

Abstracts for Early Modern Women's Writing and Critical Race Studies (Dodds and Dowd)

Alexander Lash, "Aphra Behn and the Space of Whiteness"

At least since Woolf's *Room of One's Own*, Aphra Behn has often stood as a founding figure for women's writing. This paper explores how Behn deployed whiteness as she worked to establish her place as a commercially successful woman writer. To the extent that scholarship on Behn's figurations of her own authorship has addressed race, that scholarship has most often focused on *Oroonoko*. I turn instead to an earlier stage in Behn's career where racial formations would seem to be less at stake. The whiteness of Behn's first play to be performed, *The Forc'd Marriage* (1670), appears through its ghostly appropriation of *Othello*: this tragicomedy builds towards a scene of a jealous husband—a white man—who strangles his white wife. This Desdemona figure, however, survives, and returns in a metatheatrical scene to haunt her husband as a pretended ghost. By linking herself as theatrical author with this white woman who takes control of the theatrical space, Behn begins to establish the Restoration theater as a space for white women. The link between whiteness and the empowerment of women inside the theater extends to Behn's paratextual material. The prologue to *The Forc'd Marriage* addresses Behn's unusual position as female playwright in relation to the women in the audience, and begins to define a class of women whose whiteness has been naturalized.

Sujata Iyengar, "Race Thinking in Margaret Cavendish's Drama"

This paper builds on a forthcoming essay in *Criticism* about the intersections of meritocracy (building on Patricia Akhimie's discussion of cultivation), blood purity (as it intersects w/ skin color and rank to create "race"), and sex/gender/sexuality in Margaret Cavendish's drama. I end that paper w/ a brief discussion of *The Female Academy*, in which wealthy white women are *literally* gatekeepers of blood purity and wealth, even as they as they question male supremacy. I now want to investigate whether education and in particular the dialogic form as dramatized by Cavendish are also racialized in other plays by her.

Kristina Lucenko: "I keep up the Right of my place": Margaret Cavendish and the Construction of Natural Civility"

This paper examines Margaret Cavendish's writing about civil comportment as a marker of status and difference, especially her autobiographical and biographical family histories, "A true Relation of my Birth, Breeding and Life" (1656) and *The Life of William Cavendish* (1667) and her understudied satirical play, *A Comedy of the Apocryphal Ladies* (1662). Employing a critical race studies framework, in particular the work of Margo Hendricks (1994) and Patricia Akhimie (2018), I will explore how Cavendish's formulations of social difference align with emerging ideologies of race by contrasting civil bodies that naturally practice and perform privileged power with uncivil bodies inherently excluded from power and authority. Cavendish stresses the importance of women's behavior in shaping social relations and specifically in maintaining aristocratic power and legitimacy during a period of political crisis. As the noble Lady True Honour states, "I keep up the Right of my

place, because it is the cause and interest of all the Nobility of my Country, so that if I should give place, I should be a Traytor to true Honour, and dignified Persons.”

Maria Isabel Maza: “Aphra Behn’s Travel Knowledge: “that world” and “our world” in *Oroonoko*”

This paper, through the lens of travel and mobility, considers the intersection of race, class, and gender in Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*. At the outset of *Oroonoko*, Behn provides a reductive summary of the Atlantic slave trade: “But before I give you the story of this gallant slave,” Behn states, “it is fit I tell you the manner of bringing them to these new colonies; for those they make use of there are not natives to the place” (9). The manner by which Behn elides the complexities and logistics of the seventeenth-century slave trade raises questions about the types of travel demanded by the British colonial enterprise as it is depicted in Behn’s novella. There is, without a doubt, a great deal of travel in Behn’s novella. The issue with travel in *Oroonoko* lies in how often travel is involuntary. There is no question of involuntary travel when the titular character is bound and chained. But what are we to make, for example, of Oroonoko’s offer to be the guard to the narrator and her party as they visit “Indian towns” in Suriname? Studying Oroonoko’s travel provides an insight into the narrator’s understanding of her subjectivity in the novella’s reality. The narrator’s reality, as Margaret W. Ferguson reminds us, is partially based on her creation of “a community of the unjustly oppressed.” However, it is the narrator’s very understanding of her situation that blinds her to that of Oroonoko’s reality as a royal slave.

Meaghan Pachay: “Reading Liberation in the Epistemologies of Margaret Cavendish, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker”

This paper takes its starting point at an intersection of Black feminist theory and queer theory to raise the following questions: What theory of liberation, if any, does Margaret Cavendish have to offer women, especially Black women? Do Black Lives Matter in Margaret Cavendish’s work? The answer, of course, is no: No, Black lives do not matter beyond their role in supporting Cavendish’s own scientific and imaginative projects, in reinforcing the hierarchies that give her the privilege to write and publish in the seventeenth century. However, this paper explores a negotiated reading, proposing that *The Blazing World* models possibilities for queer and Black feminist futures even as it reinforces racialist hierarchies. Building off foundational queer Black feminist work on the erotic and sentimentality in Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, this paper argues that Cavendish’s work shares with Black feminist thought a rejection of the human-nature/mind-matter divide critical to Western intellectual domination. As such, I argue, *The Blazing World* suggests an anti-patriarchal theory of knowledge even as Cavendish works to bracket the revolutionary potential of such ideas in her writings. Reading Cavendish through the lenses of Black feminism and queer theory opens space for thinking beyond our received humanist tradition in ways that posit queer futures.

Edith Snook, “Early Modern Women’s Recipes and Whiteness as Property”

In this paper I want to return to an issue I have written about before, the way that early modern English women's recipes convey the practices that contribute to what Kim F. Hall calls a "Eurocentric beauty culture that privileges one skin colour over another" (*Things of Darkness* 264). For this SAA seminar on "Early Modern Women's Writing and Critical Race Studies," I will use the insights of critical race theory to better highlight the ideological work that white women did through their recipes, both literary and medical, in constructing whiteness as a privileged norm within a context informed by European colonialism. Margaret Cavendish's recipe poem, "A Bisk for Nature's Table," which represents white women's beauty in "a body plump, white, of an even growth" and a hand "that's fat, smooth, and very white," concludes that the dish/body will be "so served up with praises of a nation." Cavendish's recipe draws on ideas about health, beauty, and whiteness also evident in her contemporaries' household recipes, such as those of Grace Mildmay, amongst others. Informed by early modern medical theories about humoral balance and put into practice, these recipes persistently aim at securing fair, white skin as a healthy ideal—albeit one beset by a multitude of perceived illnesses (redness, marks, freckles, dryness, and blackness among them). These practices were materially underpinned by extractive European colonialism in the early modern Atlantic world; this is evident, for instance, in their use of Indigenous knowledge of medical efficacies of American plants. Pulling on the threads of both theory and practice, the paper asks how the anti-racist project of making whiteness visible draws out a critique of the particular role of white women in colonial violence.

Marshelle Woodward: "White Feminist Sympathies in Formation: Hester Pulter and the Sunburned Female Slave"

This essay uses the framework of critical race studies to interrogate Hester Pulter's engagement with early modern discourses of enslavement and enfranchisement. As scholars have observed, Pulter's verse documents both her overwhelming sense of confinement and her longing for physical and spiritual liberation. While her treatment of these topics is largely biblical, glancing references to the Transatlantic Slave Trade in several of her lyrics suggest the importance of chattel slavery to her conceptualization of her own "fettered" condition. This essay examines Pulter's representation of enslaved Africans in her emblem poems and her lyric "The Pismire," showing how these texts strategically instrumentalize and appropriate images of Black suffering for the purposes of white liberation. In this, I argue, Pulter assumes a common rhetorical posture adopted by white feminists from the eighteenth-century to the present day—a fact that might lead us to question whether the occlusion of Black women's experience is endemic to a liberation movement that, like other strains of the Enlightenment project, came into formation against the backdrop of European colonial oppression.