

“In me you see the Almighty’s wondrous Power”: Amelia Newsham, Race,
and Black Women’s Intellectual History in Georgian Britain

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Over the summer of 1791, a “drawing-master” of the “Naval and Drawing Academy, Tottenham Court Road” in London, began publishing drawings and brief descriptions of the exhibitions and curiosities that “have been, and are, exhibiting in London in the years 1790 and 1791.”¹ The accumulated prints were published together as *Delineation of Curious Foreign Beasts and Birds, in Their Natural Colours* and included the colored drawings of seventeen exotic animals. Among them were the drawings and descriptions of a three-year-old lion from Algiers, a tiger from China, a pelican from the Cape of Good Hope, and a rhinoceros from “the Great Mogul Empire,” bounties of Britain’s colonial entanglement in Africa and Asia. But Burt also included more local but rare creatures, such as a cow he described as a “heifer with two heads” from Worcester.² Among the animals and birds documented by the artist and schoolmaster, a man who signed his name only “N. Burt,” were drawings and descriptions of four human “curiosities,” also from England’s colonies: Mr. Peter Davies, “the Irish Dwarf” and Mr. Patrick O’Brien, “the Irish Giant” were both from Ireland. The other two curiosities were from England’s jewel in the Caribbean sea, Jamaica: a man Burt refers to only as “the Black and white negro” and the “piebald man” but was likely John Richardson Primrose Bobey; and “The White Negro Woman,” Mrs. Amelia Newsham, the focus of this article.³

¹ N. Burt, *Delineation of Curious Foreign Beasts and Birds, in Their Natural Colours; Which Are to Be Seen Alive at the Great Room over Exeter Change, and at The Lyceum, in the Strand* (London: Printer for the author, 1791). I have been unable to locate any references to a naval and drawing academy on Tottenham Court Road in the archives.

² Burt, *Delineation of Curious Foreign Beasts and Birds*.

³ This article is meant as a provocation and therefore only provides limited detail on Amelia’s life and her social-cultural context. For a fuller account of Amelia’s life within a context of eighteenth-century race-making in Britain, see my forthcoming book, *The Many Lives of Amelia Newsham* (Viking Press, forthcoming).

Skin color, especially that of people of African ancestry, became a growing source of interest and fascination for European scholars and the public throughout the eighteenth century.⁴ Of particular interest were people, like John Richardson Primrose Bobey and Amelia Newsham, born of African parents, but who were either born with white skin or whose skin gradually became white as they grew older. Bobey likely had what today is understood as vitiligo, while Amelia was born with what is now understood as albinism. Burt's account of Amelia, unlike Bobey, Davies, or O'Brien, includes words that he attributes directly to her: an autobiographical poem and a brief account of her life. This is the only source I have found in which the author claims to quote Amelia directly.

In this short reflective piece, I want to consider how Amelia may have viewed or understood the causes of her bodily difference and the way she may have attempted to assert an image of herself through the poem and life story Burt ~~recorded. claims to have recorded.~~ This single source suggests that Amelia might have used the platform available to her to express her own ideas about her difference and to make some attempt at influencing the opinions of her viewers. Drawing upon the rich scholarship that forms Black women's intellectual history, I show first how Amelia and her physical appearance posed a problem for naturalists, philosophers, and other intellectuals in Britain and across Europe who were attempting to refine racial classifications and hierarchies while simultaneously distinguishing the boundaries between human and nonhuman. I then show how Amelia presented her own explanation for her physical appearance, and how she understood herself in a Christian intellectual framework. The account of Amelia and her words found in Burt's *Delineation of Curious Foreign Beasts and Birds, in Their Natural Colours* indicate that she was likely aware of and understood her position within these debates and discussions and also that she may have tried to engage in the intellectual and political discourse that shaped her life.

⁴ Renato G. Mazzolini, "Skin Color and the Origin of Physical Anthropology (1640–1850)," in ~~S. Lettow, ed.,~~ *Reproduction, Race, and Gender in Philosophy and the Early Life Sciences*, ed. ~~Susanne Lettow~~ (State University of New York Press, 2014), 146.

Ultimately this piece suggests the need for historians to take seriously glimpses, slivers, and fragmentary sources for what they might reveal about the intellectual lives of eighteenth-century Black people in England, as well as other people who have been marginalized in eighteenth-century British history.

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Amelia Harlequin, her name on the two institutional records that I have found, was one of thousands of people of African ancestry living in London—for example in Deptford, St George’s in the East End, Holborn, and Charing Cross—in the late eighteenth century.⁵

Although the exact population cannot be determined, London’s Black presence was certainly visible. The planter and politician Samuel Estwick wrote in 1773 that “there were already fifteen thousand negroes in England; and scarce is there a street in London that does not give many examples of that.”⁶ Several historians have argued that few of these were women; however, more recently scholars have also begun challenging this claim, arguing that the perceived absence of Black women in the records has to do with the kinds of records available to us.⁷

The absence of archival sources has limited studies on the intellectual lives of Black people in Georgian and Regency Britain, and Black women, in particular. And yet, in the case of Amelia, we have a source that presents her words, albeit mediated and brief. The dearth of archival material also suggests a need for historians to adapt a wider and more

⁵ The exact number of people of African ancestry living in London in the eighteenth century is unknown. Estimates range from 7,500 to 40,000. However, there was likely an increase in the population in 1784, following the American Revolution. See Norma Myers, *Reconstructing the Black Past: Blacks in Britain, 1780 and 1830* (Frank Cass, 2006). “Mrs. Amelia Newsham” was very likely the name Amelia used in her public appearances.

⁶ Samuel Estwick, *Considerations on the Negroe Cause Commonly So Called, Addressed to the Right Honourable Lord Mansfield* (London: J. Dodsley, 1773), 94.

⁷ See Gretchen Gerzina, *Black London: Life Before Emancipation* (Rutgers University Press, 1995); Montaz Marché, “Centring Blackness: A Focus on Gender and Critical Approaches Through Black Women’s Lives,” *European History Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2023): 26–31.

creative approach to sources when considering the intellectual lives of socially marginalized peoples. In the growing field of Black women’s intellectual history, scholars have argued that Black women throughout the diaspora often do not express their ideas in ways, forms, and places that have traditionally been recognized within definitions of intellectual history.⁸ In two influential texts on the subject, *Black Women’s Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* (2007) and *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* (2015), the questions of how historians approach both archival sources and modes of analysis—the conventions of the historical discipline—are raised and explored.⁹ Both works provide urgent new ways of thinking about and understanding the intellectual worlds of Black women from the seventeenth century onward and have opened the field up more generally. These works highlight key lessons for scholars interested in thinking critically about the intellectual lives of Black women, particularly those scholars working in the period prior to the late-twentieth century and interested in the lives of poor and working-class women. They demonstrate an approach to intellectual history described as “black woman-style” that recognizes Black women’s ideas as inextricable from their quotidian lives at the convergence of race, class, gender, and status. As Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara Savage write in the introduction of their edited collection, “black women’s intellectual histories can never be explained by way of a mere genealogy of ideas.” Rather, in tracing Black women’s intellectual history, historians must be willing to consider the social and cultural lives of women, following them “from political podiums, church pulpits, and the streets into intimate sites of writings: the letter, the short story, the poem, and the novel.”¹⁰ This broader approach

⁸ There is a very long history of Black women historians and activists who, though may not have identified as intellectual historians, were writing intellectual histories of Black women. In these works, historians have shown the interlink between activism and knowledge production, encouraging scholars to look beyond conventional sources to engage other kinds of archival materials and evidence. For example, see: Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, eds., *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images* (National University Publications, 1978).

⁹ Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara Savage, eds., *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* (University of North Carolina Press, 2015); **Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway, eds., *Black Women’s Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* (University Press of New England, 2007).**

¹⁰ Bay et al., “Introduction,” 4–5.

to intellectual history also opens different possibilities for where we might find intellectual activities of Black women and other marginalized actors. As Nell Irvin Painter writes about her study of Sojourner Truth, “if we are to write thoughtful biographies of people who were not highly educated and who did not leave generous caches of personal papers in the archives where historians have traditionally done their work, we will need to develop means of knowing our subjects, and adapt to our subjects’ ways of making themselves known.”¹¹ These may be the creative expressions of Black women artists and poets, like Phillis Wheatley, the deposition of a Black woman arrested for “riotous and disorderly” behavior, or the more intimate letters exchanged between friends. While historians must be attentive to the power present in different modes of expression, attention to the different textual, oral, and visual articulations of marginalized peoples found in unconventional spaces may yield glimpses that may otherwise go unnoticed. Although most work in this area has focused on the US and the Caribbean, Black women’s intellectual history provides a theoretical and methodological guide for the search and retrieval of archives that may provide glimpses of Black women’s lives in Britain and also may provide ways of thinking about the brief and fragmented archives. Amelia Newsham’s autobiographical poem is one of those unconventional sources that evinces the ideas marginalized individuals drew upon and recreated in order to understand the world and their place in it.

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Amelia was born into slavery, the property of Sir Samuel Clarke 6th Baronet, who also owned both her parents. She was born with a rare condition that left her without melanin in her skin and hair, a condition now described as albinism. Like most enslaved people in

¹¹ Nell Irvin Painter, “Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth’s Knowing and Becoming Known,” *The Journal of American History* 81 (1994): 462.

eighteenth-century Britain, we know very little about Amelia's life prior to her arrival in Britain. As a young child, she was sent to England to be exhibited as a curiosity. Only a brief newspaper article confirms what may have been Amelia's arrival in London on 6 October 1753.¹² A few months later, Amelia was advertised for sale in a local London newspaper called the *Public Advertiser*, her price set at 400 guineas.¹³ Over the next four years Amelia was bought and sold at least twice by people who exhibited her at various locations, but mostly in taverns and private residences, around what is now Charing Cross. In 1766 Amelia was baptized at St Lawrence parish church in Exeter.¹⁴ At this point, she is recorded as saying that she ““thought herself free”” and left her owner. In several newspaper notices after her baptism, Amelia is listed as married to a white English man, sometimes described as from Northamptonshire and sometimes from Yorkshire but never named, and the mother of several “mulatto” children. Amelia Newsham; (an alias that she began to use, at least publicly, sometime after her baptism); ~~and possibly her eldest daughter, werewas~~ displayed across the country, from Norfolk to Edinburgh, from Coventry to Exeter, possibly with her eldest daughter. She eventually disappears from the archival record in 1798, by which time she was well known across the country as the “white negro woman.”

In addition to being shown, while enslaved, and then likely making the decision to continue exhibiting herself, once she was freed, to the paying audiences at fairs and taverns and in the intimate parlours of Britain's elite, Amelia was also examined by naturalists, philosophers, and artists, including the London-based anatomist John Hunter, the novelist Oliver Goldsmith, and “apostles” of the “father of binomial nomenclature,” Carl Linnaeus.¹⁵

¹² Jackson's *Oxford Journal*, “Dispatches from London,” 5 October 1753.

¹³ *Daily Advertiser*, 1 April 1754. There is some discrepancy in between the archival sources on Amelia's exact arrival. Later in her life, she says arrived in London in 1747 on a ship captained by Benjamin Holland. The only ship Holland seems to have captained coming from the Caribbean arrived in Dover in 1753, which aligns more closely with the October 1753 report announcing the arrival of a “white negro girl” from Jamaica.

¹⁴ “Amielia Harliegwin” in Saint Lawrence Church, Exeter, Devon, England, 17 April 1766.

¹⁵ Nicholas Hudson, “From ‘Nation’ to ‘Race’: The Origin of Racial Classification in Eighteenth-Century Thought,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29 (1996): 247–26.

Like the public, British and European scholars were interested in the seeming contradiction of a person with white skin but African features and hair texture, born of “black” parents.

Amelia’s body was studied for what it might reveal to them about racial classifications and hierarchies, especially the differences between emerging understandings of whiteness and blackness. Hunter claimed, based on his examination of Amelia, that the original man was Black, and all others had descended from this origin.¹⁶ Goldsmith, for instance, claimed to have seen two “white negros” but examined only the one “last shewn in London,” who was likely Amelia, sometime between 1758 when he arrived in the city and 1776, when his account was first published.¹⁷ As he wrote, “we may consider the European figure and colour as standards to which to refer all other varieties, and with which to compare them.”¹⁸

Goldsmith drew on the idea that all other human variety had degenerated, a theory famously put forward by Buffon following his study of a white-skinned African girl named Genevieve.¹⁹ Based on Goldsmith’s examination of Amelia, and what he had read about other white-skinned children born to brown or black-skinned parents in Asia, Africa, and America, he determined that the variations in skin color among people were “but accidental deformities” caused by climate, poor nourishment, and uncivilized manners.²⁰

Amelia was also studied for what her body might reveal about nascent classifications between humans and animals, specifically apes. The correspondence between Linnaeus and his informants in London, John Ellis, a linen merchant and member of the Royal Society, and

¹⁶ *The Times*, 24 June 1788. It is not clear when John Hunter first encountered Amelia, but it was likely sometime between 1773 and 1784.

¹⁷ The other girl that Goldsmith mentions was likely the same child that arrived in England in the late 1760s and was exhibited in London and other cities, including at the George in Canterbury in May 1768. This person, who I have not been able to find in other sources, is also like the same “white negro girl” who, in 1772, is reported to have died in Kidderminster. See *Coventry Standard*, 27 April 1772. For discussion of another enslaved child brought to Britain and exhibited during this period, see my forthcoming chapter, “Just the One” in [Antionette Burton, ed., *Up Against the Archive: Experiments in Writing British Empire History Otherwise*, ed. Antionette Burton](#) (Duke University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁸ Oliver Goldsmith, *An History of the Earth, and Animated Nature*, vol. 2 (London: James Williams, 1776–77), 239.

¹⁹ For more on Buffon see Andrew Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment* (John Hopkins University Press, 2011).

²⁰ Goldsmith, *An History of the Earth*, 240–42.

Pehr af Bjerken, a Swedish physician temporarily based in London, provide what are perhaps the most detailed archives of any of the examinations Amelia endured. Between March and June of 1758, Amelia was observed by the two men on behalf of Linnaeus, who wanted to confirm whether she was the “homo troglodyte” or “homo nocturnes,” a creature which he described as a kind of counterpart to *Homo sapiens*. As the world of the European expanded to include animals previously unknown, specifically anthropoid apes such as chimpanzees and orangutans, scholars debated the relationship between humans and animals. Within this climate, Linnaeus drew upon the descriptions he found in ancient and contemporary European travel literature of Asia and Africa to answer the question of man’s relationship to animals. The “homo troglodyte” was for Linnaeus the creature that bridged the gap between *Homo sapiens* and anthropoid apes, the missing link. And for a period, he saw in the body of Amelia Newsham, the “white negro girl in London,” the proof of his theory.

English newspapers published descriptions of Amelia as a child: “as fair as any European,” her “head covered in white wool,” among other similar descriptions.²¹ A zoologist, Peter Simon Pallas, who examined Amelia when she was around sixteen years old, described her as “short in stature, with a narrow, somewhat reddish neck, white skin tinged a sanguiney-phlegmatic colour, red lips, and bright reddish cheeks; but she was otherwise of Ethiopian appearance, with a flattish nose, bulging lips, low forehead, and a round, rather rotund face, although her skin was pocked with a few smallpox scars.” Her eye color he described as “shinning grey colour,” and her eyelashes and hair “blond colour.”²² We can see in these, and other descriptions of Amelia what European authors expected her to look like, what an enslaved Black person *should* like, and what they found so shocking about Amelia’s appearance. Her appearance made her stand out in a profound and transgressive way.

Possessing white skin, as “fair as any European,” while being the offspring of a enslaved

²¹ *Norfolk Chronicle*, 16 August 1783.

²² Peter Simon Pallas, *Novae species Quadrupedum e Glirium ordine* (Erlangen: Wolfgang Walther, 1778), 10–11.

parents, Amelia was a liminal figure, whose status and skin color did not fit with the racial logic and curated racial order that was becoming more fixed throughout the eighteenth century.

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It is possible to trace Amelia's movements across the country throughout most of the second half of the eighteenth century.²³ The sources consistently record that she was from Jamaica and that both of her parents were Black and enslaved. This information is sometimes attributed to the man who owned her, John Bennet, but also directly to Amelia: "It is told, *by herself* and the people [who owned her], that she is born in Jamaica to Black parents that live there still. She was taken when she was four or five years old."²⁴ In the archives from the 1770s onward, Amelia's marital status and children are also mentioned. It is possible that Amelia provided audiences with other information, but it is only in Burt's account of Amelia in 1790 that there is any record of Amelia reciting the short poem.

The series of images and descriptions included in *Delineation of Curious Foreign Beasts and Birds* were published over the course of several weeks and sold for one shilling at several locations in London. Burt states that he was motivated to compile the images and descriptions as a way of highlighting the wonders of God: "[It] was for my private motives of curiosity and contemplation on so small a part of the wonderful works of the Creator on animated nature!" His theological motivations must have influenced the selection of animals and people included in his text, but he assures his readers, "I mean to present them without

²³ I have been able to trace exhibitions of Amelia in the newspapers from 1757 to 1798, with only short periods where she was either not exhibited or where her exhibitions were not being advertised in sources still available.

²⁴ Emphasis mine. See Pehr af Bjerken to Carl Linnaeus, 14 June 1758, Uppsala L2365 (translated by Alexander Johansson). Peter Simon Pallas also wrote that in addition to speaking to her owner, he also spoke directly to Amelia.

any exaggeration; thinking truth the best recommendation.”²⁵ It is clear from the language Burt uses that he did not see all the animals or people during the same visit or in the same place. Burt claims to have encountered Amelia in 1790 or in 1791. Though he does not specify where he sees her, another source confirms that during this same period, Amelia was one of the attractions at the Lyceum, a purpose-built entertainment venue built in 1765 comprised of small apartments, intimate rooms, and a theatre. It is also clear that Burt did not speak to all four of the people he included in his collection. In his description of John Richardson Primrose Bobey, for instance, he states only that he was “an indented servant to Mr Clarke, is about eighteen years of age, and cannot be said to be black or white, as he has a mixture of both.” The rest of the chapter on Bobey is an extended quote from a 1777 work by C. T. Middleton about skin color and “the negro in general.”²⁶ It is likely that Burt only saw Bobey in passing or perhaps heard about him. The chapter on Amelia is different. Burt notes that he conversed with her and that she provided most of the information he records in the book. It is, of course, possible that the text is exaggerated or inaccurate or otherwise inexact, but it is reasonable to assume that the words Burt recorded were a relatively accurate account.

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Delineation of Curious Foreign Beasts and Birds is the only source I have found that offers any account of what Amelia said or did, besides providing details about her life, to engage her audience when she was on display.²⁷ According to Burt, upon entering the room, the first

²⁵ Burt, *Delineation of Curious Foreign Beasts and Birds*, 3.

²⁶ Burt, *Delineation of Curious Foreign Beasts and Birds*, 24–27. Burt attributes the passage to C. T. Middleton, *A New and Complete System of Geography: Containing a Full, Accurate, Authentic and Interesting Account and Description of Europe, Asia, Africa, and America* (London: J. Cooke, 1777).

²⁷ There is one other source that provides an account of Amelia’s actions and words during an exhibition, but that account, which appears in a journal in 1808, seems to have been drawn directly from Burt’s publication, with one difference. This other publication claims that it was Amelia’s “custom when exhibited, to address strangers” with the autobiographical poem, while Burt makes no mention of whether anyone else was in the room with him when he saw Amelia, nor whether the words she recited was a regular part of her exhibition. See *The Literary Panorama (London)* 3 (Jan. 1808): 803.

words Amelia uttered were those of the poem. She began first by asking whether it was “agreeable for her to repeat a few lines.” And with his consent, “she proceeded thus”:

In me you see the Almighty’s wondrous Power,
 Who works new wonders each succeeding hour,
 Who calms the seas, and bids the tempest roar;
 Darts down his fiery flashes from on high,
 Who rolls loud peals of thunder from the sky;
 His potent arm can all things overthrow,
 And crush the world to nothing at one blow;
 Make nature change her course whene’er he list

Or from black parents, how could I exist?
 My nose, my lips, my features all explore,
 The just resemblance of 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.

In his profile on Amelia, Burt claims that these words are an accurate account of the verse Amelia recited when he went to see her performance.²⁸ Of the four human curiosities he profiles in his collection, its only Amelia that Burt claims to quote directly. This source is one of only two archives I have found that claims to maintain an accurate representation of Amelia’s own words. Beyond offering an account of her life, the source indicates that Amelia

²⁸ Burt, *Delineation of Curious Foreign Beasts and Birds*, 33.

may have used the limited platforms available to her to express her own ideas about her difference and to make some attempt at influencing the opinions of her audience. Rather, despite the scarcity of options and opportunity before her, she appears to have managed to carve out a life for herself and her children that enabled them to survive.²⁹

For most of her life, Amelia's "contrary complexion" made her a spectacle—her skin, hair, and facial features the source of fascination. It makes sense then that her exhibition centered on this difference. But in adulthood, she became more than a passive subject made available for a paying audience to gawk at and interrogate. Rather, in what is perhaps better described as a performance, it is apparent that Amelia learned the lessons of the elocutionist and adopted the "art of public speaking" to engage her audience.³⁰ It was not unusual for exhibited people, particularly those with forms of bodily difference and deformity, to develop their acts around their difference but also to pose challenges, of sorts and to varying degrees, to spectators' expectations, adding to the entertainment value of the performance.³¹

In taverns, on street corners, at local fairs, on the floor of Parliament and on the hustings, elocutionists entertained a range of spectators through performative oral recitation or speeches. The elocution movement, which took hold in the latter eighteenth century, formed part of a larger industry and culture of theatre, performance, and entertainment in London and provincial towns.³² The art of public speaking or elocution was connected to and influenced directly by theatre, and specifically the naturalistic acting techniques spearheaded by David Garrick, a famous actor and theatre owner who revolutionized Georgian theatre.

²⁹ Ono-George, *The Many Lives of Amelia Newsham*.

³⁰ I am cautious not to overextend any notion of agency here. While we have no evidence for why she made the choices she did, it is clear that Amelia's options and opportunities were incredibly restricted. For more detailed discussion of the "careers" and performance of those with anomalous bodies, see Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York University Press, 1996), and especially David A. Gerber's chapter therein, "The 'Careers' of People Exhibited in Freak Shows: The Problem of Volition and Valorization," 38–54.

³¹ As part of his performance, for instance, Peter Davies, the "Irish Dwarf," would lift multiple men to demonstrate his incredible strength and challenge any notion of physical weakness. Reported in *Morning Chronicle*, March 23, 1791, among other newspapers across England between 1791 and 1792.

³² For more on the elocution movement, see Michael Shortland, "Moving Speeches: Language and Elocution in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *History of European Ideas* 8, no. 6 (1987): 639–53.

And like the actor on stage, the elocutionist sought to embody the emotion of the words, to display words of sentiment from deep within, from the heart.³³ But the spoken arts had a more determined purpose than what might first appear. Its purpose was not only to convey the content or to engage and move the sentiment of the listener. Much more than that, the aim of the elocutionist was to persuade its audience to some action. This is what Amelia's performance, as recorded by Burt, might have sought to do; however, there are no further details about how she performed. Burt does not provide any details about the immediate context in which Amelia recited the verse, nor does he tell the reader how she spoke, the tone of her voice, or how she positioned her body, for instance. Still, although not explicitly, Amelia's words suggest she was not just interested in the "art of public speaking" but also "the art of persuasion."³⁴

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Amelia was very likely attuned to the various discourses about the white-skinned African circulating in eighteenth-century British society. By the time of her encounter with Burt, she had experienced years of speculation about her difference. Her skin color may not have been the most important force in her life, but it was certainly a significant factor in the trajectory of her life. It is why she was separated from her parents and her home, why she was put on display, how she was able to survive for a good portion of her life. It is reasonable then to ask: what did she make of her difference?

Throughout most of Amelia's life, there was little understanding of what caused the white skin of some African people born to Black parents, in scientific-medical discourse, nor among wider society. Explanations were widely varied and steeped in superstition and

³³ Thomas Sheridan, *British Education: Or, The Source of the Disorders of Great Britain* (London, 1756), 91.

³⁴ Shortland, "Moving Speeches," 645.

nascent understandings of human variation. Until the late eighteenth century, Europeans assumed that the condition only occurred among the brown- and black-skinned people they encountered in colonies and was not a condition that existed among white-skinned Europeans.³⁵ According to a handful of European travelers who claimed to have encountered “white-skinned Africans born to black parents” in kingdoms of western and central Africa in the late sixteenth and seventeenth century, such children were described as either monstrous, and treated as slaves or outcasts, or as celestial, holding special spiritual powers, and privileged within the court of royalty.³⁶

By the eighteenth century, more white-skinned Africans, both those born with an absence of melanin (albinism) and those whose skin became gradually white (vitiligo), were being examined by European anatomists, philosophers, and physicians who speculated that the white skin on African bodies may be the result of maternal imagination or fright, or was evidence of the emergence of a separate species of human variety, or was the result of a congenital disease.³⁷ For instance, in 1744, after examining a four year old boy from Angola named Maponde, the French philosophers Voltaire and Pierre Louis de Moreau de Maupertius both concluded that Maponde and other white-skinned Africans were of a separate “race of Men living,” and both speculated that the child was not fully human but instead some kind of “little white animal.”³⁸ Later, in 1776, Oliver Goldsmith wrote that he was taught to believe that the “whiteness of the Negroe skin was a disease, a kind of milky

³⁵ For more on the study of white-skinned Africans in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe and America see, Charles D. Martin, *The White African American Body: A Cultural and Literary Exploration* (Rutgers University Press, 2002) and Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness*.

³⁶ See for example, Olfert Dapper, *Description de l’Afrique contenant les noms [. . .]* (Amsterdam: Wolfgang, Waesberge, Boom and van Someren, 1686).

³⁷ James Parson, “An Account of the White Negro Shewn Before the Royal Society [. . .],” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* (1765): 45–53; Voltaire, “Relation touchant un maure blanc, amené d’Afrique à Paris en 1744,” ed. Jean Mayer, in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 28B, *Œuvres de 1742–1745 (II)*, ed. David Williams et al. (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2008), 197–200; John de Sales, *De la philosophie de la nature*, vol. 3 (Paris: Arkstee and Merkus 1770), 201.

³⁸ Voltaire, “Relation touchant un maure blanc,” 197–200. See Andrew Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness* for more in depth discussion about the examination of Maponde.

whiteness, that might be called rather a leperus crust than a natural complexion.”³⁹ Such speculations were circulated widely to the reading British public and discussed in a range of both public and specialist texts, including newspapers, medical journals, and popular pamphlets.

Amelia may have heard what people said when they viewed her, but also she could have read what was written about “white negros” in the various sources. Linnaeus’s “apostles,” the two men who examined Amelia throughout the spring and summer of 1758, noted that she was “fully reasonable with easier concepts” and that she liked to read. There is no reason to believe that Amelia would have been unable to understand what others thought about her condition. She endured the pokes, probes, and the humiliating and invasive examinations of her body for decades. She likely also bore witness to the exploitative examinations and spectacle of several others around her, those also with anomalous bodies. And while Amelia makes no claims to specific knowledge in any of the sources I have seen or found, what we know to be her lived experience placed her regularly and for most of her life within spaces in which ideas of her difference, and racial difference more broadly, were being discussed and debated, sometimes even in her presence.

Amelia’s verse, while not necessarily radical, suggests to the listener another way, a Christian or theological way, of understanding the white skin of African people that challenged some of the more scientific explanations gaining popularity in the latter eighteenth century. Amelia begins by explaining her difference as an act of God, “the Almighty’s wonderous Power.” Although not directly quoted from scripture, the first half of the poem draws on biblical imagery and language. For instance, the passage “darts down his fiery flashes from² on high” does not appear in the Bible, but the phrase “fiery darts” may have been taken from Ephesians 6:16, when the apostle Paul writes to warn the Ephesians to live faithfully in Christ—“Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to

³⁹ Goldsmith, *An History of the Earth*, 241.

quench all the fiery darts of the wicked”—a message Amelia may have also shared with the London public she encountered.⁴⁰ The imagery of a God who “calms the seas, and bids the tempest roar,” “who rolls loud peals of thunder from the sky” is also language reminiscent of passages found in the Old Testament, the Psalms, and often evoked in both sermons and hymns, such as Nathaniel Cotton’s 1761 verse, “Affliction is a Stormy Deep.”⁴¹ Although the poem is not didactic, the language is prophetic in its warning of God’s power and is reminiscent of language used among evangelicals and jeremiads.

Amelia does not make clear what “new wonders” God will work, why he might “crush the world to nothing at one blow,” or what things specifically “his potent arm can . . . overthrow.” It is possible that these prophetic words are used only to highlight her own bodily difference. It is also possible that Amelia’s words, spoken within the political and highly charged climate of debates about the slave trade and the equality of Black and African peoples, holds a deeper rhetorical purpose. Historians often refer to the latter quarter of the eighteenth century as the “age of abolition,” a period in which there were increasing legal challenges to the condition and existence of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the British colonies. But it is not until the emergence of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787 that a strong and organized effort to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire developed. Amelia’s meeting with Burt occurred then, at the height of this debate, a period marked by what Catherine Hall calls the “war of representation,” the jostling of pro- and anti-slavery advocates in a popular social and propaganda campaign to influence public opinion on the question of the slave trade and slavery. Could Amelia’s words have been a subtle reference to current debates on slavery at the time?

⁴⁰ King James Version, Ephesians 6:16.

⁴¹ Nathaniel Cotton, “Affliction is a Stormy Deep” (ca. 1761), in *The Christian Hymn Book* (Central Book Concern, 1865). The specific lines I am referring to are “Perhaps, before the morning dawn, He will restore our peace; For he who bade the tempest roar, Can bid the tempest cease.”

The biblical language Amelia draws upon also situates her within a wider Christian intellectual tradition in Britain and its empire. Many of the leading abolitionists of the day, including enslaved and formerly enslaved people, looked to scripture for their explanations of racial difference and to challenge the increasingly scientific justifications for racial inequality and slavery. For example, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano—who wrote one of the most sophisticated anti-slavery texts of the period—deployed his biblical knowledge in a strong refutation of James Tobin’s defense of slavery and David Hume’s notorious footnote that was often included in eighteenth-century discussions of race.⁴² God was the ultimate author of humanity and since he had made them of one blood, external appearances were of little import. Although we do not have the sources for consideration, we might therefore see Amelia’s explanation as an indirect and subtle response to the sort of scientific taxonomizing performed by Linnaeus in which she was reduced to her physical features and as a part of this wider intellectual tradition of mobilizing Christianity to challenge slavery and anti-Black racialization.

Besides the poem, Amelia reveals specific details about her life, which may also have served as part of a performance. Several sources, including newspapers, record that both she and her parents were enslaved, and that her parents were Black. These references to her parents highlight Amelia’s “singularity” as a curiosity. However, in her dialogue with Burt, Amelia provides additional information about her life, and also asserts her respectability and status. Among other things, Amelia tells Burt about her family, that she is married and where she was baptized. She also says that following her baptism she “looked on herself as free.” This could be a reference both to her spiritual conversion as a Christian, as well as to her physical freedom. Throughout the eighteenth century, many enslaved Africans living in Britain believed that both marriage and baptism ensured freedom, despite legal cases and

⁴² Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* [. . .] (London, 1787); Paget Henry, “Between Hume and Cugoano: Race, Ethnicity and Philosophical Entrapment,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2004): 129–48.

experiences to the contrary. The lawyer John Fielding attempted to warn the “merchants and other gentlemen who have estates in the West-Indies” of the dangers of this when he wrote that the “great Number of black Men and Women . . . enter into Societies, and make it their Business to corrupt and dissatisfy the Mind of every fresh black Servant that comes to England: first by getting them christened or married, which they inform them makes them free.”⁴³ It is possible that those “people of fortune there” that encouraged Amelia to leave the man who owned her were members of the congregation of St Lawrence Church, where she was baptized. They could have been abolitionists, or they could have also been some of the “troublesome and dangerous” Black people Fielding believed required slave owners “most serious attention.”⁴⁴ There are no further records to elaborate on who exactly the “people of fortune were,” nor the circumstances that led Amelia to freedom.⁴⁵

By asserting her marriage and baptism, Amelia might have been making a claim about her status as a free woman but also her respectability. Amelia’s self-fashioning, as a respectable woman, is asserted further by Burt’s depiction of her. The drawing, which was later copied and used on a set of privately minted coins or conder tokens, presents Amelia in respectable manner. She is fully clothed in a dress that appears modest but clean. She is not surrounded by exotic fruit or objects in the way other women of African ancestry, free and enslaved, are often depicted in British art and images.⁴⁶ Besides the texture of her hair and facial features, there is nothing else in Burt’s representation of Amelia that distinguishes her from a white English woman.

Both the poem she recited and the description of her life she gave at the Lyceum could be read as Amelia’s attempt to share her ideas and engage with contemporary politics.

⁴³ John Fielding, *Extracts from Such of the Penal Laws, as Particularly Relate to the Peace and Good Order of this Metropolis* (London: H. Woodfall and W. Strahan, 1768), 143–44.

⁴⁴ Burt, *Delineation of Curious Foreign Beasts and Birds*, p. 34.

⁴⁵ For a more detailed discussion of Amelia’s baptism, Ono-George, *The Many Lives of Amelia Newsham*.

⁴⁶ For example, see the discussion of the engraving of Genevieve, a white-skinned African discussed by the Comte de Buffon in Julia V. Douthwaite, *The Wild Girl, Natural Man, and the Monster: Dangerous Experiments in the Age of Enlightenment* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), 206–9.

If we accept that she was fully cognizant of the racialized discourses about skin color, slavery, and the various ways others viewed her difference, could we understand her words as a theoretical text, an insistence that was subversive, lodged within seemingly mundane praxis? The verse Amelia recites is simple in its composition. It is not a particularly beautiful or lyrical work, nor does it contain the kind of sentimentality of abolition poetry of the day. Burt does not comment on the quality of Amelia's poem, nor have I found any reference to it in any other source. However, in many ways it does not matter how many others heard or engaged with Amelia's words and thoughts, nor whether the words she spoke and performed were regarded positively by Burt or any other audience ~~that may have heard it~~them. As Katherine McKittrick points out: "A creative text does not have to be good or artful or aesthetically pleasing or popular. What the creative text *is*, does not matter as much as what it *does*." What is most important then is what performance, the verse and account of her life, does, what it might reveal about Amelia and what she may have thought about her own bodily difference. Her exhibition was not simply the passive display of her body. It was a performance in which she engaged her audience. Thus, it may also reveal at least one way she insisted on her respectability and dignity, despite the common discourse about enslaved women, white-skinned Africans, and people of African ancestry more generally. What the performance does is provide a possible articulation of "black life and humanity."⁴⁷

Considering Amelia Newsham within the intellectual history of race provides a rare concrete example of how the process of racialization worked in the eighteenth century, as well as an equally rare example of how an individual marginalized by this process responded to it. Only by taking seriously the words of marginalized Black women and other historical actors, even if they are brief or fragmented, and the possibilities of what these might reveal will we begin to witness the ways socially and historically marginalized people attempted to intervene and engage with contemporary intellectual and political debates.

⁴⁷ Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Duke University Press, 2020), 51–52.

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