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A T L A N T I C  M O V E M E N T

B r i g i t t e  F i e l d e r

In the anonymous 1808 novel *The Woman of Colour, A Tale*, the motherly Mrs. Honeywood imagines our protagonist, Olivia Fairfield, and her Jamaican servant, Dido, illustrated in a painting. Mimicking the black woman’s racially marked speech, Mrs. Honeywood muses, “I would give something to be able to take dat brush and dat bit of paper, Dido . . . and paint your lady and yourself, as you are now placed before my eyes” (57).¹ The painting she describes is not unusual. According to Beth Fowkes Tobin, toward the end of the eighteenth century, the increasing presence of black servants in paintings reflected imperialism’s “incorporation of the exotic into domestic life” (29–30). An alternative appears on the cover of the novel’s 2008 Broadview edition, which bears a portion of the c. 1779 double portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle and Lady Elizabeth Murray (Figure 11.1). Framed for a novel with a mixed-race heroine, the book displays only Elizabeth’s darker cousin, Dido, daughter of the white Englishman Sir John Lindsay and Maria Belle, an enslaved black woman.²

The correlation between Dido Belle and Olivia Fairfield as mixed-race Englishwomen is appropriate. The novel’s cover reflects its representation of the racial relations of empire, suggesting interracial kinship produced by Atlantic slavery and showing the titular “woman of colour” in relations of race and affiliation with white women. Mapping Olivia Fairfield onto Dido Belle allows us to read these relations within a complex structure of racialization. Expanding this correlation to the complete image, we might regard Elizabeth as representing Olivia’s white women relatives, such as her adversarial cousin-in-law, Mrs. Merton. Or we might imagine Elizabeth as Olivia’s beloved white governess, Mrs. Milbanke, book in hand, ready to teach her pupil.
There is, however, another way of reading the novel through this painting, whose original referent recalls Dido, Olivia’s black servant. In Mrs. Honeywood’s conversation we read a different set of racial relations, with Olivia as the privileged heiress and Dido as her faithful servant. This chapter reads this double portrait’s relation to The Woman of Colour as encompassing both of these interpretations, understanding Olivia’s movement between the painting’s positions of racialized womanhood. These women’s shared name, Elizabeth, might serve as a placeholder in this analogy, marking Olivia’s ability to occupy either “Elizabeth’s” position. This reading regards the mixed-race heroine not simply as a liminal figure caught between essentialized positions of racial identification but as one whose social and political racialization is mobile and relative: Olivia moves through positions of relative racialization vis-à-vis her white and black women counterparts.

As the novel opens, Olivia, the daughter of a white English planter and an enslaved black woman, is en route from Jamaica to England, accompanied by her black servant, Dido. Her recently deceased father has willed her an inheritance with the stipulation that she must marry her cousin, Augustus
Merton. If Augustus refuses marriage, the money transfers to his older brother, George, on whom Olivia will remain dependent. Olivia is understandably reluctant about her journey and anxious about her future. The novel is mostly comprised of letters Olivia sends to Mrs. Milbanke, who is back in Jamaica where Olivia longs to be.

I read these black Atlantic circulations through the friendships between this mixed-race heroine and both her white governess and her black maid. Following Paul Gilroy’s construction of the black Atlantic as a space of movement, I consider Olivia’s movement within the frames of identification that position her relative racial privilege somewhere between white English/creole Mrs. Milbanke and black Dido. Olivia is constituted by not only the fluidity of racial mixture but also, as a member of the black Atlantic diaspora, the community to which she returns at the end of the novel. Though representing only its mixed-race heroine’s experiences in England, *The Woman of Colour* suggests larger considerations for racial relationships within slave-holding empires and the black diaspora. This black Atlantic frame and Olivia and Dido’s return to Jamaica at the novel’s end affirm that we ought not to read figures of racial mixture only through their orientation toward white relations and Anglo society.

The double portrait of Dido and Elizabeth is a useful framing for these positions of relative racialization. While the portrait has been most often discussed for its contrasts between Elizabeth and Dido, reading it alongside the portrait imagined by Mrs. Honeywell allows us to see the woman of color’s movement between poles of opposing racialization and the complexity of people of color’s experience of and resistance to empire and enslavement. Pairing the portrait with the novel allows us to enter into useful confusion about who is black, how, where, and with relation to whom. This juxtaposition and the question of who best represents Olivia show how the woman of color figures within white empire and how she formulates her own black Atlantic identification. By reading Olivia’s relationship not only to whiteness but also to blackness, we uncover the novel’s more radical articulation of mixed-race women’s alignment with enslaved people. Importantly, our reading acknowledges this relationship without ignoring the privileged position in which our woman of color is situated.

**Black Atlantic Movement and Relative Racializations**

Mrs. Honeywood’s painting conversation takes place shipboard. From its start, *The Woman of Colour* is a tale about movement in transatlantic spaces and through possibilities of racial identification. While Jennifer Devere Brody reads Olivia’s movement as a trajectory of transformations, I regard her as alternating between positions of relative power and privilege (21). In the later “tragic mulatta” genre, mixed-race women do not occupy fixed racial positions but move between them. Some characters believe themselves to be white at the beginning of their stories, only to later realize they are
legally black and therefore enslavable. Narratives of mixed-race womanhood both represent and deconstruct essentialist notions of race. These characters’ embodiment exposes race’s fluidity against the fictions of permanency and fixedness on which legal and social race relations are dependent. The Woman of Colour narrates the movement of race via the movement of the mixed-race woman’s body, in Olivia’s transatlantic travel from Jamaica to England and the reverse passage of her letters.

The novel’s epistolary form embeds Atlantic movement and black Atlantic relations into the text. The letters Olivia sends provide the framing and conceit for her narrative and also posit its audience: a white English/creole woman in Jamaica. The epistolary novel was no longer common by the time of The Woman of Colour’s publication, and therefore Mrs. Milbanke seems somewhat extraneous. Her perspective never enters the plot; we read no letters from Mrs. Milbanke to Olivia. Mrs. Milbanke is therefore less a character than a literary device seemingly aligned with the novel’s imagined audience of white Englishwomen.

Mrs. Milbanke is a figure of differentiation from Olivia, lest we forget the difference between her and white Englishwomen living in the colonies. Even as Olivia longs for Mrs. Milbanke’s “friendly guidance” and “maternal counsel,” she notes the importance of her racial difference from her (53). Although she counts Mrs. Milbanke as her “earliest and best friend,” Olivia identifies with black people, writing:

We are considered, My dear Mrs. Milbanke, as an inferior race, but little removed from the brutes, because the Almighty Maker of all-created beings has tinged our skins with jet instead of ivory!—I say our, for though the jet has been faded to olive in my own complexion, yet I am not ashamed to acknowledge my affinity with the swarthiest negro that was ever brought from Guinea’s coast!—All, all are brethren, children of one common Parent! (53)

Here Olivia recalls transatlantic movement different from her own, indicating the global trade in black people, Great Britain having ended their transatlantic slave trade just a year before the novel’s publication. The woman of color’s body is itself not only a record of transatlantic movement, what Brody calls “a material reminder (and remainder) of . . . circum-Atlantic encounters,” but also a body in motion as Olivia is “at sea” “spatiotemporally, emotionally, and geopolitically” (15). By identifying herself with her black “brethren” Olivia recalls her genealogical relationship to enslaved people, simultaneously registering her exclusion from white womanhood. Her letters to Mrs. Milbanke illustrate Olivia’s relationship to white womanhood as not simply categorical, however, but also as interpersonal.

In light of the text’s female relationships I advocate what might, in some senses, be called a “queer” reading of The Woman of Colour. This is not to argue that these relationships verge on the erotic or the romantic but that my reading of female friendship might be considered “queer” in the potentially radical act of deprioritizing the heterosexual relationships that
dominate discussions of this and most nineteenth-century plots surrounding mixed-race protagonists. Refocusing on Olivia’s relationships with women rather than with men allows us to look beyond the mixed-race heroine’s hypersexualization and toward a fuller picture of her gendered racialization. Shifting focus away from relationships with white men, we can then rethink the mixed-race protagonist’s relation to blackness. We might thereby better understand the novel’s conclusion, in which Olivia and Dido embark across the Atlantic, returning to Jamaica.

Readings of mixed-race heroines have overwhelmingly focused on heterosexual marriage plots and sexual threats from white male characters. By prioritizing the text’s relationships between women I do not mean to argue that heterosexual domesticity is not important for understanding this novel and its generic contextualization. I mean, however, to extend our reading beyond the text’s heterosexual relations. While narratives of heteronormative domesticity are central to the vast majority of such stories, these readings risk prioritizing heroines’ relations to white men over all other relationships—particularly those with black women. Olivia’s ultimate plan is to “zealously engage myself in ameliorating the situation, in instructing the minds—in mending the morals of our poor blacks” (189). Her relation to the novel’s only other character of African descent is therefore significant. We must understand this “woman of colour” not only with relation to white Englishness (via romances with white men and resemblances to white women) but also with relation to black women and West Indian enslavement. Reading Olivia and Dido’s relationship allows us to reimagine this mixed-race heroine, who is neither tragic nor passing, as a black Atlantic figure.

Olivia moves between proximate relations to whiteness and blackness and ultimately belongs to a community of people of African descent. Lyndon Dominique rightly contextualizes Olivia’s position of political liminality, noting that “people of color . . . teetered between the categories enslaved yet free, oppressors yet oppressed” (27). I disagree, however, with Dominique’s assessment that the novel “deliberately skews its representation of a person of color caught within these binaries because it is interested more in promoting Olivia as a woman enslaved and oppressed by white men rather than their equal as suppressors of freedom and oppressors of Negro slaves” (27). Rather, the text illustrates the woman of color’s continual shifting within the racial and political landscape of empire. Olivia’s shifting positions of relative power reveal both her privilege and her oppression relative to the novel’s other characters.

Relative power is often read into the portrait of Elizabeth Murray and Dido Belle. Chris Roulston includes this painting in the “double portrait” genre, reading “sisters and other female pairings” of kinship and female homosociality (642). Such pairings, Roulston holds, resist “the hierarchical model of marital portraiture” (649). But racial difference complicates matters. According to Felicity Nussbaum, “Relationships between black and white women are only rarely figured in portraits” like this one in the eighteenth century (163). Power relations emerge in the painting of Elizabeth
and Dido, which Nussbaum notes “portrays their mutual affection while emphasizing their difference in status” (164). Whereas Elizabeth appears as a very British picture of white womanhood, Dido is exoticized. Her turban, the most obviously non-English clothing she wears, suggests origins in Africa despite her upbringing in England. Elizabeth holds a book, a marker of English culture and civilization, while Dido carries a basket of fruit, implying a connection to nature and hinting at relations between blackness and servitude in slaveholding empires. Dido was not her cousin’s servant, but her position within her white family was marked by differences of race, class, and legitimacy. Although both women’s gazes are directed outward at the viewer rather than toward one another, Elizabeth’s hand touches her cousin’s arm, suggesting familiarity and intimacy, affective relations present in both relations of kinship and enslavement. Elizabeth is stationary, possibly seated, while Dido is clearly in motion, her left leg extended in stride and leaning forward in a purposive, directional stance. The woman of color is a figure of movement.

Although she is not enslaved, Olivia’s movement is somewhat involuntary. It is not Olivia’s desire to travel to England, but her race and gender have dictated her white father’s plan for her support. Mrs. Honeywood’s conversation about the imagined painting continues: “I never view you on that seat, with Dido standing in her place of attendance, without figuring you in my imagination as some great princess going over to her betrothed Lord” (57). Tobin notes that such portraits usually exhibit black servants in displays of wealth and leisure, indicating imperial relations between differently racialized subjects. Dido and Elizabeth’s painting merges this genre with the family portrait. According to Roulston and Byrne, the portrait is sisterly, speaking to these women’s ties of kinship and affection. However, without knowledge of these relations and given the painting’s depiction of movement and rest, one might mistake Dido for a servant. Dido Belle’s relationship to her white family was that of a poor relation raised in the home of her rich relatives. Olivia’s relationship to white people and her relative privilege are likewise familial. Inheriting a portion of her white, slaveholding father’s fortune, as Sarah Salih acknowledges, “[S]he owes her material comforts to the profits of plantation slavery” (Review 450). Olivia benefits not only from this biological relation to whiteness but also in her personal relationship with a white woman. In Jamaica, Olivia claims, “there she [Olivia] was respected—for your sake, she was respected by all—while there, one dear, dear friend loved her for herself! Mrs. Milbanke would always have loved her, and cherished her, and there she could not have known the misery which is now her portion!” (137). In addition to imparting formal education, Mrs. Milbanke is Olivia’s protector and friend.

Olivia cannot benefit fully from this patriarchal system, however, as her wealth is tied to the exchange of her female body. She wishes, “As well might my fortune only have crossed the ocean, the nominal wife might still have remained in Jamaica” (90). Olivia works to escape both slavery and marriage, two realms in which she is likely to be dominated by white men.
(Dominique, IS 253). She characterizes the legal means of her inheritance as a form of unfreedom, noting the irony that “from the moment when I set my foot on your land of liberty I yield up my independence” (66). However, lest we too easily equate this “exchange of women” with enslavement, the narrative provides Dido as a reminder of West Indian slavery (Salih, *Representing* 72). Mrs. Honeywood imagines a different kind of double portrait than one implying sisterly kinship. Her views of Olivia’s and Dido’s relative positions of power reflect both class and color. Comparing the historical portrait with this imagined one highlights the ambiguity of relationships available. While readers may be inclined to map our mixed-race protagonist onto the mixed-race historical figure of Dido Belle, Mrs. Honeywood’s imagined double portrait asks us to do the opposite: to imagine Olivia in the position of the lighter-complexioned Elizabeth, holding her book, more formally educated and economically privileged than her darker companion.

Bindman and Gates write that Elizabeth’s “formality and bookishness are contrasted with the wild and exotically turbaned ‘natural’ figure of Dido” (xviii). Nussbaum marks this distinction as “contrasting the learned with the exotic woman” (164). In her quest for “rational employment,” Olivia exemplifies this learned bookishness, writing to Mrs. Milbanke, “I brought my books with me” (158).

Framing the paintings in this way aligns Dido Belle with The Woman of Colour’s Dido, expanding our view of the text’s depiction of relative racialization. Aligning these two Didos demands that we also acknowledge Olivia’s shifting position with relation to white and black women. This framing necessitates reading Olivia’s relationships to differently racialized characters rather than simply to concepts of racialization. Olivia’s letters recount this relationship with Dido. As Olivia continually identifies with her enslaved, black “brothers and sisters,” formerly enslaved Dido is the one black person with whom we see Olivia interact (77). Given Olivia’s expressions of kinship with other black people, this relationship with Dido deserves more attention.

**Reading Dido: The Woman of Colour and Black Atlantic Identification**

Salih notes Olivia’s denial of herself as the novel’s heroine. Unlike her black, enslaved mother, “[s]he is ‘no heroine,’ she claims, neither does she locate herself on the trajectory of courtship, love, and marriage that is typically the heroine’s narrative lot” (*Representing* 73). In this vein, I now want to decenter the mixed-race heroine in order to more closely read the novel’s broader representation of black womanhood. Olivia’s relationships with white women are rather one-sided: kindly Mrs. Honeywood leaves Olivia once they arrive in England; Olivia’s only white female relatives are adversarial; her brief friendship with Caroline is cut short by the scandal of her husband’s first marriage; the letters Olivia writes to Mrs. Milbanke receive no answers in the epistolary novel. Dido, on the other hand, is constant. Olivia’s
relationship with Dido is therefore essential to understanding the novel’s relative racializations.

Like Olivia, Dido is a woman of movement. The name Dido, known most popularly for the first queen of Carthage in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, is in keeping with common eighteenth- and nineteenth-century practices of giving Greco-Roman names to enslaved people. The name is Phoenician in origin, and its meaning, “wanderer,” is apt for a woman of the black diaspora. Dido of the double portrait is also in motion, stepping away from her cousin and toward some purpose of her own. Dido moves through the text, working her way (quite literally) through the English empire’s relations of race, class, and space. Far more than Olivia, Dido is set apart from others—most visibly by her language, written in a racialized dialect that Olivia’s speech lacks. Distingui...
between the women cannot be denied. This inequality does not foreclose Dido’s agency, however, although this often goes unmentioned in readings of the novel. What Byrne calls Dido Belle’s “knowing look” might also be applied to Dido as a “knowing” person (4). Not simply a faithful servant, Dido is well aware of Olivia’s position of relative power. Dido even critiques Olivia’s self-pity, noting her life of relative ease. “‘Pittee, no pittee,’ said Dido; ‘beauty lady—great deal monies—going to marry fine gentleman as soon as she be come to England town;—me don’t pittee dear Missee one bit—one bit!’” (59–60). Olivia imagines that Dido’s tears betray true feelings of sympathy while attempting to raise her spirits, but we might more reasonably take Dido’s words at face value. The formerly enslaved Jamaican woman knows Olivia could have it much worse. As a free person of color, Olivia is relatively privileged, especially given her mother’s enslaved status. Most enslaved people were not manumitted, even those whose fathers were white planters (Mohammed 31, 38). Further, Olivia’s father has attempted to provide for her inheritance, albeit within the bounds of British law’s inherent racism and sexism (Dominique, WoC 26–27).

Just as Dido recognizes Olivia’s privilege, she also seeks to improve her own situation and expresses enjoyment at the changes in relative power she experiences. Most important to Dido’s shifting power is her freedom. Following Lord Mansfield’s judgment on the 1772 Somerset Case, which held slavery to be illegal in England and Wales (though not, of course, in its colonies), Dido remains legally free in England. Dido fully understands her free status, complaining to Olivia, “Mrs. Merton’s maid treats me, as if me was her slave; and Dido was never slave but to her dear own Missee, and she was proud of that!” (100). While Dido’s slavish pride is discomfiting, she notably locates her enslavement in the past. Although her devotion persists, Dido regards her current state of servitude as distinctly different from her former enslavement. In what would become an ongoing abolitionist tradition of describing servitude in England as better than enslavement in the Americas, Dido expresses enjoyment at the relative power she now holds. She does not view herself as beneath white servants and assumes an “important expression” in her role as housekeeper of the “dear Fairfield estate” (105). Dido’s position in the Fairfield household grants her some status. Dido notes that “here . . . thanks to my good lady,—Dido be Missee below stairs, and treated by all as if me was as good as another, for all me be poor negro wench!” (127). Later, Dido instructs “the Monmouthshire girl whom we have hired as a drudge” in how to act toward Olivia (157).

This new role of relative power does not conflict with Dido’s apparent devotion to Olivia, but works in concert with it. Just as Olivia hopes to secure a living to support Dido and herself, Dido understands what personal advantages Olivia’s change in station might hold for her. Dido’s later hopes that Olivia will marry Charles Honeywood and move to his “so nice grand house” also include personal aspirations: “Iss, iss, me think it be very pretty house, indeed,—it be like the dear Fairfield plantation! Iss, iss, and me shall be housekeeper again, and have my bunch of keys at my own side! for here,
God help Dido, there be nothing to lock. Now, be then good Missee, my own Massa’s daughter!” (166). This last bit of instruction indicates the liberties Dido takes in their relationship, the most important of which may be orchestrating the reunion between Olivia and Honeywood, having already recounted Olivia’s hardships to him. Dido has a plan that she believes will benefit them all and works to enact it. Dido’s hope for Olivia’s marriage is a rational one. It is neither purely selfish nor unreasonable, but seems both mutually beneficial and expected according to the novel’s plot and genre. Dido is perceptive—“me was sure—me thought—that my Missee was his own very sweetheart!”—and readers are likely to have thought so, as well, given the pair’s earlier interactions and generic expectations that moral characters will be rewarded with marriage (167). Dido recognizes Honeywood’s and Olivia’s mutual affection, and she seems to know how stories like this are supposed to conclude.

Nevertheless, Dido’s relationship with Olivia is unusual in nineteenth-century narratives about mixed-race and black women. The 1831 slave narrative, *The History of Mary Prince*, tells of a free mixed-race woman, Martha Wilcox, hired by Prince’s enslaver to nurse her child. This woman, Prince holds, “was such a fine lady she wanted to be mistress over me. I thought it very hard for a coloured woman to have rule over me because I was a slave and she was free” (26). While Prince shows solidarity between free and enslaved people of color elsewhere in her narrative—and even between herself and the white washerwomen she meets in England—there is no solidarity between Prince and Martha. She recounts, “The mulatto woman was rejoiced to have power to keep me down. She was constantly making mischief; there was no living for the slaves—no peace after she came” (26). *The Woman of Colour* tells a different kind of story about racialized relationships in the African diaspora. While free mixed-race people have a distinct (though limited) privilege under Anglo-American imperialism, we ought not to ignore possibilities for their collaboration with black people. According to one scholar of eighteenth-century Jamaica, “Privileged black and colored women formed networks of friendship and mutual assistance” (Burnard 90). Both distinction and mutuality exist in Olivia and Dido’s relationship. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine explain that “However they may have achieved freedom, free woman of color were motivated by a desire to place themselves beyond slavery, and that desire might be the beginning of a long-range plan to assist family members or friends and relatives in doing the same” (x). Perhaps because she is secure in her own freedom, Olivia is willing to identify with enslaved black people.

One simple explanation for this identification is Olivia’s inability to “pass” as white. While not apparently as “black” as Dido, Olivia is dark enough that her racial difference from white people is visible. Her “mulatto countenance” ensures that she will not be mistaken for a white lady (83). The perceptibility of Olivia’s blackness results in a number of racist encounters: white Englishmen express repulsion at her complexion; she is openly mocked as a spectacle of otherness; her cousin’s young child tries to remove the “dirty” color from...
her skin; her cousin-in-law attempts to shame her by serving her rice, a food associated with enslaved people in the West Indies. Despite her freedom and relative class privilege, Olivia cannot simply disassociate herself from other black people and blackness’ connections to enslavement. Unashamed of these associations, Olivia uses her blackness as a tool of resistance by which she also makes the most clearly antislavery statements of the novel. Following the rice incident Olivia writes, “Mrs. Milbanke, this was evidently meant to mortify your Olivia; it was blending her with the poor negro slaves of the West Indies! It was meant to show her, that, in Mrs. Merton’s idea, there was no distinction between us—you will believe that I could not be wounded at being classed with my brethren!” Moreover, Olivia claims kinship with “our poor slaves (my brothers and sisters, smiling)” not only in correspondence with her confidante but also in open defiance of her white family members (77).

Regarding young George’s association of blackness with dirt, Olivia gives the child a lesson in diversity through her own relationship with Dido, who has shared this experience of racism. George has recoiled from Dido, calling her “that nasty black woman” who he believes will “dirty” his face (78). Olivia explains that Dido’s skin color is permanent, proclaims her own love for Dido, and argues that it is no less wrong to associate her own “olive” complexion with dirtiness than Dido’s “black” one. George accepts her instruction, expressing a desire to see Dido (who he now calls by name), assumedly to be reconciled to her (81). Olivia’s antiracist sentiment counters the English child’s lesson that “these black slaves are no better than horses” with an antislavery insistence on humanity: “Those black slaves are, by some cruel masters, obliged to work like horses . . . but God Almighty created them men, equal with their masters, if they had the same advantages and the same blessings of education” (80). Olivia does not espouse proslavery beliefs, as Mrs. Merton assumes any Fairfield would. Instead, Olivia voices “kindred claims” that “impel me to be anxious for the emancipation of my more immediate brethren” (81). Olivia recognizes her privilege, marking her difference from Dido as one of opportunity rather than essence. She also distances herself from slaveholders, a move that could ensure Dido’s freedom.

Dido and Olivia’s racial connections are clearest in their shared experiences of racism. As Dido welcomes the Fairfield household’s establishment, she acknowledges the benefits and hardships of life in England: “Beside, Dido be great there, and housekeeper to her dear dearest lady, to Massa Fairfield’s daughter: although here she be ‘blacky,’ and ‘wowsky’ and ‘squabby’ and ‘guashy,’ and all because she has a skin not quite so white,—God Almighty help them all—me don’t mind that though, do we, my dear Miss?—” (99–100). Dido’s switching of pronouns here—“me don’t mind that, do we”—seems more than a grammatical mistake of dialect; rather, this is a deliberate recognition that racism extends both to herself and to “Missy” Olivia. Despite their difference in class position and although Dido cannot quite pity Olivia, she acknowledges her vulnerability to racism, marking their resistance to “minding” racist epithets as a shared racial experience.
While this experience of racism is specific to England, Olivia and Dido’s plans to return to Jamaica open an important question about Dido’s freedom. Although Dido remains free in England, if she were legally enslaved in Jamaica, she would still be enslaved upon return. Salih writes, “it is interesting that the novel does not hint at the consequences of returning to Jamaica, where her status would revert to that of a slave” (Representing 180n20). Mary Prince was unwilling to return to a space of enslavement, even to be reunited with her husband. Dido, however, regards returning to Jamaica as a blessing. Despite her possible change in status, it is Dido who first voices a desire to return saying, “Oh, my dear Missee, we will go back to our own good country!—we will pray to a good God Almighty, to teach you and me to forget that we was ever set foot on English Land!” (141). One might read this desire as Dido’s faithful support of Olivia, but elsewhere we see Dido’s interests articulated alongside this apparent devotion. Dido expresses this enthusiasm just after the falseness of Olivia’s marriage to Augustus is revealed. Something worse than Olivia’s fear of rejection has occurred: the wife Augustus thought dead is alive and Olivia is ashamed, wondering what this makes her. Further, her inheritance is lost, and she is now dependent on unwelcoming relatives. In this moment, returning to Jamaica seems not only in Olivia’s best interests but also in Dido’s. The Merton’s household and social circle is the site of the racism these women have experienced in England. Dido has enjoyed positions of relative privilege in Olivia’s home, but once she is displaced, her servant’s future is also less certain.

Dido may well regard enslavement under Olivia’s guardianship and restoration to their birthplace as preferable to remaining in England under these circumstances. Dido may also have other reasons for missing Jamaica. Olivia ultimately resigns herself to figurative “widowhood,” but Dido makes no such promise. One wonders what sort of life is in store for Dido in Jamaica, as Dido’s family ties are unknown to readers. As scholars such as Frances Smith Foster and Annette Gordon-Reed have acknowledged, enslavement and freedom become more complex when we look beyond the status of the individual and instead at one’s membership in a family or community of enslaved and enslavable people. We might assume Dido is unmarried because we never hear mention of a husband or children from whom she has been separated. Still, Dido laments the absence of black children in England, where “Dido won’t see dear little creatures of her own colour running about” (99). In Jamaica, Dido likely has or will have family of some sort.

The foreclosure of Olivia’s marriage is an important twist of plot. There is no representation of legal interracial marriage in The Woman of Colour; Augustus’s unknowing bigamy renders his marriage to Olivia invalid. Although breaking with contemporary conventions, this ending is not unequivocally “dystopic,” as Salih claims (Representing 73). While widowhood does imply death, it does not imply Olivia’s death (resisting the “tragic mulatta” trope) but her husband’s. Augustus is dead to her, but she lives on, though in mourning. The novel forecloses Olivia’s marriage to any white man. She is ultimately united neither to her already married cousin nor to the lovelorn
Charles Honeywood, who she rejects despite her obvious affection for him and the fact that he offers Olivia a plausible entry into white English society and economic ease. While one may read the absence of legitimate interracial marriage as a marker of the text’s racism, this outcome propels Olivia’s return to Jamaica, the very thing she wishes for in the novel’s first pages. Her return is hopeful if we take seriously her kinship ties to the people she calls her “brothers and sisters.” Regarding Olivia’s future outside heteronormative domesticity and reproduction, her contributions to black Jamaican society might be productive in their own right. If an antislavery and antiracist cause is Olivia’s object, these are radical interracial endeavors in a slaveholding empire.

While the complex taxonomies of racialization in Jamaica demand that we understand black and racially mixed people’s differing positions of social and political power, this does not eliminate possibilities for alignment between these groups within the African diaspora. Kimberly Snyder Manganelli notes the threat free women of color were imagined to pose in places from the West Indies to New Orleans, where convergences of Euro-American imperialism resulted in a large population of free people of color whose very existence defied social and economic racial segregation (39–42). Throughout the black Atlantic, mixed-race people were themselves testaments to the untenable nature of race-based systems of enslavement. Likewise, Dominique argues, “The Woman of Colour makes it clear that the mulatto heiress in England is a real threat to the ascendancy of paternalism” (IS 228). Olivia evades her father’s supposed intentions to “whiten” her descendants. Dominique continues, “The Woman of Colour marks the fictional African woman’s boldest charge against the institution of slavery by her deif ability to attack paternalism not merely on its own terra firma . . . but within the paternalists own bloodline” (IS 228). Olivia’s insistence on remaining single involves a radical reproductive choice, as women of color’s childbearing was often dictated (and even forced) within the white patriarchal system of enslavement. Olivia ultimately rejects the social reproduction of Englishness, whiteness, and empire, and embraces kinship with the African diaspora of the colonies.

Adopting these readings of Olivia’s more radical potential, we ought to consider the conclusion’s promise of abolitionist collaboration in the black Atlantic. In the wake of the Haitian Revolution, still in recent memory after the time of the novel’s publication, the possibility of free people of color’s alignment with enslaved black people was not insignificant. Emily Clark notes that free people of color were viewed as potential threats to empire in the Atlantic world following the establishment of the free black republic of Haiti in 1804 (5). Olivia ultimately returns to a black Atlantic community, intending to take up the work of racial uplift. In this move, Olivia resembles the mixed-race characters of late nineteenth-century antipassing fiction by African American writers, seeming more akin to characters like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s Iola Leroy than the “tragic mulatta” of abolitionist fiction. The Woman of Colour thereby presents a precursor to other mixed-race heroines of the black Atlantic Americas, who would arrange themselves on
a broad scale of relatively tragic and uplifting protagonists throughout the next century of this trope’s literary development. By reading Olivia Fairfield’s movement through interpersonal relationships to the text’s other women—and especially to black, enslaveable Dido—we encounter a figure who may be mapped onto either position of the famous double portrait of Dido Belle and Elizabeth Murray and its complexities of relative racialization and power.

Notes

1. Page numbers for The Woman of Colour are from Dominique’s 2008 edition.
2. On Dido Elizabeth Belle’s life and family history, see Adams, Steedman, and Byrne.
3. See Dominique’s citation of Peter Garside et al., The English Novel, 1770–1829 (JS 235).
4. The Slave Trade Act of 1807 made the Atlantic slave trade illegal throughout the British Empire. Slavery was not abolished until the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833.
5. The drama of these interracial kinship relations is interpreted in Afro-British director Amma Asante’s 2013 film, Belle, based on Dido Elizabeth Belle’s life and family.
6. Asante’s film emphasizes the difference between eighteenth-century portraiture’s usual conventions of representing enslaved black people and Dido and Elizabeth’s double portrait.
7. See Foster and Gordon-Reed.

Works Cited


