

# Burthened Bodies: the image and cultural work of “White Negroes” in the eighteenth century Atlantic world

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***Abstract:** Under the shadow of slavery, skin color played a vital role in determining social relations within cities, ports and colonies around the Atlantic world. Eighteenth century literature propagated the idea that visual differences between the major known human populations were not simply a matter of climate, but also of discreet characteristics and biological composition. When focused on comparisons between Africans and Europeans, these discussions were often speculative and subjective, drawing heavily on traditional symbolic meanings of whiteness and blackness in a positive/negative dichotomy, and using them to explain contemporary inequalities encapsulated in the relationship between master and slave. Thus varying representations of race (in image and text) distinguished the bodies of Africans as inherently ‘other’ and as property used in labor for manufacture. But what happened to these meanings and social dynamics when Africans could be born or become white? How were the people referred to as “White Negroes”, negotiating rare skin diseases such as Vitiligo and albinism, understood? This essay explores the stories and representation of individuals with skin pigmentation disease whose bodies were used as public performers in America and Europe to prove the normative position of whiteness and forewarn the potential outcomes of race mixing. These people, who were no longer considered fit for plantation labor, were appropriated and enslaved into another form of cultural work that included the medical and philosophical examination of their bodies, public exhibitions for profitable popular entertainment, and the reproduction and sale of their physical likeness.<sup>1</sup>*

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I look into the face of this monstrous mutation of my beautiful brown skin. It is being devoured by this void of white that is slowly stealing me from myself.

—Lee Thomas, *Turning White* (89)

The fantasy of black life as a theatrical enterprise, is an almost obsessive indulgence

—Patricia Williams, “The Pantomime of Race” (1)

During the slave trade of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, racial typologies promoted by literary men were critical to the social exclusion of enslaved and free Africans in cities, ports and colonies around the Atlantic world.<sup>2</sup> The ideas articulated by travelers, philosophers, politicians, merchants, natural historians and amateur observers in transatlantic contexts were so influential that they framed the biased representation of race in the cultural sphere more broadly. Under the shadow of slavery, these writings qualified race within a matrix of layered but essentialist attitudes that sought to prove an inherent biological inequality between Africans and Europeans. And through varying modes of intellectual inquiry, these differences were presented as a standoff between the laboring Black body as a commercial asset and the rational white mind as a system of control. For example, in *The History of America* (1777), William Robertson would qualify that Africans were “more capable of enduring fatigue, more patient under servitude, and the labour of one Negro was computed to be equal to that

Work” symposium at the Center for Transnational American Studies, University of Copenhagen, for inviting me to participate in the fascinating discussion that informed this essay. In particular thanks to Joe Goddard and Martyn Bone for their kindness, patience and generosity. I would also like to acknowledge the unending support of my family, mentors and friends who have enabled the writing process and inspired my thinking. Further thanks go to Stella Mason, Simon Chaplin and Jane Hughes with whom I worked collaboratively on the exhibition “A Visible Difference: Skin, Race and Identity (1720 – 1820)” in 2007, showcasing my early research on the representation of African people with skin pigmentation conditions and their cultural legacies. Thanks also to Roy E. Goodman, library curator of printed materials at the American Philosophical Society; and Dominic Hall, curator of the Warren Anatomical Museum, Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine at Harvard University; for providing me with assistance during collections research. This current work was in part funded by the EUROTAST Marie Curie Initial Training Network.

2 For transatlantic investigations into racial thinking during the enlightenment period see Curran; Jordan; Dain; and Wheeler. For a discussion of seventeenth century notions of blackness as an accident of nature to be corrected through religious salvation, see Molineux, 88 – 109.

of four Indians” (226). The same year, Scottish philosopher David Hume would memorably add a footnote to new editions of his treatises stating: “I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the Whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual, eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences” (512). This was a prevalent view taken up in America by Thomas Jefferson, who made a similar observation in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787).<sup>3</sup>

Although emerging anti-slavery lobbyists sought to work against these theories by foregrounding the presence and achievement of accomplished Africans in Atlantic cities such as London, New York and Boston, ultimately the reductive ideas expressed within influential scholarship – separating masters from the enslaved, and similarly metropole from colony – held their ground. Thus the biological debate about the origins of an African’s black skin often fused climatic theories about heat and skin color with religious color symbolism and prejudiced ideas about mental inferiority and slovenly character propagated in other disciplines. Literature of this nature (confidently biased) was prolific and widely circulated, being reproduced in books, newspapers and periodicals as systemic knowledge that compensated for the obvious moral problems embedded in the violent Atlantic economy.

These polarizing concepts of race similarly influenced transatlantic images of Africans during this period, where paintings of doting Black servants attending to wealthy merchants, humorous prints of aristocrats soliciting Black mistresses, or isolated blackamoors heads on trading cards became symbolic motifs for colonial submission and the luxuries of global expansion.<sup>4</sup> Such images in fact worked in harmony with anti-slavery iconographies that represented Africans as passive recipients of European instruction or more ubiquitously as the kneeling and supplicating slave of Josiah Wedgewood’s popular design, which articulated the humanitarian sentiments of the Quaker abolition movement by adding the accompanying question “Am I not a man and a brother?”<sup>5</sup> Regardless of intent, through

3 Jefferson writes: “But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture” (233).

4 For a discussion on African servants in English portraiture see Tobin, 27-55. For Africans in trade cards, see Kim.

5 For abolitionist iconography and its ideals, see Parson and Margolin. See also Fischer, 274-83.

image and text Africans were continually codified as bodies of manufacture implicitly connected with the language and system of slavery. All these representations ultimately situated the physical Black body as a mirror upon which fantasies of domination were continually projected, and with which European aesthetic and biological values could be clearly defined.

But what happened when the Black body defied essentialist codes by being born or becoming white? How were the imaginative concepts of race and the enduring figure of the laboring “Black slave” destabilized by the unexpected presence of “White Negroes” negotiating rare skin diseases such as Vitiligo and albinism? The following discussion will explore the stories and representation of three individuals with skin pigmentation disease whose bodies were used as public performers in America and Europe to prove the normative position of whiteness and forewarn the potential outcomes of race mixing. By revealing the ways in which their unusual presence permeated literary thinking and popular modes of visual communication, I hope to show how people who were no longer considered fit for plantation labor were appropriated and enslaved into another form of cultural work that included the medical and philosophical examination of their bodies, public exhibitions for profitable popular entertainment, and the reproduction and sale of their physical likeness.

### **Henry Moss: a body of evidence**

It is apt to begin with the story of Henry Moss, an African American farmer from Virginia who in the summer of 1796 began exhibiting himself in Philadelphia taverns, revealing the outcomes of a skin transformation that must have seemed both unbelievable and shocking to the public. According to contemporary records that retold his testimony, for over two years, Moss, who was suffering from a skin-pigmentation condition now known as Vitiligo, had been progressively turning white. A Philadelphia handbill advertising his daily 12-hour exhibition at one Mr Leech’s Tavern is a rare piece of printed ephemera marking Moss’s story in active place and time. Headed with the title “A Great Curiosity” in large type and with no images to heighten the suspense, the handbill gives general details and context for his display. Split into two halves, the first part of the small sheet explains that “a man” (at this point unnamed) “who was born entirely black” now had a body marked by whiteness, noting:

His face attains more of the natural colour than any other part; his wool also is coming off his head, legs and arms, and in its place is growing straight hair, similar to that of a white person. The sight is really worthy the attention of the curious, and opens a wide field of amusement for the philosophic genius. (Anon, "A Great Curiosity")

The second half of the handbill includes a letter of certification, previously written in in 1794 by a Captain Joseph Holt, with whom Moss had previously served as a soldier during the revolutionary war. Holt not only named the man as Harry Moss," and authenticated his prior "dark complexion", but also stated that he was "free born".

The handbill's advertisement of Moss to the curious and intelligentsia certainly had an impact, for writers and notables including George Washington came to witness the spectacle face to face, and for a mere 25 cents fee. Although little is known of *how* Moss exhibited himself, the evidence available conveys an atmosphere of intense scrutiny. One anonymous writer called "D.W" explained that he was "a modest, well-behaved man, and the clear and pertinent manner in which he answered their various questions, left them in no doubt of the truth of such parts of his story as rested on his own credit" (Anon. (D.W), 111). It also seems that Moss solicited touching, for this writer continued on to note that "upon pressing his skin with a finger the part pressed appeared white; and on removal of pressure, the displaced blood rushed back, suffusing the part with red, exactly as in the case of an European, in like circumstances; and his veins, and their ramifications, had the same appearance" (Anon. (D.W.), 110-111).

Over the next decades Moss not only exhibited in other states, but also was the subject of essays and debate between the leading voices of natural history and philosophy – in particular the members of the American Philosophical Society based in Philadelphia. As a living and breathing body of evidence with a genealogy in memory, Moss provided an opportunity not only to investigate the parameters of "blackness" and "whiteness" but also to ascertain the potential implications of skin transformation for a colonial society that was already unsettled by news of Black revolutionary fervor in Haiti. How, many asked, could a slave be identified without the blackness of his or her skin?<sup>6</sup>

6 The author D.W writes: "...had Henry Moss happened to have been a slave, this singular change of his colour might have furnished an irrefragable argument for annihilating his owner's claim" (111). See also Anon, "Medical and Philosophical News," where the author reflects: "How additionally singular would it be, if instances of spontaneous disappearance of this sable mark of distinction between slaves and their

Through physical examinations, experiments and conversations with Moss, the literati gathered and published an archive of observed facts and personal deductions that established intellectual ownership of his body, as a public concern. Even the naturalist and physician Benjamin Smith Barton, who wrote the most substantive account on Moss, would speak of his perceptible sadness in condescending terms: “Such an astonishing change as this,” Barton wrote, “must appear miraculous in the sight of this poor, ignorant man, who knows little but of the immense agency of physical causes...” (Barton).

The evidence that was gathered is clear and yet sobering, revealing how Moss was questioned about everything from diet to his sexual life, and subjected to degrading physical inspections across his entire body, including his anus.<sup>7</sup> In spite of all this effort, scholarly conclusions on Moss’s condition were deeply flawed and speculative. Most writing circulated around the outdated idea that blackness was like an acquired visible character stain and thus changeable (something like a removable ink), and whiteness a stable and implicit essence.<sup>8</sup> Thinking about the intensity of activity that circulated around Moss during this period of his formerly anonymous life uniquely highlights the fallacy of scientific work at the time, so intently focused on pinpointing explicit signs of racial difference as a rationale for sustaining a distinct social order based on skin color.<sup>9</sup>

Although Moss features significantly in the literary archive of natural philosophy during and after the years of his public display, surprisingly

masters were to become frequent!” (200). See also Harley, 86–92. This is a later text, which aligns concepts of American nationhood with “ethnic unity,” ultimately drawing its fault lines along inherited concepts of race.

- 7 See observations from the private manuscripts of Quaker businessman and anti-slavery advocate Moses Brown quoted in Melish, 227.
- 8 These ideas were central to an old literary proverb with biblical origins about washing an “ethiop” white being essentially a labor in vain, since an African’s “blackness” was also often thought to be a permanent stain (caused by heat and character) – articulated famously by Aesop in the phrase “what is bred in the bone will stick to the flesh.” For a detailed exploration of this proverb and its manifestations in art and visual culture, see Massing, especially the essays “From Greek Proverb to Soap Advert: Washing the Ethiopian”, 281-314; “Washing the Ethiopian or the Semantics of an Impossibility”, 315-334; and “Washing the Ethiopian, Once More”, 335-356.
- 9 A cluster of social and medical historians have, in recent years, written eloquently about Henry Moss’s exhibition, the graphic accounts of his medical examinations, and the various philosophical analyses expressed through the works of contemporary writers. They also investigate more broadly how he emerges from the long and troubled history of human exhibitions, scientific racism and medical experimentation. See Martin, 39 – 43; Washington, 71-110; Sweet, 275 – 286; Reiss, 41-43; Melish, and Yokota, 213-225. Moss also figures significantly in the forthcoming volume by Chiles.

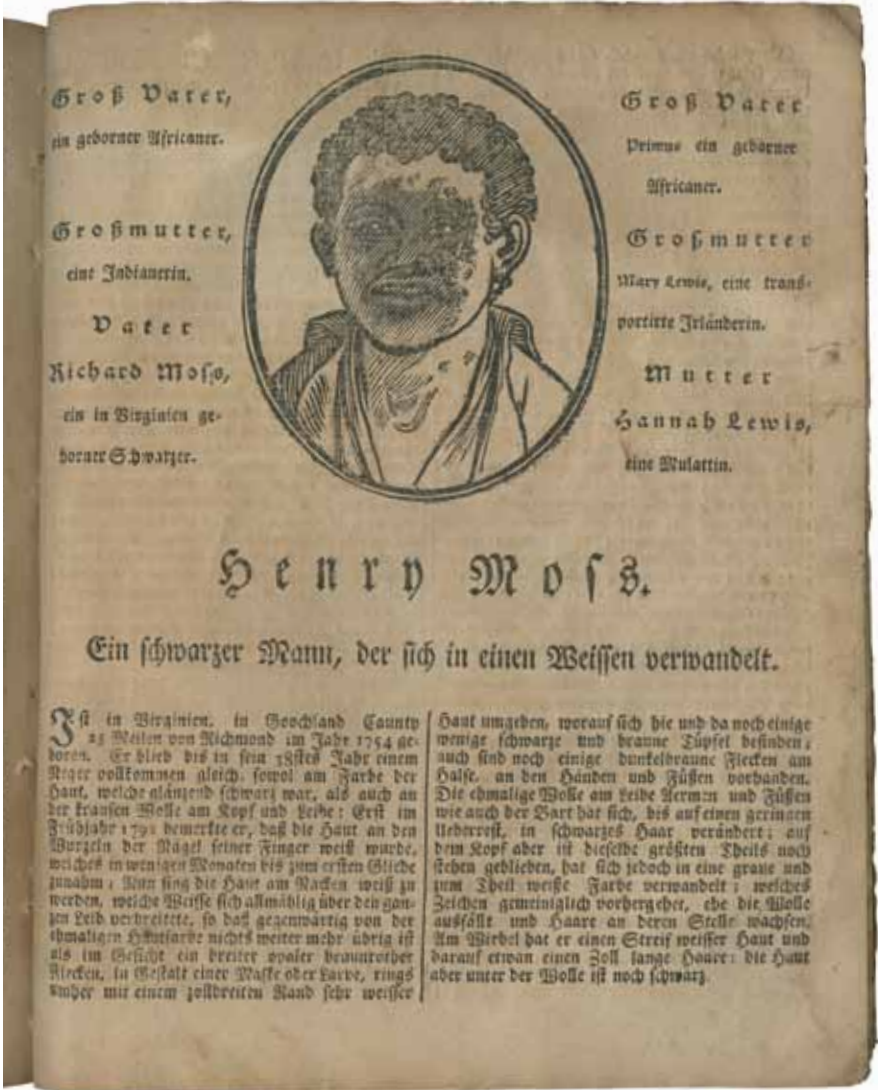


Fig. 1. Henry Moss from *Americanischer Stadt Und Land Calender Auf Das 1797ste Jahr Christi, Welches Ein Gemeines Jahr Ist Von 365 Tagen*. Philadelphia: Carl Cist, 1796, pp. 33. Library Company of Philadelphia, Philadelphia.

the only attempt to represent him visually can be found in a German almanac published in Philadelphia in 1797 (Anon, "Henry Moss: Ein Schwarzer Mann," 33). [Fig. 1]. Here a frontal portrait outline of his face inside a roundel frame is featured as a simply executed woodcut to illustrate an accompanying biography. The crude lines reconstruct Moss's face as a monochrome diagram with few distinguishing features, which are no doubt the outcomes of a limited printing technique unable to capture dynamism or nuances in skin tone. On either side of his portrait is the annotation of his family genealogy in gothic font (paternal on the left and maternal on the right), replicated as a means of ascertaining Moss's biological inheritance within three generations of his family tree. It is here that we can see the biography cited repeatedly in the written record, showing that his nameless grandmother on his father's side was Native American, and that his mother Hannah Lewis was of mixed heritage from an Irish immigrant mother named Mary. This mere diagram, devoid of the anatomical detail present in previous literature, focuses its intent on the notation of an inheritance characteristic of so many biological sagas taking place on plantations and in new republican cities that were natural spaces for race mixture. Notably in colonial Mexico, such sagas were similarly documented using allegory and textual annotation, in Casta painting (Carrera). Yet the unsettling presence of Henry Moss as a racial anomaly and potential threat to social order in North America appears to be subtly addressed in his portrait with a symbolic act of confinement – a graphic beheading as a bodiless face with no roots or limbs of connection.

### **Picturing disease and a spectacular inheritance**

Henry Moss was not the first "White Negro" (as they were often called) to be exhibited or discussed in philosophical treatises, although his gradual transformation from black to white was certainly rare and surprising at the time. Several instances of individuals with albinism and piebaldism (a genetic disposition from birth with permanent and variegated white skin patches) had already been the subject of debate and curiosity. In fact Thomas Jefferson had seen and heard of several cases which he chose to give limited importance by citing them in *Notes on Virginia* simply as an "anomaly of nature" and further placing them out of context in a written passage on birds and fish (Jefferson 118-20). As early as 1698, Royal Society fellow William Byrd would write of "a negro-boy, of about eleven years old" blighted by growing "white specks" who was being displayed in London (781). Born



like Moss in Virginia, the boy was the property of one Captain Charles Wager. The stories of these individuals, emerging as outcasts within colonial societies in the Americas and Caribbean, were documented as a strange mix of genealogy, aesthetics, speculative anatomy and obvious exploitation. So often their experiences were described in terms of dislocation, where they were moved or isolated from purportedly superstitious African communities into the “security” of European guardians who negotiated and profited from their public display.

Perhaps the most influential example of a “White Negro” who gave wider exposure to the existence of rare skin disorders transforming black skin was Mary Sabina. Born in 1736 to enslaved African parents named Martiana and Patrona on a Jesuit plantation in Cartagena (now Colombia), she was a mere baby when a visiting priest named José Gumilla saw her in hospital with her mother. We know now that Mary had piebaldism, but when Gumilla eventually wrote of her in 1745, he described her not as a medical anomaly but a work of art, marked with black and white skin seemingly designed by a paintbrush (Gumilla 100-3).<sup>10</sup> He spoke of how she awed all those who saw her, so much so that gifts of jewels from aristocrats and offers of purchase were sometimes made. Gumilla also notes that Mary’s portrait was painted, intended for immediate dispatch to England. Written in Spanish, Gumilla’s citation of Mary’s condition may well have been forgotten or overlooked, if not for the anonymously painted portrait that in the subsequent decades would participate in the cultural work of translation – visualizing a distant and rare colonial body for curious Euro-Americans who could not travel. The Gumilla portrait would mediate encounters with Mary’s body as a non-tactile experience of wonder, and literally move across continents via painted copies and as an illustration for varying forms of albinism in a seminal enlightenment text on natural history.

In a version of the Gumilla portrait (likely the original) now hanging in the Hunterian Museum collection at the Royal College of Surgeons in

10 Gumilla writes: “*Toda la niña (que tendría como unos seis meses, y hoy ha entrado ya en los cinco años de edad), desde la coronilla de la cabeza hasta los pies, está jaspeada de blanco y negro, con tan arreglada proporción en la varia mixtura de entrambos colores como si el arte hubiera gobernado el compás para la simetría y el pincel para el dibujo y colorido*”/ “*The entire girl (who by that time must have been 6 months old, but today is already 5 years old) from the top of the head to the tip of the toes, is mottled black and white, varying between both colors with such a fancy proportion, as if art had ruled the compass and the brush to achieve that symmetry and colored drawing*” (100). Many thanks go to Marcela Sandoval Velasco (University of Copenhagen) for translation of the text.



Fig. 2. Portrait of Mary Sabina, Anonymous, c.1744. Oil on Canvas. Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons, London.

London [Fig.2], we find all the visual tools used to persuasively describe a human phenomenon to a potentially skeptical audience. Nothing is left to the imagination and with the exception of a small loincloth protecting her modesty (which may well have been added at a later time) Mary Sabina is represented naked in full-length standing in what looks to be the plantation of her birth. The landscape is framed by mountains and contains a small dwelling topped by a cross, and the faint mast of a ship can be seen in the middle distance behind her. The whole scene recalls the forced arrivals, departures and continuous renewal that identified slave colonies as landscapes of production. In this painting, Mary's skin is a canvas of competing meanings – blackness and whiteness, foreign and indigenous, healthy and diseased, asset and liability, original and imitation. Looking directly at the viewer with a slight smile, she “speaks” with her hands which have both maintained their original color: commanding a parrot which rests on the forefinger of her left hand whilst her right points to the white area on her chest, inviting the inspection of her skin. The decorative presentation of Mary's body as a prized possession or keepsake is reinforced by its ornate dressing in colorful beaded necklace and matching bracelets tied by pink satin bows, gold drop earrings, and the floating loincloth that is even whiter than her skin. All of these allusions evoke an atmosphere of staged and perhaps even romantic ethnographic melodrama, where the viewer is challenged to accept the veracity of such a miracle of nature. An ornate motif in the bottom corner of the painting inscribes the particulars of Mary's birth in text and describes the painting as “a true picture,” marking it as an authentic copy of life in a fashion similar to the certification letter for Henry Moss. Whatever Mary Sabina inherited is represented as from nature, utterly distinct from her African parents, who are referred to only as a side note in the general visual scheme. This certainly contrasts with the more prominent genealogy given to Henry Moss in the German almanac portrait, which was perhaps the information deemed most biologically significant. But where Moss's unstable whiteness was linked to his inheritance, we see here that Mary's condition is fixed – a permanent design of colored contrasts taking place on her skin but not necessarily in her biology. Even Gumilla, after interviewing Mary's parents, concluded that it was an external natural influence – the ownership of a spotted dog – that impressed its variegated appearance on the imagination of Mary's mother, who transferred it on to her unborn child. This understanding of inheritance as the product of maternal impressions from the outside was nothing new (Bondeson 144-69), and in

fact it was the argument used in a famous medical hoax in Britain in 1726, where a woman named Mary Toft proclaimed herself to be giving birth to rabbits (Porter 4, 149-51). These ideas, however, make the parrot on Mary's hand in the portrait all the more significant. For not only is she placed in symbiotic relation to this exotic animal – “as if she has called it from the trees” (Martin 8) – but furthermore the parrot's known habit of mimicking “original” sounds similarly positions Mary as a copy (or mirror) of some other animal in the natural schema.

The Hunterian painting is one of three recorded versions of Mary Sabina, of which only two can currently be traced. The second version is in the Colonial Williamsburg collection in Virginia.<sup>11</sup> Assuming the Hunterian version is the original portrait, the Williamsburg version is probably one of the several noted copies taken from it, after it was purportedly captured first on a Spanish ship headed for the American colonies, and then again on a French ship headed from New England to London. Certainly the survival of these canvases makes a convincing argument for the value placed on their importance as cultural commodities, being pictorial records of rare biological quirks within sensitive colonial demographics. Eventually one of these portraits found its way into the hands of the natural historian George Louis Leclerc Comte de Buffon in Paris, and this encounter would see Mary's body implicated in wider and more public discourse. Although Buffon had never seen such an instance of piebaldism before, he commissioned a revised design of the portrait by Jacques de Seve, which was then engraved by Carl Guttenberg, to be included in the supplement to the fourth volume of *Histoire Naturelle* (1777) [Fig.3]. Here represented in addition to the image of an Albino woman called Genevieve from Dominica, Mary Sabina's portrait was assessed as a biological document in an essay on “les Blafards” describing the phenomena of people without skin pigment in general (Buffon 555-78).

How Mary Sabina's portrait is adapted for the text is interesting. Moved into a non-descript interior setting, she is now completely naked in front of an open window accentuated by fishing nets. She may even be in the hold of a ship, but it is difficult to tell. Although she is still holding a parrot, this time instead of pointing to herself she directs our attention to a feathered head-dress by her side, which rests on a box decorated with geometric design. On

11 For a discussion about the provenance of these paintings see Dobson.

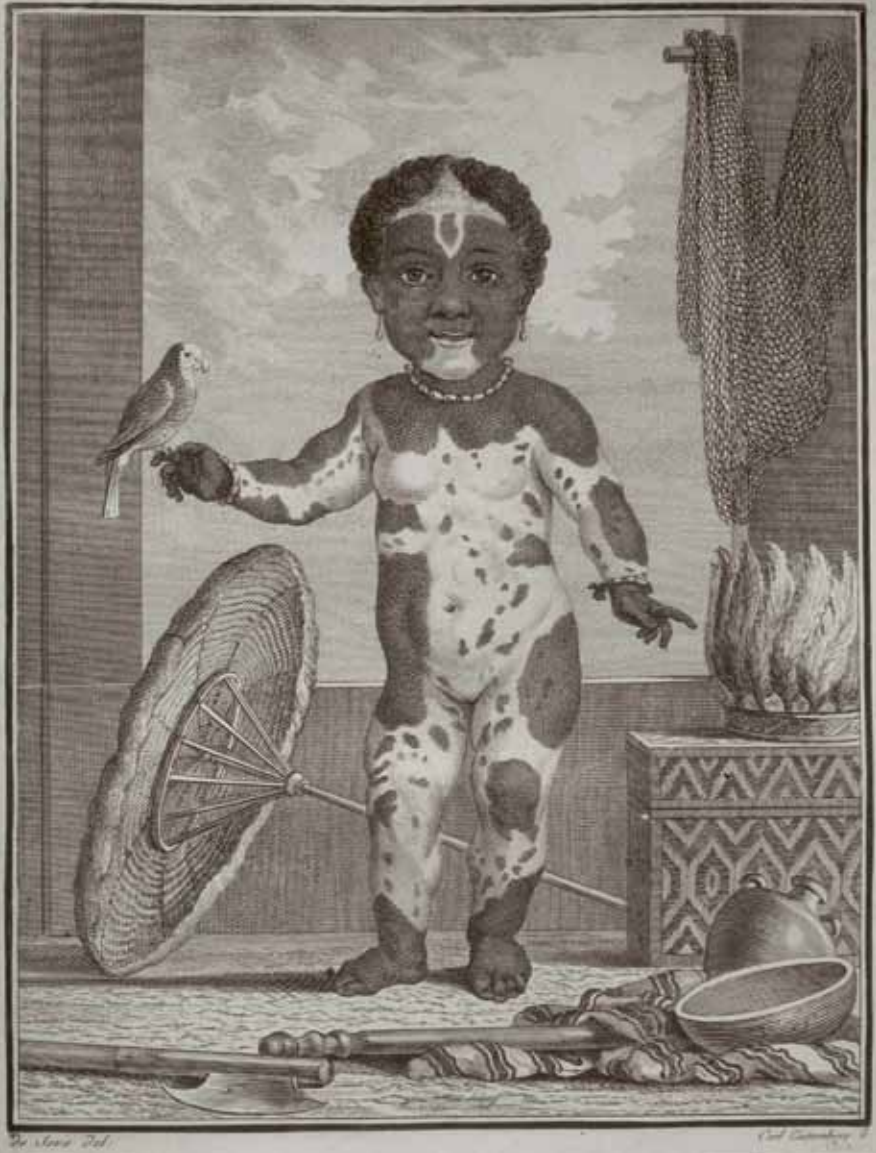


Fig. 3. Mary Sabina from Buffon, George L., 'Sur les Blafards et Nègres blancs' in *Histoire Naturelle, Générale et Particulière. Servant de suite à L'Histoire Naturelle de L'Homme. Supplément, Tome Quatrième*. Paris: 1777, p.568. Library of the Royal College of Surgeons, London.

the floor at her feet are scattered an axe, bowl, water jug and wooden stick casually arranged on striped fabric. Behind her, also on the floor, is a raffia parasol that seems to allude to the protection of her skin from the sun. This visual paraphernalia – a hotchpotch of Amerindian and colonial artifacts – implies “otherness,” but also an uncomfortable dislocation from genealogy or geographic origins that is entirely unnatural. Perhaps this pictorial shift symbolized Buffon’s view that Piebald and Albino Africans were a degenerate form of human, completely unrelated to the four fundamental races of the human family (Curran 104).

Buffon’s discussion of “White Negroes” in *Histoire Naturelle* also touched on wider socio-political sensitivities. Historian Charles D. Martin has detailed their significance in the intellectual debate between European and American philosophers as unsettling the essentialist codes governing Black and white relations in the slaving colonies. Since Buffon had already concluded that the Black skin of Africans might change across generations if they were forced to live in a Northern climate, a white African body undermined the sustainability of slavery based on race in North America (Martin 19-24). Buffon also had a reductive view of North America, which he described as desolate land more populated by bison and other animals than with men. He wrote:

It is to be presumed, therefore, that the want of civilization in America was owing to the small number of the inhabitants; for though each nation might have manners and customs peculiar to itself; though some might be more fierce, cruel, courageous, or dastardly than others; they yet were all equally stupid, ignorant, unacquainted with the arts, and destitute of industry. (Buffon and Barr, 4, 312)

These words (ironically similar to the terms used to describe Africans) were given further emphasis in the English translations of Buffon’s thesis published during the 1790s. Enlightenment historian Phillippe Roger has described how these sentiments reflected French intellectual snobbery and consequent disregard for the architects of the new American republic, who were essentially unrecognized (1-29). Roger further highlights the diplomatic efforts made by Thomas Jefferson and other philosophers to push against this reductive rhetoric in spite of Buffon’s revered achievements and intellectual influence (26-28). Once again we see here how the scholarly work done to control and contain the ideological discussion and documentation of skin color in fact only highlighted contradictions and instabilities within the discourse itself.

However, in the case of Mary Sabina's imaging in Buffon's text, an indelible and lasting impression was made. And when a similarly "spotted" child called Adelaide from Guadeloupe was discussed in the American Philosophical Transactions of 1784, Buffon's account of Mary Sabina was invoked again as a reference of authentication for the facts presented in her case – particularly with regard to her African heritage (Anon., "No. 44"). It also seems that Buffon's illustration influenced the decision to commission a wax model of Adelaide, in the same pose as Mary's portrait, for the new collection of the Harvard Medical College in 1783 (Gifford).<sup>12</sup> Through cultural transmission in both image and text, the painting of Mary Sabina worked in place of the "original" child, influencing and thus being held captive in the racial debate.

### **Public commodities: to be seen and to be had**

Texts and images were critical to the intellectual work of qualifying racial difference, but the exhibition of live individuals for entertainment was also a form of intensive and laborious cultural work in which Black people (with various physical talents or rare physiognomic expressions) participated. Much of the remaining early ephemera associated with the display of human curiosities at fairground displays and in tavern sideshows reveals how the public was implicated in the objectification and collective ownership of these individuals through the act of "witnessing." For a small fee access was provided in long daily exhibitions of twelve or more hours. The Henry Moss handbill, for example, stated that he "may be seen at any time from eight in the morning till eight in the evening, at one Quarter of a dollar each person." Between 1809 and 1813, a traveling showman would exhibit a piebald child named George Alexander Gratton, hailed "The Spotted Negro Boy," in the interval between two dramatic plays.<sup>13</sup> Advertisements for his display would note: "He must be seen, to convince it is not in the power of language to convey an adequate description of this fanciful child of nature formed in her most playful mood, and allowed by every lady and gentleman

12 Many Thanks to Dominic Hall, curator of the Warren Anatomical Museum, Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine at Harvard University, for providing me with this research context.

13 For a more detailed biography see my essay "Exhibiting Difference." The story of George, Mary Sabina and other individuals were the subject of an exhibition I curated in 2007 at the Hunterian Museum, Royal College of Surgeons in London, entitled "A Visible Difference: Skin, Race and Identity (1720 – 1820)."

that has seen him, the greatest curiosity ever behold" (Anon., "Spotted Negro Boy"). It was also further offered that "Ladies and Gentlemen wishing to see this Wonderful Child at their own Houses, may be accommodated by giving a few hours notice." A young girl with Albinism called Amelia Newsham could also "be seen" with exotic birds and animals in London "at a commodious apartment at the *Red-Lyon and Three Pigeons*, in *Castle-Street*, near *King's-Mews*." Described as "A phenomenon indeed!" her handbill – unusually headed with a royal insignia – accentuated her rarity and significance by noting that "she has likewise had the Honour to be shewn to the Royal Family, and to the Royal Society, who express'd great satisfaction on the inspection of so great a curiosity" (Anon., "The White Negro Girl"). Audiences were also given continual twelve-hour attendance and had the possibility to purchase birds whilst there.

The advertising hype in all instances followed a similar formula, emphasizing the spectacular and the unbelievable, and always mentioning distant geographic "origins" that made clear these individuals were foreign imports – embodying the outcomes of a biological drama taking place somewhere far away. Amelia Newsham's story is of particular interest in this regard, since her transatlantic infamy hinged not only on the spectacle of her alabaster whiteness as the child of Black parents, but also due to the fact that she eventually married an Englishman and had children of ordinary mixed heritage who did not display signs of albinism. In literal terms this meant that her condition appeared to have no biological repercussions, and yet purely from a visual perspective two "white" parents had produced Black children. Her display as part of a collection of exotic birds and wild beasts provides the starkest evidence of the recurring associations made between Africans and the animal world – in domestic settings with the obedience of dogs and horses, and in the case of curiosities with wild, rare and thus unpredictable animals from unknown lands.

Amelia's troubled biography began in the sugar colonies sometime in the 1740s near Kingston, Jamaica, where she was born to African parents described as "remarkably black."<sup>14</sup> Her mother was the "house slave" of

14 Many thanks to historian Kathleen Chater for providing me with information about archival references to Amelia Newsham's early appearances and movements around the UK. Baptized as Amelia Harlequin, her most detailed biography to date (due to thorough investigative research by Chater) can be found in the *Dictionary of National Biography* online edition, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/98525> (last accessed 29 June 2014).



council member Sir Simon Clarke (6th Baronet of Salford Shirland), who sent Amelia as a gift to his son in London, who then sold her on to John Burnett, the owner of a small menagerie. Amelia's arrival in England and presentation to the royal family, when she was aged around nine years old, was briefly noted in *Jackson's Oxford Journal* on 6 October 1753. Between February and June 1758, the *Public Advertiser* newspaper promoted her exhibition as one of several human and animal curiosities. It is more than likely that the handbill already discussed, which is currently undated, is from this period. In one of the adverts from 9 June an anonymous poem by a young woman who had seen the exhibition was added for dramatic effect. Clearly seduced by the encounter she wrote: "And since, for many rolling years / Such wonders ne'er may reach our shore; / Poz! I'm resolved – to face my fears / I'll see the dearest brutes once more" (Anon., "London").

The absence of a narrative that adequately explains how Amelia was perceived and engaged with in England is palpable. In the archive she appears in different guises at contrasting moments in her life. First, she appears as a child, only referred to as the "white negro girl" and not visually represented; then, at some point in the 1770s, she resurfaces, married, with the last name Newsham (sometimes Lewsham), and the mother of children. This is when the African writer and anti-slavery campaigner Olaudah Equiano mentions how he saw "a remarkable circumstance relative to African complexion" following his arrival in England in 1777. He continues: "a white negro woman, that I had formerly seen in London and other parts, had married a white man, by whom she had three boys, and they were everyone mulattoes, and yet they had fine light hair" (Equiano 2, 216). By 1788 the surgeon, anatomist and collector John Hunter had commissioned a painter (thought to be Johann Zoffany) to document Amelia, with her English husband and two of her mixed children, in an unusual genealogical portrait that is now lost or possibly destroyed.<sup>15</sup> In her forties when it was painted, Amelia's body and accompanying family still had cultural and academic currency, continually causing people to reflect on the transformative powers of nature and its destabilizing effect on racial boundaries.

For the wider public however, another more crudely drawn image kept the figure of Amelia Newsham in circulation as literal currency and as keepsake. In 1791, an amateur artist called N. Burt decided to document the

<sup>15</sup> The portrait was housed at the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons but disappeared at some point in the 1940s. A black and white photographic record of the painting does however exist.

so-called “beasts and birds” he had witnessed in two London exhibitions of curiosities. The short reference book included illustrations and short descriptions of the exhibits, which included Amelia and another “Black and White Negro” who was the servant of one of the show’s proprietors. Burt’s short biography of Amelia was based on an interview he had with her, and has proved useful in research on her story (Burt 33-34). It is here we learn something of how she engaged with her audience, since he reproduces a short monologue that she supposedly insisted he let her recite:

Make nature change her course when'er he list,  
 Or from black parents, how could I exist?  
 My nose, my lips, my features all explore,  
 The just resemblance of a Blackamoor;  
 And on my head the Silver-colour'd wool,  
 Gives further demonstration clear and full.  
 This curious age may with amazement view,  
 What after ages won't believe is true.

Much like the quality of Henry Moss’s portrait, Burt’s drawing of Amelia is a mere sketch, in which she is a monochrome standing figure in a simple dress, with her woolen hair and facial features being the only form of ethnic identification. Although a basic illustration, Burt critically titles the image “a striking likeness of Mrs Newsham the White Negress, 1791.” This act had multiple implications: tying her visual identity to the constraints of the artist’s impression, naming her as a wife and therefore an autonomous citizen, but also signaling her new status as the property of her husband. Her naming in this way, in addition to the reductive quality of her portrait, could also be seen as ironic given the artist’s claim to present his subjects “without any exaggeration; thinking truth the best recommendation” (Burt 3).

Burt’s simple drawing of Amelia was clearly deemed effective, because a few years later in 1795, it would be impressed onto a half-penny coin given to visitors of Thomas Hall’s exotic menagerie [Fig.4]. One side of the coin bore the portrait with the words “Mrs Newsham, The White Negress” around its edge, and on the reverse: “To be had at the Curiosity House City Road near Finsbury Square, London 1795.” These trade tokens, which represented several human and animal curiosities at the time, were part of a private regional coinage system, introduced to address the British deficit in small denomination copper coins. Whilst some had real monetary value, there were many counterfeits that subsequently created a measure of rarity for future collecting. The Mrs Newsham halfpenny became a collector’s

Fig. 4. Condor token showing Mrs Newsham, “the white negress”, produced in 1795. In 1795, Mrs Newsham was exhibited at Thomas Hall’s “Curiosity House” in Finsbury Square, along with a dwarf, contortionist, live Toucan and other exotic birds and animals. From the private collection of the author.



item as soon as it was produced, first catalogued by James Conder in a guide for metal enthusiasts in 1798 (Conder 69, 88).

### Continuing economies

Following its production, the Amelia Newsham coin became absorbed into a tactile culture of classification and public ownership that mirrored the repetitive performances of the sideshow and the intellectual work of collecting underpinning the naturalists’ museum. Mrs Newsham was indeed “to be had” as a cultural commodity over and over again – *for* money and *on* money – bound in the “circum-atlantic economy of superabundance” that connected race, slavery and visual reproduction in so many unusual ways (Roach 41). As continuing collectors’ items in the present day (on eBay and with specialist dealers), all of these coins, playbills and now antiquarian texts are enduring signifiers of the peculiar cultural capital invested in Black bodies across time and space. The escalating costs of these and other racialized artifacts reflect the transference of value from one age to another, where today the contested nature of slavery’s past (in combination with the rarity of evidence) now gives meaning and context to museum and archive collections in former sites of colonial memory. And so the cultural work of preserving an observational record of race relations is repeated in the present day, in another round cycle of the “complex system of mimetic cir-

culatation” that categorized healthy and diseased Black bodies as inherently “other” through representations (Greenblatt 119).

Within the shared Atlantic space of cultural production in the eighteenth century, African people and their bodies were, in general, a critical aspect of the visual language of empire. But the so-called “White Negro” had specific appeal, which encouraged genuine literary interest in their physical bodies and biological genealogy. The cultural value placed on the body and image of these anomalous African individuals through artifacts reveals a deeply ironic contradiction within the transatlantic colonial perspective, which easily sanctioned the disposal of anonymous African bodies that were either exhausted, diseased or killed by slavery’s processes. This adds another layer of meanings to the function of the painted or drawn “portrait” which was used so frequently as a document of authentication for human curiosities. And just as “looking” and “witnessing” were critical aspects of the economic exchange in the encounter with rare African subjects, so too is the awe that emerges from looking at visually arresting bodies through modern research. This presents an ethical quagmire: to look or not to look, to reproduce or not to reproduce? As Leslie Fiedler once explained, “nobody can write about freaks without somehow exploiting them for his own ends” (171).<sup>16</sup> Yet the very presence of individuals like Henry Moss and Mary Sabina in the archive of the revolutionary period demonstrates uniquely how the transatlantic world was interconnected in its struggle with race and reproduction under the shadow of slavery. It is therefore critical to investigate further how the surviving evidence negotiates the curiosity, affects prejudice, and exhorts the wonderment both in the past and present.

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<sup>16</sup> See also Martin, 8.

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