

# Black English in Britain in the Eighteenth Century

David Paisey

*for Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee*

Historians have added in various ways to our knowledge of the black presence in Britain during the eighteenth century, but one aspect has not figured largely in the accumulated evidence, namely records of how black people, a distinct underclass, spoke to each other and to all classes of the native white population. In a period long before sound recording, we are obviously dependent on written sources for indications of how lower-class groups spoke, that is to say their deviations in vocabulary, grammar, syntax and pronunciation from what we must call standard English, itself a construct from written sources. Accessible Court records from the period, of testimony by black defendants and witnesses, seem not to have been verbatim,<sup>1</sup> and there is no key which might lead us to potential untapped sources in private manuscripts. It is also the case that works actually written and published by literate members of all ethnic groups generally aimed at the standard: this certainly applies to the published works of well-known black writers such as Ignatius Sancho (c. 1729-1780), Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745-1797), Ottobah Cugoana (c. 1757-after 1791) and the African-American Phyllis Wheatley (c. 1753-1784). There are exceptions, however, in various works of imaginative literature by non-black writers, and these will provide all my evidence here. Amongst these, drama looms large, since the words given to some (though not all) of its black characters constitute an attempt to provide non-speakers of Black English (the actors of the day) with what must have been thought a believable likeness of the real thing. My earliest drama dates from 1768, and there may be earlier ones I have missed. There is no Black English in *Polly* (1729), a ballad opera by John Gay (1685-1732) set in the West Indies, which was a sequel to his immensely popular *Beggars' Opera* (1728). Of the two most celebrated and influential literary subjects of the century with leading black characters, which appeared in various genres, including drama, to support the anti-slavery cause, *Oroonoko*<sup>2</sup> always relied on standard English alone, while *Inkle and Yarico*<sup>3</sup> included Black English only at a late stage (see below). It should also be noted that there are many literary records of other forms of non-standard English during the eighteenth century, notably Irish and Scots English, but also other English dialectal forms and the attempts of foreigners to speak the language.

---

<sup>1</sup> We do have, in the Old Bailey records, the sole attempt during that century to render verbatim and phonetically a passage of non-standard English, in this case spoken by an Irishman in 1725. Old Bailey Proceedings online <<http://www.oldbaileyonline.org>> 7 April 1725, testimony of James Fitzgerald.

<sup>2</sup> *Oroonoko*, based on a story of 1688 by Aphra Behn (1640?-1689) and originally set in Surinam and Africa. See Susan F. Iwanisziw, *Oroonoko: Adaptations and Offshoots* (Aldershot, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> *Inkle and Yarico*, originally a brief anecdote in Richard Ligon's *A True and Exact History of the Islands of Barbadoes*, 2nd edn (London, 1673), p. 55, developed into a more substantial story published by Richard Steele (1672-1729) in 1711 in the *London Spectator*.

British Black English is largely a British West Indian creole, which will have developed from various pidgins as a *lingua franca* enabling communication between the three main ethnic groups there: the dominant English of the slave-owners, the many different African languages spoken by the imported slaves,<sup>4</sup> and the Taino languages of the original islanders. Speakers in Britain will have included people from Jamaica and other parts of the West Indies, though the examples of the language provided by white writers of the eighteenth century in their works of imagination (while, I suggest, as faithful as possible to what they heard in everyday life) cannot be taken as providing evidence of particular local origins; indeed, as we shall see, some writers did not scruple to assign samples of this same language to invented members of foreign language groups such as American slaves and Native Americans. The *Dictionary of Jamaican English*, edited by F. G. Cassidy and R. B. Le Page,<sup>5</sup> indexes ‘forms attested at any time between 1655 and the present day’, the earliest, including the eighteenth century, obviously from written sources, which do not include imaginative literature,<sup>6</sup> but it must remain an open question how far Cassidy and Page’s *Jamaican English* also represents the West Indies in a general sense during this period. The dictionary provides a vocabulary, and my samples – always remembering that they were written down by a variety of members of the white British population not attempting to provide a historical record – nevertheless provide an insight into a living usage. That they are largely unsurprising in vocabulary may reflect both their conversational mode and the authors’ intention not to overtax the expectations of their white middle-class audience.

It should be remembered that creoles are not standardized, or fixed in written form, and are dynamic by nature, so that changes will have continued to be made by speakers at various times and in various places. By the eighteenth century, there were large numbers of black people in Britain, who took the practice of this language (no doubt with many variant features) to several parts of the country where it served as a perfectly adequate means of communication, both within the group and externally. However, the spread of the black population cannot be inferred from this literature, because of the overall dominance of London in publishing and printing, though we can be sure that the largest numbers were in that city. Nigel File and Chris Power quote a claim in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* for 1764 that there were currently 20,000 black servants in London alone, but the article cited in that publication (from an unnamed newspaper) is very hostile in tone, and the figure surely a would-be alarming overestimate.<sup>7</sup>

American versions of Black English (sometimes called Ebonics) have been more studied than British ones, by linguists and others, for instance in J. G. Dillard’s *Black English: History and Usage in the United States*,<sup>8</sup> and his findings were a valuable starting-point for me, with his major examples beginning with Daniel Defoe (c. 1660-1731) in England.<sup>9</sup> While specifically

<sup>4</sup> See Joseph T. Farquharson, *The African Lexis in Jamaican: Its Linguistic and Sociohistorical Significance* (2012). Available at <[http://works.bepress.com/joseph\\_farquharson/1](http://works.bepress.com/joseph_farquharson/1)>. The earliest English examples of the languages of African slaves in Jamaica were written down by Sir Hans Sloane in his *Voyage to the Islands of Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers, and Jamaica*, vol. i (London, 1707), pp. xlvi–xlix, in transcriptions of the music for African dancers from ‘Angola, Papa & Koromanti’, of which the first and third have words. For a detailed analysis of this record see Richard Cullen Rath, ‘African Music in Seventeenth-Century Jamaica: Cultural Transit and Transition’, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 1 (Oct. 1993), pp. 700–26. Lorenzo Don Turner, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (Ann Arbor, 1973, originally 1949) has dealt in great detail with the dialect of slaves imported into coastal areas of South Carolina and Georgia during the eighteenth, and the first part of the nineteenth, century.

<sup>5</sup> 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> Beryl Loftman Bailey, *Jamaican Creole Syntax: A Transformational Approach* (Cambridge, 1966) is almost entirely a detailed analysis of the present form of the language.

<sup>7</sup> Nigel File and Chris Power, *Black Settlers in Britain 1555–1958* (London, 1981); *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, xxxiv (1764), p. 495, rubric *Short Notes from the Papers*. I have not found the original text in any newspaper in the British Library’s Burney database of newspapers to 1800.

<sup>8</sup> New York, 1972.

<sup>9</sup> Before Defoe, Dillard has American examples of isolated words from sources such as the Salem witchcraft trials of 1692. I am also grateful to Sheila O’Connell and Peter Hogg for very useful suggestions.

American sources have then to await the later eighteenth century,<sup>10</sup> British literary history is somewhat more forthcoming, and my small selections of samples from strictly eighteenth-century sources follow, listed chronologically from a variety of genres, as an encouragement for others to search for more<sup>11</sup> and to check the several passages of speech I have deliberately omitted to save space.

The earliest examples are indeed generally supposed to be found in three works by Defoe, a prolific author who never travelled abroad, so that what he portrays as Black English must be what he had heard in England, despite his putting it in the mouths of individuals of three different origins. These are therefore the first examples of the use of Black English (which British people had heard spoken on the street) as a default also for other variant languages or creoles which they were not accustomed to hear (notably Native American English and the English of Black slaves in America). In the first and most famous of Defoe's examples, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), he invents a West-Indian islander (not an African) whom the shipwrecked Crusoe calls Friday and to whom he teaches English from scratch. In Friday's very few examples of direct speech, Defoe has him using expressions no doubt taken from the creole already mentioned, whereas logically they should be in Crusoe's own standard English.

**1719** *my nation beat much; in the place where me was; me speakee wit you*

The second, more interesting, example occurs in *The Family Instructor*, Part 2 (1720), which is an attempt to teach (white) families how to live moral lives, partly in the form of household dialogues, with two of these between one young son and a black boy servant from the neighbour's house. The latter is named Toby and, as he tells us, was born in Barbados, but I see no reason to assume that Defoe the writer of fiction was here attempting to render a specifically Barbadian creole.

**1720** *me much want speak with you; me no read; how God hear up there? I no speak much loud; black mans be servant, white mans be master; when negro mans know God, he go take the Name [is baptized] and be free mans; I do no ting. I say no-ting*

Finally, in *Colonel Jack* (1722), Defoe gives a voice to a slave named Mouchat on a Virginia plantation.

**1722** *muchee sorree; as long as me live; they no try; me speakee de true*

In these few early extracts, we already find instances of what appear to be perhaps the most distinctive features of Black English in general during this century: firstly the use of verbs solely in the uninflected infinitive, whatever number, tense and mood might be required in standard English; secondly, pronouns in one case only (not always the nominative), whatever

---

<sup>10</sup> John Rickford (ed.), *African American Vernacular English* (Oxford, 1999) points out that large numbers of slaves were imported into America from the colonies of Jamaica and Barbados, so the creoles they spoke would have been common in parts of America as well as Britain.

<sup>11</sup> David Sutcliffe, *British Black English* (Oxford, 1982), p. 20. 'It has proved difficult to find examples of Jamaican Creole preserved in writing that pre-date 1790'; Gretchen Gerzina, *Black England: Life Before Emancipation* (London, 1999) quotes from the 1792 print *The Rabbits* also quoted by me below, but her other undated quote from another print should be dated 1824; James G. Basker (ed.), *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems about Slavery* (New Haven, 2002) includes a poem with a few examples of Black English ('Negro affection') by Robert Anderson (1770-1833), who also wrote many poems in his native Cumberland dialect, which Basker dates 1798, the year when Anderson's *Poems on Various Subjects* was published in Carlisle. However, the poem is not present in that publication, but was published in Anderson's *Poetical Works* (Carlisle, 1820), and I omit it as properly belonging the nineteenth century.

their grammatical function, notably *me* for *I* and *he* for *him* (or *vice versa*); and thirdly, the random addition of proclitic and enclitic (respectively preceding and following) unaccented and superfluous syllables either independently, for instance *a*, as in *you want speak a wid me?* or *-ee (-y)* at the end of words, for instance *muchee*, *Gracy*. Other characteristics we shall often meet are caused by letter combinations in standard English found difficult to pronounce, such as voiced and unvoiced *th-* and *wh-*, and these pronunciation difficulties are also features of the reported speech of foreigners in printed texts of the period.

Ten years after *Colonel Jack*, in 1732, there appeared a most interesting and little-known work (not a play) by William Oldisworth (1680-1734), a miscellaneous writer and translator of Horace. This was *The Delightful Adventures of John Cole, That Merry Old Soul*,<sup>12</sup> published in London anonymously, claiming to be ‘By a tipling Philosopher of the Royal Society’, though Oldisworth had no connection with that institution. It tells the farcical and bawdy story of Cole, who preferred black to white in all things, was ‘Patron of the merry Blacks of Waltham’,<sup>13</sup> and married a black wife, and is interspersed with four songs. This text includes a tender epitaph ‘wrote by a Collanantee<sup>14</sup> negro from Antiego in the Ceolian [*sic*] style’, which I quote in full:

1732 *If you dis pash do walkee*  
*Tan here, and tankee, tankee,*  
*About dis Whitee Blackee*  
*Jackee Cole.*

*Dis Whitee, goodee Godee,*  
*So lof de Blackee body,*  
*‘Fore G-d me too much sadee*  
*Jackee Cole.*

*Come here all Mausre Negro,*  
*And cry we poor Diego,*  
*And tellee where mus he-go,*  
*Jackee Cole.*

*He haf a Negro Wiffee,*  
*He live de Negro Liffee,*  
*‘Fore G-d heart burn wee Grieffee,*  
*Jackee Cole.*

*Fate he now go to Coma*  
*To Negro Country, homa*  
*To Fader and to Mamma,*  
*Jackee Cole.*

On 3 October 1768, a short two-act ‘comic opera’ (a spoken play with songs, which we would now call a musical), *The Padlock*, by Isaac Bickerstaff (c. 1735-after 1802) had its first of many successful performances as an afterpiece at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, one of London’s three leading theatres after the Licensing Act of 21 June 1737 (the others being the Royal Opera

<sup>12</sup> BL, 12410.bbb.14.

<sup>13</sup> The Waltham Blacks were a gang of deer-poachers and thieves who wore masks and black gloves; their leader was called King. See *The History of the Blacks of Waltham in Hampshire, and those under the Like Denomination in Berkshire* (London, 1723). BL, 606.b.29.

<sup>14</sup> Perhaps *Coromantee* was intended, the English name given to Ashanti slaves in Jamaica. F. G. Cassidy, R. B. Le Page (eds.), *Dictionary of Jamaican English*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1980) have ‘Cromanty’ (1757).

House in Covent Garden and, from 1767, the Theatre Royal in the Haymarket);<sup>15</sup> the textbook was also printed repeatedly.<sup>16</sup> Set in Salamanca and based on Cervantes, it includes a comic character in the form of a Negro slave named Mungo,<sup>17</sup> who was first played by Charles Dibdin [the Elder] (1745-1814), the composer of the music, as well as an actor and author. As Dibdin tells us in his autobiography, Bickerstaff had intended the part of Mungo for John Moody (stage name of John Cochran 1727-1812) ‘who had been in the West-Indies and knew, of course, the dialect of the negroes’,<sup>18</sup> but Dibdin wanted the part himself, having also spent seven years in the West Indies, and deliberately made the songs too difficult for Moody, who was not a trained singer; Roger Fiske has written of Dibdin’s general ‘flair for accents’,<sup>19</sup> but his portrayal of Mungo was very far from being ‘the first blackface role in British theatre’, as Jon A. Gillaspie recently claimed in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Some of his music for this work survives,<sup>20</sup> and we shall meet him again.

*1768 my old Massa; here and dere; bless you heart; me say; me lilly tire; you never axe me; youself; troo [through]; noting [nothing]; tanks [thanks]; tink; wid de [with the]; you self [yourself]; you old [you are old]; misy [miss]; she like you; him [his]; togeder [together]; neger [negro]; to be use kine [used kindly]*

A mezzotint by the printmaker Butler Clowes (c. 1730-after 1782) showing Dibdin in the part of Mungo, published in London bearing the date 1 January 1769 to establish copyright, was another sign of *The Padlock*’s popularity.<sup>21</sup> Mezzotints were not technically more difficult to produce than ordinary etchings, but the plates wore out more quickly and consequently were printed in smaller numbers and at higher prices, even more so when coloured before sale, as many copies of this one were.<sup>22</sup> The theatre-goers who will have bought impressions were certainly well-off citizens. The caption includes the following words:

*1769 me wish to my heart me was dead*

Another print (an etching) by William Austin (1721 or 1733-1820) was published in London with the date 1 May 1773, and shows a fencing match between a black man with the name Mungo (taken from *The Padlock*) and a woman representing the Duchess of Queensbury, who furthered the career of her real black page Soubise.<sup>23</sup> Mungo’s words include the following:

*1773 Mungo here, Mungo dere [...] vat your Gracy tink of me now?*

On 1 February 1776, the Drury Lane theatre saw the first performance of another short two-act ‘comic opera’, *The Black-a-more Wash’d White*, by Henry Bate Dudley (1745-1814), which seems not to survive in printed form, though a manuscript is preserved among the Larpent Plays

<sup>15</sup> There were predecessor theatres in the Haymarket from 1720 to 1737.

<sup>16</sup> BL, 11777.c.73. The earliest edition was Isaac Bickerstaff, *The Padlock* (London, 1768).

<sup>17</sup> Mungo is a Scottish name, not African.

<sup>18</sup> BL, 992.1.8. *The Professional Life of Mr. Dibdin, Written by Himself*, 4 vols, vol. i (London, 1803), p. 70.

<sup>19</sup> *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. v (1980), p. 424.

<sup>20</sup> A notice in *The Public Advertiser* of 18 October 1768 says that the music is all original, and not taken from Italian songs, as had been alleged.

<sup>21</sup> <<http://www.britishmuseum.org/collection>> no. 1835,0711.79. These dates used on prints will not have differed by more than a couple of days from those of their appearances for sale. Dibdin underlined the importance of the role of Mungo to his career by naming a son born during the run Charles Isaac Mungo Dibdin (1768-1833).

<sup>22</sup> See Sheila O’Connell, ‘Humorous, Historical and Miscellaneous: Mezzotints, One Shilling Plain, Two Shillings Coloured’, *Publishing History*, lxx (2011), pp. 83-100.

<sup>23</sup> <<http://www.britishmuseum.org/collection>> no. 1865.0610.1111.

in the Huntington Library, California.<sup>24</sup> These are a collection of plays, extending from 1737<sup>25</sup> to 1834, assembled by John Larpent, licenser of plays for the Lord Chamberlain of Great Britain. At that time, and indeed until after the Second World War, the texts of all plays intended for public performance in Britain had to be submitted in manuscript for prior approval by the Lord Chamberlain's Office; the handwriting in most cases will not have been the author's, but that of a copyist. Where texts were subsequently printed, it is possible to assume what alterations, if any, had been required before licensed performance, though of course censorship was not the only possible reason for variation. Though Bate Dudley's play is silly and politically incorrect in matters of race, it includes a white male character 'blacking up' in order to get close to his intended but well-guarded love object and speaking 'the dialect', which is understood and unchallenged by the other characters.

*1776 me so shame Massa; a young Teaf [thief] vatch old cross ven he sleep;  
old Crossy mo cross for dat; come den shake hand wid de poor Blackey man;  
I no forget a vord on my life; I no come back myself if I no bring him*

*The Black-a-more Wash'd White* is the only one of my linguistic sources in which the author expresses prejudice against black people. Towards the end of Act I his white English character Jerry says, in relation to the employment of black servants, 'Why surely the times are turned topsey turvey, that white Englishmen should give place to foreign Blacks!' Jerry then sings a 'ballad' whose refrain ends with the words 'British boys will still be right/ 'Till they prove that black is white!'

On 10 October 1780, in a farce by Isaac Jackman (1752?-1831) entitled *The Divorce*, with music by William Shield, also played at Drury Lane,<sup>26</sup> there are samples of both Irish and Black English, the latter spoken by Sambo, a servant given sadly little to say.

*1780(a) Massa; tank [thank]; I [me]; tings*

The same year 1780 saw, on 25 November at Covent Garden, the first performance of the 'comic opera' in three acts *The Islanders*, both written and composed by Charles Dibdin, certainly one of the most interesting of my examples. In this case an original 1780 text survives in manuscript form, as submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's Office (Larpent 537), but was never printed in full; in 1781 it was published in severely abridged form as the 'farce in two acts' *The Marriage Act* (first played at the same theatre on 17 September 1781).<sup>27</sup> There is also a manuscript in Dibdin's own hand of Act 2 of *The Islanders* in the British Library, which contains some material not included in the manuscript submitted to the Lord Chamberlain;<sup>28</sup> it is not possible to say whether this was

<sup>24</sup> Larpent 400. See Douglas MacMillan, *Catalogue of the Larpent Plays in the Huntington Library* (San Marino, 1939). They may be consulted in microfiche form in the Manuscripts Reading Room of the British Library.

<sup>25</sup> The Licensing Act related only to performance, not to publication.

<sup>26</sup> BL, 161.e.11. Larpent 574, published in London in 1781.

<sup>27</sup> There is no manuscript of this abridged version among the Larpent plays. The abridgement seems to have been carried out at the wishes of Thomas Harris, owner of the Covent Garden Theatre, and the new title chosen to exploit public familiarity with the phrase in the wake of a piece of legislation before Parliament just prior to its performance. The Marriage Act (the Bill before Parliament) was intended to legalize certain kinds of marriage previously forbidden because of the youth of the parties and the place of the wedding, but, after passing its three readings in the House of Commons in June 1781, it was rejected by the Lords on 12 July that year. The Larpent plays also include another dramatic work attempting to exploit the public's interest in this piece of current legislation, an 'Interlude' by Charles Stuart, *Ripe Fruit; or, The Marriage Act*, first played at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket on 22 August 1781 (Larpent 566); this has no relevance to the present subject.

<sup>28</sup> BL, Add. MS. 30964, ff. 196a-233a

actually spoken on stage. The music of *The Islanders* survives also, several of the numbers having become popular enough for separate publication of their texts alone in 1780, plus both text and music of two songs sung in the play by its most delightful character, the ‘Indian’ Orra, also 1780. *The Islanders* is a quite substantial play with a large cast and convoluted plot, parts of which were borrowed by Dibdin from two French plays of 1743 and 1749, respectively *L’Isle Sauvage* and *La Colonie* by Germain François Poullain de Saint-Foix (1698-1776). From the first of these French plays (in which the only black character, the villain of the piece, spoke perfect French, as indeed did the white characters, said to be of Spanish origin), Dibdin took his theme of two white girls growing up on an island without ever having seen a young white man, while from the second he took the idea of a beauty contest on ‘an island in America’ for ladies of whom one was a man in drag. Dibdin’s *The Islanders* has a large cast of white characters, also from Spain, plus unnamed ‘slaves, islanders, Indians, etc.’ His named black characters include the separated lovers Orra and Yanko (both ‘Indians’, not slaves), of whom Orra alone speaks and sings in Black English; in the abridged *Marriage Act*, only the plot-line from Poullain de Saint-Foix’s *La Colonie* survives, and Yanko and several other characters have been cut, as has the cast-list reference to slaves. In all Dibdin’s versions, Orra is in everything an admirable and touching character, and in both the early stagings was played by the Irish singer and actress Mrs Margaret Kennedy (formerly Farrell), who had sung the title role in Arne’s opera *Artaxerxes* at Covent Garden in 1777 and was clearly technically accomplished as well as popular. In Dibdin’s manuscript of Act 2, Orra has a conversation with the intellectual white character Fabio, in which he tells her ‘Truly thou hast a most extraordinary<sup>29</sup> mind [...] There now – there is what puzzles me how an Indian – a savage whose ideas must be [...] such a confused mass should hit upon such apt and intelligent remarks.’

My samples come from *The Islanders* in the original Larpent version of 1780 plus material from Dibdin’s autograph of Act 2, the first few spoken by an unnamed slave, the remainder by Orra, with the text of one of her three songs in full:

**1780(b)** [slave:] *oh iss, Massa, he be very safe, me see him 'pon rock; my arm and leg be dev'lish tire*

[Orra:] *Massa Fabio, have you seen my Missa Camilla?; for vat [why] old man make love?; when Yanko speak, me heart dance; vat I sing?; den you better cry, he to be pity, if he be fool; vat you ask for den?; I tink it be time to go sleep when is talk what I no understand; I like you [...] much best when you love you joke*

*Poor Orra, tink of Yanko dear,  
Do he be gone for ever,  
For he no dead, he still live here,  
And he from here go never.*

*Like on a sand, me mark him face,  
The wave, come roll him over,  
De mark he go – but still de place,  
'Tis easy to discover.*

*Me see 'fore now, de tree, de flower,  
He droop, like Orra, surely,  
And den, by 'm bye, dere come one shower,  
He hold him head up purely.*

---

<sup>29</sup> This word is ‘enchanting’ in the Larpent manuscript, but the remainder of this quotation is absent there. Subsequently in the same source, Dibdin refers to Yanko’s ‘wampum belt and tomahawk’, suggesting a conflation of West Indian and Native American.

*And so some time, me tink me die,  
My heart be sick, he grieve me;  
But in a lillie time, me cry  
Good deal, and dat relieve me*

The most astonishing thing about Dibdin's *Islanders*, however, and only preserved in the manuscript, is the concluding speech given to 'the Governor'<sup>30</sup> – of a West Indian island, we must presume – which includes the words 'let the name of Master and Slave be forgotten [...] all mankind are brothers [...] virtue & humanity extend throughout the world'. These would certainly have been cut by the Lord Chamberlain's Office before performance, and in the abbreviated *Marriage Act* there is no longer any such character, and the play ends with a sung *Catch* for all the actors. It is clear from more samples of his work from 1788 (see below) that Dibdin continued in his own way to play an active part in the abolitionist movement.

On 11 August 1787, 'an opera in three acts' entitled *Inkle and Yarico* by George Colman the Younger (1762-1836) with music by Samuel Arnold (1740-1802) was first performed at the Theatre Royal in the Haymarket, with the text published in London.<sup>31</sup> As noted above, this is a version of the story told in various genres throughout the eighteenth century after its influential appearance in *The Spectator* in 1711. Act 1, set 'in an American forest' introduces us to two native American women, the huntress Yarico, who has been taught perfect English, and her attendant Wowski, who in her rather few lines speaks a brogue very similar to what is being exemplified here as Black English, though Colman also gives her a meaningless string of exotic words including one real native American word ('Wampum, Swampum, Yanko, Lanko, Pownatowski').<sup>32</sup> Yarico, having saved the life of the English trader Inkle, is taught how to read and then taken to Barbados, where Inkle has to be persuaded by the Governor not to sell her into slavery.

**1787(a)** *iss* [yes]; *you* [you are a]; *teach* [taught]; *feed* [will feed]; *who be* [who is]; *carry* [carries]; *not* [do not]; *I not see* [I will not see]

Another dramatic version of the story of Inkle and Yarico by John Thelwall (1764-1834), also dating from 1787, has recently been discovered in manuscript and published in America.<sup>33</sup> This manuscript of a short two-act farce, now in the Beinecke Library at Yale, once belonged to Colman's father (George Colman the Elder, 1732-1794), and, though its date slightly preceded the published play described above, there is no obvious sign of plagiarism in the latter's printed text. The manuscript's modern editors make a comment on the language which supports my finding of Black English speech heard in Britain being written down as a default for unfamiliar variants: 'The "negro" dialect that Thelwall employs for his Native American Indians, Yarico and Yahamona, may seem incongruous, though the indiscriminate hybridization of different racial groups was fairly common in the eighteenth century'.<sup>34</sup> The text includes the following:

**1787(b)** *me no more am love; over de hills and trough de briar; she who save you life; have not me left my fader; me terrified wid de tunder* [thunder]; *here den, dis is de way*

A hand-coloured etching by William Dent (active 1783-1783) with the date 12 January 1787 appeared in London, entitled *The Poor Blacks Going To Their Settlement*.<sup>35</sup> This is a satire on

<sup>30</sup> Poullain de Saint-Foix has a 'Gouverneur' also, but he says nothing politically daring.

<sup>31</sup> BL, 643.e.16.(2.)

<sup>32</sup> 'Wampum' is Native American for shell beads, 'Yanko' perhaps taken from Dibdin, while Stanisław Poniatowski was elected King of Poland in 1764.

<sup>33</sup> Frank Felsenstein, Michael Scrivener (eds.), *Inkle and Yarico and The Incas, Two Plays by John Thelwall* (Madison, 2006). In this version, Yarico's assistant is named Yahamona.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32. I take the editors' 'hybridization' to mean syncretism.

<sup>35</sup> <<http://www.britishmuseum.org/collection>> no. 1868,0808.5603

certain politicians (white, of course) who supported the party of the Prince of Wales. Among them is a negro wearing a cap inscribed ‘Purveyor’, who is given the following words:

**1787(c)** *bless your heart Massa Beetle-brow – if you no lick [like?]<sup>36</sup> a poor neger man he’d pimp for you*

Another example of Charles Dibdin’s professional use of Black English, recorded in two letters dated Bristol, 17 March 1788, is part of a ‘sketch’ he performed several times during what he called ‘a musical tour’ through various parts of the country.<sup>37</sup> This is mostly in the form of a dialogue between Cudgo (‘a negro’) and Quaco (‘a mulatto’), in which the latter tries to assert what he considers his superiority on racial grounds (‘you a black dog – you a *Jenny Neger* – you don’t tan like a me’). Their quarrel threatens to become dangerously physical, and is settled by the appearance of Orra (the character from *The Islanders* we have already met, here described as ‘a real Indian’) who sings one of her songs from that source, after expressing what were obviously Dibdin’s own sentiments: ‘*every man your buddy, every woman my sissy*’. ‘She then [...] shews, with wonderful force and energy, the comfort, the convenience, and even the strong political necessity of universal philanthropy and benevolence [...] at length, won by her exemplary virtue, both Negro and Mulatto forget their animosity, and agree in their own language, to take Miss Orra to *de house*, and give her *nin yam*.’<sup>38</sup>

**1788** *wat a divle you carry one someting dere; he da buckra [white man] rum master savee send um to anudder buckra lib [live] in great house yonder; paper la talk – he savee tell massa; you tink you dam creber [clever]; he can’t tell him nation*

In *The Lady’s Magazine* (London), xxii, April 1791, there is an anonymous poem entitled *Yarico, The Faithful American*, signed with the pseudonym ‘Edward’, which again takes up the subject of the Native American we have already met, and again gives her some words in what sounds very much like what we expect in Black English:

**1791** *tink how grieve my heart; tank; me grot [my grotto]; me hail’d the happy dawn; I bent me bow; in me cell; all white man true; have not me left my fader*

On 21 April 1792, a play in two acts by William Macready the Elder (1755-1829) entitled *The Irishman in London; or, The Happy African* was performed at the Theatre Royal Covent Garden.<sup>39</sup> One of the characters speaks an Irish brogue, and another, a black female servant to one of the white women, is named Cubba and is said to have been born a princess in the Gold Coast. Her speech has the uninflected verbs we have noted elsewhere, and many single words indicating the types of pronunciation difficulties and other features we have also seen frequently.

**1792(a)** *missa [mistress] you frettee [fret] so, you make a de rain come in poor Cubba eyes; me [I]; mout [mouth]; dat [that]; no [does not]; zample [example]; iss [yes]; ting [thing]; you want a speak a wi me?; me hope me not live till den; wid [with]; fader [father]; cross Bochro man catch me*

<sup>36</sup> Cassidy and Le Page have ‘lick’ meaning ‘hit’, but no sources earlier than the nineteenth century.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Dibdin, *The Musical Tour of Mr. Dibdin, in which, prior to his embarkment for India, he finished his career as a public character* (Sheffield, 1788). BL, 797.dd.18.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Hogg suggests this is from Portuguese ‘inhamé’ or Spanish ‘iñame’, both meaning ‘yam’. Cassidy and Le Page have ‘nyam’ meaning ‘yam’ (1788) or ‘food’ (1828), and ‘ninyam’ meaning ‘food’ (1826).

<sup>39</sup> BL, 643.f.11.(8). Printed in London in 1793.

A satirical popular print dated 8 October 1792 was published in London by Sayer & Co. entitled *The Rabbits* (etching with stipple on poor paper, intended for the least well-off end of the market).<sup>40</sup> This shows a black door-to-door salesman with the now familiar generic name Mungo trying to sell a rabbit carcass to a white lady; his repartee includes the following:

**1792(b)** *Be gar Misse dat no fair: If Blacke man take you by Leg so – you smell too*

*The Gentleman's Magazine* for August 1793 included a short poem by 'J. C.' entitled *The African's complaint on board a slave ship* which is written mostly in Black English, and has concluding verses in Latin for a highly educated audience.

**1793** *none of dis in Negro land; here de white man beat de black man; [chains] put so tick dey on me stand; hear 'em toke [talk] den wak in weeping; de bad traders*

In August 1795, *The Scots Magazine*<sup>41</sup> published a poem by 'Peter Pindar' (John Wolcot (1738-1819), who had lived in Jamaica in 1768/69 as physician to the Governor's household) entitled *Azid, or The Song of the Captive Negro*. This gives Azid repeated longings to be in 'Domahay' (perhaps Dahomey?), and further expressions such as the following:

**1795** *Poor Mora eye be wet wid tear; heart like lead sink down wid wo; see dere [their] eye [eyes]; me look in stream; far off de fields of Domahay; den let we die*

Scotland is again mentioned on the printed title-page of an unusually interesting one-act play with songs of 1799, *The Negro Slaves*, by Archibald McLaren (1755-1826), 'performed by His Majesty's Servants, of the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh, being the original of the Blackman and Blackbird, performed at the Amphitheatre, Westminster Bridge' and printed in London in 1799: it is not clear to me whether this was the text performed in Edinburgh or London.<sup>42</sup> Short plays like this would normally precede or follow a larger, more important, drama, and its place of performance in London, known as Astley's Amphitheatre, was not normally used for plays, but for spectacle and entertainments such as circuses. It is a rousing piece of anti-slavery campaigning, and its separate printing is further unusual in including a list of 'Subscribers for my [McLaren's] productions in London', of whom many are aristocrats. Its named actors seem not of the first rank,<sup>43</sup> and possibly some may even have been amateurs. There is no manuscript among the Larpent plays, and the therefore probably unlicensed and presumably private performances were possibly one-offs in both locations. I suggest both these and the publication of a printed text ('Price sixpence') may have been fund-raising events to encourage abolitionism.

No place of action is named in the text, but the loving couple of slaves, Quako and Sela, both say they came from Guinea; Quako has been taught to read and write English, and speaks it perfectly,<sup>44</sup> but Sela's still has creole features. 'Indians and squaws' appear at one point, and sing a song including the words 'tamohawk [*sic*] them, scalp them', possibly another instance of the odd syncretism between West Indian and Native American we have already noticed. Sela's few non-standard English words include the following:

**1799** *my massa away; I will be tink on you; shall me leave you?; we have meet [met] dere*

---

<sup>40</sup> <<http://www.britishmuseum.org/collection>> no. 1861,0518.974.

<sup>41</sup> Edinburgh, lvii, p. 327f.

<sup>42</sup> BL, 11777.b.53, also available online. I have been unable to establish a precise date for the performance, or to find any reference to *Blackman and Blackbird*. McLaren is recorded to have composed a play entitled *The Slaves* in 1808, but I have failed to find a text and establish whether it has any bearing on this one.

<sup>43</sup> Checked against *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses [...] in London 1660-1800* (Carbondale, 1987).

<sup>44</sup> Quako was played by William Meadows (fl. 1779-1809), who in better days had played Mungo in *The Padlock*.

In the Black English vocabulary present in the above samples, we have now seen two instances of apparently only one word (apart from names) of African origin – *buckra* (1788) and *bochro* (1792a), different in orthography but essentially the same word for white man, which entered West Indian creole from the West African languages Efik and/or Ibibio of slave speakers.<sup>45</sup> Unlike the remaining words, they are contemptuous in meaning, and carry a charge of revolt against oppression which was commonly suppressed by both sides in the desperately unequal power struggles of ethnicity and class. An example of the weight such a word could carry for its target group can be found in the issue for 19-21 February 1789 of the London newspaper *St James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, in an extract from a letter from Kingston, Jamaica, dated 2 January 1789 and from an unnamed (white) correspondent. During the seasonal celebrations there at the end of 1788, we learn: 'such a scene of Noise, Drunkenness and Folly never was seen. The Negroes chanting in the Streets, *free like a Buckra* (Buckra means White Man)'. This correspondent clearly felt the threat, if only verbal.

My examples of Black English spoken in Britain during the eighteenth century, from writings of a variety of authors, are from sources in the white middle-class, overwhelmingly sympathetic to their black fellow-citizens in an underclass, but, while basically accurate by their standards, probably omitting, for whatever reasons, reflections of antagonism from both sides. Nevertheless it is encouraging to see so many ordinary Britons attempting, in however limited a way, to give a voice to victims of oppression, and their efforts in publications and on the stage will have played a part in the growing abolitionist movement. As far as spoken Black English is concerned, they are all we have.

My examples of the spoken language clearly do seem to maintain the overall grammatical structures and pronunciation suggested at the outset, and as the century progressed speakers will have grown in number and for a time at least consolidated its spread. Linguistic change needs to be investigated into the nineteenth century, when the weight of the powerful majority's norms and the spread of literacy will have made themselves felt.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Cassidy and Le Page have 'backerary' (1688) and 'bacceroes' (1740).

<sup>46</sup> I should like to express my gratitude to the anonymous reader for the *eBLJ*, who contributed many helpful suggestions.