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'The Desponding Negro', and Other Impersonations

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Abstract

This paper examines verse representations by British writers in 1760-1834 of the imagined mentality and feelings of slaves. It considers the motives behind this strategy and contrasts these writings with poems and songs by slaves themselves recorded from the same period.

'The Desponding Negro' by John Collins, first published in 1792, belongs to a subgenre of verse by British writers in which a black slave laments or protests against his or her tragic situation and history. The huge popularity of the poem *The Dying Negro* (1773), by John Bicknell and Thomas Day, initiated the vogue for such verse, which flourished particularly during the campaign for abolition of the slave trade. The earliest example, however, is by Bryan Edwards, famous later as spokesman for the West India lobby against the abolitionists. His 'Stanzas Occasioned by the Death of Alico, an African Slave, condemned for Rebellion in Jamaica, 1763' are supposedly uttered by the slave from the gallows, in an address to his wife.

Edwards' African slave is defiant, whereas most abolitionist poems project a self-image of the negro slave as helpless, suffering, despairing victim. This is conspicuously at variance with the robust self-construction that characterizes poems by West Indian slaves themselves: wry, humorous, occasionally defiant but not self-pitying. Nonetheless this paper defends the 'dying negro' trope against the charge that it demeans its subject and functions more as an emotional outlet for white, liberal shame and guilt than as a force for change. It is significant that Collins' poem was used as ammunition by the black radical Robert Wedderburn in his antislavery paper, *The Axe Laid to the Root* (1817).

This paper is concerned with verse representations of the mentality and feelings of African-Caribbean slaves as imagined by British authors in the period between 1760 and 1834. These ‘impersonations’ take a variety of forms but, whatever the author’s views on slavery or the slave trade, they have one thing in common: their construction of the slave’s cast of mind is, inescapably, distorted by the Eurocentric preconceptions about race that prevailed at the time.

Whether typed as savage and barbaric, or as noble and innocent in their primitive simplicity, Africans were perceived not only as inferior in the hierarchy of beings to ‘civilized’ Europeans, but further, as lacking in full, adult selfhood. What Elleke Boehmer says of colonialist ‘othering’ of indigenous peoples in general applies precisely to white British writers’ portrayal of slaves: ‘Overdetermined by stereotype, the characterizations ... tend to screen out their agency, diversity, resistance, thinking, voices.’ (Boehmer, 1995, 21)

The erasure of slave voices in colonial discourse lends a special irony to the class of poems I am considering, which *assume* the voice of an enslaved ‘negro’ while at the same time projecting a reductive, homogenized construction of ‘negro’ subjectivity. Such impersonations divide broadly into two categories: those by white abolitionists usually present images of the black slave as a suffering, often despairing victim, whereas those by anti-abolitionists are prone to portray him or her as a joyous, carefree, childlike being. The paper ends by briefly contrasting these images with the robust self-constructions typical of songs from the same period produced by enslaved Africans themselves. The evidence they offer deserves more scrutiny than it has so far received.¹

(i) Poems by white writers: the desponding negro

‘The Desponding Negro’ (Appendix, no.1), written by a now forgotten actor and playwright, John Collins, was evidently popular in its time: it was described as a ‘favourite new song’ when it was published in London in 1792 as a broadsheet, with musical accompaniment.² Collins later included it in a collection of his own verse, *Scrapscrapologia: or, Collins’s Doggerel-Dish of All Sorts*, published in Birmingham in 1804. As a sample of literary verse, it is no masterpiece. It is useful, nevertheless, both as a typical example of poetic impersonations, and as a specimen of the vast number of the poetry of slavery, of all kinds, which played a significant role in arousing public feeling in Britain during the campaign for abolition of the slave trade between 1770 and 1807, and again, later, in the period leading up to the Emancipation Act of 1833.

Poems and songs were widely used as propaganda by the abolitionist camp. Some of the most influential texts were by women (see Ferguson, 1992, 145-164), though the present study does not happen to draw on any of these. Verse was employed by the opposite party also; the most celebrated example is James Boswell's verse tract, *No Abolition of Slavery*, published in London in 1791, and dedicated to the powerful lobby of West-India Planters and Merchants which was opposing attempts in parliament to abolish the slave trade (included by Richardson, Basker and Wood).

Collins's song circulated in the year after Boswell's polemic was published, when the campaign against the slave trade reached a peak with the presentation of Wilberforce's first Abolition bill to the House of Commons. There is no evidence that 'The Desponding Negro' was written specifically to serve Wilberforce's cause, but it draws on the emotive rhetoric and imagery which had by then become the common stock of abolitionist verse. Moreover, whatever its origins, the song was manifestly exploitable for political ends. It was certainly so used later by the black radical activist Robert Wedderburn, who printed it in his short-lived journal, *The Axe Laid to the Root* (see McCalman, 1991, 91-2).

Wedderburn was born and bred in Jamaica, son of a slave, Rosanna, by her Scottish master, James Wedderburn, a plantation owner.³ He came to England in about 1778, at the age of seventeen. *The Axe Laid to the Root*, which appeared at intervals in London in 1817, stands out among antislavery publications for its political extremism. As its modern editor Ian McCalman says, it is 'notable as a plebeian contribution to the abolitionist cause and a rousing tocsin for West Indian slave revolution.' Though nominally addressed to a black Jamaican audience, it was obliquely aimed at English working-class readers; its 'most important contribution to radical ideology came from its sustained attempt to

integrate the prospect of slave revolution in the West Indies with that of working-class revolution in England' (McCalman, 1991, 18).

Needless to say, Wedderburn's ultra-radical journal would not have been read by mainstream, middle-class abolitionists; if it had, they would have been shocked and alarmed by its revolutionary programme. It is notable, nevertheless, that in reprinting poems by white writers Wedderburn drew from the same wells as were used by the middle-class antislavery movement. Besides 'The Desponding Negro', he printed several poems published in contemporary magazines and other sources, including 'The Negro's Complaint' by William Cowper (see below).

The feature of Collins's song which makes it especially typical of poems about slavery by white British writers is its adoption of the persona of a negro slave. It was thus one in a long line of poems which 'gave voice and romantic personal histories to African captives' (Basker, 2002, xl). The vogue for these impersonations began in the mid-eighteenth century, but the genre was given fresh impetus by the development of organized protest against the slave trade in the 1770s. James Basker's recent anthology, *Amazing Grace*, prints nearly forty poems belonging to this fertile subgenre dating from the fifty years 1760-1810 alone. Further poems of the same kind were published in the period between 1810 and the ending of slavery in the British colonies in 1834.

The archetypal impersonation poem is *The Dying Negro*, a work of over 300 lines by John Bicknell and Thomas Day, first published in London in 1773 (printed in full by Richardson, Basker and Wood). Its full title is *The Dying Negro, A Poetical Epistle, Supposed to be written by A Black, (Who lately shot himself on board a vessel in the river Thames;) to his intended Wife*. This famous text was based on a true incident; it

represents the sentiments and recollections of a runaway African slave in London who has been recaptured and is about to be transported by his master to America, but chooses to commit suicide rather than return to slavery and separation from his lover. *The Dying Negro* won instant and enduring success, establishing a pattern of sentimental, pathetic discourse which was repeated, with wide variations, over and over again in the next sixty years.

Many of the poems which followed Bicknell and Day's lead, including 'The Desponding Negro', took the form of a 'ballad' in the eighteenth-century sense of the term, meaning an art song designed for public performance. One of the most effective of these ballads was 'The Negro's Complaint' (Appendix, no.2). Cowper wrote this poem in 1788 in response to a request by the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and it was issued, along with other antislavery texts written by Cowper, in a pamphlet distributed throughout Britain. Thomas Clarkson noted that 'many thousand copies' of the tract were sent out from London by the Committee until 'it travelled almost over the whole island' (Clarkson, 1808, 2:348).

'The Negro's Complaint' became phenomenally popular, reappearing countless times in anthologies and magazines in the pre-Emancipation period. Unlike many impersonations, it does not attempt to give a realistic imitation of the speech or imagined sensibility of the slave. It owes its impact, rather, to its skillful interweaving of familiar arguments in the discourse of abolition, namely:

- that slavery is contrary to natural justice and the will of God,
- that difference in skin colour does not justify enslavement of Africans by the English,
- that black and white races are alike in human feeling.

Cowper gives his African slave just enough of a personal history to lend authenticity and eloquence to his pleas, without relying simply on the emotive power of his personal story, as many impersonations did.

The slave-complaint mode lent itself all too easily to sentimentalisation. Negro slaves joined jilted lovers, orphan children, juvenile chimney-sweepers, caged birds, and other pitiful creatures, as subject-matter for pathetic ballads, a fashionable and marketable subgenre in this period. 'The Slaves Lament' (Appendix, no.3), published anonymously in the same year as 'The Desponding Negro' in the fourth volume of *The Scots Musical Museum* (Edinburgh, 1792), is one of the better examples. It was contributed to this famous collection of songs by Robert Burns, and was probably written by him, but the lustre of his name should not be allowed to warp critical judgment. The song is a graceful, facile version of the suffering-slave *topos*, rendered with the fluency and brevity suitable for drawing-room entertainment or public performance, but it adds nothing original or individual to the well-worn mode.⁴

It would be cynical however to accuse abolitionist poetry of merely exploiting the real sufferings of black slaves by turning them to commercial account, or (an alternative charge) of using the topic more as an outlet for white middle-class guilt than as a force for change. It is here that Robert Wedderburn's inclusion of several of these poems in his periodical becomes significant. It is clear that to this slave-born, working-class radical they appeared powerful and expressive enough to reinforce his libertarian message. 'The Desponding Negro' is appended to a call to arms to 'the slaves of Jamaica' by Wedderburn, setting out a blueprint for revolutionary change. He ends by warning his audience to use all their strength 'to defend yourself against those men, who are now

scheming in Europe against the blacks in St. Domingo', before introducing the poem with these words:

Teach your children these lines, let them be sung on the Sabbath day, in remembrance of your former sufferings, which will teach them what you may expect from the hands of European Christians, by what they have practised before. (McCalman, 1991, 89-90)

Wedderburn seems not to have been troubled by the racial stereotyping of enslaved Africans that characterises most antislavery poems by white writers, but for the modern reader it is their most disabling feature. Such performances were motivated by sincere humanitarian ideals, and undoubtedly contributed effectively to the arousal of public feeling against slavery, yet they did so at the price of endorsing and perpetuating reductive views of African humanity.

Moira Ferguson has argued forcefully that British women writers especially 'misrepresented the very African-Caribbean slaves whose freedom they advocated' (Ferguson, 1992, 3). Their feminisation of the negro subject had a wide influence on public perceptions of slavery; Ferguson contends that they 'constructed a colonial discourse about Africans in general and slaves in particular ... [which] came to be accepted by a majority of the white population as an authentic expression of slavery's "reality"'. She perhaps exaggerates the responsibility of women writers for the spread of this 'Anglo-Africanist rhetoric', as she dubs it, since the discourse she identifies is characteristic of male abolitionists also. Nevertheless her critique of white abolitionist writing for its distorting effect on public perceptions of enslaved Africans is valid and important.

A few impersonation poems, however, appear to run counter to the dominant idea of the slave as powerless victim by endowing him or her with vengeful or mutinous feelings. 'The Dying Negro' itself ends with a long paragraph in which the speaker vows revenge

on his masters (Appendix, no.4). Basker says that it offers ‘a vision of apocalyptic racial violence’, but that is too broad a claim. The revenge sought by the speaker is local and specific: he prays simply for immediate retribution, in the form of shipwreck, to fall on the captain and crew of the vessel which was to transport him back to slavery.

Bicknell and Day conspicuously avoid playing the card, later used by both sides in the abolition debate, of exploiting the fear of slave uprisings. One of the authors of impersonation poems who did play on this fear was the staunch abolitionist, Edward Rushton. He published a series of poems in 1787, under the title of *West-Indian Eclogues*, based on his own observation of conditions in Jamaica and on the Middle Passage as seaman on the West Indian run: first on a merchant ship, later on a slave-trading vessel.⁵ Rushton’s first *Eclogue* contains a dialogue between two slaves, one urging the other to rise in rebellion against the whites in retaliation for the brutal treatment of himself and his wife and child. The poem is clearly sympathetic towards the slaves’ desire to rise against their masters, but Rushton is also conscious of the tragic futility (as he saw it) of attempts to rebel against the power of the white plantocracy, and his second *Eclogue* carries that message. Thus, even when resistant to white power-structures in intent, slaves in his text remain ultimately powerless. The tacit assumption is that agency for change remains in white hands. One can only speculate how Rushton might have presented the issue if he had been writing after the rebellion in St. Domingo.

‘The Negro’s Dying Speech’ by Bryan Edwards (Appendix, no.5) is a significant but problematic representation of slave rebellion by a white poet. Edwards is best known as author of *The History of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (1793-1819), and as a prominent spokesman in parliament *against* abolition, on behalf of West Indian slave-owners. Yet as previous commentators have pointed out, Edwards’s poem seems to glorify

rebellion, portraying the slave as a martyr dying in the cause of 'Freedom', and facing death 'with pathos and dignity, defiant to the end' (Richardson, 1999, 125; Basker, 2002, 131).

In another version, the poem is titled 'Stanzas, Occasioned by the Death of Alico, An African Slave, Condemned for Rebellion, in Jamaica, 1760', indicating that it refers to the famous uprising of that year known as 'Tacky's rebellion'. If the poem itself was written in 1760, the year after Edwards arrived in Jamaica, he would have been only eighteen years old at the time. But the poem cannot be explained simply as an effusion of youthful radicalism, since it was first published in an English magazine in 1777, seventeen years after the event it commemorates, and later still was included, with the new title but otherwise substantially unchanged, in Edwards's collection of his own *Poems, written chiefly in the West Indies* (1792).

What we have here is something more complex than youthful idealism, and a reminder that opponents of abolition in the eighteenth-century were not all uncompromising supporters of slavery in principle. In a long section on 'Negro Slavery' in the *History*, Edwards in fact both accepted the humanitarian premise that slavery and the slave trade were cruel and unjust, and yet maintained that they were necessary evils, given what he perceived as historical, social and economic realities. He summed up his position in the paradox that 'nothing is more certain than that the Slave Trade may be very wicked, and the planters in general very innocent' (Edwards 1793, 2.40).

'The Negro's Dying Speech' thus presents an irresolvable hermeneutic ambiguity. It stands both as an acknowledgment of the heroic quality of the slave's defiance, and as a

warning of the latent threat of slave rebellion. How that threat was to be construed would depend on the reader's viewpoint; for while abolitionists argued that the continuance of slavery was an actual or potential cause of insurrection, the opposing party claimed that antislavery agitation itself was an incitement to rebellion. Either way, the fact that a poem showing such empathy with the negro in his active resistance to slavery should come from a West Indian *opponent* of abolition underlines, by default, the misrepresentation by abolitionist writers in Britain of the subjectivity of the enslaved.

(ii) Poems by white writers: the happy negro

At the other extreme from poems about suffering black slaves are a handful of poems by white writers showing them as merry and carefree. Though not necessarily written for that purpose, such writings could be used to support stock arguments of anti-abolitionists; that slaves in the colonies lived and worked under conditions which compared favourably with both the labouring poor in Britain and their fellow-countrymen in Africa, and that – if not stirred to discontentment by abolitionist agitators – they were happy with their lot.

One example is a song written by Robert Dallas (Appendix, no.6), to the accompaniment of an English melody which he 'caught by ear from some of the negroes' (Dallas, 1823, 144-5). It was published in 1823, the year in which the organized campaign for total abolition of slavery in the British colonies was launched. Dallas, son of a Scottish plantation-owner, was born in Jamaica in 1754 and spent some years managing the family estates. He was author of a *History of the Maroons* (1803), which remains an authoritative source to this day.

Dallas was not himself a bigoted supporter of slavery, but that did not prevent his song being recruited by hardline anti-abolitionists. Alexander Barclay, a prominent Jamaican

planter of that persuasion, cited it in his polemical work, *A Practical View of the Present State of Slavery in the West Indies* (1826). In a section of the book subtitled 'Slaves in Jamaica kindly treated and happy', Barclay writes: 'They are slaves, but this happily gives them no concern, as they have never known any other condition. Strangers to hunger and cold, (the scourges of the poor in England,) and equally so to the cares and anxieties which often perplex their masters, they are thoughtless, contented, and happy.' Then he adds in a footnote: 'Mr. Dallas, of Jamaica, must have seen and felt this when he wrote the following verses so truly descriptive of the negro', quoting the song in full (Barclay, 1826, 212-13). Dallas's song is not wholly unsubtle, however: it makes a barbed point about the white man's troubled consciousness.

Another song, 'Me be a nigger boy, born in de hovel', heard in the 1820s in Grenada (Bayley, 1830, 438) is cruder. The singer claims that he is well-fed, comfortable, and content: its reiterated message is 'Me happy fellow, den why me want free?'. Though allegedly sung by slaves (to a popular English tune of the day), it is highly unlikely to have been composed by one of them; it looks like a piece of white propaganda intended for local edification.

(iii) Slave songs

Finally we may turn from poems and songs by white writers, purporting to show the thoughts and feelings of African-Caribbean slaves, to songs which were composed in the West Indies by slaves themselves. These songs passed down through oral tradition and were recorded by white residents or visitors to the West Indies. Paula Burnett included several of them in her anthology of *Caribbean Verse in English* (1986); some can be found in *Voices of Exile* by Jean D'Costa and Barbara Lalla (1989); others remain buried in nineteenth-century travel writings and other sources.

Particularly notable in these songs is the absence of complaint or self-pity, even when they refer explicitly to the hardships of slavery. The two work-songs recorded by J.B. Moreton in Jamaica in 1793, for example (Appendix, no.7), are assertive and realistic, rather than plaintive. The bold imperative in the first, 'Tink dere is a God in a top' ('remember there is a God up above'), gives it the force of a warning to the overseer against violation of divine law rather than a plea for mercy.

The second song, 'If Me Want fe Go in a Ebo', tellingly evokes the reality of dispossession and confinement, but the manner is sardonic, not pitiful. In the absence of the master, it appears, the speaker is forbidden to leave the plantation: separated from Africa by abduction and an impassable ocean, he or she has not even the freedom to visit the local city.

At least two of these texts are songs of rebellion: 'Take force by force' is the refrain of the defiant 'Song of the King of the Eboes', heard by Matthew Lewis in Jamaica in 1816 (Lewis, 1834, 228; reprinted in D'Costa and Lalla, 1989, 32; Burnett, 1986, 7). Another, heard by Emma Carmichael in Trinidad in the 1820s, refers to 'a meditated insurrection' on the island (Carmichael, 1833, 2.301).

Several songs are associated with dancing and other social activities, conveying well the energy, enthusiasm and high spirits with which African-Caribbeans embraced any opportunities for recreation the slave system allowed them. This was an aspect of West Indian slavery which impressed every contemporary observer, but the sophistication and self-awareness shown in a song like 'Quaco Sam' (printed in Burnett, 1986, 8-9) show up white impersonations of merry black slaves as laughably naïve.

Other songs are derisive or satirical about the practices of white colonists, especially about their sexual habits. One of the most remarkable of these is ‘Me Know No Law, Me Know No Sin’ (Appendix, no.8), a song which evidently had lasting currency among slaves in Jamaica, since different versions of it are recorded over a span of thirty years.⁶ Carolyn Cooper provides a brilliant analysis of this song, demonstrating the dexterity with which the voice of the speaker, a female slave, is modulated to create a complex subjectivity. The speaker’s voice encompasses both pathos and defiance. At one level, the song exposes ‘the tragic condition of the exploited black woman’, who has no choice but to prostitute herself to the whites: in that respect it shares common ground with some white imaginings of the miseries of slavery. But unlike white representations of female slaves, the singer is not a stereotypical victim; a strong, individualized self controls her discourse from the outset. As Cooper points out, ‘The qualifying “Altho’ a slave me is born and bred” declares her refusal to be commodified by anybody but herself’ (1993, 21-32).

Cooper’s general comment on the transgressive character of all these relics of oral utterance is a good point to end with. ‘The official, written histories of enslavement, voicelessness and erasure ... are continually contested by alternate oral discourses that *reclaim the self* and *empower the speaker*.’ (Cooper, 1993, 22: my emphasis). Mediated though they necessarily are by transmission through colonial texts, they nevertheless enable the subaltern to speak, testifying to the retention by enslaved African-Caribbeans of ‘resistance, thinking, voices’ and of some degree of agency even under the most adverse conditions.

Appendix

1. John Collins, **The Desponding Negro** (1792)

On Afric's wide plains where the lion now roaring,
When freedom stalks forth the vast desert exploring,
I was dragg'd from my hut and enchain'd as a slave,
In a dark floating dungeon upon the salt wave.

CHORUS

Spare a half-penny, spare a half-penny, 5
O spare a half-penny to a poor Negro boy.

Toss'd on the wide main, I all wildly despairing
Burst my chains, rush'd on deck with my eye balls wide glaring,
When the light'ning's dread blast, struck the inlets of day,
And its glorious bright beam sent for ever away. 10
Spare, etc.

The despoiler of man his prospect thus losing
Of gain by my sale, not a blind bargain chusing,
As my value compar'd with my keeping was light,
Had me dash'd overboard in the dead of the night.
Spare, etc.

And but for a bark, to Britannia's coast bound then, 15
All my cares by that plunge in the deep had been drown'd then,
But by moonlight deferr'd was dash'd from the wave,
And reluctantly robb'd of a watery grave.
Spare, etc.

How disastrous my fate, freedom's ground though I tread now,
Torn from home, wife and children, I wander for bread now, 20
While seas roll between us which ne'er can be cross'd,
And hope's distant glimmering in darkness is lost.
Spare, etc.

But of minds foul and fair, when the judge and the ponderer,
Shall restore light and rest to the blind and the wanderer,
The European's deep dye may out-rival the foe, 25
And the soul of an Ethiop prove whiter than snow.
Spare, etc.

2. William Cowper, **The Negro's Complaint** (1788)

To the tune "Hosier's Ghost" or
As near Porto Bello lying

Forc'd from home, and all its pleasures,
Afric's coast I left forlorn;
To increase a stranger's treasures,
O'er the raging billow borne. 5
Men from England bought and sold me,
Paid my price in paltry gold;
But, though theirs they have enroll'd me,
Minds are never to be sold.

Still in thought as free as ever,
What are England's rights, I ask, 10
Me from my delights to sever,
Me to torture, me to task?
Fleecy locks, and black complexion
Cannot forfeit nature's claim;
Skins may differ, but affection 15
Dwells in white and black the same.

Why did all-creating Nature
Make the plant for which we toil?
Sighs must fan it, tears must water,
Sweat of ours must dress the soil. 20
Think, ye masters, iron-hearted,
Lolling at your jovial boards;
Think how many backs have smarted
For the sweets your cane affords.

Is there, as ye sometimes tell us, 25
Is there one who reigns on high?
Has he bid you buy and sell us,
Speaking from his throne the sky?
Ask him, if your knotted scourges,
Matches, blood-extorting screws, 30
Are the means which duty urges
Agents of his will to use?

Hark! he answers – Wild tornadoes,
Strewing yonder sea with wrecks;
Wasting towns, plantations, meadows, 35
Are the voice with which he speaks.
He, foreseeing what vexations
Afric's sons should undergo,
Fix'd their tyrants habitations
Where his whirlwinds answer – No. 40

By our blood in Afric wasted,
Ere our necks received the chain;

By the mis'ries we have tasted,
 Crossing in your barks the main;
 By our suff'rings since ye brought us 45
 To the man-degrading mart;
 All-sustain'd by patience, taught us
 Only by a broken heart:

Deem our nation brutes no longer
 Till some reason ye shall find 50
 Worthier of regard and stronger
 Than the colour of our kind.
 Slaves of gold, whose sordid dealings
 Tarnish all your boasted pow'rs,
 Prove that *you* have human feelings, 55
 Ere you proudly question *ours*!

3. Robert Burns, **The Slave's Lament** *The Scots Musical Museum*, 4 (1792), no.384

It was in sweet Senegal that my foes did me enthrall,
 For the lands of Virginia – ginia O:
 Torn from that lovely shore and must never see it more;
 And alas I am weary weary O!
 Torn from &c.

All on that charming coast is no bitter snow and frost,
 Like the lands of Virginia – ginia O;
 There streams forever flow, and there flowers for ever blow,
 And alas! I am weary, weary O!
 There streams &c.

The burden I must bear, while the cruel scourge I fear,
 In the lands of Virginia – ginia O;
 And I think on friends most dear with the bitter, bitter tear,
 And alas! I am weary, weary O!
 And I think &c.

4. From Bicknell and Day, **The Dying Negro** (1773)

Thou Christian God, to whom so late I bow'd, 280
 To whom my soul its fond allegiance vow'd,
 When crimes like these thy injur'd pow'r prophane,
 O God of Nature! art thou call'd in vain? ...
 Thy hopes, and blessings I alike resign,
 But let revenge, let swift revenge be mine!
 Be this proud bark, which now triumphant rides,
 Toss'd by the winds, and shatter'd by the tides!
 And may these fiends, who now exulting view 300
 The horrors of my fortune, feel them too!
 Be their's the torment of a ling'ring fate,
 Slow as thy justice, dreadful as my hate,
 Condemn'd to grasp the riven plank in vain,
 And chac'd by all the monsters of the main, 305

And while they spread their sinking arms to thee,
Then let their fainting souls remember me!

5. Bryan Edwards, **The Negro's Dying Speech, on his being executed for Rebellion in the Island of Jamaica** (1777)

'Tis past: – ah! calm thy cares to rest!
Firm and unmov'd am I: –
In Freedom's cause I bar'd my breast, –
In Freedom's cause I die.

Ah stop! thou dost me fatal wrong: –
Nature will yet rebel;
For I have lov'd thee very long,
And lov'd thee very well.

To native skies and peaceful bow'rs,
I soon shall wing my way;
Where joy shall lead the circling hours,
Unless too long thy stay....

On those blest shores – a slave no more!
In peaceful ease I'll stray;
Or rouse to chace the mountain boar,
As unconfin'd as day!

No Christian Tyrant there is known
To mark his steps with blood,
Nor sable Mis'ry's piercing moan
Resounds thro' ev'ry wood!

Yet have I heard the melting tongue,
Have seen the falling tear;
Known the good heart by pity wrung,
Ah! that such hearts are rare!

Now, Christian, glut thy ravish'd eyes
– I reach the joyful hour;
Now bid the scorching flames arise,
And these poor limbs devour:

But know, pale Tyrant, 'tis not thine
Eternal war to wage;
The death thou giv'st shall but combine
To mock thy baffled rage.

O Death, how welcome to th' opprest!
Thy kind embrace I crave;
Thou bring'st to Mis'ry's bosom Rest,
And Freedom to the Slave!

6. R.C. Dallas, **Song: 'What are the joys of white man here?'** (1823)

What are the joys of white man here?
What are his pleasures? say;
Me want no joys, no ills me fear,
But on my Bonja play;
Me sing all day, me sleep all night,
Me hab no care, my heart is light;
Me tink not what to-morrow bring,
Me happy, so me sing.

But white man's joys are not like mine,
Dho' he look smart and gay:
He proud, he jealous, haughty, fine,
While I my Bonja play.
He sleep all day, he wake all night,
He full of care, his heart no light,
He great deal want, he little get,
He sorry, so he fret.

Me envy not dhe white man dhen,
Me poor, but me is gay;
Me glad at heart, me happy when
Me on my Bonja play.
Me sing all day, me sleep all night,
Me hab no care, my heart is light;
Me tink not what to-morrow bring,
Me happy, so me sing.

7. Worksongs (recorded in Jamaica, 1793)

Tink dere is a God in a top

Tink dere is a God in a top,
No use me ill, Obissha!
Me no horse, me no mare, me no mule,
No use me ill, Obissha.

If Me Want fe Go in a Ebo

If me want for go in a Ebo,
Me can't go there!
Since dem tief me from a Guinea,
Me can't go there!

If me want for go in a Congo,
Me can't go there!
Since dem tief me from my tatta,
Me can't go there!

If me want for go in a Kingston,
Me can't go there!
Since massa go in a England,
Me can't go there!

8. Me Know No Law, Me Know No Sin (1793)

Altho' a slave me is born and bred,
My skin is black, not yellow:
I often sold my maidenhead
To many a handsome fellow.

My massa keep me once, for true, 5
And gave me clothes, wid busses:
Fine muslin coats, wid bitty too,
To gain my sweet embraces.

When pickininny him come black,
My massa starve and fum me; 10
He tear the coat from off my back,
And naked him did strip me.

Him turn me out into the field,
Wid hoe, the ground to clear-o;
Me take pickininny on my back, 15
And work him te-me weary.

Him, Obisha, him de come one night,
And give me gown and busses;
Him get one pickininny, white!
Almost as white as missess. 20

Then missess fum me wid long switch,
And say him da for massa;
My massa curse her, "lying bitch!"
And tell her, "buss my rassa!"

Me fum'd when me no condescend; 25
Me fum'd too if me do it;
Me no have no one for 'tand my friend,
So me am forc'd to do it.

Me know no law, me know no sin,
Me is just what ebba them make me; 30
This is the way dem bring me in;
So God nor devil take me!

Notes

¹ None of these slave songs are printed in the collections of poems of slavery and abolition by Richardson (1999), Basker (2002), or Wood (2003), but see Cooper, 1993, 19-36, for critical and historical comments on several of them.

² For details of its 1792 publication see Basker, 2002, 452. He suggests that it may have been arranged originally for performance in a musical drama. Wood (2003, 312) erroneously attributes the song to Robert Wedderburn.

³ See the account of his life in McCalman, 1991, 44-51. The Wedderburn name is notorious in the legal history of slavery in Britain for the landmark case (1778) in which Joseph Knight, an African slave whom Robert's uncle Sir John Wedderburn had brought back from Jamaica to Scotland, won an action against his master to secure his liberty. See also James Robertson, *Joseph Knight* (2003), a fictionalised narrative of this episode based on careful and thorough research.

⁴ Burns apparently had no qualms about slavery in 1786 when he was planning to go to Jamaica to work as overseer on a plantation, but his change of heart led him to write warmly in praise of an abolitionist poem by Helen Maria Williams in 1789.

⁵ Extracts from Rushton's *Eclogues* and notes on his life are printed by Basker (2002, 342-349). See also 'The Negro Incantation' (1797) by Rushton's friend and biographer William Shepherd, a poem evoking the 1760 slave rebellion in Jamaica (Basker, 2002, 525-527).

⁶ The song appears in full in J.B. Moreton, *West India Customs and Manners* (2nd edn., London, 1793, 154-5). An abbreviated version was heard by Michael Scott sometime between 1806 and 1822 and printed in *Tom Cringle's Log* (London, 1834, 1.258).

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