in 1727, he was initially disinterested in ethnography. His first description of people comes more than halfway through the narrative when he writes "but before I describe the Vegetables, I shall

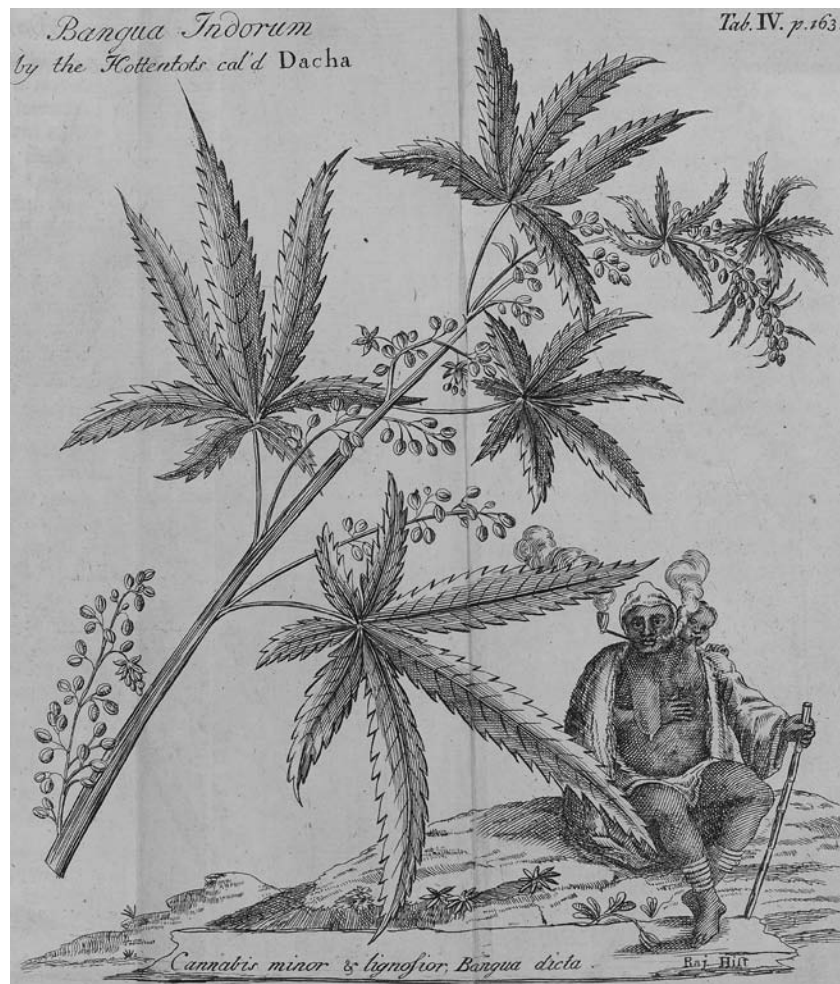


Figure 13. Hottentot woman suckling over her shoulder while smoking marijuana. From Peter Kolb, *The Present State of the Cape of Good Hope*, vol. 1 (London, 1731), plate 4.



Figure 14. "A Description of the Habits of Most Countries in the World." From Ansham and John Churchill, *Collection of Voyages* (London, 1732). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

take Notice of the Animals of this Country; beginning with the Natives, who are generally speaking a lusty strong-bodied People, but are mostly of a lazy idle Disposition.”⁸⁶ His short description, followed by a section on “Quadrepedes,” is organized primarily around accusations of polygamy and promiscuity in which “hot constitution’d Ladies” are put to work by husbands who treat them like slaves. As the narrative continues, his ethnographic passages, while always brief, are also always organized around sexually available African women. In Whydah, for example, the reader encounters female Priests inclined to whoredom, and he tells of an anomalous Queen in Agonna who satisfies her sexual needs with male slaves, hands down her crown to the resulting female progeny and sells any male children into slavery.⁸⁷ Like de Marees a century earlier, Smith is not averse to using African women to critique European women’s fashions:

In Europe when our Children can go alone, how many Cares and Anxieties continually perplex us, nor do we think that we can ever take enough Care of them: but here they have none of this Trouble. Childrearing in this part of the World, is attended with no Expence of long Lying-in, Gossipping, etc. A Negroe Woman, I have been told, has been deliver’d of a Child in less than a Quarter of an Hour, and in their Labour they use no Shrieks or Cries; nay the very same Day it is customary for the Lying-in women to go to the Sea-Side and bathe herself, without ever thinking of returning to her Bed. Here are no Provision of any Necessaries for the newborn infant, and yet all its Limbs grow vigorous and proportionate, and I must deliver it as my Opinion that the contrary Practice in Europe makes so many crooked People.⁸⁸

Despite the fact that women and their sexual identities stand in for Smith throughout his text both as evidence of African difference and as a backhanded criticism of European women, it is not until the final pages of the text that he performs an astonishing sleight of hand during which an African woman “speaks” of Africa and Europe. As Smith prepares to leave the coast, bound for Barbados and then to England, he is heartened by the company of Charles Wheeler who, he tells the reader, had been a factor for the Royal Africa Company for the past ten years and whose professed tales of Guinea “render’d his Company diverting.” He then reproduces a first person account that runs some twenty-one pages, much of which is taken up with conversations between Wheeler and “her Ladyship,” an African concubine given to Wheeler during a visit to a king.⁸⁹ While initially loath to accept this woman as offered, Wheeler succumbs and finds himself entranced.

Her lovely Breasts, whose Softness to the Touch nothing can exceed, were quite bare, and so was her Body to her Waste . . . and though she was black, that was amply recompenc'd by the Softness of her Skin, the beautiful Proportion and exact Symmetry of each Part of her Body, and the natural, pleasant and inartificial Method of her Behaviour. She was not forward, nor yet coy, when I pressed her lovely Breasts, she gently stroak'd my Hand and smiling met my Salute with equal Ardour and Fervancy.⁹⁰

Having located the legitimacy of his desire (he later says that “had she been White, I should have begg'd her of the King”), and offered a veiled pornography of their encounter, he goes on to level a relentless critique of Europe's sexual behaviors through the voice of the savage “Lady.” In response to her queries about the ways of the English, Wheeler (Smith) vents about the irrationality of English marital customs, of conventions ostensibly about chastity that lead to the ruin of England's best men and women, and ultimately about the civility of the savage. He closes his narrative by stating that “I doubt not by an impartial Examination of the Premises, it would be found, that we Christians have as many idle ridiculous Notions and Customs as the Natives of Guinea have, if not more.”⁹¹

What is important about this use of the savage is not that it would have been particularly unusual at this time, but rather that it occurs exclusively through the voice of a female informant and through the behavior of African women. Perhaps Smith—aware of the danger of his words and thus channeling them through not one but two secondary narrators—relied upon her ladyship's queries not simply because of the titillating factor of having a savage woman say that “she believ'd, according to the Account I had give, few Women in Europe presented their Husbands with their Maidenheads” but because, as the sine qua non of savagery herself, her civility was that much more evocative. The rhetorical maneuver performed by Jobson's dairymaids and Ligon's Cape Verdean Queen Anne is echoed here, and its effect is to cement the position of the African lady in opposition to her European counterpart. Whether English writers used the African woman to criticize their own culture or to demonstrate their racial superiority, the images such writers used were the linchpins of England's emerging notion of itself.

One of a very few English woman in late eighteenth-century West Africa, abolitionist Anna Falconbridge yearned for cultural relativism when she noted that women's breasts in Sierra Leone were “disgusting to Europeans, thought considered *beautiful* and ornamental here.”⁹² But such weak claims of sisterly sympathy could hardly interrupt 300 years of porno-tropical writing. By the 1770s, Edward Long's *History of Jamaica* presented read-

ers with African women whose savagery was total, for whom enslavement was the only means of civilization. Long maintained that “an oran-outang husband would [not] be any dishonour to a Hottentot female; for what are these Hottentots?”⁹³ He asserted as fact that sexual liaisons occurred between African women and apes and made no reference to any sort of African female shame or beauty. Rather, Long used women’s bodies and behavior to justify and promote the mass enslavement of Africans. By the time he wrote, the Jamaican economy was fully invested in slave labor and was contributing more than half of the profits obtained by England from the West Indies as a whole.⁹⁴ The association of black people with beasts—via African women—had been cemented: “Their women are delivered with little or no labour; they have therefore no more occasion for midwives than the female oran-outang, or any other wild animall. . . . Thus they seem exempted from the course inflicted upon Eve *and her daughters*.”⁹⁵ If African women gave birth without pain, they somehow sidestepped God’s curse upon Eve. If they were not Eve’s descendants, they were not related to Europeans and could therefore be forced to labor on England’s overseas plantations with impunity. Elaine Scarry has persuasively argued that the experience of pain—and thus the materiality of the body—lends a sense of reality and certainty to a society at times of crisis.⁹⁶ Early modern European women were so defined by their experience of pain in childbirth that an inability to feel pain was considered evidence of witchcraft.⁹⁷ In the case of England’s contact with Africa and the Americas, the crisis in European identity was mediated by the construction of an image of pain-free reproduction that diminished Africa’s access to certainty and civilization, thus allowing for the mass appropriation that was the transatlantic slave trade.

After Richard Ligon saw the black woman at Cape Verde, he pursued her around a dance hall, anxious to hear her voice, though she ultimately put him off with only “the loveliest smile that I have ever seen.” The following morning he came upon two “prettie young Negro Virgins.” Their clothing was arranged such that Ligon could see “their breasts round, firm, and beautifully shaped.” He demurred that he was unable “to expresse all the perfections of Nature, and Parts, these Virgins were owners of.” Aware of the image of African womanhood already circulating in England, he assured his readers that these women should not be confused with the women of “high Africa . . . that dwell nere the River of Gambia, who are thick lipt short nos’d and commonly [have] low foreheads.”⁹⁸ As though their breasts did not adequately set these women apart, Ligon used these qualifiers to highlight the exception of their beauty. Along with many of his contempo-

raries, Ligon was quite willing to find beauty and allure in women who were exceptional—not “of high Africa”—but whose physiognomy and “education” marked them as improved by contact with Europe. Ligon encountered them in a domestic space, one familiar to him, and he sidestepped the discourse of savagery and painted a picture of seductive beauties that was understandable in part because of the familiarity of the setting.⁹⁹ In response to Ligon’s pursuit, these women, like the beautiful woman he met the evening before, remained silent. Ligon tried, unsuccessfully, to test the truth of their beauty through the sound of their speech. Language had marked monstrosity for centuries; Pliny identified five of his monstrous races as such simply because they lacked human speech.¹⁰⁰ It appears that decent language, like shame, denoted civility for Ligon in the face of this inexplicable specter of female African beauty. Finally, Ligon begged pardon for his dalliances and remarked that he “had little else to say” about the otherwise desolate island.¹⁰¹ To speak of African beauty in this context, then, was justified.

When Ligon arrived in Barbados and settled on 500-acre sugar plantation with 100 slaves, his notion of African beauty—if it had ever really existed—dissolved in the face of racial slavery. He saw African men and women carrying bunches of plantains: “Tis a lovely sight to see a hundred handsom Negroes, men and women, with every one a grasse-green bunch of these fruits on their heads . . . the black and green so well becoming one another.” Here in the context of the sugar plantation, where he saw African women working as he had never seen English woman do, Ligon struggled to situate African women as workers. Their innate unfamiliarity as laborers caused him to cast about for a useful metaphor. He compares African people to vegetation; now they are only passively and abstractly beautiful as blocks of color. Ligon attested to their passivity with their servitude: They made “very good servants, if they be not spoyled by the English.”¹⁰² But if Ligon found interest in beauty, as Jobson did in shame, he ultimately equated black people with animals. He declared that planters bought slaves so that the “sexes may be equall . . . [because] they cannot live without Wives,” although the enslaved choose their partners much “as Cows do . . . for, the most of them are as near beasts as may be.”¹⁰³ Like his predecessors, Ligon offered further proof of Africans’ capacity for physical labor—their aptitude for slavery—through ease of childbearing. “In a fortnight [after giving birth] this woman is at worke with her Pickaninny at her back, as merry a soule as any is there.”¹⁰⁴ In the Americas, African women’s purportedly pain-free childbearing thus continued to be central. When Ligon

reinforced African women's animality with descriptions of breasts "hang[ing] down below their Navels," he tethered his narrative to familiar images of black women that—for readers nourished on Hakluyt and de Bry—effectively naturalized the enslavement of Africans. His contemporary, Felix Spoeri, wrestled with the image of over-the-shoulder breast-feeding in 1661 when he noted that "when slave mothers go to work, they tie the young children onto their backs. While they work they frequently give their children the breast, across the armpits, and let them suckle." In less outlandish terms then, Spoeri worked to reconcile the tension between mothering and hard labor.¹⁰⁵

By the time the English made their way to the West Indies, decades of ideas and information about brown and black women predated the actual encounter. In many ways, the encounter had already taken place in parlors and reading rooms on English soil, assuring that colonists would arrive with a battery of assumptions and predispositions about race, femininity, sexuality, and civilization.¹⁰⁶ Confronted with an Africa they needed to exploit, European writers turned to black women as evidence of a cultural inferiority that ultimately became encoded as racial difference. Monstrous bodies became enmeshed with savage behavior as the icon of women's breasts became evidence of tangible barbarism. African women's "unwomanly" behavior evoked an immutable distance between Europe and Africa on which the development of racial slavery depended. By the mid-seventeenth century, what had initially marked African women as unfamiliar—their sexually and reproductively bound savagery—had become familiar. To invoke it was to conjure a gendered and racialized figure that marked the boundaries of English civility even as she naturalized the subjugation of Africans and their descendants in the Americas.