

# First encounters of Europeans and Africans with Native Americans in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*: White woman, black prince and noble savages

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## ABSTRACT

A curious episode of the first encounter with Native Americans out of Aphra Behn's novel *Oroonoko, or the History of the Royal Slave* (1688) is reconsidered, using various types of interpretation, such as the structural, philosophical and historical. Special attention is paid to the position and configuration of the episode: all the participants are others to each other. This episode may be interpreted as a model of the first contact between different folks, as well as a story of the origins of religion. In the context of seventeenth-century colonial policy it may be seen as a non-violent way of colonizing America.

KEYWORDS: Aphra Behn; *Oroonoko*; colonial policy; Edward Winslow; Indians.

**Primeros encuentros de europeos y africanos con nativos americanos en *Oroonoko*, de Aphra Behn: la mujer blanca, el príncipe negro y los nobles salvajes**

RESUMEN: Esta nota reconsidera un curioso episodio del primer encuentro con nativos americanos en la novela de Aphra Behn *Oroonoko, or the History of the Royal Slave* (1688), usando varios aspectos de interpretación estructurales, filosóficos e históricos. Presta especial atención a la posición y configuración del episodio: todos los participantes son el otro para los demás. Este episodio puede interpretarse como un modelo del primer contacto entre diferentes pueblos, así como una historia de los orígenes de la religión. En el contexto de la política colonial del s. XVII se ve como una manera no violenta de colonizar América.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Aphra Behn; *Oroonoko*; política colonial; Edward Winslow; indios.\*

**Primeiros encontros de europeus e africanos com nativos americanos em *Oroonoko*, de Aphra Behn: a mulher branca, o príncipe negro e os nobres selvagens**

RESUMO: Reconsidera-se aqui um episódio curioso sobre o primeiro encontro com nativos americanos no romance de Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko, or the History of the Royal Slave* (1688), usando-se várias formas de interpretação, nomeadamente estruturais, filosóficas e históricas. Presta-se especial atenção à posição e configuração do episódio: todos os participantes são o outro para todos os outros. Este episódio pode ser interpretado como um modelo do primeiro contacto entre povos, assim como uma história sobre as origens da religião. No contexto da política colonial do século dezassete, é visto como uma maneira não violenta de colonizar a América.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Aphra Behn; *Oroonoko*; política colonial; Edward Winslow; índios.\*\*

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\* Translation into Spanish by Tamara Pérez Fernández.

In this paper I am going to reconsider different aspects of a very curious episode in Aphra Behn's most famous novel *Oroonoko, or the History of the Royal Slave* (1688), that is, her visit to the Indian town in Surinam, its inhabitants having never seen white people before. Although this genre was emergent in Behn's times, and *Oroonoko* does not fit all characteristics generally ascribed to a novel, I consider it more applicable to Behn's work than the novella or any other genre discussed, for example, in *Approaches to Teaching Behn's Oroonoko* (Richards 2014). From a structural perspective, much attention is paid to the position of the episode inside the novel and the role of this "digression" – it is placed in the middle of the second part dedicated to Oroonoko's life in Surinam, and it is an attempt to overcome "feud" and "fear" before the natives (Behn 1997, 47, 51). The next important point here is the configuration of the meeting itself: we see here not only a white woman traveller and South American Indians, but also a noble Black slave, the hero of the novel. All of them are others to each other, and Aphra Behn and Oroonoko are marginal people in their society: she acts as a powerless woman (although she pretends to a considerable power in the colony), and he is a black man, an ex-prince and a slave deprived of rights and freedom. The author shows that Indians are ready to accept these marginals, and such marginals are much better at establishing good relationships with local people than ordinary colonists, white men with weapons and money.

The analysis of the relationships between the others in the episode is formal in method. The main device to be analyzed by Russian Formalists was defamiliarization (*ostranenie*) (Trofimova 2015, 82). Defamiliarization aimed at presenting ordinary things in an unusual form or perspective. Known long before Shklovsky and other Russian Formalists, it was widely used by Aphra Behn in her most famous novel. It is defamiliarization that brings in the social criticism which is so important in Behn's novel. In eighteenth-century English literature this device was used by Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* (Trofimova 2015, 83–84).

In a more general and even philosophical regard, this episode can be read as a model of the first contact between different folks, as well as a story of the origins of religion. From a historical point of view this episode is an example of a non-violent way of colonizing the

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\*\* Translation into Portuguese by Miguel Ramalhete.

New World in seventeenth-century English colonial policy. A comparison with earlier English texts on the same subject will shed new light on Behn's novel.

Although I am not going to compare the episode of the first encounter with Native Americans in Behn's *Oroonoko* with similar texts from non-English literatures, the general methodological framework for this paper is that of Comparative Literature. In particular, I will follow the principles of Comparative Literature which focus on literature within the context of culture and the insistence on inclusion (Tötösy de Zepetnek 1998: 17). The comparative method was used in *Approaches to Teaching Behn's Oroonoko* by Vincent Carretta, who analyzed the concepts of race, identity, status, slavery and abolition using both *Oroonoko* and *Interesting Narrative* by Equiano (Richards 2014, 167-72). As for the concept of inclusion, it is revealed, on the one hand, in the combination of textual analysis based on formalism and the comparative approach, and on the other hand, in using the earlier text covering the same issues as Behn's *Oroonoko*. I have not been able to find proof that Behn was acquainted with the text I use for my comparison, although her knowledge of it is quite plausible from a chronological perspective.

Turning back to the structural analysis and formal approach, we can notice that the episode of the first encounter with Native Americans contains a number of inconsistencies, if we read it against the entire text of the novel. Behn talks about "mortal Fears, about some Disputes the English had with the Indians" (1997, 47), while at the very beginning of the novel she claimed the Englishmen live with Indians "in perfect Amity [...] caress 'em with all the brotherly and friendly Affection in the World," "with these People, as I said, we live in Perfect Tranquillity, and good Understanding" (Behn 1997, 8, 10). Nevertheless, just before Behn's visit to an Indian town the colonists and the natives are on the brink of the war. At the closure of the episode Behn mentions "Indian slaves" (1997, 51), while at the beginning of the novel she claims "we find it absolutely necessary to caress 'em as Friends, and not to treat 'em as Slaves" (Behn 1997, 11). We may suppose she used the word "slave" here in the meaning servant, but she does not reveal what events broke the tranquility between the English colonists and the Indians. However, we may suppose cheating and lies practiced by White people damaged their relationships with the Natives.

The position of this episode in the novel is very significant: it is placed after the colonists' suspicions of Oroonoko, and just before his decision to organize a slave rebellion and his famous "harangue" on the "miseries and ignominies" of slavery (Behn 1997, 52). It is introduced in contrast to a laconic description of the atrocities of the Indians towards white colonists that the narrator was told about (she claims she was not an eyewitness of those terrible events): "They cut in pieces all they cou'd take, getting into Houses, and hanging up the Mother, and all her Children about her; and cut a Footman, I left behind me, all in Joynts, and nail'd him to Trees" (Behn, 1997, 47). The temporary balance in the relationships between English colonists and South American Indians is broken after the arrival of the Dutch. The narrator accuses the Dutch colonists of maltreatment of the natives: "The Dutch, who us'd 'em not so civilly, as the English" (1997, 47). If we take into consideration Behn's description of English Colonial Council – "such notorious Villains as Newgate never transported" (1997, 59) – we may only wonder, what Dutch colonists were like. Nevertheless, seventeenth-century readers of *Oroonoko* were not at all surprised by Dutch cruelty at all. There were plenty of prejudices against the Dutch, therefore Behn's description of the Dutch colonists' attitude to the natives fits excellently within a seventeenth-century paradigm. On the other hand, as I am going to prove, Aphra Behn followed an English concept of peaceful colonization and friendship with the natives revealed in English texts from the beginning of the seventeenth century.

Behn and her company undertake this journey without any clear purpose. The narrator mentions eighteen people, who dared to go by barge along the river to an unknown "Indian Town" (Behn, 1997, 47). It is left unclear how many of them disembarked. Behn mentions "herself," her brother and her maid, as well as Oroonoko – Caesar, and a fisherman "that liv'd at the Mouth of the River" (1997, 48). Nevertheless, we may suppose there were more visitors, and those most probably were not white people:

We, who resolv'd to surprize 'em [i.e. Indians], by making 'em see something they never had seen, (that is, White People) resolv'd only my self, my Brother, and Woman shou'd go; so Caesar, the Fisherman, and *the rest* [...] let us pass on towards the Town. (Behn, 1997, 48)

One of “the rest” might have been Oroonoko’s wife Imoinda-Clemene, “a sharer in all [their] adventures,” but her presence in this episode is not articulated (Behn 1997, 51).

The configuration of their company is peculiar. Their leaders are Behn, a woman claiming an influence in the colony, being the daughter of a “Lieutenant-General of Six and Thirty Islands, besides the Continent of Surinam” (Behn 1997, 43), but totally incapable of helping her friend Oroonoko, and Oroonoko-Caesar, a man of noble birth, but de facto a slave, a person reduced to a commodity. In the text of the novel Behn strives to dissociate herself from bad English colonists and even Christians. There is also her brother, who wears a suit with “abundance of Green Ribon” (Behn 1997, 48). As Mary-Ann O’Donnell has pointed out, these “green ribbons” reveal his sympathy to the Levelers, or even, anachronistically, his belonging to a Green Ribbon club in the 1680’s (2012). Thus, he is also a problematic figure. The Fisherman who has lost his European appearance and looks like “a perfect *Indian* in Colour” is also a marginal (Behn 1997, 48). Moreover, all these people—a royalist Aphra Behn, her republican brother, their Black slave-friend, and Indian-like Fisherman—are others to each other. Behn develops the device of defamiliarization almost to absurdity. What her characters share is the interest in the environment and the people different from them. They are able to conduct a dialogue with South American Indians thanks to their willingness to understand others.

Although they took the Fisherman to enable oral communication with the Indians, Behn, her maid and her brother start their interaction with them by gazing and touching. The narrator introduces the first meeting of the Indians and the White people in a picturesque way. The three Europeans enter the town with “Houses, or Huts” standing on the bank of the river (Behn 1997, 48). Some Indians are dancing, while others are busy carrying water from the river. The Indians are amazed at seeing unknown creatures. Behn and her company first perceive their cry as addressed to the warriors: “We thought it had been for those that should Kill us” (Behn 1997, 48). Fortunately, they are mistaken. The contrast between the natives and the white visitors is strengthened by their outward appearance: “They were all naked, and we were Dressed” (Behn 1997, 48). Moreover, it is the white people who establish the communication; the Indians “stand still,” stupefied with amazement

(Behn 1997, 48). Overcoming fear, Behn, her brother and her woman offer them their hands, and this gesture is accepted by the Indians.

The author makes a detailed description of the stages of acquaintanceship. First the Indians go around the visitors and express surprise at their strange appearance. Then they start to touch the women and examine their petticoats. At this point Oroonoko and the rest come to them, and an obvious mediator is introduced, that is, the Fisherman, who knows their language and who is known to them. For the Indians he is a friend, "Tiguamy," while the visitors are "those things," and it is still unclear to the natives whether these White people are reasonable creatures or not (Behn 1997, 49). Aphra Behn successfully shifts the perspective and introduces the point of view of the Indians. The Fisherman assures them these "things" are reasonable (Behn 1997, 49). Closer to the end of the episode Behn and her company become the Indians's friends: the War Captains cry "Amora Tigame" to them, that is, greet them in the same way as their countrymen greeted the Fisherman (Behn 1997, 50).

Towards the end of the episode Behn replaces the figure of the Fisherman with the hero of the novel, Oroonoko, who becomes a mediator between white colonists and Native American Indians. It is Caesar who expresses a wish to meet War captains, and it is he who asks them about their wounds and scars. Oroonoko has to communicate with the Indian warriors with the help of the interpreter (that is, the Fisherman), but the ground of the dialogue is not a common language. Oroonoko does not know the language of the Indians, but he shares common principles of honor with them. It is no accident he becomes their friend.

Oroonoko proves to be a more important mediator than the Fisherman, as he manages to establish "so good an understanding between the Indians and the English, that there were no more Fears, or Heart-burnings during our stay; but we had a perfect, open, and free Trade with 'em" (Behn 1997, 50). His ability to understand their concept of honor and valor makes him indispensable in the dialogue between white colonists and the natives.

Native American Indians express their hospitality, inviting the guests to share a meal with them, and then offering them "Drink of the best Sort" (Behn 1997, 50). Food and drink are very important in communication, something Behn understood very well. Food sharing is neutral in terms of gender, while drinking is associated

with masculinity – War Captains offer drinks to the visitors. Another important form of communication is music, and Behn with her brother organize a small concert. They play flutes – the flute was a popular musical instrument in seventeenth-century England, and, of course, it was highly unusual for the Indians to hear one played. Finally, the narrator mentions flirtation as another component of communication: Behn’s brother kisses Indian Peeie’s wife, and the husband kisses Behn.

If we place *Oroonoko* in the context of late-seventeenth century European culture, we will see that on a philosophical level Behn uses this episode to introduce her own model of the origins of religion. It is acknowledged that she translated *The History of the Oracles* by Fontenelle simultaneously with work upon *Oroonoko*, and both books came out in 1688. Although the first English translation of *The History of the Oracles* was published anonymously, the “Dedicatory” was signed A.B., so, bearing in mind Behn translated Fontenelle’s *Entretiens sur la Pluralité des Mondes* as *A Discovery of New Worlds* in the same year, her authorship is unquestionable. Music and tricks perceived as miracles are the basics for religion. The Indians are ignorant and superstitious, they are eager to believe in any fiction, if it looks neat and incomprehensible. For example, they treat Behn’s kinsman as a prophet, because he performed a trick with a burning-glass. Their own prophet, “a Youth of about Sixteen Years old,” is extremely handsome, and he impresses people by making them believe in his supernatural abilities (Behn 1997, 49).

We see that Aphra Behn creates an episode that describes first contact of different folks in general. On the other hand, her digression had a more practical meaning in the context of English colonial politics. Behn’s portrayal of Native American Indians bears striking similarities with a much earlier English text on the subject, Edward Winslow’s *Letter sent from New England to a friend in these parts, setting forth a briefe and true Declaration of the worth of that Plantation; as also certaine useful Directions for such as intend a Voyage into those Parts* (1621). It was first published as part of a book entitled *Relation or Journall of the beginning and proceedings of the English Plantation settled at Plimoth in New England, by certaine English Aduenturers both Merchants and others* (later it was known as *Mourt’s Relation, or Journal of the Plantation at Plymouth*). It came out in London in 1622 and was printed for John Bellamie. A comparison of such a text with Behn’s *Oroonoko* may seem ridiculous, bearing in

mind the personality of Edward Winslow, a Separatist, sixth governor of Plymouth colony, and part of a puritan community. Behn was always highly critical of Puritans, and her relationship to this community is still little-known. On the other hand, she could have read a work about the experience of English colonists in America, possibly before she went to Surinam in the 1660's. Despite her royalist views, Behn held Oliver Cromwell in high esteem and called Harry Martin, the brother of the character of the novel Colonel Martin, "the great Oliverian" (Behn 1997, 45). Her obvious awareness of the Levelers also lends credence to her interest in such works as Winslow's letter.

As the title of Winslow's letter shows, it served as a kind of an advertisement to those who were planning to come to America and to settle there. Apart from describing the fertility of American soil and abundance of fruit, berries and vegetables there, the author also makes very interesting remarks about the natives: "We have found the Indians very faithful in their Covenant of Peace with us [...]. They are a people without any Religion, or knowledge of any God, yet very trustie, quicke of apprehension, ripe witted, just [...]" (Winslow 1865, 133, 135). Such a description coincides with what Aphra Behn wrote about South American Indians: they do not have a word for "liar" in their language, "they have a Native Justice, which knows no Fraud, and they understand no Vice, or Cunning" (1997, 10). Winslow also pointed out Indian nakedness: "The men and women go naked, only a skin about their middles" (1865, 135), although he does not make a contrast with English people fully or colorfully dressed. Winslow's vision of the relationships with the Indians is much more positive and idealistic than Behn's. While Behn admits the lack of communication between the colonists and the native people: "they love not to go far from home, and we never go to them" (Behn 1997, 49), Winslow claims, "we often go to them, and they often come to us" (Winslow 1865, 133-34). Not only do the Indians invite Englishmen to their houses, but the colonists also receive the natives as their guests: "We entertain them familiarly in our houses, and they as friendly bestowing their Venison on us" (Winslow 1865, 135). Behn's Indians also "dressed Venison and Buffalo" for the visitors (1997, 49). Sharing food is important for both authors, but in Winslow's case his text is crucial in mythologizing Thanksgiving celebrations in North America. It is his letter that gives



the earliest description of Thanksgiving involving not only English colonists, but Indians too:

Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, so that we might after a special manner rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruits of our labours [...] at which time amongst other Recreations, we exercised our Arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted (Winslow 1865, 133).

There is no indication in Behn's text that the common meal the Indians have with the White people is part of any festival, but the mutual curiosity and openness of the hosts and the guests is reminiscent of the idealistic description in Winslow's letter. Despite their religious differences, Behn shared with Winslow a concept of mild and non-violent colonization of the American continent. The episode of the visit to an Indian town is a utopian model of peaceful relationships and dialogue with the Indians, and this idealistic vision is reinforced by the El Dorado story at the end of this digression. The image of plenty and endless riches is marred by a bitter lamentation about "what his Majesty lost by losing that part of America" (Behn 1997, 51). While Winslow's letter is a celebration of the success of English colonial policy in the New World, Behn's *Oroonoko* bears witness to the failure of this policy in South America. Not only did England lose Surinam to the Low Countries, but English colonists created an unstable and vulnerable society structure leading to conflicts and even war. Behn warned about the possibility of massacres performed by the Indians as well as about slave revolts. Positioning herself as an advocate of the colonization of the New World, she understood the challenges that English colonists would inevitably face during this process.

The episode of the first encounter with Native Americans in Surinam bears both historically determined and timeless features. It is a valuable source for a better understanding of English colonial policy in the seventeenth century, but it is also a model for peaceful communication between different people and different folks.

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