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978-0-521-88571-3 - The Grateful Slave: The Emergence of Race in Eighteenth-Century British and American Culture

George Boulukos

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Introduction

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GRATEFUL SLAVE

Before the abolition movement brought sustained attention to the “problem of slavery” in British culture, slavery was nonetheless a problem.¹ Slavery is an inherently paradoxical institution, depending on laborers who are valuable precisely for their human abilities – their ability to learn continuously and to perform complex, demanding tasks – but at the same time systematically, and symbolically, denying them the expression of their humanity.² And, of course, enslaving and dehumanizing human beings inevitably provokes their resistance.³ Peter Hulme, in his reading of the meaning of slavery in *Robinson*

¹ David Brion Davis’s two classic studies, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966) and *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1828* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), referred to below as *Western Culture* and *Age of Revolution*, examine the contradiction of slavery in an age claiming to value liberty. Christopher Leslie Brown offers a brilliant rethinking of the meaning and effects of this “problem” in eighteenth-century British culture in *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

² See Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 2–3; Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Low Country* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 257–8; Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 16 and *passim*; David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3; and Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). That slaves were valued for their human abilities was noted from the seventeenth century: see Morgan Godwyn, *The Negro’s and Indians Advocate* (London: The Author, 1680), 13–14, and Colonel Samuel Martin, *Essay on Plantership*, 7th edn (Antigua: Robert Mearns, 1785), 2, 4.

³ Stanley Elkins’ controversial *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), arguing that slaves became docile “Sambos,” galvanized scholarly interest in slave culture and slave resistance. Two key studies were John Blasingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), and Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*. For studies of the eighteenth century, see David Barry Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master–Slave Relations in Antigua with Implications for Colonial British America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*; Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740–1790* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); and James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race Rebellion and Identity in Gabriel’s Virginia, 1730–1810* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

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Crusoe, gives pithy expression to the dilemma this creates: “the problem with slavery is that slaves are dangerous because forced to labor against their will; the danger is removed if their ‘enslavement’ is voluntary and therefore not slavery at all.”⁴ How can such a paradoxical state of voluntary slavery be achieved? Eighteenth-century fiction suggests that it can be done through an emotional relationship, a relationship of gratitude. Friday sets *Crusoe*’s foot on his own head, eagerly offering himself as a slave. Friday is grateful, devoted to *Crusoe*, for having saved his life, happy, even eager, to be his slave.⁵ Strikingly, Defoe both presents this relationship as “realistic” within the terms of his novel and also as a form of wish fulfillment, as *Crusoe* dreams of the arrival of just such a slave before it actually takes place.⁶

Although Friday is an Amerindian, Hulme contends that his enslavement is meant as a negotiation of the issues of African slavery.⁷ Furthermore, the relationship of mastery through gratitude is so satisfying to *Crusoe* that he uses it as the model for all his subsequent social relationships on the island.⁸ Still, Hulme concludes in his reading, the relationship between *Crusoe* and Friday represents “a final step that, historically, was never taken,” because, of course, “slavery was never founded on the gratitude of the slave.”⁹ The actual practice of slavery could not be based on gratitude; such slavery remains a master’s fantasy, a dream.¹⁰ However, in the eighteenth-century British Atlantic world, the central literary image of plantation slavery – one which came to have a profound impact on views of real slavery and, indeed, on imagining the possibility of racial difference – was of grateful slaves.

The grateful slave, in fact, was the dominant trope in eighteenth-century fictions about slavery.¹¹ The trope describes the successful reform of slave

1997). For slave revolts, see Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982) and Richard Hart, *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery: Blacks in Rebellion*, 1985 (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 2002).

⁴ *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean 1492–1797* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 205.

⁵ As Hulme points out, Friday is not called a slave, *ibid.*, 205. ⁶ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁷ See *ibid.*, 205. Roxann Wheeler, “Christians, Savages, and Slaves: From the Mediterranean to the Atlantic,” in *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 49–89, critiques those who take Friday unproblematically as African.

⁸ Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, 216. ⁹ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁰ Gaspar describes eighteenth-century masters demanding “gratitude” from their slaves for humane treatment (*Bondmen*, 130–1).

¹¹ Those critics who have identified the grateful slave as a recurrent trope have done so in asides. See Claudia Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 107–8; Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); and Moira Ferguson, “*Mansfield Park*: Slavery, Colonialism, and Gender,” *Oxford Literary Review*, 13 (1991), 124. The books devoted to slavery in eighteenth-century literature are: Wylie Sypher, *Guinea’s Captive Kings: British Anti-Slavery Literature of the XVIIIth Century*, 1942 (New York: Octagon, 1969); Moira Ferguson, *Subject to*

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plantations through the ameliorative efforts of a sentimental planter or overseer; the reforms end brutal punishment of slaves, and the slaves become personally devoted to the reformer in gratitude for his kindness. Their devotion results in highly productive labor under the new, humane regime of discipline. The key to this regime of discipline is the threat that non-compliant – “intractable” – slaves will be sold away to new, presumably less humane, masters. The first instance of this trope appeared in Daniel Defoe’s 1722 picaresque novel, *Colonel Jack*; versions continued to be written throughout the century, and into the nineteenth century, with the majority of eighteenth-century examples coming in the 1780s and 1790s, at the height of the abolition debate.

When examples of this trope have been analyzed, they have often been understood as part of (or as foreshadowing) the anti-slavery movement, because they begin with sentimental attention to the suffering of slaves.¹² Less often have scholars noticed that the trope depends for its success on two key assumptions: first, that plantation slavery will continue in a brutal form that makes the humane reformers’ efforts remarkable, and second, that Africans can be induced not just to accept slavery, but to embrace it, to be overwhelmed by ecstatic gratitude toward someone who continues to claim mastery over them.¹³ As if to underline the difference implied in the second point, “white” characters in grateful slave novels reject the

Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670–1834 (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Eva Beatrice Dykes, *The Negro in English Romantic Thought, Or a Study of Sympathy for the Oppressed* (Washington: Associated Publishers, 1942). The following books deal extensively with eighteenth-century representations of slavery: Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Keith A. Sandiford, *The Cultural Politics of Sugar: Caribbean Slavery and Narratives of Colonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Charlotte Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender, and British Slavery, 1713–1833* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Limits of the Human: Fictions of Anomaly, Race, and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Philip Gould, *Barbaric Traffic: Commerce and Antislavery in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Deirdre Coleman, *Romantic Colonization and British Anti-Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760–1807* (New York: Palgrave, 2005). Those works centrally concerned with slave narratives are discussed in chapter 5 below.

¹² See Ellis, *Politics*, 87; Ferguson, *Subject to Others, passim*; and Sypher, *Guinea’s Captive Kings*, 257–317.

¹³ Ellis (*Politics*, 100) acknowledges these contradictions, but sees grateful slave fictions as progressive; Carey (*British Abolitionism*, 52, 67) reviews the debates, ultimately agreeing with Ellis. Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, sees the limits of some of these fictions, but wholeheartedly views others as anti-slavery. For more insistently critical positions, see Nussbaum, *Limits*, 143, and Alfred Lutz, “Commercial Capitalism, Classical Republicanism, and the Man of Sensibility in *The History of Sir George Ellison*,” *SEL*, 39:9 (1999), 557–74.

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constraints of gratitude, not only for themselves, but also for their white servants. In Defoe's novel, for instance, Colonel Jack's master, Smith, disdains Jack's offer to show "as much Gratitude as a *Negro*."

Recognition of the importance of this trope – which also appeared, if less pervasively, in drama and poetry, and in non-fictional writings, including travel writing and polemical essays – carries implications for three important and interrelated issues in studies of the British Atlantic world of the eighteenth century: slavery, sentiment, and racial difference. One of the key ambitions of this study is to place these issues in the context of the emerging transatlantic culture of eighteenth-century Britain.¹⁴ As explored in the Epilogue below, the ongoing cultural power of the "grateful slave" trope can be gauged by the influence of such fictions on nineteenth-century US culture, for instance on key sections of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: the forced sale of Uncle Tom (who could be seen as a "grateful slave" himself) to pay Mr. Selby's debts, a scenario previously envisioned by Maria Edgeworth in "The Grateful Negro" (1804), and the martyrdom of Uncle Tom, anticipated closely in Dr. John Moore's *Zeluco* (1789).

The grateful slave trope, most importantly, when contrasted with the concepts of race underlying polemical discussions of African slavery throughout the century, offers a case study in the transatlantic negotiation of concepts of human difference in the eighteenth century. The trope begins with a nod to human similarity, in the sentimental attention to slave suffering, but ends with the suggestion of meaningful difference, as the slaves are so overwhelmed by passionate, irrational gratitude that they enthusiastically accept their state of slavery. This implies distinctions from the rationality, desire for independence, and rejection of slavery expected from whites.

These racial implications of the grateful slave trope mark a striking departure from the consensus views of race and slavery in eighteenth-century Anglophone culture. Only in response to the watershed moment of Lord Mansfield's 1772 decision to free a petitioning slave in the Somerset case were ideas of difference tentatively brought into the mainstream of debates on slavery. A fascinating example of the consensus views from which the grateful slave trope departs is Edward Trelawny's *Essay Concerning Slavery* (1746). Trelawny was the sitting governor of Jamaica as he wrote. His primary

¹⁴ This study is intended as a contribution to the "transatlantic" studies following the path-breaking works of Paul Gilroy and Bernard Bailyn: Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Bailyn, "The Idea of Atlantic History," *Itinerario*, 20 (1996), 19–44, and *Atlantic History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

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concern was maintaining white supremacy, in the ability to control and exploit the labor of slaves; “our Danger,” as he explains, “being plainly owing to the too great number of Negroes in Proportion to white Persons.”¹⁵ Trelawny is not exclusively committed to using whites to keep slaves in their place; he acknowledges that “Freemen” of “one Colour or another, white, black or yellow” will serve the purposes of maintaining a “due Proportion” to slaves.¹⁶ To help reach this proportion Trelawny makes two proposals: to stop importing “Negroes” to Jamaica and to exclude them from skilled jobs, in order to lessen the need for their labor. He never suggests that blacks are inferior or incapable, only that they, in sufficient numbers, represent an unanswerable threat.

Trelawny states matter-of-factly that slavery is immoral, and that he wishes for its abolition, but sees that as unfair and impractical.¹⁷ But he frankly recognizes the slaves’ humanity, even in his fear of them. He quite cleverly answers the philosophical arguments of Locke and Hobbes that sparing the life of a conquered enemy justifies demanding his service in perpetuity, pointing out that once the demand can be made, the state of war between the two combatants is actually over, in which case killing the captive is no longer morally valid.¹⁸ Further, Trelawny argues, even if the state of war is assumed to continue into captivity, this implies that the captive also has a continuous right to kill his captor and free himself (8–11). Although he treats it as a grudging concession to philosophical views of slavery, this idea of slave and master in a continued state of war seems best to explain his own imagining of Jamaica’s slaves, and his motive in writing the essay, which is to plead the case for strong measures to keep whites in a position to enforce their dominance over slaves.

Trelawny is explicit that his fear of slaves is based on their humanity. Noting the large number of plantations shown by the poll tax of 1740 to

¹⁵ London: Charles Corbett, [1746]. This quotation (and the following) is from the third page of the unnumbered introduction. Trelawny published the essay anonymously. For the attribution to him, see Peter C. Hogg’s invaluable bibliography, *The African Slave Trade and its Suppression: A Classified and Annotated Bibliography of Books Pamphlets and Periodical Articles* (London: Cass, 1973), 140.

¹⁶ Trelawny here offers an illustration of Theodore Allen’s thesis in *The Invention of The White Race* vol. I: *Racial Oppression and Social Control* (London: Verso, 1994) and *The Invention of the White Race* vol. II: *Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (London: Verso, 1997) that white privilege in the mainland colonies served the purpose of creating allies for the ruling class against their slaves, and that other intermediary classes, defined in other terms, could serve the same purpose.

¹⁷ Unnumbered Introduction, 3–4, 14.

¹⁸ See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651, ed. C. B. MacPherson (Baltimore: Penguin, 1968), 255–6 (Part II, chap. 20), and John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, 1690, ed. Thomas P. Peardon (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952), 14. For analysis of Hobbes and Locke on slavery, see Carole Pateman, “Contract, The Individual, and Slavery,” in *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 39–76, esp. 44–5, and Davis, *Western Culture*, 116–21.

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The grateful slave

operate at ratios of thirty black slaves to one white man, he asks worriedly, “what must this come to in the Course of a few Years?” (18). His answer is left implicit, as he goes on to mock the ill-preparedness, and the self-deception, of the planters:

One would imagine that the Planters really think the *Negroes* are not the same species with us, but that being of a different Mold and Nature, as well as Colour, they were made entirely for our Use, with Instincts proper for that Purpose, having as great a Propensity for Subjection, as we have to command, and loving Slavery as naturally as we do Liberty; and that there is no need of any Art or Discipline to subject ten Men or more, to one, no need of any Management, but that of themselves they will most pleasantly submit to hard Labour, hard Usages of all kind, Cruelties and Injustice at the Caprice of one white Man – such, one would imagine, is the Planter’s Way of Thinking. (19)

Trelawny makes no bones about it: his goal is the subjection of his fellow men. Although Trelawny publishes only a few years after Hume’s notorious footnote suggesting the serious possibility of racial inferiority, such a way of imagining slaves is intended by Trelawny to register as utterly absurd.¹⁹ The moment in which he wrote would not allow his readers to miss the irony: Jamaica in the late 1730s and early 1740s had been racked by continuous warfare with groups of Maroons – runaways organized into a guerilla force – and by several revolts.²⁰ His argument, then, is for a need for a more thorough, more carefully regulated system of white supremacy that will keep the slaves’ inevitable human urge for freedom in check. The type of “management” Trelawny imagines is very different from that of the grateful slave trope.

Trelawny’s view typifies two tendencies of the discourse on slavery and racial difference before the watershed moment of the Somerset case in 1772, neither of which has been recognized by scholars. Firstly, it captures the rhetorical state of play, in which the possibility of racial inferiority is mentioned – but only to be mocked, and often to be attributed to one’s antagonists in argument as means of discrediting them. Only a fool who believes this, suggests Trelawny, would reject my proposal. Secondly, Trelawny illustrates a mentality in which slavery is to be regretted and African humanity cannot be

¹⁹ He does make denigrating comments, for instance about the failure of slave women to be chaste (35).

²⁰ See Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 81–96. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon, 2000), 193–5, argue that serious insurrection seemed imminent in the 1730s and 1740s. James G. Basker shows that the London press frequently reported slave uprisings from 1737 on: “To the Next Insurrection of the Negroes’: Johnson, Race and Rebellion,” *The Age of Johnson*, 11 (2000), 37–51.

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denied but, as slavery entails a virtual state of war, the use of force to keep slaves in place is, if not exactly justified, nonetheless necessary.²¹ This attitude was not confined to colonial politicians, but also can be found in the writings of planters, English journalists and indentured servants, as we will see in chapter 3 below. The Somerset case, in which James Somerset sued to avoid being returned to colonial slavery by a master who had previously abandoned him, was viewed as challenging the legality of slavery not only in England itself, but potentially in the colonies as well.²² This changed the rhetorical situation for discussions of slavery, leading defenders of the planters, such as Edward Long and Samuel Estwick, to suggest, for the first time, the possibility of substantial difference as a justification of racialized slavery.²³

Given this rhetorical state of play – in which accepting Africans' full humanity is the default position – the image of the grateful slave enabled the transition, at its most dramatic between 1770 and 1790, to a raced view of humanity throughout the British Atlantic world in the wake of the racialization of colonial slavery itself. The grateful slave trope marked the movement away from the assumption of humanity,²⁴ based on the Christian orthodoxy of monogenesis (the unity of mankind due to a single act of creation by God) to the serious consideration of meaningful racial difference, through theories introduced into metropolitan discourse in response to the perceived threat of the Somerset case.²⁵ The ambiguity of the grateful slave – its simultaneous affirmation and circumscription of

²¹ As governor Trelawny was expected to defeat Cudjoe's Maroons, but instead made peace with them. They agreed to return runaways, helping address the threats outlined in the *Essay*; see Hart, *Slaves*, 98–105, and Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 87–9.

²² Although Somerset won the case, the belief among both eighteenth-century Britons and some later scholars that the decision freed all slaves in England is mistaken. For the definitive account, see F. O. Shyllon, *Black Slaves in Britain* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 76–140. On the impact of the decision for blacks in the colonies, see Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves, and the American Revolution* (New York: Ecco, 2006), 18, 222, 380.

²³ See chapter 3 below.

²⁴ On the development from this position, monogenesis, to the nineteenth-century racist position of polygenesis, see Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1981), 39–42 and *passim*; Nancy L. Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800–1960* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1982), 1–5 and *passim*; Londa Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 136–42; Hannah F. Augstein, "Introduction," in *Race: The Origins of an Idea* (London: Thoemmes, 1996), ix–xxxiii; Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 257–71; and Roxann Wheeler, *Complexion*, 37, 296–9. George Fredrickson argues that scientific polygenism, because un-Christian, remained unpopular even in the antebellum South: *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper, 1971).

²⁵ Winthrop Jordan, who argues that prejudice preceded racial slavery, acknowledges that spiritual equality was taken for granted in the eighteenth century even by colonists: *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969), 215.

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African humanity, of African capacities for reason and emotion – enabled this transitional role. To engage a metropolitan audience, the trope begins with deference to human unity, before developing strong implications of significant differences. The sentimental, reformist scenario of the grateful slave, presented in fictional narrative, was far more engaging to the values of its metropolitan audience than were the explicit arguments put forth in the polemics of apologists for slavery like Long and Estwick.

The rhetoric of Trelawny – who states “I cou’d wish with all my Heart, that Slavery was abolish’d entirely, and I hope in Time it may be so” – and other early-century commentators on African slavery calls another key scholarly assumption into question.²⁶ Adam Hochschild, in his lively account of the abolition movement, takes a typical view in claiming that, as late as 1787, if “you had stood on a London street corner and insisted that slavery was morally wrong, nine out of ten listeners would have laughed you off as a crackpot. The tenth might have agreed with you in principle, but assured you that ending slavery was wildly impractical.”²⁷ However, scholars looking directly at the early century have documented that attitudes toward slavery were consistently negative (or apologetic) whenever the topic came up.²⁸ Well before the watershed moments of the Somerset case (1772) and the beginning of the parliamentary campaign against slavery (1787) – and well after them, too – even the most ardent supporters of colonial slavery made sure to position themselves, like Edward Trelawny, as understanding that slavery was wrong and that all right-thinking men would at least regret its existence.²⁹ What changed at the end of the century, then, was not the simple acknowledgment of the immorality of slavery, but the sense that the English were in a position to do something about this.³⁰ Previously, slavery was just another front in an all-out war to establish oneself and one’s country in a position of power adequate to ensure survival.

²⁶ Trelawny, unnumbered Introduction, 4.

²⁷ Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 7.

²⁸ See Brown, “Antislavery Without Abolitionism,” in *Moral Capital*, 33–101, and John Richardson, “The English and Slavery,” in *Slavery and Augustan Literature: Swift, Pope, Gay* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 13–37. See also Suvir Kaul, *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire: English Verse in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 2–6.

²⁹ Even Edward Long did this: *Candid Reflections*, 73. For further examples see Brown, *Moral Capital*, 369.

³⁰ Indeed, anti-slavery was a cause that was taken up by conservatives, not only radicals: Nicholas Hudson, “Britons Never Will be Slaves’: National Myth, Conservatism, and the Beginnings of British Antislavery,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 34 (2001), 559–76, and Brown, *Moral Capital*, 333–88.

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No one can dispute that “slavery” had strongly negative political connotations throughout the period.³¹ And it was long into the century, too, that the term “slave” continued to be applied to those whom we would now classify as colonial indentured servants. White Englishmen could easily imagine themselves becoming slaves,³² especially through Barbary slavery and galley slavery to Catholic powers, but also through plantation slavery and even naval impressment.³³ This added, at once, to their willingness to call slavery immoral, and to their willingness to see life as a war-like struggle in which it was indubitably better to become a master than a slave. Hence, the idea in the grateful slave trope of African slaves coming to accept their state of slavery is strikingly new in eighteenth-century discourse. Their acceptance of slavery becomes more emphatic later in the century as “free labor” becomes increasingly central to British ideology. The possibility that enslaved Africans could become free laborers is confronted, and rejected, in a complex move within grateful slave fictions. The ameliorationist reformer invokes free labor as an ideal and models his reforms on it, while nonetheless concluding that the slaves are incapable of becoming free.

This history of attitudes to slavery is of great importance in understanding images of the grateful slave. For, if the default rhetorical approach to slavery, even for planters, is to regret it, the fact that grateful slave narratives question slavery’s cruelty is much less remarkable than it may at first seem. Indeed, the grateful slave embodies an aspect of the eighteenth-century politics of slavery

³¹ See Michael Guasco, “Encounters, Identities, and Human Bondage: The Foundations of Racial Slavery in the Anglo-Atlantic World” (Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 2000), 12–128; Davis, *Western World*, 3–28, 91–121; J. C. D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty 1660–1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Knopf, 2005), xi–xii.

³² As Linda Colley hints in *Captives* (New York: Pantheon, 2002), 47, James Thomson’s words “Britons never, never, never shall be slaves” do not reflect the impossibility of such a fate, especially in reference to Barbary captivity. Nicholas Rogers, “Vagrancy, Impressment and the Regulation of Labour in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” *Slavery & Abolition*, 15:2 (1994), 102–13, argues that the emergence of “free labour” was in fact slow and torturous; Michael J. Rozbicki documents that new projects to enslave the poorest Britons were dreamt up into the mid-eighteenth century: “To Save Them From Themselves: Proposals to Enslave the British Poor; 1698–1755,” *Slavery & Abolition*, 22:2 (2001), 29–50. And some Scottish miners were held as unfree laborers even in the eighteenth century.

³³ These specific forms of slavery for whites were invoked in the Somerset case; people we classify as “indentured servants” were often called slaves in the eighteenth century; both of these issues are discussed in chapter 3, below. For the pervasiveness of narratives of Britons as captives, see Joe Snader, *Caught Between Worlds: British Captivity Narratives in Fact and Fiction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000) and Colley, *Captives*; on impressments, see Daniel James Ennis, *Enter the Press-Gang: Naval Impressment in Eighteenth-Century British Literature* (Cranbury, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2002), and Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, The African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 49–51.

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that has been neglected in scholarship: amelioration. Amelioration seems to recognize slavery as a problem, but seeks to solve this problem through reform rather than more extreme measures such as emancipation. The solution it offers, in fact, denies that slavery is inherently problematic by imagining that it can be made acceptable, or that Africans can be understood as suited to it. In the final quarter of the century, with the rise of the abolition movement and of revolutionary rights discourse, amelioration only became more pervasive as the meeting ground between planters and opponents of the slave trade. In 1787 the London Abolition Committee in essence endorsed a concept of amelioration when it voted to make the ending of the African slave trade, rather than emancipation, its political goal. Part of the argument against the trade became that eliminating the supply of fresh slaves would force planters to ameliorate the condition of those remaining. Planters, too, argued that they were changing their own laws and practices to ameliorate slavery – that they had recognized doing so as being in their own best interests – and therefore that further intervention by parliament was unnecessary.

The significance of the grateful slave trope's indirect but insistent account of racial difference is that it challenges the standing consensus on race and slavery from within the rhetorical norms of the time. Throughout the seventeenth century and up until the 1770s, positive articulations of racial difference, and suggestions that slavery could be made palatable, were extremely rare. A consensus backed by standard interpretations of scripture – which Trelawny takes for granted – held that God had created all men in his image and therefore they all participated in a common humanity. Challenges to this consensus took the form of brief, elliptical suggestions of the possibility of polygenesis – multiple, separate creations by God which would then lead to distinct natures for different human groups.³⁴ The most notorious hypothesis of difference in the entire century came in Hume's 1742 essay "Of National Characters." Notably, even Hume took this position in a footnote. Hume's iconoclastic comment did attract notice, but did not attract adherents until after the Somerset case increased the stakes of debate in the 1770s. Indeed, as late as 1774, an apologist for slavery used Hume and his view of race as a bogeyman,

³⁴ For two early and isolated suggestions of polygenesis, see John Atkins, *A Voyage to Guinea, Brazil and the West Indies in His Majesty's Ships, the "Swallow" and "Weymouth,"* 1735 (London: Cass, 1970), 39; and Davis, *Western Culture*, 340 n.17 and 452–3 on Peter Heylen; Godwyn scornfully invoked Heylen's suggestion (*Negroes and Indians*, 18).