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Author(s): Jennifer L. Morgan

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# “Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder”: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500–1770

Jennifer L. Morgan

IN June 1647, the 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; as 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 comming out, which was with far greater Majesty and gracefulness, than I have seen Queen Anne, descend from the Chaire of State.”<sup>1</sup> Ligon’s rhetoric may have surprised his English readers, for seventeenth-century images of black women did not usually evoke the ultimate marker of civility—the monarchy—as the referent.

Early modern English writers conventionally set the black female figure against one that was white—and thus beautiful. In *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), Sir Thomas Browne argued that blackness and beauty were mutually dependent, each relying on the other as antithetical proof of each one’s existence.<sup>2</sup> Recently, depictions of black women in early modern England have attracted scholarly attention. 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

Jennifer L. Morgan is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of History at the University of Maryland, College Park. Versions of this article were presented at the 1994 Caribbean Studies Association meeting; at *Interrogating the Nation—Feminist Perspectives*, a symposium sponsored by the Program in Women’s Studies at The Johns Hopkins University; and at the Tenth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She thanks participants in the Institute of Early American History and Culture’s Constructing Race seminar, the anonymous *William and Mary Quarterly* referees, and Herman Bennett, Antoinette Burton, Shelly Eversley, Kirsten Fischer, and Robert Reid-Pharr for being both friends and critics.

<sup>1</sup> Ligon, *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes* (London, 1657), 12–13.

<sup>2</sup> Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica: or Enquiries into very many received tenents and commonly presumed truths* (1646), cited in Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, 1995), 12.

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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.<sup>3</sup> As these and other scholars have shown, male travelers to Africa and the Americas contributed to a European discourse on black womanhood. Femaleness evoked a certain element of desire, but travelers depicted black women as simultaneously un-womanly and marked by a reproductive value dependent on their sex. Writers' recognition of black femaleness and their inability to allow black women to embody "proper" female space composed a focus for representations of racial difference. During the course of his journey, Ligon came to another view of black women. As he saw it, 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." For Ligon, their monstrous bodies symbolized their sole utility—their ability to produce both crops and other laborers.<sup>4</sup>

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" Amerindian and African women, Europeans found a means to articulate shifting perceptions of themselves as religiously, culturally, and phenotypically superior to those 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 whiteness that accompanied European expansionism.<sup>5</sup> Well before the publication of Ligon's work, New World and African narratives that relied on gender to convey an emergent notion of racialized difference had been published in England and Europe. Although this article is primarily concerned with England and its imperial expansion, by the time English colonists arrived in the Americas they already possessed the trans-European ethnohistoriographical tradition of depicting the imagined native in which Ligon's account is firmly situated.<sup>6</sup>

Ligon's attitude toward the enslaved has been characterized by modern historians as "more liberal and humane than [that] of the generality of

<sup>3</sup> Erickson, "Representations of Blacks and Blackness in the Renaissance," *Criticism*, 35 (1993), 514–15; Boose, "The Getting of a Lawful Race": Racial Discourse in Early Modern England and the Unrepresentable Black Woman," in Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, eds., *Women, "Race," and Writing in the Early Modern Period* (London, 1994), 49; Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 4, 6–7.

<sup>4</sup> Ligon, *True and Exact History . . . of Barbadoes*, 51.

<sup>5</sup> In regard to "whiteness" as defined by "blackness," Toni Morrison asserts that "the fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the [white] self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work not to see this," in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1797* (London, 1986), II, 18.

planters.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, his text indicates the kind of negative 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 seductively to disclose their monstrosity over the course of the narrative. Travel accounts, which had proved their popularity by the time Ligon’s *History . . . of Barbadoes* appeared, relied on gendered notions of European social order to project African cultural disorder. I do not argue here that gender operated as a more profound category of difference than race. Rather, this article focuses on the way in which racialist 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.<sup>8</sup>

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. These travelers learned to dismiss the idea that women in the Americas and Africa might be innocuous, unremarkable, or even beautiful. Rather, indigenous women bore an enormous symbolic burden as writers from Walter Raleigh to Edward Long employed them to mark metaphorically the symbiotic boundaries of European national identities and white supremacy. The struggle with 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 ultimately in

<sup>7</sup> P. F. Campbell, “Richard Ligon,” *Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society*, 37 (1985), 259. For more on Ligon see Campbell, “Two Generations of Walronds,” *ibid.*, 38 (1989), 253–85.

<sup>8</sup> Arguments about the primacy of race or gender regarding the original construction of difference comprise an enormous theoretical literature. See, for example, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Writing, ‘Race,’ and the Difference It Makes,” in Gates, ed., *“Race,” Writing and Difference* (Chicago, 1985), 5, who asserts that “race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference.” Hortense J. Spillers similarly argues that slavery—the theft of the body—severed the captive from all that had been “gender-related [or] gender-specific” and thus was an “ungendering” process, in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics*, 17 (Summer 1987), 65–81. I would posit that, rather than creating a hierarchy of difference, simultaneous categories of analysis illuminate the complexity of racialist discourse in the early modern period. See, for example, Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York, 1995), 61, on the connections between categories of difference; Elsa Barkley Brown, “Polyrhythms and Improvisation: Lessons for Women’s History,” *History Workshop Journal*, 31 (Spring 1991), 85–90, on simultaneous categories of analysis; and Ania Loomba, “The Color of Patriarchy: Critical Difference, Cultural Difference, and Renaissance Drama,” in Hendricks and Parker, eds., *Women, “Race,” and Writing*, 17–34, for cautions on the dangers of erecting hierarchies of difference.

the service of racial distinctions. Writers who articulated religious and moral justifications for the slave trade simultaneously grappled with the character of the female African body—a body both desirable and repulsive, available and untouchable, productive and reproductive, beautiful and black. This article argues that these meanings were inscribed well before the establishment of England's colonial American plantations and that the intellectual work necessary to naturalize African enslavement—that is, the development of racialist 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. Pliny the Elder's ancient collection of monstrous races, *Historia Naturalis*, catalogued the long-breasted wild woman alongside the oddity of Indian and Ethiopian tribal women who bore only one child in their lifetime.<sup>9</sup> Medieval 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."<sup>10</sup> The shape of her body marked her deviant sexuality; both shape and sexuality evidenced her savagery.

Thus, writers commonly looked to sociosexual deviance to indicate savagery in Africa and the Americas and to mark difference from Europe. 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." Further, "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."<sup>11</sup> 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 exemplified 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.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Pliny, *Natural History in Ten Volumes*, vol. 2, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), 509–27; Herodotus, *The History*, trans. David Grene (Chicago, 1987) 4, 180, 191.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages: A Study in Art, Sentiment, and Demonology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), 33–41, quotation on 34. See also Peter Mason, *Deconstructing America: Representations of the Other* (New York, 1990), 47–56.

<sup>11</sup> *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville: The Version of the Cotton Manuscript in Modern Spelling*, ed. A. W. Pollard (London, 1915), 109, 119.

<sup>12</sup> See McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 22–23, for more on what she labels the "pornotropic" tradition of European eroticized writing on Africa and the Americas.

Richard Eden’s 1553 English translation of Sebastian Münster’s *A Treatyse of the Newe India* presented Amerigo Vespucci’s voyage to English readers for the first time. Vespucci did not mobilize 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 enlargeing of their 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 bristles with illuminating contradiction:

Theyr bodies are veye 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.<sup>13</sup>

The passage conveys admiration for indigenous women’s strength in pregnancy and their ability to maintain aesthetically pleasing bodies, and it also represents the conflict at the heart of European discourse on gender and difference. Vespucci’s familiarity with icons of difference led him to expect American women with hanging breasts; thus he registers surprise that women’s breasts and bodies were neither “wimpeled” nor “hanginge.” That surprise is inextricable from his description of childbearing. His admiration hinges on both a veiled critique of European female weakness and a dismissal of Amerindian women’s pain. The question of pain in childbirth became a central component of descriptions of Africa and Africans. Vespucci presented a preliminary, still ambiguously laudatory account of Amerindian women. Nonetheless, 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 utilized women’s behavior and physiognomy to mark European national identities and inscribe racial hierarchy.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *A Treatyse of the Newe India by Sebastian Münster* (1553), trans. Richard Eden (microprint), (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1966), [57]. See also Mason, *Deconstructing America*, 55, who links Vespucci’s surprise at Indian women’s firm breasts with expectations grounded in medieval imagery of wild women with sagging breasts. The language of “fylth” and shame also evoked sodomy and treachery for English readers. See Alan Bray, “Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England,” in Jonathan Goldberg, ed., *Queering the Renaissance* (Durham, N. C., 1994), 48. The wording of Münster’s passage materializes many axes of difference.

<sup>14</sup> It is significant that this association with sagging breasts, unusual childbearing, and monstrosity emerged so early. Not until the 16th century, for example, did elite European women begin to use corsets to impose an elevated shape to their bodies, and only then did the

In the narration of Columbus's voyage that appears in *A Treatyse*, Münster situated women both as intermediaries between the intrusive and indigenous peoples and as animal-like reproductive units.<sup>15</sup> On arriving at Hispaniola, Columbus's men "pursewinge [the women and men who had come down to the shore] toke a womanne whom they brought to theyr shypp . . . fyllinge her with delicate meates and wyne, and clothing her in fayre apparel, & so let her depart . . . to her companie."<sup>16</sup> As Stephen Greenblatt has illustrated, the female "go-between" was crucial in encounter narratives. 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.<sup>17</sup>

In a passage that closely follows, Münster considered another role for indigenous women and children, a role whose proximate contradiction evokes the complicated nature of European assessment of 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."<sup>18</sup> The metaphor of domesticated livestock introduced a notion that became an *idée fixe* concerning indigenous and enslaved women's twofold value to the European project of expansion and extraction.<sup>19</sup> This metaphor, however, did not fully encompass the complexity of dangers indigenous women presented for

elevated breasts of corseted women became a marker of refinement, courtliness, and status; Georges Vigarello, "The Upwards Training of the Body from the Age of Chivalry to Courtly Civility," in Michel Feher, Ramona Naddaff, and Nadia Tazi, eds., *Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part Two* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 154–55. Very soon thereafter, the "unused" breast, preserved among the elite by employing wet-nurses for their children, embodied the "classic aesthetic ideal," according to Londa Schiebinger, "Why Mammals Are Called Mammals: Gender Politics in Eighteenth-Century Natural History," *American Historical Review*, 98 (1993), 401.

<sup>15</sup> Two years after the publication of Münster's *Treatyse*, Eden translated and published Peter Martyr, *The Decades of the New Worlde of West India* (1533), (London, 1555), another description of the Columbus encounters.

<sup>16</sup> Münster, *Treatyse*, trans. Eden, [4]; Martyr, *Decades of the New Worlde*, trans. Eden, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Greenblatt discusses the role of the "go-between" through his analysis of Bernal Díaz's conquest narrative. He argues that Doña Marina, a native woman who becomes connected to the Spaniards, is the "object of exchange, agent of communication, model of conversion, the only figure who appears to understand the two cultures, the only person in whom they meet. . . . the site of the strategic symbolic oscillation between self and Other is the body of this woman," in *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago, 1991), 143.

<sup>18</sup> Münster, *Treatyse*, trans. Eden, [5]; Martyr, *Decades of the New Worlde*, trans. Eden, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the language of "increase" permeated 17th- and 18th-century slaveowners' probate records as planters in the West Indies and the southern colonies laid claim to enslaved women's productive and reproductive value; Jennifer Lyle Morgan, "Laboring Women: Enslaved Women, Reproduction, and Slavery in Barbados and South Carolina, 1650–1750" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1995).

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 roosting them at a greate fyre.<sup>20</sup>

Vespucci made manifest the latent sexualized danger embedded by 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.<sup>21</sup>

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), utilized 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 modisty 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.<sup>22</sup>

Benzoni's description invokes a sizable catalogue of cultural distance packed with meaning made visible by early modern conventions of gendered

<sup>20</sup> Münster, *Treatyse*, trans. Eden, quoted in Louis Montrose, “The Work of Gender in the Discourse of Discovery,” *Representations*, No. 33 (1991), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Montrose, “Work of Gender,” 5. For more on gender and cannibalism see Carla Freccero, “Cannibalism, Homophobia, Women: Montaigne’s ‘*Des cannibales*’ and ‘*De l’amitié*,’” in Hendricks and Parker, eds., *Women, “Race,” and Writing*, 73–83; for the etymological relationship between Caribs and cannibalism see Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, 13–42.

<sup>22</sup> Benzoni, *History of the New World* (1572), trans. W. H. Smyth (London, 1857), 3–4.



difference. His inability to satisfy his gaze speaks to an obfuscation Ligon enacted one hundred years later and Greenblatt argues is the defining metaphor of the colonial encounter. His “wonder” situated her distance.<sup>23</sup> In the context of a society concerned with the dissemblance 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 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.<sup>24</sup>

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 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, 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.<sup>25</sup>

Benzoni utilized the pathetic figure of the fecund mother and the sexually violated young girl against 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 over access to the Americas directed toward Spain by other European nations. In “Discoverie of the . . . Empire of Guiana” (1598), Raleigh stated that he “suffered not any man to . . . touch any of [the

<sup>23</sup> Greenblatt argues that “wonder is . . . the central figure in the initial European response to the New World, the decisive emotional and intellectual experience in the presence of radical difference,” in *Marvelous Possessions*, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Hall argues that “the painted woman often represents concerns over female unruliness, [and] the power of whiteness. . . . Male writers continually accuse women of hiding their ‘blackness’ under the fair disguise of cosmetics,” in *Things of Darkness*, 89–90. See also Paul-Gabriel Bouce for an early 18th-century reference to popular English beliefs correlating the size of a woman’s mouth to that of her vagina, in “Some Sexual Beliefs and Myths in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” in Bouce, ed., *Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester, Eng., 1982), 29–46, esp. 31–32.

<sup>25</sup> Benzoni, *History of the New World*, trans. Smyth, 8. For an example of the consequences of the Black Legend for English settlers in the Americas see Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *Providence Island, 1630–1641: The Other Puritan Colony* (Cambridge, 1993), 92–96.

natives'] wives or daughters: which course so contrary to the Spaniards (who tyrannize over them in all things) drew them to admire her [English] majestie.”<sup>26</sup> While permitting himself and his men to gaze upon naked Indian women, Raleigh accentuated their restraint. 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.”<sup>27</sup> 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.”<sup>28</sup>

This rhetorical flourish, through female bodies, highlighted the contradictions of the familiar and unfamiliar in the Americas. The woman who opened Benzoni’s narrative, in her nakedness and her monstrous adornments, 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-violated-mother by mobilizing her in the service of publicizing Spanish atrocity. In effect, the Black Legend created (among other things) this confusing figure of pathos—the savage mother whose nurturing quality is both recorded and praised. 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 reverberated back onto Europe, signifying disdain for the Spanish and disregard for monstrous women.<sup>29</sup>

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.<sup>30</sup> 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

<sup>26</sup> Raleigh, “The discoverie of the large, rich, and beautifull Empire of Guiana,” in Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques & Discoveries of the English Nation* (1598–1600), 12 vols. (Glasgow, 1903–1905), 10:391, cited in Montrose, “Work of Gender,” 20.

<sup>27</sup> Karen Robertson, “Pocahontas at the Masque,” *Signs*, 21 (1996), 561, argues that “representation of an Indian woman does involve a dilemma for a male colonist, as expression of the erotic may signal his own lapse into savagery.” See also Montrose, “Work of Gender,” 21.

<sup>28</sup> Benzoni, *History of the New World*, trans. Smyth, 11 (emphasis added).

<sup>29</sup> In 18th-century England, writers intent on displaying the *natural* role of motherhood for English women idealized the “savage mother” and in doing so created tension as the dichotomy of civilized-English and savage-Other slipped; Felicity A. Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore, 1995), 48–53.

<sup>30</sup> Hugh Honour, *The New Golden Land: European Images of America from the Discoveries to the Present Time* (New York, 1975), 54–55.

encounters.<sup>31</sup> 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 I, II). These images 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 was 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 III, IV). Bucher argues that the absence of a suckling child in these depictions is essential to the image's symbolic weight.<sup>32</sup> Their childlessness signified their cannibalism—consumption rather than production. Although cannibalism was not exemplified by women only, women with long breasts marked such savagery among Native Americans for English readers. 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 in 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.

American narratives contributed to a discursive triangulation among Europe, America, and Africa. English travelers to West Africa drew on American narrative traditions. Richard Hakluyt's collection of travel narratives, *Principall Navigations* (1589), brought Africa into the purview of English readers. *Principall Navigations* portrayed Africa and Africans in 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 concerning England's role in overseas expansion required a forceful antidote.

<sup>31</sup> Theodor de Bry, ed., *Grand Voyages*, 13 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1590–1627). De Bry also published the series *Small Voyages*, 12 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1598–1628), chronicling voyages to Africa and the East Indies. Language training among the elite, particularly in Latin, meant that those with access to de Bry's volumes would possess the capacity to understand them. See Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558–1641* (Oxford, 1965), 672–702. For a discussion of the availability of books on reproduction and physiognomy see Patricia Crawford, "Sexual Knowledge in England, 1500–1750," in Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich, eds., *Sexual Knowledge, Sexual Science: The History of Attitudes to Sexuality* (Cambridge, 1994), 86.

<sup>32</sup> Bucher, *Icon and Conquest: A Structural Analysis of the Illustrations of de Bry's Great Voyages*, trans. Basia Miller Gulati (Chicago, 1981), 135, 145. Bucher's analysis includes a complex discussion of the morphology of consumption and an explanation that locates the reversal at the heart of anthropophagy in the icon of the sagging breast. See Bucher, "Savage Women with Sagging Breasts," *ibid.*, 73–120. For the formulation of the long-breasted woman in the Americas see also Mason, *Deconstructing America*, 47–60.



FIGURE I

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 of The Johns Hopkins University.

In response, Hakluyt presented texts that, through an often conflicted depiction of African peoples, ultimately differentiated Africa and England and erected a boundary that made English expansion in the face of confused and uncivilized peoples reasonable, profitable, and moral.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Emily C. Bartels, “Imperialist Beginnings: Richard Hakluyt and the Construction of Africa,” *Criticism*, 34 (1992), 519. See Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968), 3–43, for further discussion of the fluidity of images of Africa in the early modern European imaginary. See also David Armitage, “The New World and British Historical Thought: From Richard Hakluyt to William Robertson,” in *America in European Consciousness, 1493–1750*, ed. Karen Ordahl Kupperman (Chapel Hill, 1995), 52–75. The Hakluyt collection served as “a mythico-historical amalgam intended to introduce . . . conquest and colonization to Europeans”; Bucher, *Icon and Conquest*, 22.

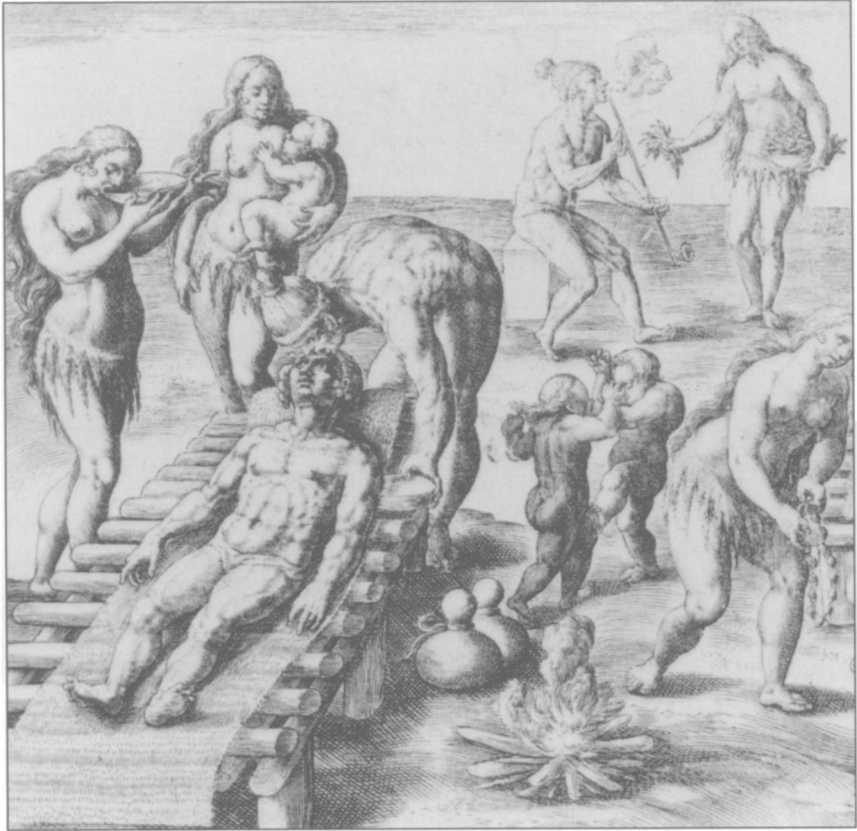


FIGURE II

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

On the West African coast, women's bodies, like those of their New World counterparts, symbolized the shifting parameters of the colonizing venture. English writers regularly directed readers' attention to the sexually titillating topic of African women's physiognomy and reproductive experience. In doing so, they drew attention to the complex interstices of desire and repulsion that marked European men's gaze on Amerindian and African women. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers conveyed a sexual grotesquerie that ultimately made African women indispensable, in that it showed the gendered ways of putting African savagery to productive use. Although titillation was certainly a component of these accounts, to write of sex was also to define and expand the boundaries of profit through productive and reproductive labor.

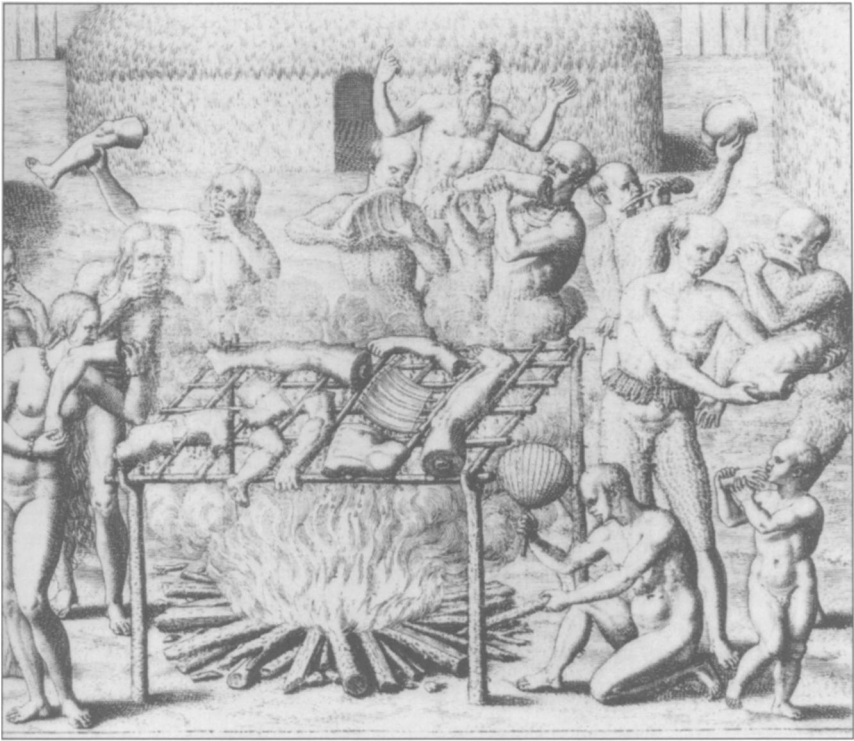


FIGURE III

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 of The Johns Hopkins University.

The symbolic weight of indigenous women’s sexual, childbearing, and child-rearing practices continued to be brought to bear on England’s literary imagination. John Lok, in his account of his 1554 voyage to Guinea, published forty years later in Hakluyt’s collection, re-inscribed Africans’ place in the human hierarchy. Borrowing verbatim from Richard Eden’s 1555 translation of Peter Martyr, 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.”<sup>34</sup> Eden’s Martyr has a long descriptive passage on African oddi-

<sup>34</sup> “The second voyage [of Master John Lok] to Guinea . . . 1554,” in Hakluyt, *Principal*

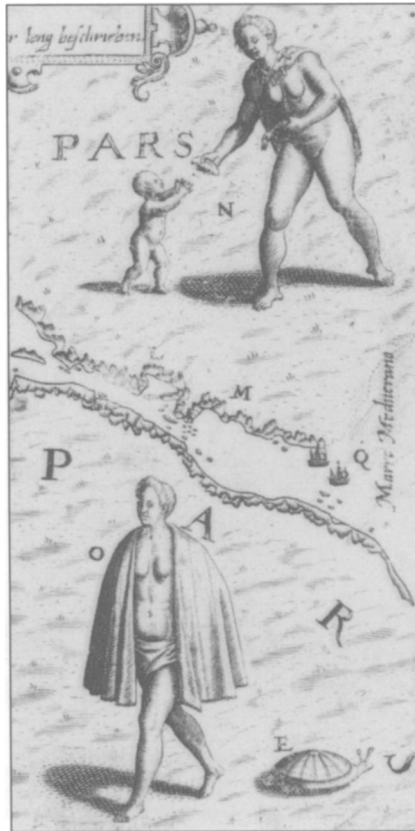


FIGURE IV

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

ties; in it the reference to Garamante women is followed by one to a tribe who “have no speche, but rather a grynnyng and chattering. There are also people without heades cauled Blemines, havinge their eyes and mouth in theyr breast.”<sup>35</sup> By not reproducing the entire paragraph, Lok’s abbrevia-

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*Navigations* (1598–1600), 6:167, 168; see also Martyr, *Decades of the New Worlde*, trans. Eden, 356. “Garamantes” originally occur in Pliny, who describes them as an Ethiopian race that did not practice marriage. See John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 15.

<sup>35</sup> *Decades of the New Worlde*, trans. Eden, 356. In this paragraph, Martyr clearly borrows from Herodotus and Pliny.

tion suggests 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, 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.”<sup>36</sup> This was, perhaps, the first time an Englishman in Africa explicitly used breasts as an identifying trait of beastliness and difference. He goes on to maintain that “diverse of the women have such exceeding long breasts, that some of them wil lay the same upon the ground and lie downe by them.”<sup>37</sup> Lok and Towrson represented African women’s bodies and sexual behavior so as 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.<sup>38</sup> 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 senselesse, then our Country beasts,” a state he attributed to their close association with the livestock they raised.<sup>39</sup> Unlike many of his contemporaries, Jobson regarded African women with admiration. In contrast to Fulbie men, the women were “excel-

<sup>36</sup> “The first voyage made by Master William Towrson Marchant of London, to the coast of Guinea . . . in the yeere 1555,” in Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* (1598–1600), 6:184. Jordan notes that “many chroniclers [of Africa] made a point of discussing the Negro women’s long breasts and ease of childbearing,” in *White over Black*, 39–40. Schiebinger places the equation of African women’s breasts with the udders of goats in a continuum of European imagery of, and relationship to, the breast. She notes that 19th-century ethnologists compared and classified breast size and shape much as they did skulls. Not surprisingly, they used African breasts, like African heads, to prove the linkage between Africans and animals. See Schiebinger, “Why Mammals Are Called Mammals,” 402–03, 394. Philip D. Morgan asserts that “[Beginning with Richard Ligon.] Barbadians were the first coherent group within the Anglo-American world to portray blacks as beasts or as beastlike,” in “British Encounters with Africans and African-Americans, circa 1600–1780,” in Bernard Bailyn and Morgan, eds., *Strangers within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire* (Chapel Hill, 1991), 174.

<sup>37</sup> Towrson, “The first voyage made by Master William Towrson,” 187. Once he categorized them, Towrson relegated women to a passive role in the background of his interactions with Africans, despite the fact that they “worke as well as the men”; *ibid.*, 185.

<sup>38</sup> Jobson, *The Golden Trade or a Discovery of the River Gambra . . . by Richard Jobson* (1628), (Amsterdam, 1968).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.



lently well bodied, having very good features, with a long blacke haire.”<sup>40</sup> He maintained that the discovery of a “mote or haire” in milk would cause these dairywomen to “blush, in defence of her cleanelly meaning.”<sup>41</sup> 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*.”<sup>42</sup> Despite his well-meaning description of African women, Jobson recorded their behaviors associated with English civility only inasmuch as they deviated from that which he, and his readers, expected. His appreciation of Fulbie women and Maudingo people was predicated on their ability to exceed his expectations. To Jobson, African women proved the precarious nature of African civility. His narrative, even at its most laudatory, always returned to inferiority. While describing 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.<sup>43</sup>

Other English publications continued to locate evidence of savagery and legitimated exploitation in women. After Hakluyt died, Samuel Purchas took up the mantle of editor and published an additional twenty volumes in Hakluyt’s series in 1624.<sup>44</sup> 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 skinnes of beasts, neither had they any peculiar wives . . . and when night came they resorted . . . both men and women into one Cottage together . . . and each

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 56 (emphasis added).

<sup>43</sup> 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 are 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”; *ibid.*, 58, 52, 54, and Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas His Pilgrimes* (1624), 20 vols. (Glasgow, 1905).

man choosing his [woman] which hee had most fanciee unto.”<sup>45</sup> This indictment opened the descriptive passages on “Ghinea,” thereby making women’s sexual availability the defining metaphor of colonial accessibility and black African savagery.

In the following volume, Purchas published Andrew Battell’s “Strange Adventures.”<sup>46</sup> 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.”<sup>47</sup> 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.”<sup>48</sup> Battell positioned his discussion of this unnatural behavior in such a way as to close the debate on African savagery. Gaga savagery began, in his account, with cannibalism and ended with mothers who consented to the killing of the children they bore.

Purchas also provided 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.<sup>49</sup> 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 uncleanenesse; 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.”<sup>50</sup> As did most of his contemporaries, de Marees invoked women’s sexuality to castigate the incivility of both men and women: all Africans were savage. The passage displays African males’ savagery alongside their multiple access to women. Similarly, De Marees located evidence of African women’s savagery in their unrestricted 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

<sup>45</sup> “Observations of Africa, taken out of John Leo his nine Bookes, translated by Master Pory . . .,” *ibid.*, 5:517.

<sup>46</sup> “The Strange Adventures of Andrew Battell . . .” (1625), ed. E. G. Ravenstein, in *Hakluytus Posthumus*, 6:367–517.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 377–78.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>49</sup> Pieter de Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea* (1602), trans. and ed. Albert van Dantzig and Adam Jones (Oxford, 1987), xvii.

<sup>50</sup> De Marees, “Description and historicall declaration of the golden Kingdome of Guinea,” in Purchas, ed., *Hakluytus Posthumus*, 6:251. I cite the Purchas edition rather than the modern edition so as to draw on the narrative that early modern English readers encountered.

West African women: they delivered children surrounded by men, women, and youngsters “in [a] most shamelesse manner . . . before them all.”<sup>51</sup> 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 dwelt on the brute nature of shameless African women. He marveled that “when the child is borne [the mother] goes to the water to wash & 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.”<sup>52</sup> 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.”<sup>53</sup>

De Marees inscribed an image of women’s reproductive identity whose influence persisted long after his original publication. “When [the child] is two or three moneths 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 dug backward over her shoulder, and so the child suckes it as it hangs.”<sup>54</sup> Frontispieces for the de Marees narrative and the African narratives in de Bry approximate the over-the-shoulder breastfeeding de Marees described, thereby creating an image that could symbolize the continent (see Figures V, VI, VII). The image was 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 1660s was used, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to mean 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.”<sup>55</sup>

African women’s African-ness seemed 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

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 258–59.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>53</sup> De Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea*, ed. Dantzig and Jones, 23.

<sup>54</sup> De Marees, “Description and historically declaration of the golden Kingdome of Guinea,” 259.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.



FIGURE V

Woman breastfeeding over her shoulder, title page from *Verum et Historicam Descriptionem Avriferi Regni Guineaa*, 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 VII. Courtesy of The John Work Garrett Library of The Johns Hopkins University.

women in the Americas almost always highlighted their fecundity along with their capacity for manual labor.<sup>56</sup> Seventeenth-century English medical writers, both men and women, equated breastfeeding and tending to children with work.<sup>57</sup> Erroneous observations about African women’s propensity for easy birth and breastfeeding reassured colonizers that these women could easily perform hard labor in the Americas while simultaneously erecting a barrier of difference between Africa and England. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English women and men anticipated pregnancy and child-

<sup>56</sup> Jordan, *White over Black*, 39.

<sup>57</sup> Marylynn Salmon, “The Cultural Significance of Breastfeeding and Infant Care in Early Modern England and America,” *Journal of Social History*, 28 (1994), 247–70.

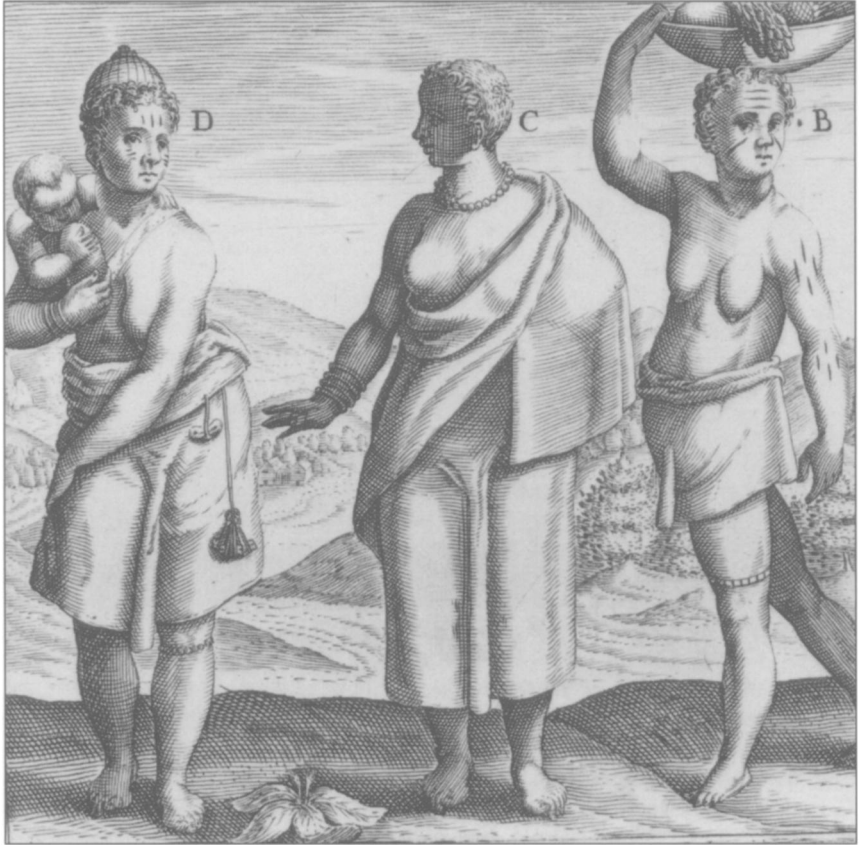


FIGURE VI

Women in Africa, from *Verum et Historicam Descriptionem Avriiferi Regni Guineaa*, in Theodor de Bry, *Small Voyages*, vol. 6 (Frankfurt am Main, 1604), plate 3. Courtesy of The John Work Garrett Library of The Johns Hopkins University.

birth with extreme uneasiness and fear of death, but at least they knew that the experience of pain in childbirth marked women as members of a Christian community.<sup>58</sup> African women entered the developing discourse of national resources via an emphasis on their mechanical and meaningless childbearing. Early on, metaphors of domestic livestock and sexually located

<sup>58</sup> Linda Pollock, "Embarking on a Rough Passage: The Experience of Pregnancy in Early Modern Society," in Valerie Fildes, ed., *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England* (New York, 1990), 45.



FIGURE VII

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 of The Johns Hopkins University.

cannibalism relied on notions of reproduction for consumption. By about the turn of the seventeenth century, as England joined in the transatlantic slave trade, assertions of African savagery began to be predicated less on consumption via cannibalism and more on production via reproduction. African women were materialized in the context of England’s need for productivity. The image of utilitarian feeding implied a mechanistic approach to both childbirth and reproduction 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 could,

indeed, embody the developing discourses of extraction and forced labor at the heart of England's national design for the colonies.<sup>59</sup>

By the eighteenth century, English writers rarely employed 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."<sup>60</sup> 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 attempted to sacrifice the child and claimed that the reunion cemented his goodwill in the eyes of the enslaved, who, convinced of the "good notion of White Men," caused no problems during the voyage to Antigua.<sup>61</sup> Having utilized 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.<sup>62</sup> Thus women's fecundity undermined African society from without and within as they provided a constant stream of potential slaves.

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."<sup>63</sup> Atkins then considered the idea of African women copulating with apes. He noted that "at some places the Negroes

<sup>59</sup> Ruth Perry argues that the valuation of "Motherhood" developed in England alongside empire so that not until the 19th-century did "the production of children for the nation and for the empire constitute childbearing women as a national resource," in "Colonizing the Breast: Sexuality and Maternity in Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 2 (1991), 204, 205; see also Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 7. Miranda Chaytor maintains that in 17th-century England only poor women had "laboring bodies," for as elite women withdrew from household production, their "entire mental and physical lives" became sexualized and thus defined as nonproductive, in "Husband(ry): Narratives of Rape in the Seventeenth-Century," *Gender and History*, 7 (1995), 378–407, esp. 396–98.

<sup>60</sup> Barbot, *A Description of the Coasts of North and South-Guinea . . .*, in A. Churchill, ed., *A Collection of Voyages* (London, 1732), 36. See also J. D. Fage, "'Good Red Herring': The Definitive Barbot," *Journal of African History*, 34 (1993), 315–20.

<sup>61</sup> Snelgrave, introduction, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-trade* (1734), (London, 1971).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–4.

<sup>63</sup> Atkins, *A Voyage to Guinea, Brazil, and the West-Indies* (1735), (London, 1970), 50.

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 control lust.”<sup>64</sup> Abolitionists and antiabolitionists alike accepted the connections between race, animality, the legitimacy of slavery, and black women’s monstrous and fecund bodies. By the 1770s, Edward Long’s *History of Jamaica* presented readers with African women whose savagery was total, for whom enslavement was the only means of civility. Long maintained that “an oran-outang husband would [not] be any dishonour to an Hottentot female; for what are these Hottentots?”<sup>65</sup> He asserted as fact that sexual liaisons occurred between African women and apes. Nowhere did he make 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 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 animal. . . . Thus they seem exempted from the course inflicted upon Eve and her daughters.”<sup>66</sup>

If African women gave birth without pain, they somehow sidestepped God’s curse upon Eve. If they were not her 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.<sup>67</sup> Early modern European women were so defined by their experience of pain in childbirth that an inability to feel pain was evidence of witchcraft.<sup>68</sup> In the case of

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>65</sup> Edward Long, “History of Jamaica, 2, with notes and corrections by the Author” (1774), Add. Ms. 12405, p364/f295, British Library, London. Long was not alone in his delight at suggesting interspecies copulation. Schiebinger details 17th- and 18th-century naturalists’ investigations of apes. She notes that naturalists “ascribed to [simian] females the modesty they were hoping to find in their own wives and daughters, and to males the wildest fantasies of violent interspecies rape,” in her *Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston, 1993), 75–114, quotation on 78.

<sup>66</sup> Long, “History of Jamaica,” p380/f304 (emphasis added).

<sup>67</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York, 1985), 15, 185–91; see also Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 67–68, on the role of inflicted pain as a process of ungendering “female flesh” in slavery.

<sup>68</sup> Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York, 1994), 203–04. See also Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago, 1988), 24–50, who shows that, during mid-19th-century debates over anesthesia for women in childbirth, members of the medical and religious professions argued that to relieve women of pain would interfere with God and deprive women of the pain that ultimately civilized them. See also Diane Purkiss, “Women’s Stories of Witchcraft in Early Modern England: The House, the Body, the Child,” *Gender and History*, 7 (1995), 408–32, for the connection between pain-free childbirth and accusations of witchcraft. On the connection between midwifery and accusations of witchcraft, Carol F. Karlsen notes that “the procreative nurturing and nursing roles of women were perverted by witches,” in *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York, 1989), 144.



England's contact with Africa and the Americas, the crisis in European identity was mediated by constructing 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 viewed "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."<sup>69</sup> As though their breasts did not adequately set these women apart, Ligon used these qualifiers to highlight the exception of their beauty. As were many of his contemporaries, 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.<sup>70</sup>

In the face of 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 been a mark of monstrosity for centuries; Pliny identified five of his monstrous races as such simply because they lacked human speech.<sup>71</sup> 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.<sup>72</sup> To speak of African beauty in this context, then, was justified.

<sup>69</sup> Ligon, *True and Exact History . . . of Barbadoes*, 13, 15–16.

<sup>70</sup> Another example can be found in John Gabriel Stedman's relationship to the mulatto woman Johanna in his *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam: Transcribed . . . from the Original 1790 Manuscript*, ed. Richard Price and Sally Price (Baltimore, 1988). His attempts to persuade this almost-English woman to return to Britain with him failed in part because she understood what he did not—that her status as "exceptional" was contingent on her location in Surinam. Had she gone to England, she would have become, in effect, a "high African" woman. See Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October*, 28 (Spring 1984), 108, for a discussion of the symbolic importance of those who occupy the borders of colonial spaces.

<sup>71</sup> Friedman, *Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, 29.

<sup>72</sup> Ligon, *True and Exact History . . . of Barbadoes*, 17. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., argues that the primary theme in Afro-American literature is the quest for literacy, a response to white assertions that blacks lacked "reason." Just as Phillis Wheatley's literacy had to be authenticated by thirteen white male signatories, so all Afro-American writing was an oppositional demonstration of authentic intellect that "was a political act." Ligon's need to hear the voices of the black women who excited his lust and curiosity suggests a precursor to the black literary link between reading and reason. "The *spoken* language of black people had become an object of parody at

When Ligon arrived in Barbados and settled on a 500-acre sugar plantation with one hundred slaves, African beauty—if it 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 handsome 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.” African people became comparable to vegetation and 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.”<sup>73</sup> 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.”<sup>74</sup> 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. 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.”<sup>75</sup> In the Americas, African women’s pain-free childbearing thus continued to be central in the gendering of racism.

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.<sup>76</sup> 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, that which had initially marked African women as unfamiliar—their sexually and reproductively bound savagery—had

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least since 1769,” says Gates, in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (New York and Oxford, 1987), 5–6 (emphasis added). Ligon wrote out of a period that predated that tradition of parody and instead located reason and civility in spoken language.

<sup>73</sup> Ligon, *True and Exact History . . . of Barbadoes*, 44.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 51

<sup>76</sup> Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 55.

become familiar. To invoke it was to conjure up a gendered and racialized figure who marked the boundaries of English civility even as she naturalized the subjugation of Africans and their descendants in the Americas.