**‘Such and so great was the Affection he bare to Musick’:
Hearing London's Eighteenth-century Black Community**

Our subject is ‘Black Music in Eighteenth-Century Britain’. What does that mean? Focusing on two musical theatre works, John Gay’s *Polly* of 1729 and Isaac Bickerstaff’s *The Padlock* of 1768, I’d like to consider ways in which members of the black community might have contributed to playhouse entertainments representing them.

Both of these productions called for a white man to portray a black man. *Polly* is said to contain the first blackface role on the English stage, and *The Padlock* the first stage vocal music in dialect and blackface. But African disguise had been popular in England for centuries. A 1510 description of a court banquet for Henry VIII drew attention to, ‘Two ladies, in kirtles of crimson … their heads rolled in pleasants [gauzelike fabric] … like the Egyptians, embroidered with gold. Their faces, necks, arms and hands [were] covered with fine pleasants black … marvellous thin, so that the same ladies seemed to be negroes or black Moors’. In their dress, these ladies of 1510 emulated not just ‘negroes and black Moors’ but also the morris dancers whom they probably watched that evening.[1] Morris dance was conducted in blackface, in theatricalized celebrations for court, church and guilds until the seventeenth century, and for villages until today. I’d like to share with you two brief video clips of morris dancing.

[clip]

Writing *Polly* in early summer of 1728, John Gay chose the morris tune you just heard, ‘Three Sheep-Skins’ for his ballad opera *Polly* – why? I think Gay was using music to help playhouse audiences see and hear the hero of his story, the black pirate Morano. *Polly* was a sequel to *The Beggar’s Opera*, which had opened in January 1728. Continuing his story a few months later in *Polly*, Gay made Macheath, the hero of *The Beggar’s Opera*, disguise himself as the African Morano.[2] Whereas Macheath in *The Beggar’s Opera* represented the real-life

thief Jack Sheppard, Morano stands, according to my findings, for a new real-life criminal: Captain Bartholomew Roberts, known from the best-selling *General History of Pirates* of 1724. In song Morano comes to represent not just Captain Roberts but the black sailor generally who, standing outside factions and nations, voices uncomfortable truths.

Most of the characters in *Polly* think that Morano is African; only his wife knows he's white, and by this means Gay makes Morano both black and white. We find this same colour conflation in the *History of Pirates*, where Roberts is described as a native of Wales who has become a swashbuckler – waistcoat, gold chains, pistols (Slides) – and a 'tall black man near forty years of age' (Slides). Besides seeming to be both white (Welsh) and black, Roberts also shares attitudes with Morano. Both celebrate freedom in the teeth of enforced servitude: 'Damn to him who ever lived to wear a halter',[3] Roberts reportedly shouted when drinking; in air 46 Morano sings 'They must conquer and die who have no retreat'.[4] Both men try and fail to free African slaves; we read that Roberts sent his men to unshackle slaves before burning the slave-ship he'd captured, but instead Roberts' men burnt the slaves alive. Morano leads a slave rebellion against the English but is captured, defeated and abandoned by his men.[5] To instil order in their company, Roberts and Morano both get their men to sign articles – for his dialogue Gay practically quotes Roberts' anti-gambling rule printed in the *History of Pirates*[6] – yet in the end, both captains suffer betrayal by their men.

The morris tune 'Three Sheep-Skins' underpins a lesson about faithless followers. Singing this tune is not Morano, but the white pirate Cutlace. Before he sings, he states the rule by which he conducts himself: 'to get favour, or keep it, no man ever speaks what he thinks, but what is convenient'. Then he sings about this rule, driving his point home in his final line 'The richest sin is lying'. By setting these words to a tune routinely performed in blackface, Gay makes this a song about disguise. Gay's lesson is complicated: through this song Morano's blackness comes to denote integrity – it is visible – unlike his men's

whiteness, underneath which lurks malice. After the ‘Three Sheep-Skins’ ballad, Morano is the only dramatis persona who refuses to lie.

Although Morano is a truth-teller, he does assume different musical guises, receiving the greatest stylistic range of music. While the other characters sing mostly country dance tunes, [7] Morano sings English broadsides, a grand march, Italian opera recitative, French airs and drinking songs, and English country dance tunes (see Handout). In Gay’s story, Morano turns from private to public duty, escaping domination by his wife Jenny Diver – another London celebrity criminal, who was eventually hanged in 1741[8] – to embrace his Captain’s duties. Music tracks his progress. In his second air Morano sings the tune ‘The virtuous wife’. To this music, Gay has Morano promise Jenny to ‘conquer’ in war only to ‘to make’ her ‘great’ (audio, youtube). [9] Morano then shrugs off Jenny’s jealousy of his other girls with a French drinking song.[10] When leading the battle against English slave masters, Morano boldly declares ‘For the war, for the prize I burn’ to Jeremiah Clarke’s march honouring Prince Eugene’s 1706 victory against the French (audio, youtube). In Italian recitative, Morano promises to torture and kill his prisoner, an Indian chief who has joined the English to quell the slave’s rebellion that Morano leads (Berta sings).

Following his defeat in battle, Morano’s song culminates, just like Macheath’s in *The Beggar’s Opera*, in a string of numbers – except that in *Polly* each tune was famous as both a dance and a song; that is, as embodiment, and sound. As in *The Beggar’s Opera*, the protagonist moralizes before being marched to the scaffold – except that this time, the last-minute pardon arrives too late and he is hanged. So what does Morano teach us? First, that even the ‘Ambitious’ will be held to account for their crimes – a message embedded in the tune ‘Parson upon Dorothy’, whose traditional words tell of a knight forced to marry the shepherdess whom he has ravished (audio visual).[11] Second, Morano observes that history is told by the victors; or in Gay’s words, ‘When right or wrong’s decided, / In war or civil

causes, / We by success are guided, / To blame or give applauses' – sung to jaunty "Scotch" tune, called the Collier has a daughter (audiovisual youtube). Third, Morano says bluntly that 'All crimes are judg'd like fornication', meaning that only if caught do you face consequences. Yet Morano sings also that a higher truth prevails: 'If justice had piercing eyes, / Like ourselves to look within, / She'd find power and wealth a disguise, / That shelter the worst of our kin' – a solemn reflection sung to a flippant hornpipe, Mad Moll (audio).

'Power and wealth a disguise': this is Morano's theme. He dies because his disguise goes unnoticed. But he recognizes the masks others wear, and tries to tear them off. In his last scene, Morano's piercing observations distance him from the lawless Captain Roberts, and suggest instead other stateless men: Africans working on, or trapped in, English vessels. W. Jeffrey Bolster, in his important study, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*, identifies the contradictory perspectives of African American men at sea, and these coincide with Morano's own. Morano and the black seaman alike know what it is to be both a slave, and to be free; what it is to be both English and black; what it feels like to both command respect and be subject to humiliation. The hornpipe was thought to be the song of English sailors. In *Polly*, Morano, who dies as a black man, co-opts his captors' music to judge them.

Part II: Padlock

Whereas Gay's *Polly* in 1729 was banned from being staged – though it reigned in print as a Town favourite – *The Padlock* of 1768 was a black-face production successful in London and then taken up across Britain, in other European countries including Russia and in the Americas and India. Its impact is illuminated in Felicity Nussbaum's forthcoming article 'Mungo Here, Mungo 'Der': Charles Dibdin and Racial Performance', which is in press. I am

very grateful to Prof. Nussbaum for sharing with me her findings, which I'll briefly summarize.

Dibdin (1745-1814) created the role of Mungo, both on stage and in the score he composed. Nussbaum identifies the subtle ways that Mungo's song and parodic stage persona (Fig *) re-inscribe racist and colonial aims. Mungo is maltreated in stage action, and pleads for audience sympathy; but because he's buffoonish, his plight becomes funny. The stripes of Dibdin's costume (slide) are from the clothes of slaves in the West Indies, signalling Mungo's status but perhaps also his resistance, since stripes were also worn by American revolutionaries to protest their oppression. Mungo's faux West Indian dialect entered common language for joking purposes. Mungo's most celebrated song, 'Mungo here, Mungo Der, Mungo ev'rywhere', chimes with suspicions levelled against Shakespeare's Othello whom Roderigo, in a speech well known to playhouse audiences, calls an 'extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere'. Dibdin seems, as Nussbaum tells us, to have played both sides of the slavery debate, common humanity versus established order, to advance his career.

But even in *The Padlock*, both text and music likely transmitted something of the power of black identity. Before Dibdin wrote his score, playwright Isaac Bickerstaff wrote the wordbook, working with Irish actor John Cochran, known as John Moody. As Dibdin later admitted, Mungo 'would not have been written as it is but for Moody's suggestions, who had been in the West-Indies, and knew, of course, the dialect of the Negroes'.[12] In fact, Moody had worked closely with theatre amateurs in Kingston, Jamaica. Arriving there in 1745, he organized and led three Shakespeare productions – Hamlet, Romeo, and Lear[13] – for residents who until then had performed in a ballroom.[14] Moody then set about founding Kington's first playhouse. After recruiting a resident company from England, he returned to Kingston in 1746 and converted a long room in Harbour Street (Fig *) into a theatre where he

worked for three years[15] In the Kingston playhouse, according to the historian Eroll Hill, audiences of all backgrounds sat together; only in 1790s were calls made to segregate playgoers by colour. [16] Company members may have included non-white Kingston residents.

So what Dibdin called ‘the dialogue of the Negroes’ in *The Padlock* came at least partly from Kingston’s playhouse. Moody brought these accents with him after he ‘worked his passage home as a sailor before the mast’. [17] Moody joined Drury Lane in 1759, and that year the novice playwright John Townley gifted him a bespoke role: the black servant Kingston in *High Life below Stairs*. [18] Servants among the audiences were outraged, as David Worrall has shown, by the way Townley seemed to degrade them,[19] and this very outrage made *High Life below Stairs* popular. Moody’s Kingston was not just part of a beloved stage staple (Fig *), but a character in a favourite comedy for domestic theatrics.

In 1768 Bickerstaff will have been well aware of Moody’s Kingston, and Moody’s popularity since 1764 in ballad opera. So to create *The Padlock* Bickerstaff, known as ‘the Dramatick Cobbler’, pieced together Moody’s role of Kingston, his line in ballad opera, Dibdin’s compositions, and a story borrowed from Cervantes and known in English as ‘The Jealous Husband’.[20] Cervantes’ ‘Jealous Husband’ features the ‘Negro Luys’ who longs to make music. To quote Cervantes in translation, the Negro ‘hugged close in his Bosom’ his cittern ‘such and so great was the Affection … he bare to Musick’.[21] In writing the words of Mungo’s airs Bickerstaff invested Mungo with this same passion.

But though the role of Mungo had been intended for Moody, Dibdin had written music too difficult for Moody to sing – probably intentionally. Dibdin was a singer-actor as well as a composer, and when Moody in rehearsal proved unequal to the task, Dibdin alone could step in and rescue the production.[22] Having co-opted London’s favourite black stage character, Dibdin scored a hit on two counts, as author and performer. Within this historical context, we can perhaps hear in Mungo’s song how Jamaican speech, Moody’s character of

Kingston, and Bickertaff's and Dibdin's talent were mingled. The Mungo of 'Mungo here, mungo der' is to my ear cousin to Mozart's Figaro – a stage type from commedia dell'arte – who asserts his power musically, through break-neck speeds, athletic vocalism and daring shifts, for instance from major to minor, and from English to Italian song idioms (audio). In such patter-based song, the composer follows the sounds of a 'dialect'. For Mungo's second number, Bickerstaff picked out Cervantes's central motif: the black servant's love of music. Dibdin, in his youthful grace, seems to have heightened Mungo's declarations through stage action (Fig *). In his second song 'Let me, when my heart a sinking' Mungo recalls the sonorities that move him: 'the sweet guittar', 'the string', 'the merry flute', the 'cymbalo' and 'tymbalo'. Although emanating from a playhouse band, these sonorities belong also to African instruments, and are conjured in Dibdin's musical gestures (audio and slide).

That eighteenth-century British stage music often strengthened propaganda for colonialism should not deafen us to sounds on stage that arose from black communities, or to views shared by writers and audiences. Knowing production details can sometimes complicate what on the page may seem to be a story of naked prejudice only. For instance, by making Morano hang in *Polly*, Gay *may* have been silencing his black pirate character, but mostly I think he was cashing in on celebrity gossip: the star Lavinia Fenton in the title role had just become the Duke of Bolton's lover, so Gay needed Polly to be free to accept a prince's marriage proposal in the final scene. As for *The Padlock* and Mungo, both were offspring of the Irishman's Moody's popularity in the character of Kingston.

The sounds of stage works can suggest stories other than the plot: that the black man of letters Ignatius Sancho printed his music, and not his letters, highlights this potential. Born on a slave ship, educated in London, enslaved then freed, Sancho composed minuets, polite song and some lovely English country dance tunes, one of which he titled 'Mungo's dance' (Fig audio). Mungo meant 'slave' in English, but in the 1770s it meant also a 'person of

privilege';[23] and today Mungu is the Swahili word for 'God'. British music-making was a public activity to which members of black communities contributed. Sharing the perspectives and knowledge of our respective disciplines, we can better explore how this happened.

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[1] History of Morris Dance

[2] 'Marrano, a term applied to forcibly Christianized Jews and Moors of medieval and early modern Spain, especially those who only pretended to convert'. 'Dramatis Personae', Polly, OUP, p. 201.

[3] General History, pp. 213-14

[4] Air 46 'We've cheated the Parson, pp. 133-34 just before battle against the English and Native Indians.

[5] General History, pp. ***; Polly,

[6] Polly, p. 143-44;

[7] Dianne Dugaw, Deep Play Dianne Dugaw shows, are metaphors for shifts in power relations.

[8] Jenny Diver was one of several aliases of Mary Young, who engineered her thefts by staging public scenes – falling ill, needing assistance, wearing fake arms to hide her pickpocketing motions – to steal rings, purses, watches and the like. CUP London book; http://www.capitalpunishmentuk.org/diver.html

[9] Act II, scene 3, air 30, Polly, pp. 117–18. The common tune title is that of its source play Thomas D'Urfey's *The Virtuous Wife* (1679); Thomas Farmer may have composed it. The song was also known by its first line, Sawney was tall and of noble race'.

[10] Bacchus m'a dit. Its source is not known. Act II, scene 7, Air 38.

[11] Polly

[12] Dibdin, Life, vol. 1, p. 70; cited in Dramatic cobbler, p. 154

[13] 'John Moody' ODNB

[14] Erroll Hill, The Jamaican Stage, 1655-1900: Profile of a Colonial Theatre, p 21.

[15] Ibid. His company included David Douglass who take over management from him. The Hallam family, who had formed a company London Company of Comedians, led by Lewis Hallam that toured urban east coast urban colonial centres (New York, Philidalphia, Boston). The Hallams went to Kingston in 1755 to join forces with Douglass. Hallam had two children by his first wife, Sarah, a young Jamaican girl he married when he was about eighteen (in or before 1758). seems to have appeared on stage only once, separated from her husband at some time around 1763. Perhaps as early as 1770, but surely by 1775, she was running a dancing-school in Williamsburg. Lewis and Sarah's son Mirvan (whose date of birth is unknown) became an actor and played in his father's company in 1793

[16] Ibid. His company included David Douglass who take over management from him. The Hallam family, who had formed a company London Company of Comedians, led by Lewis Hallam that toured urban east coast urban colonial centres (New York, Philidalphia, Boston). The Hallams went to Kingston in 1755 to join forces with Douglass. Hallam had two children by his first wife, Sarah, a young Jamaican girl he married when he was about eighteen (in or before 1758). seems to have appeared on stage only once, separated from her husband at some time around 1763. Perhaps as early as 1770, but surely by 1775, she was running a dancing-school in Williamsburg. Lewis and Sarah's son Mirvan (whose date of birth is unknown) became an actor and played in his father's company in 1793

[17] M. Kelly, Reminiscences, 2nd edn, 2 vols. (1826); repr., R. Fiske, ed. (1975) , 199; cited in ODNB

[18] "Keeping Place": Servants, Theater and Sociability in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Britain

[19] David Worral;. Harlequin Empire: Race, Ethnicity and the Drama of the Popular Enlightenment (2015), 30-35. Worrall's account of servants' reaction – riots in playhouses in London, Bristol and Edinburgh, Oliver Gray's pamphlet, and the comedy's subsequent popularity as patrician class's private theatricals, in English country houses and in the Governor's garden in Madras 1788 as a benefit for orphaned girls, and performed by army officers and white women

[20] Bickerstaff's biographer wrongly identifies the English translation that he used. Bickerstaff identifies this translation in his introduction: it was Moses Mendez's revised translation of 1743, and not that of ** in 1720. Tasch **

[21]

[22] This wasn't just naked ambition; it was professional survival. The young Dibdin had flubbed his composer's debut, and first collaboration with the mighty Bickerstaff – Bickerstaff had three major hits behind him by 1768 – in the failed *Love in a City*.

[23] OED