Amongst the Aristocracy and Underclass: the lives of Black people and Attitudes to Race in Eighteenth Century Britain
by Anne-Marie Sandos

This chapter explores the lives of Black people in the eighteenth century and how attitudes towards race shaped the conditions in which they existed. Trade links meant that the majority of Blacks were employed as servants or slaves to the upper classes or were concentrated in urban slums trying to make a living for themselves amongst the poorest of the poor. Life on two opposite ends of the spectrum meant that the circumstances in which Black people lived were marked either by comfortable servitude or excluded poverty. Black people, whether treasured pet or destitute vagabond, were unified by a struggle for self-actualisation and rights; living within a society which they were prevented from being part of. These seemingly disparate lifestyles were shaped by a set of common attitudes within Britain during the eighteenth century.

For the purpose of this chapter the term Black relates to people of African descent, either directly from Africa or the colonies. After setting the historical context the study explores the lives of Black people who lived amongst the aristocracy. The next section examines evidence relating to Black people amongst the underclass. Then the chapter explores eighteenth century attitudes to race and how these shaped the experiences of Black people at the time.

Historical Context

Prior to the eighteenth century it was common for Black people to be brought to England as servants and slaves to the upper classes. So much so that in 1596 Queen Elizabeth I issued an edict demanding they leave.[1] This move proved unpopular and was either blocked or evaded by their masters or employers. There are records of Black artists performing in Britain from the sixteenth century. King James I even had Black servants for a range of roles, including fashion accessories and minstrels.[2]

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[1] G. Gerzina, *Black England: Life Before Emancipation* (London: John Murray, 1995) , p. 4.
[2] Gerzina, p. 4.

In the eighteenth century most Black people arrived in England either directly or indirectly as a result of the Triangular Trade which saw the exchange of goods between England, the Caribbean and Africa. Amongst these goods were tea, cotton, sugar, arms and people. From the mid eighteenth century the Abolition movement gathered pace and support. A court case concerning a slave called Somerset gave impetus to the cause. Somerset was brought to Britain from America. During his time in Britain he ran away. Although slavery was legal in the colonies it was not recognised on the mainland. He was recaptured, brutally beaten, clapped in irons and put on a slave ship. Amongst the claims and counter claims Somerset was accused of duping his master by absenting himself from service, resulting in him being effectively put on bail for the course of the trial despite him being the plaintiff. The case judge Mansfield ruled that he could not be forcibly removed from Britain against his will but also insisted that the ruling was specific to the case and he was set free. During this century court rulings around slavery were contradictory, highlighting the ambiguous status of Black people in the society. The Black community and Abolitionists saw this ruling as a step towards freedom, whilst for slavers the ruling threatened to bring chaos creating a risk to their control in the plantations.[3]

Evidence held by the National Archives shows "Black people were an integral part of 18th century Britain; they worked in a wide variety of occupations, reacted to atrocities, campaigned to end slavery, became politically active and had a lively social life."[4] The National Archives contain evidence of established social networks and communities of Black people. "Black servants and settlers in London developed into a genuine community. Black servants and slaves gravitated towards each other's company, meeting in

[3] Gerzina, pp. 116-132.
[4] National Archives, 'Black Presence: Asian and Black History in Britain 1500-1850 Work and Community'. Available from: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhsitory/work_community/docs (accessed 15 April 2008).

homes of their masters, in their favourite local tavern, celebrating together and most crucially passing on news and information."[5]

Amongst the Aristocracy: Black Servants and Slaves

Black servants and slaves to the upper classes were status symbols. Having a Black servant showed that you were moneyed, cultured and cosmopolitan. As markers of fashion and status their owners spent significant amounts of money on outfits, schooling and nursing. Keen to display their wealth and status, families would include Black servants in their portraits. Charles the Black was included in the portrait of Lady Mary Montagu on display at Boughton House near Kettering, Northamptonshire. He is well dressed, standing at her feet and holding a skein of embroidery silk. Despite this depiction in wealth and finery, the markers indicate his low social status. As Gerzina argues, "clothing, always a marker of class, by its very opulence ironically indicated the lowliness of the slave's position even though he may have been treated as a pampered pet."[6]

The function of Black pages was to highlight the beauty of their mistresses: "white women complemented themselves with black pages…the darker the skin the more valuable the child, and the more elaborate and expensive the livery to set it off. Given classical names like Pompey and Caesar, they were dressed in brightly coloured silks and satins, silver padlocked collars and turbans."[7]

This led to resentment from the White British servants as it appeared that Black servants received more privileges.[8] This echoes contemporary tensions between British people and new immigrants. Many servants were brought from abroad and had lost their family, culture and freedom. Despite their seemingly privileged position, Black servants were the bottom of the pile within the hierarchy of service having fewer rights or opportunities for

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[5] J. Walvin, 'The Man and His Times', in C. Phillips (ed.), *Ignatius Sancho: An African Man of Letters* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 1997), p. 99.
[6] Gerzina, p. 16.
[7] Gerzina, p. 15.
[8] R. Ramdin, *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain* (Aldershot: Wildwood House,1987), p. 7.

advancement. An engraver from the time, Cruickshank, created an artwork which highlighted their social position by showing servants playing cards with a Black servant waiting on them. [9]

In contrast, a portrait of Black writer Ignatius Sancho by the famous painter Thomas Gainsborough depicts him as a cultured gentleman without irony. Sancho worked for three sisters in Greenwich who treated him cruelly. His situation was precarious, so he repeatedly petitioned to work for the Montagu family whom he had impressed with his thirst for knowledge. Sancho was largely self-educated, with the Duke of Montagu supporting his learning. He was part of small group who "enjoyed the benevolent patronage of aristocratic families… they were representative of a small elite in Britain's eighteenth century Black community…in contrast to other pictures of Black servants the portraits indicate status and they are one of the few that are known or were recorded of black people at the time."[10]

After working for the Montagu household for a number of years, Sancho became a grocer. This put him on a social footing unusual for Black people, making him middle class and entitled to a vote. However his existence was still precarious. "He may have conversed with writers and painters, published musical compositions and dined with dramatists but nothing would gloss over the fact that he was an impoverished and socially vulnerable Negro living in a foreign land."[11] In his letters he alluded to the racism which he and his family experienced on a regular basis. Sandhu found evidence in one of Sancho's letters describing Londoners' hostility to foreigners.[12]

Black woman Dido Elizabeth Belle also lived amongst the aristocracy. Her father was a sea captain who took her mother from the Spanish. She grew up and lived in Kenwood House. Her position in the family was ambiguous as she was neither a servant nor a full family member. She grew up as a playmate and personal attendant to her cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray and

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[9] Gerzina, p. 39.
[10] R. King, 'Ignatius Sancho and Portraits of the Black Elite', in Phillips, p. 16.
[11] S. Sandhu, 'An African Man of Letters', in Phillips, p. 59.
[12] Sandhu, pp. 62-63.

when she was older she was responsible for the dairy and poultry yard. She was not allowed to dine with the family but would have after-dinner coffee in the drawing room.[13] Dido was included in a portrait painted with her cousin, presented in jewels, satin and turban. She is shown on the same level as her cousin and yet separate and exotic. In the portrait she points to her cheek, indicating the colour of her skin which keeps her separate.

Each of the above examples shows how Black people were brought into aristocratic circles and received benevolent patronage from the upper classes. In comparison with those living amongst the working classes their lifestyles were comfortable and they had greater opportunities. However, compared with their White counterparts their status was ambiguous and their situation more precarious based on aristocratic patronage rather than a secure legal status.

Amongst the Underclass: Living in Poverty

The lives of working class people have traditionally not been as well documented as those of the upper classes. Communities of Black working class people developed in London, Liverpool and Bristol. As mercantile cities having links with international trade they had visitors and settlers from all over the world. In London, Black people were centred around the St Giles, Seven Sisters, St Paul's, Ratcliff, Limehouse and Wapping districts.[14] Walvin says this became part of the urban landscape: "knots of poor blacks were to characterise the expanding city of London throughout the late eighteenth century"[15] They became so much a part of the social landscape that the artist William Hogarth included them in engravings satirizing social conditions . They found themselves in settlements of squalid, run down, back to back slums. Their areas were notoriously dangerous and crime was rife, from pick-pocketing to murder.[16]

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[13] 'The Black 18th Century', BBC 4, 3 July 2006.
[14] Gerzina, p. 19.
[15] J. Walvin, 'The Man and His Times', in Phillips, p. 108.
[16] National Archives, 'Black Presence', www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathwys/blackhistory/work_community/docs (accessed 15 April 2008).

In 1783 Black immigrants from North America who fought for Britain in the American war now arrived to claim their promised freedom. "The British had periodically used slaves in the fighting and as support labourers (often linked to the promise of freedom). When the defeated British finally quit [the United States], they escaped north to Canada or back to Britain with those former slaves who had sided with them in the war."[17] However, strict rules regarding trades aimed at preventing migration made it impossible to gain steady employment.

In 1731 immigrants to London were forbidden by the Lord Major's proclamation to learn trades.[18] This law effectively banished Black people to begging or stealing. Ramdin argues, "The Black poor were among the poorest of the poor in London."[19] Conspicuous by their skin colour, their situation was precarious as they faced daily dilemmas. "On the other hand, hunger and poverty forced them to beg and steal, while on the other they were faced with the possibility of deportation and slavery."[20] British Legal institutions were not sympathetic to the plight of these soldiers. "Commissioners dealing with claims for compensation for losses in that fighting looked much less favourably on Black claims…[they] felt that it was sufficient that the supplicant Blacks secured their freedom."[21]

Communities developed networks "that could be mobilized for the purpose of social and political action".[22] They offered each other support in difficult times. "When in 1773, for example, two Black men were confined to Bridewell prison for begging more than 300 black people not only visited them provided for their economic support." [23] Whilst some Londoners offered their support others were concerned about the strain it put on the community. As Black people were not eligible for poor law support the burden fell upon the parish

[17] Walvin, p. 107.
[18] Gerzina, pp. 18-19.
[19] Ramdin, p. 16.
[20] Ramdin, p. 17.
[21] Walvin, pp. 107-8.
[22] Gerzina, p. 24.
[23] Gerzina, p.6.

council and the good will of neighbours who were also in straitened circumstances.

In 1786 a committee was formed to provide relief for London's Black Poor and within months more than 400 had been provided with food, clothing and lodging.[24] Famous Black Abolitionist writer and campaigner Olaudah Equiano was involved with a plan to send London's Black poor to Sierra Leone. The plan proved a disaster, beset with problems of recruitment and administration, and the majority of those that went to settle died within a year. The consequences of the plan were tragic and highlight the desperate circumstances of the times.

Making a living from the street was necessary for those surviving amongst the underclass. There were a number of Black street performers and buskers who entertained the public. One such performer became a well-known character, gaining notoriety. Billy Waters was believed to have been a soldier in the American War of Independence. He worked as a fiddler and was commonly seen outside the Adelphi Theatre. He was famously caricatured by Cruickshank and had figurines made of him. Records from St Giles' workhouse showed that he became ill and spent his final days there, where he was elected king of the beggars.[25]

Life was hard for the working class in eighteenth century Britain and opportunities were limited for everyone.[26] An early Black writer gives a detailed description of poverty in England in the eighteenth century: "A Narrative of the most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukasaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself." Gerzina notes that his writing describes not only the situation of the Black community but "gives us a picture of the formidability of life for the working poor. Food, housing, medical care, burial: those fundamentals were often inadequate,

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[24] Walvin, p. 108.
[25] National Archives, 'Black Presence', www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/culture/music.htm (accessed 15 April 2008).
[26] National Archives, 'Black Presence', www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/work_community/docs (accessed 15 April 2008).

sometimes non-existent.[27] While Black people living amongst the underclass shared common experiences of poverty with the White community, they were experiencing additional hardships due to the mind set of those in authority.

Attitudes to Race

Ideologies of racial stratification were created by intellectuals to justify and promote White economic interests and subordinate Black people in Britain and the colonies. "The pivotal figure in this development [of racial stratification] was the philosopher John Locke who played a large part in the creation of the Board of Trade, the architect of the old colonial system."[28] He was a proponent of the idea that human beings can be ordered according to physical traits such as skin colour. At the time there was a 'cult of physiognomy' which held that you could read morality into how people looked. The ideas of goodness, beauty and truth became linked and the definition of beauty was based on European ideals.[29]

These attitudes were disseminated by the social elite and used as a means of social control: "for about 300 years racism has had a precise social function. It has functioned as an ideology: a system of false ideas justifying the exploitation of and domination of people."[30] Ramdin argues that "plantocracy racism supported by British capitalists, politicians, historians and influential people of letters, engendered a dogmatic belief in white supremacy and institutionalised racism in Britain and her colonial possessions."[31]

The eighteenth century was an age of money made through the slave trade. Thousands of Black slaves were brought to Britain by merchants and planters. People believed "the whole earth is the market of Britain."[32] Slavery was rationalised on economic grounds as necessary, making morality a secondary

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[27] Gerzina, pp 21-22.
[28] P. Fryer, *Black People in the British Empire, An Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 1989) , p. 65.
[29] 'The Black 18th Century', BBC4.
[30] Fryer, p. 61.
[31] Ramdin, p. 7.
[32] D. Dabydeen, *The Black Presence in English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 26.

consideration. The moral justification was that it was benevolent as the trade provided jobs for poor whites and saved Blacks from tyranny.[33]

These attitudes meant that the status of Black people was subordinate to White people, whether amongst the aristocracy or the underclass, as social attitudes of the decision-makers and society in general sought to justify their position within a social and economic framework. This situation led to "thousands of Black people living and working under a legal system which recognised most of them only as property and denied the most fundamental rights."[34] These attitudes were enshrined in law and institutional racism. However the relationship was not straightforward: "The presence of black slaves in Britain introduced a new social problem. The ownership of human beings as property was a challenge to common law."[35]

In order to resolve and rationalise inconsistencies, ideological and psychological justifications were developed to legitimise the position of Black people. Gerzina argues: "This growing presence [of Black people] challenged English sensibilities about race and fairness and Xenophobia…to deal with this contradiction a whole intellectual industry of justifying slavery was necessary, finding exhaustive expression in David Hume's assertion of Negro inferiority in Bryan Edwards' and Edward Long's treatise on the West Indies and running through Carlyle's infamous Discourse of the Nigger Question."[36]

Although the rise of Abolitionism in the mid-eighteenth century marked a challenge to institutional attitudes to Black people, even progressives stopped short of expounding equality. Writer Sir John Fielding, in his extracts from period laws, worried in 1765 that black people were being inappropriately influenced by notions of equality once they got to Britain.[37]

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[33] Dabydeen, p. 28.
[34] Gerzina, p. 2.
[35] Ramdin, p. 9.
[36] Gerzina, p. 6.
[37] Gerzina, p. 24.

Abolitionism had become fashionable a *cause-celebre* with artists, writers, clergy and the working classes rallying to the cause. Dabydeen argues that by 1770 England was deluged with anti-slavery verse.[38] Wordsworth, Blake, Southey and Cowper added to the artistic genre. He is cynical about the White writers' motives: "Unlike the Black writers of the 18th century whose finances and very lives were bound up with their literary productions, English writers merely exploited the slave theme for their own gain and recognition."[39]

Towards the end of the century the idea of Black inferiority was challenged. Sancho's letters were cited by the Abolitionist movement as an "outstanding refutation of the idea that Black people lacked souls, intellects or rational facilities."[40] In 1789, William Dickson's 'Letters on Slavery' argued that poor standards of education and morality were actually perpetuated by plantation life.[41] This argument was beginning to become adopted by more people as Black and White people developed closer relationships.

Parish records show numerous mixed marriages across the country. The National Archives have records from 1731 showing Englishman Warren Hull married Maria Sambo in Earls Colne.[42] Mixed marriages were generally accepted within the community as they tended to happen amongst the lower classes: "However concerns were in the press raised about their impact on the country. In 1773, one outraged correspondent wrote to the London Chronicle begging the public to 'save the natural beauty of Britons from contamination."[43] A writer and social commentator of the time raged, "in almost every village, are to be seen a little race of mullattoes, mischievous as monkeys and infinitely more dangerous."[44]

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[38] Dabydeen, p. 44.
[39] Dabydeen, p. 45.
[40] Sandhu, p. 67.
[41] Ramdin, p. 15.
[42] National Archives, 'Black Presence', www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/work_community/docs (accessed 15 April 2008).
[43] National Archives, 'Black Presence', www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/work_community/docs (accessed 15 April 2008).
[44] Gerzina, p. 22.

Over the course of the eighteenth century English racial attitudes can be seen evolving from a kind of naïve and not necessarily benign curiosity into surprisingly modern and complicated beliefs about race.[45] Sentimentality and hypocrisy surrounded attitudes towards Black people. The eighteenth century elite found it easier to connect emotionally with poetry and plays about the plight of slaves than through everyday contact: "A slave sold in a coffee house in Liverpool or run off from a master in Bristol, or parodied with a padlocked collar in London, ironically aroused far less public sympathy than a White man or women pretending to be a Black person in the theatre."[46] Black people were separated from the rest of British society, working within a class system but rarely finding a place within it. The majority of Blacks found themselves dependent on the goodwill and humanity of their White employers, masters or patrons. Racial attitudes were created by those of the elite who stood to gain from the slave trade. The system depended on the dehumanisation of Black people; however growing contact with Black people themselves challenged these attitudes. This paved the way for the nineteenth century and the Act to abolish the slave trade and emancipation.

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[45] Gerzina, p. 25.
[46] Gerzina, p. 7.

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