The Burney Journal

Volume 10 (2010) Article 6

"Having a Lesson of Attention from Omai": Frances Burney, Omai the Tahitian, and Eighteenth-Century British Constructions of Racial Difference

Lori Halvorsen Zerne, West Virginia University

Recommended Citation
Zerne, Lori Halvorsen. "'Having a Lesson of Attention from Omai': Frances Burney, Omai the Tahitian, and Eighteenth-Century British Constructions of Racial Difference." *The Burney Journal*, vol. 10, 2010, pp. 87-104, https://www.mcgill.ca/burneycentre/burney-society/burney-journal/vol10/6.

THE BURNEY JOURNAL

"Having a Lesson of Attention from Omai": Frances Burney, Omai the Tahitian, and Eighteenth-Century British Constructions of Racial Difference

LORI HALVORSEN ZERNE

For two years, from the summer of 1774 to the summer of 1776, London society was enthralled by a visitor from Tahiti known as Omai.[1] As the sister of James Burney, second lieutenant of the ship that brought Omai to England, Frances Burney had several encounters with the Tahitian. The textual record of Omai's visit to England provided by Burney and her contemporaries reveals the characteristics of, and conflicts inherent in, eighteenth-century discourses of racial difference. Scholars of race in the eighteenth century—notably Roxann Wheeler and Felicity Nussbaum, whose recent books on the subject provide the theoretical foundation for this essay—have observed that the period is marked by conflicting theories of racial difference. These conflicting theories broadly fall into two basic categories: theories based on the humors and theories based on anatomy. Humoral theories of racial difference date back to the ancient Greeks and Romans and, to give a very simplistic definition, asserted that people's disposition depended on their balance of the four humors based on the climate in which they lived. Because climates vary by location on the earth, groups of people who lived in the same place developed similar types of dispositions, creating a local group or national identity. Of course, the Greeks and Romans developed a humoral system that favored the Mediterranean climate—and as a result its inhabitants—as the most temperate. Not surprisingly, the British contrived to revise the system to favor their much more northern location, and they focused as much on customs and manners as on disposition. The anatomical theories of racial difference developed from discourses of medicine and science, and, in contrast to the humoral theories, they contended that the physical body was both the source and the major signifier of difference. Of course,

the European body—especially the British body—was considered the best while the African anatomy usually ranked last in these taxonomies of race.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries constituted a transitional period in which both theories of racial difference were prevalent and accepted in common discourse. These competing theories of racial difference usually overlapped within constructions of race in the eighteenth century even though they often conflicted as well: "Anatomy and humors were rival theories of the body and its mechanics but tended to be combined syncretically rather than treated as mutually exclusive" (Wheeler 27). This overlapping of "rival theories" is evidence of multiplicity in the eighteenth-century ideology of race: "An awareness of multiplicity is based on the premise that in historical terms, ideologies and practices do not disappear; rather, they coexist with new ways of thinking and living, are revised partially to fit new conditions, or 'go underground' for a while and resurface later" (Wheeler 39). Such multiplicity is evident in British culture of the time: "Eighteenth-century racial ideology moves freely between civil and physical characteristics. This fluidity is particularly noticeable in encomiums on Britons' own beautiful white skin color, felicitous government, and polished manners—often all in one sentence" (Wheeler 177). Nussbaum explains that "rather than congealing into modern racism, incongruent manifestations of 'race' in language and culture coexist in the eighteenth century, and that strategic confusions persist regarding the meanings assigned to skin colorings, physiognomies, and nations" (136). Or as Wheeler declares, "Cultural and physical ways of racializing people could work separately, but mostly they appeared in conjunction" (289). Despite working together, however, competing theories of racial difference within a given construction could, and usually did, cause tension, revealing what Alan Sinfield calls an ideological faultline—a site where the "conflict and contradiction that the social order inevitably produces within itself" become visible (41).

The textual record of Omai's visit to England is such a site, yet Omai as a historical figure has been largely ignored by recent scholarship. He is occasionally mentioned in passing, but detailed analyses of his visit are rare.[2] This essay attempts to begin filling in this gap in eighteenth-century scholarship. During and after his visit to England, Omai was constructed

by the British who met him and by those who merely read about him in the papers and co-opted him for their own aims in ways that reflected the conflicting theories of racial difference in the eighteenth century. These conflicting theories of race allowed Omai to be constructed in ambivalent, if not contradictory ways, even by the same person. Despite this tension between racial theories, however, many of the records of Omai focus on cultural difference rather than on anatomical difference. By favoring cultural markers of race, such writers believed, at least to some degree, in Omai's capacity to become "civilized." Wheeler notes, "Eighteenth-century writers placed great faith in cultural 'makeovers' for Others within Britain's borders and beyond. Christian conversion, European clothing, increased trade activity, and desire for ornamental commodities were all components of this process" (289). The cultural qualities that are most notably repeated and emphasized in records of Omai are clothing, manners, consumerism, and language. The ways these qualities are constructed in these records further reveals the conflicted nature of racial theory, for the focus on cultural difference as a marker of racial difference creates ambivalence by both upholding and deconstructing racial difference. Because the cultural markers of race fail to mark difference consistently, it is not surprising that in the nineteenth century anatomical markers became the dominant method of theorizing difference.

Omai was actually not a native of Tahiti, for he was born on the island of Raiatea (known as Ulhietea in the eighteenth century), an island approximately ninety miles northwest of Tahiti, around 1753 (McCormick 1). When he was about 10 years old, he and his surviving relatives escaped to Tahiti after warriors from Bora Bora attacked Raiatea and killed Omai's father (3, 9). As a result of this migration, he was generally referred to by the English as a Tahitian. When Captain James Cook visited Tahiti during his second voyage of exploration in 1773, Omai boarded Cook's consort ship the *Adventure*, commanded by Tobias Furneaux, and journeyed to England, arriving in July 1774. Under the patronage of the Earl of Sandwich, who was First Lord of the Admiralty and a key supporter of Cook's voyages, and the scientists Joseph Banks and Dr. Daniel Carl Solander, Omai met King George and Queen Charlotte as well as many other people of note in London, such as Frances Burney, Samuel Johnson, and Hester Thrale. Although Omai would be constructed

mostly in cultural terms by those he met in England, not surprisingly, initial records of him focus on easily observed physical attributes. George Forster, a naturalist who joined Cook's second expedition, declares that his skin was "the darkest hue of the common class of people" (Forster 211), a comment that conflates race and class, while Cook portrays him as "dark, ugly and a downright blackguard" (qtd. in McCormick 53). More positively, James Burney describes Omai as "possessed of many good qualities—is Strong, active, healthy & as likely to weather the hardships of a long Voyage as any of us" (J. Burney 70). Interestingly, James Burney notes that the shipmates almost immediately alter another easily learned attribute of the Tahitian, his name: "The Indian who came on board us is named Omy, though we commonly call him Jack" (70). Yet once Omai reached England, racial ambivalence became more evident as he both regained his native name and simultaneously began to acquire British cultural qualities.

* * *

Clothing was an important cultural-based signifier of racial difference in the eighteenth century, and not surprisingly, observers of Omai often mention his dress. Wheeler notes, "Important as residual ideology and refashioned as part of the consumer revolution in the eighteenth century, clothing draws on the vectors of Christian tradition and secular subordination. It was key to the constitution of religious, class, national, and personal identity during the eighteenth century" (17). Dress as a signifier was changing during the eighteenth century as lower-class people in the cities began to have access to clothing that traditionally had been available only to the upper class. As a result of this change,

> apparel assumed a new general importance based on colonial and imperial experiences. If commercial society tended to destabilize clothing as a legible sign of status, then European encounters with native people tended to establish anew the comparatively stable significance of specifically European clothing norms. . . . Clothing assumed a new value in the repeated confrontations between fully garbed Europeans and lightly clothed 'savages'. (17-19)

The first time Charles Burney met Omai, just a few days after his arrival in England, he was still "dressed according to the fashion of his Country," but by the time Frances Burney finally met him in late November, she notes his fine English clothes: "He had on a suit of Manchester velvet, Lined with white satten, a *Bag*, lace Ruffles, & a very handsome sword which the King had given to him" (41, 60). Dressed in specifically British clothing (Manchester velvet) and accessories (a sword given to him by King George III), Omai appeared as European as he did Polynesian, though Burney follows her description of his clothing with the comment that he appeared "[m]uch Darker than I expected to see him" (60), a move that uses an anatomical marker to restore racial difference. In the spring of 1776, near the time of his departure, Burney notes in a letter to family friend Samuel Crisp that not only had Omai fully absorbed English fashions but he even critiqued a member of the aristocracy who did not measure up. As Burney and her older sister were walking in a London park, they observed Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire "walking in such an undressed & slatternly manner. . . . Two of her Curls came quite Unpinned, & fell lank on One of her shoulders; one shoe was down at Heel, the Trimming of her Jacket & coat was in some places unsewn; her Cap was awry, & her cloak, which was rusty & powdered, was flung half on & half off" (203-04). The Burney sisters met Omai, who "says he went to her Grace, & asked her why she let her Hair go in that manner? Ha, Ha, Ha,—don't you Laugh at her having a Lesson of Attention from Omai?" (204). Thus, Omai's residence in England resulted in more than a change in his clothing; he transformed from a man dressed in native clothing to a man so expert in English fashion that he censured a duchess for appearing, if not English enough, at least not aristocratic enough.

Omai took this new role as fashion critic with him on his return to the Pacific, after two years in England, on Cook's ship the *Resolution*. In Tasmania, the ship's occupants encountered people who were completely naked. Surgeon's mate David Samwell recorded that Omai's reaction to these people was to clothe them: "[H]e threw a piece of white cloth, 'cut in the Otaheite Fashion,' over the shoulders of 'a little deform'd hump-backed fellow' who 'expressed great Joy by laughing shouting & jumping'" (McCormick 199). This incident reveals several assumptions about eighteenth-century racial ideology. First, Omai demonstrated his

superiority to these natives not only by being dressed himself but also by proselytizing them to the "joys" of clothing. Second, Omai recognized their inferiority to himself by giving the man Tahitian clothing rather than English clothing. Finally, Samwell demonstrates Western bias in assuming that the Tasmanian man's actions of laughing, shouting, and jumping indicated "joy" at having acquired clothing; after all, what other emotion could he possibly experience at gaining such an important marker of civilization? Samwell could not imagine that the man might have been mocking the clothing, its giver, and his companions through his antics. Omai's own conversion to "civilized" clothing, and by extension to civilization itself, however, was not permanent. After returning to Tahiti, Omai, Cook notes, clothed himself "not in English dress, nor in Otaheite, nor in Tongatabu nor in the dress of any Country upon earth, but in a strange medly of all he was possess'd of" (qtd. in McCormick 228). When Omai died of illness two and a half years after Cook's expedition sailed away from the islands, a native informed Captain William Bligh of the *Bounty* that until his death Omai continued to ride in his boots though he mentioned nothing of Omai's other articles of clothing. Significantly, Bligh interprets the information about Omai's boots as evidence that "he did not immediately after our leaving him, lay aside the Englishman" (qtd. in McCormick 275). Thus, clothing was seen in the eighteenth century as a signifier of civilization, but the fact that Omai, a racial Other, could put on and even retain English dress as well as create hybrid forms of clothing (part British, part native) reveals the instability of clothing as a reliable marker of racial and cultural difference.

Good manners were another important and visible signifier of civilization, and many of those who recorded anecdotes of Omai's stay in England noted his manners, often contrasting them with the manners of individual Britons who did not measure up. Some observers insisted that his behavior was innate, a sign that he was an embodiment of Rousseau's noble savage. However, at Omai's first significant social event in England, his presentation to the king and queen almost immediately upon his arrival, Omai did not demonstrate perfect manners; instead, he had to be prompted to display the expected civilities, and Omai was forgiven when he blundered. Although Omai had received instruction for the ceremony, "so great was his embarrassment as the King approached

that he remembered only to kneel and when his sponsors urged him to speak could merely stretch out his hand and repeat the familiar, *'How do ye do?'*[5] To which salutation His Majesty responded courteously by very freely shaking his hand" (McCormick 96). Omai quickly learned to mimic polite British manners, however, and he became so adept that he often behaved better than the British and other Europeans.

When Frances Burney first met Omai four months later, she was ill and appeared, as she records in a letter to Samuel Crisp, "very much wrapt up, & *quite a figure*" (60). When James "told him that I was not well, he again directly rose, & muttering something of the *Fire*, in a very polite *manner*, without *speech* insisted upon my taking his seat,—& he *would* not be refused" (60). Omai's good manners extended to his technique of greeting people, despite his language barrier: "When Mr Strange & Mr Hayes were Introduced to him, he paid his Compliments with great politeness to them, which he has found a method of doing without words" (60). Burney continues to analyze each aspect of Omai's manners, examining every behavior that was important in polite society: "He makes *remarkably* good Bows—not for *him*, but for *any body*, however long under a Dancing Master's care. Indeed he seems to shame Education, for his manners are so extremely graceful, & he is so polite, attentive, & easy, that you would have thought he came from some foreign Court" (60). His table manners were equally impeccable: "He Eat heartily, & committed not the slightest blunder at Table, niether did he do any thing *awkwardly* or *ungainly*," and he even had the grace to compliment the hostess even though other guests were making "wry face" because "a Joint of Beef was not roasted enough" (61). When Omai left, he knew to "make his Compliments" first to the host but not to interrupt him in order to do so (62). When Burney contrasts Omai's manners to those of Philip Stanhope, the illegitimate son of the Earl of Chesterfield, Omai comes out far on top while Stanhope is dismissed as "a meer *pedantic Booby*" (63). A year later another European was negatively contrasted with the Tahitian when the Burneys entertained a Russian Count known as Prince Orloff. This European aristocrat took good manners to such an extreme that he refused a seat that was offered him, and instead he "*squatted* himself on the corner of a Form" (182). This action prompted another guest to comment to Burney: "I wish Dr. Burney would have had *Omiah* here,

instead of Prince Orloff!" (182). By demonstrating better manners than the Europeans, Omai showed that he was more civilized than they were.

Omai's manners were so perfectly British that the extremely short-sighted Samuel Johnson could not differentiate between the Tahitian and an English aristocrat. James Boswell records Johnson's commentary on Omai's manners at Streatham, the estate of Henry and Hester Thrale, where Johnson spent much of his time:

> Sir, he had passed his time, while in England, only in the best company; so that all that he had acquired of our manners was genteel. As proof of this, Sir, Lord Mulgrave and he dined one day at Streatham; they sat with their backs to the light fronting me, so that I could not see distinctly; and there was so little of the savage in Omai, that I was afraid to speak to either, lest I should mistake one for the other. (Boswell 723)

Johnson's comments reveal, of course, the usually unspoken fear underlying observations about Omai's impeccable manners: using manners as a method of signifying racial difference can mean that such difference is easily erased, or at least diminished. Johnson, unable to see the anatomical markers of race, found that he could not depend on the cultural markers either. During this dinner, racial difference for him had collapsed. Forster asserts that Omai "naturally imitated that easy and elegant politeness . . .which is one of the ornaments of civilized society; he adopted the manners, the occupations, and amusements of his companions, and gave many proofs of a quick perception and lively fancy" (11). If Omai, racial and cultural Other, could "naturally imitate" English manners, then how Other, how different, was he? How "civilized" were the British? And how "natural" to themselves were those civilized English manners? Thus, the representations of Omai reveal the faultline in using cultural signifiers, such as manners, which are easily imitated, to form the basis of a theory of racial difference.

The representations of Omai's relationship with consumerism, another important cultural signifier of race, were more overtly ambivalent. As Wheeler notes, consumption was an important part of both race theory and imperialism: "Consumption of English goods figures as a primary antidote to savagery and as the key to cultural assimilation" (178). As an

imperial power, Britain needed her subjects to consume goods brought from the colonies in order to fund further imperial expansion. In fact, Frances Burney's friend James Bruce assumes that the part of Omai's experience in England that the Tahitians would find most interesting and incredible was all the material goods available in England, as she writes: "[H]ow can he make them believe half the Things he will tell them? He can give them no idea of our Houses, Carriages, or anything that will appear probable" (92). To remedy this difficulty, another friend, Mrs. Strange, suggests that Omai show the Tahitians English consumerism in miniature: "'Troth, then,' cried Mrs Strange, 'they should give him a set of Doll's Things, & a Baby's House, to shew them; he should have every Thing in miniature, by way of model: Dressed Babies, Cradles, Lying In Women, & a' sort of pratty Things!'" (92).[4]

A person's behavior as a consumer revealed his or her role in the empire. A consumer in England was, generally speaking, a British subject and in this way demonstrated his or her support for the king. Natives who traded necessities such as fresh food for manufactured consumer goods such as nails and cloth demonstrated that they too were supporters of the king. They would not be shot as enemies, and in time they might even be accepted as subjects themselves. By consuming luxury goods in England, Omai demonstrated that although he was a Tahitian, a racial Other, he too could behave as, and show the cultural markers of, a British subject. Omai consumed many goods during his two-year stay in England. His curiosity about and desire for consumer objects—like most of the Tahitians, who frequently were caught stealing goods from English ships—were evident early in his residence in England. The Reverend Sir John Cullum, for example, states that "when I dined with him, with the Royal Society, a small multiplying glass had been newly put into his hands; was perpetually pulling it out of his Pocket, and looking at the Candles &c with excessive Delight and Admiration" (qtd. in McCormick 129). The Tahitian soon became a prolific consumer, as Joseph Banks' financial records of his visit indicate. For his first year in England Omai's "'Taylors 2 Bills' amounted to £52-0-4, and he spent £16-10-0 on wine; among lesser items, £3-13-0 went to his hairdresser, £4-0-0 to his shoemaker, and three guineas to his apothecary. The total amounted to the not inconsiderable sum of £317-11-11½" after lodging, board, and other necessities were added (McCormick 161). The following year Omai's expenses were even higher: £395-8-9.

This time the consumer goods he purchased included "£4-0-0 for 'Drums,' £10-2-4 for 'Beads,' £4-14-6 for '2 Women's Dresses,' with £20-7-7 paid to 'Ironmongers,' £2-12-6 to 'printsellers' . . . , £3-17-6 for 'Toyman's Bill,' and £5-19-0 'payd for a sword'" as well as "a tailor's bill for £86-1-6, two from linen drapers for £33-9-6, two from a shoemaker for £10-5-6, one from a hosier for £12-4-0, and another from a hatter for £3-5-6." Added to this was another £20-19-9 spent on clothes and footwear while his apothecary bill was £3-2-6, his wine merchant bill was £12-4-0, and his hairdresser received £10-14-0 (187). Thus, Omai appeared to have become fully assimilated as a British consumer, but he had the advantage of having his patrons' money to spend instead of having to earn his own money, a fact that colonized and infantilized him.

Yet perhaps because he was spending someone else's wealth instead of his own, he displayed evidence of the wrong kind of consumerism. Forster views Omai's consumerism as particularly childlike, rather than sophisticated: "His judgement was in its infant state, and therefore, like a child, he coveted almost every thing he saw, and particularly that which had amused him by some unexpected effect. To gratify his childish inclinations, as it should seem, rather than from any other motive, he was indulged with a portable organ, an electrical machine, a coat of mail, and suit of armour" (11). Omai's infantile consumerism was perceived to be a sign of his racial Otherness rather than evidence of his civilization. Furthermore, consumption could easily deteriorate into waste and disregard for one's own property, as Wheeler points out:

> A proper relationship to luxuries was intimately tied to racializing Britons positively and other people negatively. Consumerism was a patriotic activity that reflected more than culture chauvinism: Luxury items and consumable goods were the basis of exchange that underwrote civil society and polite sociability. . . . The quantity as well as the quality of these items helped distinguish among ranks of Britons, and they were fundamental items in social rituals like coffeehouses, afternoon teas, and punch bowls at men's clubs. . . . [T]he ability to consume luxury items yanked entire groups of people out of the savage realm. (191)

If Omai displayed an improper relationship to luxuries, then, as Wheeler suggests, he became racialized negatively. One anecdote that suggests a not altogether proper relationship to luxuries occurs in Frances Burney's letter to Samuel Crisp about her first encounter with the Tahitian. Dressed in his Manchester velvet suit, Omai spilled some beer but took only perfunctory precautions to protect his expensive clothing. Burney narrates, "I was afraid for his fine Cloaths, & would have pin'd up the wet Table Cloth, to prevent its hurting them—but he would not permit me; &, by his *manner* seemed to *intreat* me not to trouble myself!—however, he had thought enough to spread his Napkin out over his knee" (62). One suspects that the napkin was not enough to protect the velvet suit, which Burney informs Crisp "was on for the first Time" because of a visit to the House of Lords before calling on the Burneys. By failing to protect the expensive velvet suit, Omai displayed what could be interpreted as an improper relationship to luxuries he could not fully appreciate.

Not all Britons accepted the ideology of consumption, of course. Omai not only exemplified a native turned civilized consumer, but he also was appropriated by those opposed to consumerism. In the anonymous poem *An Historic Epistle, From Omiah, to the Queen of Otaheite,* for example, the Omai of the poem asserts that Tahitian simplicity is both healthier and more satisfying than European consumption of "pomp" and "luxuries":

> Can Europe boast, with all her pilfer'd wealth,
> A larger share of happiness, or health?
> What then avail her thousand arts to gain
> The stores of every land, and every main:
> Whilst we, whom love's more grateful joys enthral,
> Profess one art—to live without them all.
>
> (qtd. in McCormick 142)

This appropriation of Omai's voice in a backlash against consumerism, along with his occasionally frivolous attitude toward material goods, suggests that the relationship between consumption, colonialism, civilization, and race was an ambivalent one that was easily co-opted by competing ideologies.

The final major cultural signifier of race evident in English representations of Omai was language, which appeared as an important

factor of almost every interracial interaction in the eighteenth century. Wheeler declares, "Language and empire go hand-in-hand" (197). Language and empire have a symbiotic relationship not only because communication is vital to travel and power but also because the ability to read and write separates the civilized human from the savage Other. As Wheeler affirms, "Correct language use was a sign of English political authority; moreover, it marked one as a gentleman" (198). The English language was Omai's greatest barrier to becoming fully assimilated into English society, and many observers in London used his poor English as a means of continuing to emphasize his Otherness. Forster's comments about Omai's difficulty with the English language interestingly reveal the conflict between cultural and anatomical markers of race: "His language, which is destitute of every harsh consonant, and where every word ends in a vowel, had so little exercised his organs of speech, that they were wholly unfit to pronounce the more complicated English sounds; and this physical, or rather habitual defect, has too often been misconstrued" (10). Forster attributes Omai's struggle with English to both an anatomical difference and a cultural difference that made the language difficult, or even impossible, for him to pronounce, and he fails to reconcile the two kinds of difference that he blames.

Although Omai proved to be a capable translator on his return trip to Tahiti, he left behind him a strong memory of his halting, heavily accented pigeon English. Frances Burney, for example, highly praises Omai's dress and manners during the various encounters she records, but each instance of praise is paired with disparaging remarks about Omai's speech, destabilizing the initial description of Omai as civilized and replacing it with a racialized Omai. When she describes her father's first encounter with Omai, she mocks the Tahitian's pronunciation of the family name, "Bunny" (41). In the record of her first meeting with Omai, she follows compliments on Omai's impeccable manners with remarks about his poor grasp of English. She notes that when he gave up his seat by the fire for her, he "then drew his chair next to mine, & looking at me with an expression of pity, said 'very well to *morrow-morrow*?'—I imagine he meant *I hope* you will be very well in *two or 3 morrows*,—& when I shook my Head, he said '*No? O very bad!*'" (60). Later that same evening when he complimented the hostess on the

dinner, he "said two or three Times '*very dood*—very *dood.*' It is very odd, but true, that he can pronounce the *th*, as in *Thank you*, & the *W*, as in *well*, & yet cannot say *G*, which he uses a *d* for" (61). Thus, twice in Burney's description of the events of this one evening with Omai, her praise of his manners is undercut by her comic renditions of his speech. Instead of admiring Omai, the reader ends up laughing at him. Furthermore, these transcripts of his speech emphasize his specifically non-European difficulty with English. Burney notes that Omai had no trouble pronouncing the *th* and *w* consonant sounds, which various non-English Europeans commonly had difficulty pronouncing, but she is astonished that he could not pronounce the seemingly much simpler *g* sound.

When he again visited the Burney home a year later, Frances Burney asserts that Omai "has learnt a great deal of English since his last Visit," and she recognizes difficulties he faced in learning the language: "[H]e really has made a great proficiency, considering the disadvantages he labours under, which render his studying the Language so much more difficult to him, than to other strangers; for he knows nothing of *Letters*, & there are so very few Persons who are acquainted with his Language, that it must have been extremely difficult to have Instructed him at all" (193-94). Nevertheless, his communication still required "the assistance of signs, & Action [to] make himself tolerably well understood," and he "pronounces English in a manner quite different from other Foreigners & sometimes unintelligibly" (193). From Burney's perspective, and probably the perspective of most of her fellow Britons as well, Omai's year's worth of progress in learning English was undermined by his heavy accent—he still pronounced "good" as "dood," for example (194)—and by his continuing reliance on nonverbal communication. Thus, Omai's speech destabilizes any construction of him that civilizes or deracializes him by emphasizing his non-English, even non-European, Otherness. While Omai's ability to learn English undermines racial difference, his failure to become fully proficient in the language simultaneously reinforces difference.

* * *

The ambivalence evident in these constructions of Omai's race reflects, and is reflected by, the ambivalent attitude of the British toward

the racial Other in the eighteenth century. The British desired and exoticized racial Others even as that they found them abhorrent and savage, as Nussbaum points out: "The reverse of the enthralling appeal of alterity is, of course, repulsion and disgust. . . . Observers nostalgically wish to possess the qualities of romanticized and exoticized others while at the same time to denigrate them as monstrous and corrosive" (243). In England Omai encountered both desire and disgust directed toward him. Frances Burney notes Omai's popularity with London women on at least two occasions, and both times she immediately undermines his desirability by showing him to be not fully civilized, if not downright repulsive, and a fool to be laughed at. The first time she met him he had to leave for "an engagement . . . to see no less than 12 Ladies," and he "began to Count, with his Fingers, in order to be understood—'1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10.—*twelve—Woman*!' said he" (61). The absurdity of counting on his fingers like a child undercuts Omai's desirability, even if twelve women desired his presence. To further emphasize his repulsiveness, Burney comments, "He is *by no means* handsome, though I like his *Countenance*" (62).

During his visit to the Burneys a year later Omai mentioned the noted London beauties he was acquainted with: "'Very pretty Woman, lady Townshend!' cried he,—'I drink Tea with lady Townshend in 1: 2: *tree* Days.—Lord Townshend, my friend: Lady Townshend, my friend: very pretty woman, Lady Townshend!—very pretty Woman, Mrs Crewe!—very pretty Woman Mrs Bouverie!—very pretty Woman Lady Craven!'" (195-96). On this occasion Omai's apparent desirability among the beauties of England is destabilized by his singing, which he did at Dr. Burney's request even though "he was either so modest that he blushed for his own performance, or his Residence here had made him so conscious of the *barbarity* of the South Sea Islands' Music, that he could hardly prevail with himself to comply with our request" (196). Omai's singing proved to be barbaric to Burney's well-tuned Western ears: "Nothing can be more *curious*, or less *pleasing*, than his singing Voice, he seems to have none, & *Tune*, or *air*, hardly seem to be *aimed* at; so queer, wild, strange a *rumbling of sounds* never did I before hear; & very contentedly can I go to the Grave if I never do again. His *song* is the only thing that is *savage* belonging to him" (196). Omai's "savage" song undermines his desirability by emphasizing the repulsive barbaric side of his Otherness.

Omai's popularity with the upper-class British women inspired at least two anonymous satirical poems mocking desire for the exotic Other—*Omiah's Farewell; Inscribed to the Ladies of London* and *Seventeen Hundred and Seventy-Seven.* The first satire contains "references to Omiah's intimacy with 'women of quality' coupled with sly allusions to 'the depravity of female inclinations'" (McCormick 184). Though slightly disguised by the use of asterisks, the Omiah of the poem drinks a toast to each of the women he mentions to Burney: "first to Lady C*****, then in succession to 'beauteous B******' and 'courteous C***' and 'lovely T*******'" (McCormick 185). The second satire advertised itself as an "Epistle from a Lady of Quality in England, to Omiah, at Otaheite" (qtd. in McCormick 301). The Lady of Quality urges other young men from Tahiti to visit England as well to serve as lovers and exoticized objects of desire for British women:

> These faithful lines shall tell thy native train,
> What honours court them to the British plain.
> Oh, may the picture tempt the youths to rove,
> And bring their pleasures, and their arts of love!
> Let sooty throngs the cream-fac'd courtiers shame,
> And southern lovers glad the curious dame.
>
> (qtd. in McCormick 302)

The existence of these satires indicates that Omai's popularity with the English women threatened at least some citizens of Britain. In this poem the Lady of Quality's desire for the exotic Other seems to point to a hidden wild Otherness in herself, a characteristic, of course, inappropriate for a white British woman. Moreover, the speaker's desire threatens to break down racial difference even further, for the sexual encounters described in the lines above will inevitably lead to miscegenated children. These satires reveal that the racial Other in eighteenth-century England was both the desirable exotic and the repulsive threat to white Englishness.

Thus, representations of Omai as racial Other in eighteenth-century British records reveal a faultline of conflicts between competing theories of race and even the conflicts within a given theory, especially conflicting meanings of cultural differences. David Garrick, in a 1775 letter to George Colman the Elder, envisions a stage character inspired by Omai,

and Garrick calls this character an "*Arlequin Sauvage*, a fine character to give our fine folks a genteel dressing" (Peake 388). Both savage and genteel member of society, fool and wise revelator of others' absurdities, Omai, like the traditional clown in drama, embodies the contradictions of society, in this case, specifically the contradictions of racial construction. In the accounts of Omai's visit written by Frances Burney and her contemporaries, representations of his clothing, manners, consumerism, and language, though all cultural markers of racial difference, reveal contradictions within themselves while also simultaneously constructing and deconstructing racial difference. The resulting ambivalence of cultural difference contributes to the rising dominance of anatomical theories of racial difference in the nineteenth century though the ambivalence of racial Otherness as both desirable exotic and abhorrent savage remains.

NOTES

[1] Omai is an Anglicization of the Tahitian's name, which is more correctly rendered Mai. Such distortion of Tahitian names was common at the time "due to the mistaken fusion of the article 'o'" with proper names (McCormick 19). Most notably the British called the island Otaheite. To confuse matters further with regard to Omai's name, he is also referred to as Omiah and Omy in eighteenth-century sources, and Frances Burney, exemplifying the spelling habits of the time, uses all three Anglicized versions of his name in her journals and letters. Nevertheless, in this essay I use Omai as the Tahitian's name because it is the most commonly used version in eighteenth-century records.

[2] There has been, however, recent academic interest in Philip de Loutherbourgh and John O'Keefe's pantomime *Omai, or, A Trip Round the World*, which plays quite loosely with the historical details of Omai and his visit to England. See, for example, Daniel O'Quinn's chapter, "'As Much as Science Can Approach Barbarity': Pantomimical Ethnography in *Omai; or, A Trip round the World*," in his book *Staging Governance* (74–114), and David Worrall's "Pacific Pantomimes: *Omai, or, A Trip Round the World* and *The Death of Captain Cook*," in *Harlequin Empire* (139–70). Though the pantomime is outside the scope of this essay, it is interesting that

O'Quinn and Worrall disagree about how much the character Omai and other non-European characters are racialized in the pantomime. O'Quinn argues that *Omai* is highly racialized and imperial, while Worrall asserts that the pantomime is not racially specific, that it is sympathetic to the Tahitian character, and that it is as much about British class as about race and imperialism.

[3] Instead of the more formal, "How do *you* do?"

[4] Mrs. Strange's particularly domestic list of consumer goods suggests an interesting relationship between the ideology of consumption and gender, but an analysis of this relation is outside the scope of this essay.

WORKS CITED

Boswell, James. *Life of Johnson.* 1791. Ed. R. W. Chapman. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.

Burney, Frances. *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney, Vol. II: 1774-1777.* Ed. Lars E. Troide. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP; Oxford: Clarendon, 1990. Print.

Burney, James. *With Captain James Cook in the Antarctic and Pacific: The Private Journal of James Burney, Second Lieutenant of the Adventure on Cook's Second Voyage, 1772-1773.* Ed. Beverley Hooper. Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1975. Print.

de Loutherbourgh, Philip, and John O'Keefe. *Omai, or, A Trip Round the World.* London, 1785. Print.

Forster, George. *A Voyage Round the World.* 1777. Ed. Nicholas Thomas and Oliver Berghof. 2 vols. Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 2000. Print.

McCormick, E. H. *Omai: Pacific Envoy.* Auckland: Auckland UP, 1977. Print.

Nussbaum, Felicity A. *The Limits of the Human: Fictions of Anomaly, Race, and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. Print.

O'Quinn, Daniel. *Staging Governance: Theatrical Imperialism in London, 1770-1800.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005. Print.

Peake, Richard Brinsley. *Memoirs of the Colman Family.* Vol. 1. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1972. Print.

Sinfield, Alan. *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1992. Print.

Wheeler, Roxann. *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture.* Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2000. Print.

Worrall, David. *Harlequin Empire: Race, Ethnicity and the Drama of the Popular Enlightenment.* London: Pickering, 2007. Print.