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Using *Oroonoko* to Teach the Corrosive Effects of Racism

Summary

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* offers the reader a rich set of examples illustrating the complexities of interracial relationships. Throughout the work, the imperatives of slave society clash with the human desire for friendship, resulting in a series of untenable contradictions for the characters involved. When people, even those of good will, are participants in and beneficiaries of systems that victimize others, they find their friendships complicated and compromised. The work is a powerful text for teaching the conflicting dynamics of race relations in our own times. By having students order the characters in power ranking, plot a power grid of shifting alliances, and carefully examine moral dilemmas faced by the characters, the teacher can get them to see the contortions caused by prejudice and clashing economic interests. Teaching *Oroonoko* in the safe confines of a literature classroom can also give students training and practice in how to have conversations about race, a skill which they can put to good use when they enter broader society.

Key words: Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko*, Teaching race relations, Slave society

Roman *Oroonoko* pri pouku o razdiralnih posledicah rasizma

Povzetek

Delo pisateljice Aprhe Behn z naslovom *Oroonoko* ponuja bralcu bogato paleto vpogledov v zapleteno problematiko medrasnih odnosov. Besedilo vseskozi prepleta boj med suženjsko naravnano družbo ter človeško željo po prijateljstvu, kar doživljajo osebe kot niz nevzdržnih nasprotujočih si okoliščin. Tako ljudje, ki bodisi sodelujejo pri sistemu, ki tlači druge, bodisi se okoriščajo z njim, in to celo tisti, ki jih žene dober namen, ugotavljajo, da so njihove prijateljske zveze otežene ali celo ogrožene. *Oroonoko* je izjemno primerno delo za poučevanje navskrižnih dinamičnih trenj v sodobnih medrasnih okoljih. S pomočjo razvrščanja pripovednih oseb glede na njihovo pozicijo moči, izdelovanja mreže menjajočih se povezav in zavezništev ter z natančnim opazovanjem moralnih dilem študenti spoznavajo izkrivljene predstave, ki jih porajajo predsodki in nasprotujoči si ekonomski interesi. Poučevanje besedila študentom hkrati odpira možnosti za vzpostavljanje pristne komunikacije glede rasnih vprašanj pri vstopanju v svet širše družbe.

Ključne besede: Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko*, družba suženjstva in pouk o njej

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1. Introduction

“Can we all get along?” Rodney King plaintively asked as he saw the 1992 Los Angeles race riots break out following the acquittal of the policemen who had been videotaped beating him. My students invariably ask a version of this question whenever issues of race surface in the literature that we are studying. They want to know why we can’t all just be friends. The question is laudable, of course, and testifies to their good hearts. They believe, with Martin Luther King, that our relationships should be based on the content of our character rather than on the color of our skin.

But sometimes these same students may resist undertaking the tough exploration that answering their question requires. Sometimes they act as though it is the very act of talking about race that keeps people apart. If we didn’t mention racial tension, they imply, it would disappear. African-American poet Lucille Clifton, finding herself criticized for discussing how racism continues to taint the American landscape, complains, “I am accused of attending to the past/as if I made it” (Clifton 1991, 7). Truth-tellers can find themselves branded as the cause of the problem rather than a necessary part of the solution.

If we need open and honest conversations about race to foster genuine interracial friendships, then why do students (and not only students) shy away from these conversations? In part, I think, it is because they fear that, if they fully acknowledged the pervasiveness and intensity of bigotry, they would feel overwhelmed. If ignorance is bliss, they figure, ’tis folly to be wise. They may also harbor, or fear that they harbor, their own racist sentiments and wish to avoid conversations that might expose them to others, or even reveal themselves to themselves. They may feel guilty that their own privileged status in the world comes at the expense of someone else. Feeling angry and confused may seem easier than substantive exploration.

Only it’s not easier. In Hegel’s famous formulation, the master as well as the slave pays a price for power imbalance. The students’ denial takes a toll, making them fearful and evasive. They can live hunkered-down lives. Yet where such repressed energy is present, the opportunity for deep insight and commitment also exists, especially in idealistic young people. Once students realize that their fears need not control them, that they can confront the issues head-on, that interracial friendships are actually strengthened rather than undermined by frank discussions of race; they feel liberated from a shackling denial. This, I believe, helps explain the success on college campuses of the hard-hitting film *Crash*, the 2005 Oscar winner. Through its even-handed strategy of finding racism, sexism, and a host of other “isms” within each character in the film, yet at the same time finding something redemptive about each character, *Crash* shows audiences that it is possible to face up to and move beyond corrosive prejudice. When, in the climactic ending, the sexist and racist white cop heroically risks his life to save the African American woman that he has abused, we see how, despite all our flaws, we can step into our better selves.

This insight, however, cannot be doled out from a moral height and distributed in the form of maxims to people who are expected to salute sharply and change their behavior. Only by participating in communal conversations can society grapple with charged racial topics. The classroom is one place – maybe the main place – where young citizens and future leaders can learn how to talk about race. The teacher’s challenge is to create a safe environment in which practice conversations can occur. The challenges are formidable, as anyone knows who has tried to hold discussions about race. White students can remain silent or censor themselves for fear of being “politically incorrect” and exposing themselves as racists. They can go on the attack or overly defer to students of color as “the experts.” Students of color, meanwhile, can remain silent to avoid controversy or use their “victim status” to claim a moral superiority and score points. Such class discussions can be marked by long silences, angry outbursts, defensive attacks, and convoluted sentences. If the health of the society were not at stake, all the discomfort might not seem worth it. Why not use literature to escape from rather than to engage with a flawed world?

Yet if one sets up a discussion intelligently and sensitively, the literature classroom can be a site of healing and empowerment. The indirection of symbolic literary representation provides a way to circumvent defenses while introducing students to charged issues. Students are less likely to retreat into a formulaic soapbox stance where thinking stops if they have become involved in the lives of characters and the complexities of their situations. Paradoxically, the very fictionality of literature allows real conversations to occur.

Aphra Behn’s 1688 masterpiece *Oroonoko*, the quasi-autobiographical, quasi-fictional memoir-travelogue-biography-romance about an enslaved African prince, is one of the most successful works I have found for fostering these conversations because it sets forth the complex dynamics of an interracial friendship between a white woman and a black man. In certain ways, the narrator is like my students: Behn wants everyone to get along. And like many of my students, she is blind to the ways that social injustices and power imbalances contaminate such friendships. The book lays out the contradictions clearly in part because the author doesn’t have our 21st century awareness, and therefore our evasions and defenses. Often the contradictions are dropped into the text without comment and without any attempt at resolution. Teachers of the work therefore can turn their students loose on a set of provocative ethical questions and moral dilemmas and have them try out the kinds of conversations they will need to engage in as they enter society.

One reason *Oroonoko* is so rich is because of the contradictory nature of the author herself. Teaching her colorful and fascinating life along with *Oroonoko* both enthralls students and helps them to identify and better understand their own contradictions. Although an entrepreneur who made her living by her pen – one of the first British women to do so – Behn was opposed to capitalism. Her opposition was not progressive, however, but reactionary, coming from a monarchist vantage point. (She herself, however, was probably middle class, notwithstanding her self-depiction in *Oroonoko* as the daughter of a lieutenant general.) She may well have been a friend of the slave whose life she recounts, but her work is not against slavery, just against the treatment of this one exceptional slave. Although Behn is seen as an early feminist – Virginia Woolf famously wrote that all women writers should “let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned

them the right to speak their minds” – the author celebrates the divine Imoinda/Clemene’s total devotion to Oroonoko, culminating in her enthusiastic willingness that he cut her throat in their suicide pact. This from an author who was an independent widow and who took advantage of this status to (among other things) serve as a spy for the English during the Second Anglo-Dutch War, make a public name for herself as a successful playwright, and write propaganda for the crown. Teaching the life along with the work has the advantage of undermining traditional political categories, thereby creating a more open field for discussing difficult topics.

The issue of interracial friendships is broached at the beginning of the book and becomes the major focus of the second half, when Oroonoko is enslaved and transported to Surinam. In my class, I set the stage for discussion by having my students, in a homework assignment, comb through these parts of the work to find instances of interracial friendships, both false and true. They invariably discover the following examples:

“. . . we find it necessary to caress ’em [the Indians] as Friends . . .” (Behn 1973, 4)

“And the Captain [of the slave ship], in return of all these mighty Favours, besought the Prince to honor his Vessel with his Presence, some day or other at Dinner, before he shou’d set sail . . .” (Behn 1973, 32)

“Trefry [the plantation overseer] soon found he [Oroonoko/Caesar] was yet something greater than he confess’d; and from that moment began to conceive so vast an Esteem for him, that he ever after lov’d him as his dearest Brother . . .” (Behn 1973, 38)

“So that obliging him [Oroonoko] to love us very well, we [the British women] had all the Liberty of Speech with him, especially my self, whom he call’d his *Great Mistress*; and indeed my Word would go a great way with him.” (Behn 1973, 46)

“The Deputy-Governour . . . , who was the most fawning fair-tongu’d Fellow in the World, and one that pretended the most Friendship to *Caesar*, was now the only violent Man against him . . . He was a Fellow, whose Character is not fit to be mentioned with the worst of the slaves” (Behn 1973, 63–4)

“He [Colonel Martin] was a Friend to *Caesar*, and resented this false dealing with him very much.” (Behn 1973, 68)

This exercise allows the students to divide people into two groups they recognize, liberals and racists. Because the narrator’s voice is vouching for these friendships and because, as readers, we want to believe in interracial friendships, the students often overlook trouble spots and override uneasiness. These trouble spots will become the centerpieces of the discussions to come.

The second homework exercise asks the students to diagram the social power grid. They are to do a power ranking, first of the different populations and then of every character within each population.

Ordering the groups is fairly easy. The colonists are clearly the most powerful and the slaves the least. Some discussion invariably arises about the ordering of the first two. Although the natives cannot repel the colonists, neither can they be conquered by them. This conversation has the value of surfacing the following remarkably open admission (by 21st century terms): The narrator writes, “we find it absolutely necessary to caress ‘em as Friends, and not to treat ‘em as Slaves, nor dare we do other, their numbers so far surpassing ours in the Continent” (Behn 1973, 5).

This passage will prove so useful that we look at it closely. I ask my students what the statement reveals about the relationship between friendship and power and why Behn writes this compound-complex sentence the way that she does. The students unpack the author’s words, balancing her apparent sincerity with the colonists’ self interest. Would the colonists cease caressing if they could in fact enslave the natives, we ask? What does this reveal about the nature of interracial friendship in the book?

Having the students rank the characters within each population helps them appreciate the complexity of the issues. It also gets them to read the work closely as they must comb through every sentence. I tell them that they are to leave no individual behind. When the students bring their assignments to class, I divide them into groups and have them compare their rankings. There are usually disagreements, and the resultant conversations lay out some of the power ambiguities in the book.

For simplicity’s sake, in the student ranking below (which is fairly common) I have eliminated the Indians and many of the minor characters:

The British Colonizers

Lord Willoughby of Parnham, absentee coproprietor of Surinam

William Byam, Lieutenant Governor

John Trefry, Parnham plantation overseer

Aphra Behn, daughter of a deceased lieutenant general of islands off Surinam’s coast

Colonel Martin

Captain of slave ship

Bannister, member of the council and Byam ally

The African Slaves

Oroonoko/Caesar

Imoinda/Clemene, Oroonoko’s wife

Tuscan, spokesman for the other slaves

The male slaves

The female slaves

While ordering the slaves is fairly straightforward (essentially they fall into some version of house slaves and field slaves), ordering the colonists is more difficult. The difficulty leads to illuminating discussions. The students must wrestle with where authority lies: in the executive authority (Byam) or in the plantation owners and their representatives (Trefry, Colonel Martin)? What emerges in these discussions is a sense that the upper-class plantation owners are able to appear humane only because others do the dirty work. Trefry may invoke the king's charter to provide a safe haven for Oroonoko at Parnham House, but the Parnhamites are often conveniently absent when Byam moves against Oroonoko. Behn may claim authority as the daughter of a (now deceased) lieutenant general, but it is not clear whether her status endows her with any real clout. Behn's identity as a woman, of course, raises its own set of questions about how much power a woman had in this society.

Once we have discussed the rankings, I ask the students to disregard the population groupings and see how many different alliances they can find in the text. The result is a scrambled picture. Among the alliances they identify are the following:

- Oroonoko first with and then against the slave trader
- Parnham plantation (Trefry and Behn) with Oroonoko against Byam
- Oroonoko mediating with the Indians on the colonists' behalf
- Oroonoko with the other slaves against the colonists
- The colonists and the slaves against Oroonoko
- Byam's Indian mistress with Byam
- Tuscan with Byam against Oroonoko
- The British women with Oroonoko in complaining against the injustices that have been done to him

In addition to rendering problematic naïve notions of friendship, having the students focus on the shifting alliances helps them see the ambiguities and complexities of power. Other than the very top and very bottom of the list, we discuss how no one is either a pure victimizer or a pure victim. The lieutenant governor may have the ultimate power to mete out injustice and the wives of the lesser slaves seem to justify Zora Neale Hurston's depiction of poor black women as the "mules of the world," but everyone else occupies a middle ground. And to be in the middle, *Oroonoko* makes clear, is to be conflicted. The most interesting characters from this point of view are Trefry, Behn, and Oroonoko. Although all three are described as people of good will who witness and protest against injustice, all three are participants in and beneficiaries of systems that victimize others, including each other. They reach out the hand of friendship in mutual respect, but their friendships are complicated and compromised.

For instance, Trefry admires Oroonoko but collaborates in his capture. Behn admires Oroonoko, placates him, spies on him, flees from him, and empathizes with him in his agony, experiencing in this last instance some of his own feelings of powerlessness in the face of white male power. Oroonoko identifies with the slave trader, is victimized by the slave trader, bonds with Trefry, is

strung along by Trefry, promises to enslave others to gain his freedom, seeks to make common cause with the other slaves, is betrayed by the other slaves, and in the end is twice promised protection by Trefry and twice ends up in the hands of Byam.

The students are more likely to come to an appreciation of these intricacies if they struggle with them on their own than if they hear them presented in a lecture. I therefore divide the class into small groups and hand out the passages below, along with a set of instructions. Each passage provides a difficult moral and political dilemma that challenges the reader. Following their small group discussions, the students return to the assembled class and report on their ideas. Along with the passages and instructions, I have added a brief comment on how the teacher can show the relevance of the passages to our own race conversations today.

Passage #1 – Oroonoko strung along

“[Oroonoko, having discovered that Imoinda is pregnant] was every day treating with Trefry for his and Clemené’s liberty, and offered either Gold, or a vast quantity of Slaves, which should be paid before they let him go, provided he could have any Security that he should go when his Ransom was paid. They fed him from day to day with Promises, and delay’d him till the Lord-Governour should come; so that he began to suspect them of Falshood . . .” (Behn 1973, 45)

Instructions for discussion: Recall that Trefry, who purchased Oroonoko, has promised him, “on his Word and Honour, [that] he would find the means to reconduct him to his own Country again” (Behn 1973, 38). List the possibilities of who “they” are. If Trefry, why would he be feeding Oroonoko with promises? Who else could “they” be, and why does Behn use a vague pronoun. Why, instead of laying out the situation clearly (she, after all, may be in a position to know), does she use Oroonoko’s limited point of view?

Continuing relevance: Trefry’s desire to be both friend and master of Oroonoko and the elaborate dance that this contradictory stance requires points to the contradictions of privilege and what is sacrificed when one human being exploits another. Behn’s vague and evasive language, used to cover the contradictions of privilege, is characteristic of many current discussions of race.

Passage #2 – Trefry’s negotiation with Oroonoko

“But Trefry and Byam [negotiating with a cornered Oroonoko] pleaded and protested together so much, that Trefry believing the Governour to mean what he said, and speaking very cordially himself, generously put himself into Caesar’s hands, and took him aside, and persuaded him, even with Tears, to live, by surrendering himself, and to name his Conditions. . . .”

But [following Oroonoko’s agreement and surrender] they were no sooner arrived at the Place where all the Slaves receive their Punishments of Whipping, but they laid hands on Caesar and Tuscan . . . bound them to two several Stakes, and whipped them in a most deplorable and inhuman manner, rending the very Flesh from their Bones . . .” (Behn 1973, 66–7)

Instructions for discussion: Discuss whether Trefry gets a free pass here. How responsible is he for his apparent naiveté (or stupidity)? Exactly how innocent is he? Does he benefit in any way from collaborating with Byam? From Oroonoko's capture? Does he pay a price if Oroonoko escapes? If you had to choose between (1) acknowledging that your wealth comes from a system of horrendous brutality and (2) pretending that you didn't know how depraved humans could be, which way would you go? Why? What would you gain and lose from each choice?

Continuing relevance: The desire for innocence in the text – which starts with the Edenic innocence of the natives and recurs in professions of ignorance on the part of Trefry, Behn and Oroonoko – continues on today as people react against the compromises pushed upon them by the societies in which they live. We often want to pretend that racism doesn't exist because we don't want to admit how close we are to it or how we benefit from it. The teacher can ask the students to what extent is that innocence in actuality a willed ignorance.

Passage #3 – Behn's Friendship with Oroonoko

“This Thought made him very uneasy [Oroonoko's growing suspicion that he is being strung along with future promises of freedom], and his Sullenness gave them some Jealousies of him; so that I was obliged, by some Persons who fear'd a Mutiny (which is very fatal sometimes in those Colonies that abound so with Slaves, that they exceed the Whites in vast numbers), to discourse with Caesar, and to give him all the Satisfaction I possibly could: they knew he and Clemene were scarce an Hour in a Day from my Lodgings; that they eat with me, and that I oblig'd 'em in all things I was capable of. . . . [H]e liked the Company of us Women much above the Men So that obliging him to love us very well, we had all the Liberty of Speech with him, especially my self, whom he call'd his Great Mistress; and indeed my Word would go a great way with him. For these Reasons I had opportunity to take notice to him, that he was not well pleased of late, as he used to be; was more retired and thoughtful; and told him, I took it ill he shou'd suspect we wou'd break our Words with him, and not permit both him and Clemene to return to his own Kingdom He made me some Answers that shew'd a doubt in him, which made me ask, what advantage it would be to doubt. It would but give us a fear of him, and possibly compel us to treat him so as I should be very loath to behold: that is, it might occasion his Confinement. Perhaps this was not so luckily spoke of me, for I perceiv'd he resented that word, which I strove to soften again in vain . . .” (Behn 1973, 45–57)

Instructions for discussion: Discuss the nature of Behn's relationship with Oroonoko. What do you think it means for her to “be obliged by some persons who feared a mutiny” to give Oroonoko “satisfaction.” Is she a willing or unwilling tool? Do you think she feels compromised or does she feel proud to be of service? Or does she have other feelings about the situation? What power does she think she actually has? Is she deliberately manipulating Oroonoko and, if so, what do you think of the fact that she tries to shame him into trusting her? What mistake does she feel she has made when, after mentioning “confinement,” she sees Oroonoko's reaction?

Continuing relevance: This wonderfully complex passage captures the contradictions of privilege as effectively as any in the book, with Behn’s conflicting loyalties set forth. The situation rings true for many students, who find themselves caught in such middle positions, especially when they leave the classroom and have conversations about race with less sympathetic family and friends.

Passage #4 – Distrusting Oroonoko

“Before I parted that day with him, I got, with much ado, a Promise from him to rest yet a little longer with patience, and wait the coming of the Lord Governour, who was every day expected on our shore: he assur’d me he would, and this Promise he desired me to know was given perfectly in complaisance to me, in whome he had an intire Confidence.

After this, I neither thought it convenient to trust him much out of our view, nor did the Country, who fear’d him; but with one accord it was advis’d he should be permitted, as seldom as could be, to go up to the Plantations of the Negroes; or, if he did, to be accompany’d by some that should be rather in appearance Attendants than Spies.” (Behn 1973, 47–8)

Instructions for discussion: Discuss whether you think that Behn believes that Oroonoko will in fact receive his freedom when the lieutenant governor shows up. If not, what does that say about her relationship with Oroonoko? Recall that, earlier in the book, Behn says that the Africans and the Indians, when they give their word, are unlike the Europeans in that they always keep it. What do you make of Behn’s lack of trust? How do you imagine that she is communicating with “the country”?

Continuing relevance: The passage points to the kinds of disjunction that can occur when one converses with a person of another race and then leaves to enter the society of one’s own race, with all its prejudices. It’s a challenging situation, and the class can discuss how to negotiate it.

Passage #5 – The women flee

“. . . we were possess’d with extreme Fear [during the slave revolt], which no Persuasions could dissipate, that he would secure himself till night, and then that he would come down and cut all our Throats. This Apprehension made all the Females of us fly down the River, to be secured; and while we were away they acted this Cruelty [the whipping of Oroonoko]; for I suppose I had Authority and Interest enough there, had I suspected any such thing, to have prevented it . . .” (Behn 1973, 68).

Instructions for discussion: Recall that Behn has conversed daily with Oroonoko and traveled with him on dangerous expeditions. Why would she now see him this way? Were there the roots of this fear in their previous relationship – what exactly was the nature of their friendship? – or is this vision of a throat-cutting Oroonoko entirely new? Is Behn correct in saying that she could have prevented the whipping? Does she believe it? If she does and the idea is preposterous, why would she be so deluded? If she doesn’t believe it, why would she make the statement?

Continuing relevance: One issue raised by the passage is how and why we stereotype people from other races, even when we know them. Another is how difficult it is to acknowledge how little power we actually have.

Passage #6 – Begging pardon of Oroonoko

“We [the women] were no sooner arrived but we went up to the Plantation to see Caesar; whom we found in a very miserable and unexpressible Condition We said all things to him, that Trouble, Pity, and Good-Nature could suggest, protesting our Innocency of the Fact and our Abhorrence of such Cruelties; making a thousand Professions of Services to him, and begging as many Pardons for the Offenders, till we said so much, that he believed we had no hand in his ill Treatment; but told us, he could never pardon Byam; as for Trefry, he confess’d he saw his Grief and Sorrow for his Suffering, which he could not hinder, but was like to have been beaten down by the very Slaves for speaking in his defence” (Behn 1973, 68–9)

Instructions for discussion: Are the women more concerned that Oroonoko feel better or that he absolve them of any responsibility for what has happened to him? Do they want his absolution because they feel guilty? If they feel guilty, why do they? Is it important to Behn that Oroonoko absolve Trefry? Why? Why does Oroonoko distinguish between his own absolution of Trefry and the refusal of the other slaves to do likewise.

Continuing relevance: This passage allows a discussion of liberal guilt, a powerful player in race issues. Although I can’t do justice to the complexity of the topic here, suffice it to say that guilt can sometimes function as a cheap substitution for action. It can also provide consolation to those who are powerless, allowing them to believe that their failure to act comes from choice rather than necessity.

Passage #7 – Helping out the slave captain

“. . . he [Oroonoko] besought ’em [the other slaves on board this ship] to bear their Chains with that Bravery that became those whom he had seen act so nobly in Arms; and that they could not give him greater Proofs of their Love and Friendship, since ’twas all the Security the Captain (his Friend) could have against the Revenge, he said they might possibly justly take, for the injuries sustained by him”

After this, they no longer refus’d to eat, but took what was brought ’em, and were pleas’d with their Captivity, since by it they hoped to redeem the Prince” (Behn 1973, 36).

Instructions for discussion: The captain of the slave ship stands to lose his entire “cargo” if the hunger fast continues so he persuades Oroonoko to persuade his people to eat in return for their eventual freedom. Why was Oroonoko tricked by the slave captain the first time? Why didn’t he understand that the captain might see him as a potential slave? Why does he believe him this time? Is he naïve or stupid? If naïve, what is the nature of that naïveté? Is naïveté preferable to the other options before him? How hard would it be for Oroonoko to acknowledge his actual

powerlessness? And how culpable is he for playing into the captain's hands, essentially saving his merchandise?

Continuing relevance: It is often revealing to white students that their fellow students of color are just as desirous as they are to believe that racism does not exist and that they too often strive to remain willfully blind to racism. The difference is that, as targets of racism, it is ultimately harder for them to ignore it. College students of color on predominantly white college especially find themselves engaging in a complex and confusing identity dance with white students.

Passage #8 – Oroonoko's first and final words to the slaves

“Caesar troubled with their Over-Joy and Over-Ceremony [the adulation of the other slaves upon his arrival], besought ‘em to rise and to receive him as their Fellow-Slave; assuring them he was no better.” (Behn 1973, 41)

“As for the Rashness and Inconsiderateness of his Action, he would confess the Governour is in the right; and that he was ashamed of what he had done, in endeavoring to make those free [the other slaves] who were by Nature Slaves, poor wretched Rogues, fit to be used as Christians’ Tools; Dogs, treacherous and cowardly, fit for such Masters; and they wanted only but to be whipped into the knowledge of the Christian Gods, to be the vilest of all creeping things; to learn to worship such Deities as had not power to make ‘em just, brave, or honest. . . .” (Behn 1973, 66)

Instructions for discussion: These two passages mark Oroonoko's first and final encounters with the Surinam slaves. What are we to make of his initial gesture to them? How do you imagine them reacting to the fact that, after his first encounter, he doesn't return to them until he needs their help in the rebellion? Are they to be blamed for abandoning him? What does the above attack on them say about him?

Continuing relevance: Oroonoko's relationship with the other slaves resembles that of the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* to the lower-class African Americans in the “Battle Royale” chapter. How a white power structure exacerbates already existent fault lines within black society, and how middle-class people of color find themselves torn in different directions, is a drama that many of my students of color recognize.

Conclusion

I conclude with an account of how a discussion of *Oroonoko* helped students talk about a series of conflicts at the college where I teach. St. Mary's College of Maryland is a small liberal arts residential college with a student body of just under 2000. Like many American colleges, it has a multicultural mix of students, and like most colleges, the tensions that exist in the larger society manifest themselves periodically in this small community. Recently, over a two-year period, the college underwent a series of incidents which, while insignificant by the world's standards – most of them were not even of interest to the local newspaper – nevertheless disrupted St. Mary's, which likes to see itself as a family. A white male student date raped a white female student.

The black girlfriend (not a student) of an African American man beat up his ex-girlfriend, who was white. A Koran owned by a Muslim student was vandalized. A gay slur was written on the door of a homosexual student. A Latino and an Ethiopian-American student squared off in a fistfight with two white students. The Latino man was also involved in several lunchroom shouting matches with African American women. In a campus that puts a premium on trust and mutual respect, as ours does, the incidents make an impact. The student leaders called together a community meeting where people could air their concerns.

I was teaching *Oroonoko* at the time and invited the Latino and the Ethiopian-American student to my class and briefly summarized the plot of the book. Both students recognized relationships they had had with white women students in the Oroonoko-Behn friendship. They said that sensed that they were seen as exotic, which both flattered them and made them feel slightly unreal. The Ethiopian-American, who was solidly middle class, talked of his attraction to lower-class African-American culture although he admitted that he would be rejected by lower class blacks as a “college boy” if he were to try to reach out to them. The Latino student, whose mother entered the country illegally and eleven years later brought him over from Nicaragua after gaining citizenship, talked of feeling angry about the privilege he saw all about him but also said he wanted to be accepted by those at whom he was angry. Some white students in the class essentially asked why everyone couldn’t just get along – they were bewildered at all the commotion – although they admitted that they didn’t try to make friends with students of color, including those who lived and ate beside them, because they felt uncomfortable.

This unusually frank conversation may have been initiated by the events on campus, but the framework of *Oroonoko* made possible a deeper discussion. No conclusions were reached – one class discussion will not change attitudes – but students left feeling relieved that seemingly taboo issues could be laid out in the open. They received a glimpse of the potential of conversations about race.

I choose to describe these incidents, not because they are momentous – most of them would hardly cause a ripple in a metropolitan area or even in a large American urban high school – but because versions of these tensions regularly appear in organizations and workplaces. They don’t always result in blow-ups. Sometimes the effects are less dramatic, a subtle corroding of the bonds that hold communities together. The power of talking about race in the safe space of a literature classroom with a complex work like *Oroonoko* allows the future leaders of those organizations and of the workplace to see the potential power of such conversations. They see that civil dialogue over a hot button topic can lead to mutual respect and new hope. It’s not a bad lesson to learn.

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