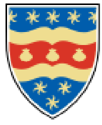

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Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Business

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“We were amused by an itinerant singing-man”: Print, Writing, and Orality in Mungo Park’s Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa

A Sood

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Sood, A

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"We were amused by an itinerant *singing-man*": Print, Writing, and Orality in Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*

Introduction

On his journey back to the coast after reaching the River Niger at "Segu"[1], Mungo Park finds himself destitute, starving, and writing *saphies* to survive. As Park puts it, saphies are "prayers or rather sentences, from the Koran, which the Mahomedan priests write on scraps of paper", considered by "simple natives" to "possess very extraordinary virtues"[2]. Arriving at the market town of "Koolikorro", Park finds food and lodging with a "Bambarran"[3] man in exchange for writing a saphie. The man, according to Park, possessed a "superstitious confidence", immediately fetching "his walha, or writing-board" to protect him from "wicked men" (221). Park continues:

> The proposal was of too great consequence to me to be refused. I therefore wrote the board full, from top to bottom, on both sides; and my landlord, to be certain of having the whole force of the charm, washed the writing from the board into a calabash with a little water, and having said a few prayers over it, drank this powerful draught; after which, lest a single word should escape, he licked the board until it was quite dry. (221)

The "Bambarran" man's actions, his bodily absorption of Park's written text, does not draw further comment from our narrator. However, the act is latently delegitimized through the suggestion of his "superstitious" nature, as well as Park's preceding comment that "natives…consider the art of writing as bordering on magic" (92). Here, Park's narrative restraint eschews outright moral judgement in favour of a critical relativism that remains anchored in European legitimacy. He creates a microcosmic "Great Divide"[4] between narrator and "native", exerting a form of

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[1] This refers to modern-day Ségou, in south-central Mali.

[2] Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* [1799], ed. Kate Ferguson Marsters (Durham, 2000), 92. Subsequent references will appear in the text. For discussion of saphies in more specific relation to Park and racial politics, see Scott Juengel, "Mungo Park's Artifical Skin; Or, the Year the White Man Passed", *The Eighteenth Century* 47 no. 2 (2006): 19-38, 30.

[3] I use the spellings "Koolikorro" and "Bambarran" as they appear in Park's text. Modern anglophone spelling is "Koulikoro", while "Bamana" or "Bambara" is now generally favoured to "Bambarra".

[4] For an informed discussion of "Great Divide" theories specifically in relation to orality and West African literary cultures, see Jack Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge, 1987), 123-196.

superiority that fails to acknowledge the complex synthesis of Islamic and Mande cultures evident through the man's actions.[5] However, one consequence of Park's strategic objectivism—what Mary Louise Pratt calls his "anti-conquest"[6]— is that it allows for multiple possibilities of critical inquiry and recovery.[7] In reconsidering the actions of the "Bambarran" man, for example, we might venture to identify a Platonic-idealist position of writing as "non-truth", whereby it sows "forgetfulness in the soul" and turns us "toward the inanimate and toward nonknowledge".[8] By swallowing the text, and licking his "walha" dry, the "Bambarran" substitutes the mnemonic device for a living memory. That is, he forsakes "prosthesis" (writing) for the "organ" (speech), returning the text to body so that knowledge might actively be reanimated again.[9]

However, this form of analysis is to subordinate the representation of an indigenous subject to Western modes of theoretical discourse and Greek philosophy, highlighting a recurrent problem that arises when scholars attempt to reclaim indigenous agency and knowledge from within the colonial archive and texts. Specifically, there is often a desire to legitimize subjects through Western ways of knowing, which in turn reinforces colonial epistemologies. This brings to mind Evelyn Araluen Corr's critique in "The Limits of Literary Theory", where she powerfully argues that theory is "ill-equipped to recognize or reconcile the priority of indigenous contexts and knowledges'.[10] The task of recognition and recovery, then, is complex. Is it possible to disrupt Eurocentric norms of objectivity without reverting back to Western epistemologies/theory? How should non-indigenous and/or settler scholars avoid misunderstanding—indeed misappropriating—indigenous knowledges whilst acknowledging them? And what methods might be useful in facing these challenges?

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[5] For further description of "Koranic Writing Boards" see https://africa.si.edu/collections/objects/14345/koranic-writing-board;jsessionid=7CBE6752C2E5BE664B154192EF920C50 [accessed 06.09.21]

[6] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* [1992], 2nd edn. (New York, 2008), 27-67. Pratt's hugely influential term refers to a trope in European travel writing in which the narrator claims innocence while consolidating hegemonic control. The "seeing-man", in this case Park, is the protagonist of the anti-conquest.

[7] Pratt contrasts the "plausible worlds of African agency and experience" offered by Park with later [Victorian] travel narratives which are void of African agency and experience altogether"(82).

[8] Taken from Derrida's critique of the *Phaedrus,* "Plato's Pharmacy", in *Dissemination,* 105.

[9] As Derrida notes in *Dissemination:* "What Plato is attacking in sophistics, therefore, is not simply recourse to memory but, within such recourse, the substitution of the mnemonic device for live memory, of the prosthesis for the organ; the perversion that consists of replacing a limb by a thing, here, substituting the passive, mechanical "by-heart" for the active reanimation of knowledge, for its reproduction in the present.", 108.

[10] Evelyn Araluen Corr, "The Limits if Literary Theory and the Possibilities of Storywork for Aboriginal Literature in Australia" in Jo-ann Archibald Q'um Xiiem, Jenny Bol Jun Lee-Morgan and Jason De Santolo eds. *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork As Methodology* (London, 2019), 189.

This article is a contribution to the study and ongoing contestation over indigenous knowledges in the colonial archive and decolonial methods within the field of eighteenth-century studies. It offers some possibilities for the critical recovery of indigenous knowledges within a colonial text, but also underlines problems, failures, and limitations along the way. As Katherine Binhammer has recently highlighted, the "colonizing temporality" of eighteenth-century studies has tended to privilege archival research on orality rather than "groundedness within living communities and cultures"; a fact that inherently makes any claims of "decolonial" problematic.[11] For this reason, this paper—relying as it does on the early *printed* work of indigenous West African scholars as well as contemporary anthropologists—does not make any claims for groundbreaking decolonial method. Rather, it invites reflection on the ongoing problems and possibilities of incorporating and indeed locating non-Eurocentric knowledges from *within* colonial archives and texts. Drawing on Lynette Russell's methodological approach towards accessing "silenced" indigenous "history and understandings", my focus is not on indigenous knowledge *per se* but rather "western or colonial knowledge about Indigenous people and their cultures."[12] Russell addresses aboriginal texts (or rather texts about aboriginal subjects) in Australian archives in an attempt to better acknowledge different knowledge systems, celebrate their ontological incommensurability, and work towards making them "at least comprehensible and of equal value".[13] This paper seeks a similar goal—drawing on critical indigenous theories— only in the field of Romantic literary criticism. While Critical Indigenous theories have predominantly emerged from the settler colonial contexts of Australia, New Zealand, and North America, they also tend to be globally orientated in terms of framing systems of colonial oppression and epistemological violence in relational terms.[14] It is only recently, however, that scholars working on West Africa (and other non-settler regions of the Global South) have engaged with these methods, with much work yet to be undertaken in literary studies.[15] Consequently, this paper also

[11] Katherine Binhammer, "Is the Eighteenth Century a Colonizing Temporality?" *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 33, No. 2 (2021), 199-204.
[12] Lynette Russell, "Indigenous Knowledge and Archives: Accessing Hidden History and Understandings", *Australian Academic & Research Libraries* 36, no. 2 (2005), 161.
[13] Ibid., 170.
[14] See Aileen Moreton-Robinson ed. *Critical Indigenous Studies Engagements in First World Locations - Critical Issues in Indigenous Studies* (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2016).
[15] Recent work across the Environmental Humanities, Agriculture, Politics, and Law make the case for the mainstreaming of indigenous African knowledges. See for example Chika Ezeanya-Esibou, *Indigenous Knowledge and Education in Africa* (Springer Singapore, 2019); and Shalini Puri and Debra A. Castillo eds., *Theorizing*

experiments with, and tests the limits of, "global indigenous" or "trans-indigenous" frameworks that, perhaps paradoxically, might also risk reaffirming the universalising tendencies of much globally-orientated scholarship.[16]

Like Russell's investigations, my own inquiry engages with a text in which indigenous people were the object (and subject) of the gaze of colonial authorities, and in which indigenous knowledge and perspectives were ideologically mediated. My particular focus is on representations of writing, print, and orality in Park's *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* [1799], a travel narrative which abounds in descriptions of "jilla keas", "singing-men" and other examples of West African literary cultures (written and oral). These representations are inherently problematic given Park's mission and resulting publication were integral to British colonial expansion in West Africa. In 1788, Joseph Banks formed the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa, also known as the "African Association", and it was under the patronage of Banks that Park set out to map the course of the Niger and determine economic opportunity. As Pratt has established, Park and the "African Association" were well aware of the expansionist implications of publishing such a meticulously-crafted adventure narrative.[17] However, this does not detract from, but rather complicates, the multiple and atypically-detailed depictions of Mande literary cultures.[18] Thomas A. Hale remarks, for example, that Park understood "more clearly than his predecessors the importance of griots in the societies which he travels", further claiming that he "was the first [European writing about griots] to discern a difference between the *jeli*, what we know as a griot from the central Mande area, and the *fune*, often called Islamic praise-singers or griots".[19]

In the Part I of this essay, I aim to demonstrate how we might bear witness to "profound, powerful, and complex articulations of indigenous being"[20] by locating indigenous knowledge in

Fieldwork In The Humanities: Methods, Reflections, and Approaches to the Global South (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

[16] For more on relational "trans-indigenous" frameworks see Chadwick Allen, *Trans-Indigenous Methodologies for Global Literary Studies* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 2012).

[17] Pratt, 27-67.

[18] I refer here to both oral and written cultural productions under the umbrella term "West African Literatures". See Stephanie Newell's 'a note on terminology' in Stephanie Newell, *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading* (Oxford, 2006), 22-23.

[19] Thomas A. Hale, *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1998), 97.

[20] Sium and Ritskes, 1.

Park's text as a form of "epistemic resistance".[21] Njoki Wane uses this term to describe her engagement with "transformative ways of knowing within the Western academy—a place that has had no space for African indigenous knowledges and a space that has actively worked to marginalize and degrade these ways of knowing."[22] My analysis demonstrates how Park's representations of West African writing and orality can both engage and disrupt Euro-centric ways of seeing, as demonstrated by my opening example of the "Bambarran" man. This leads me to consider orality in the context of non-European ways of thinking about language, demonstrating the merits of embracing a critical lineage which lies outside the bounds of Eurocentric thought and the Western academy. The section finishes by addressing a significant moment in Park's narrative relating to the transcription of West African song that both engages and problematizes Pratt's formulation of "autoethnographic expression". In Part II of this essay, I go on to offer a possible reason for Park's detailed engagement with West African oral cultures by engaging with wider contextual debates about the "death of orality" and "primitivism" in Romantic-period Scotland. In this section, I connect Park's treatment of Mande griots or "singing-men" to Scottish Romanticism's extensive engagement with oral culture, highlighting the significance of Park's friendship with Walter Scott, and suggesting that he shared the novelist's Romantic interest in oral culture.

As Sium and Ritskes summarise, any attempt to decolonize literary studies requires us "to both deconstruct colonial ways of coming to know, as well as construct alternatives"[23], and this essay attempts to participate in both of these objectives, whilst acknowledging the complexities and contradictions of "recovery" along the way.

I. Beyond Imperial Eyes: Mande Conceptions of Language in Park's *Travels*

Let us return, in the first instance, to the "Bambarran" man's bodily absorption of text in an attempt to better integrate non-European knowledges, and glimpse ways of seeing beyond "imperial eyes". In order to do so, I would like to touch upon the concept of *Nyama*, specifically as it relates to

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[21] Njoki Wane, "[Re]Claiming my Indigenous knowledge: Challenges, resistance, and opportunities", *Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education and Society* 2, No. 1 (2013), 94.
[22] Ibid., 96.
[23] Sium and Ritskes, 8.

language and identity in Mande society. It is my contention that considering *Nyama*, and tracing its lineage, can help us to locate "complex articulations" of "indigenous being" and thought in Park's text, pointing us towards a decolonial manner of reading which Njoki Wane terms "epistemic resistance".[24] However, it is also worth noting that this this mode of reading offers as many problems as it does possibilities. Namely, a firm grasp of the ontological and teleological implications of Mande oral cultures and associated terms remains difficult to grasp for "western" scholars, particularly without extensive relationship-building as many anthropologists and indigenous scholars have pointed out.[25] What follows, then, is more a provocation to highlight the possibility for expanding the scope of Romantic and Eighteenth-Century Studies, celebrating "ontological incommensurability", and working towards making different knowledge systems "at least comprehensible and of equal value".[26] It is hoped this process might l invite further reflection on method, practice, and how future collaboration might enrich this area of study.

The term *Nyama* dervies from the *Nyamakalaw*— a professional class of artists and other occupationally defined specialists among the Mande-speaking peoples of West Africa including griots, blacksmiths, and leatherworkers.[27] In their essay "Etymologies of Nyamakala", Charles S. Bird, Martha B. Kendall and Kalilou Tera map multiple definitions of the term, noting that:

> Etymologies of nyamakala, whether collected from native speakers or scholarly sources, generally divide the word into two putative "constituents": *nyama* and *kala*…In a typical example, *nyama* is held to mean "natural force" and *kala* is held to mean "stick", "twig", or "straw", and, by extension, "the handle of a tool", as in *dabakala,* "hoe handle". The combinatorial justification proceeds by means of the following reasoning: people who know how to deal with this force of nature—who know how to handle *nyama*, as one would handle a tool—are *nyama*-handlers. Bards, leatherworkers, and blacksmiths handle *nyama*; hence they are called *nyamakalaw*[28]

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[24] Njoki Wane, "[Re]Claiming my Indigenous knowledge: Challenges, resistance, and opportunities", *Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education and Society* 2*,* No. 1 (2013), 94.

[25] For an overview see Barbara G. Hoffman, "Secrets and Lies: Context, Meaning, and Agency in Mande", *Cahiers d'études africaines* 38, No. 149 (1998), 85-102.

[26] Ibid., 170.

[27] "Introduction" in David C. Conrad and Barbara E. Frank eds. *Status and Identity in West Africa: Nyamakalaw of Mande* (Indiana, 1995), 1.

[28] Charles S. Bird, Martha B. Kendall and Kalilou Tera, "Etymologies of Nyamakala" in *Status and Identity in West Africa*, 28.

The idea that bards or griots (*jali)* have a tool—orality—which is infused with *Nyama* is important to consider, particularly since the concept has often been overlooked in major Western studies of print and orality. However, it is admittedly difficult to discuss *Nyama* in this context without subordinating it to Greek metaphysics. As Christopher Wise notes, generic definitions have often taken precedence, whereby critics usually resort to Plato and Aristotle. Wise's intervention is to propose that *Nyama* might be construed as a force generative of these ideas and more, stating that while the "griot must learn the secret of occult power and knowledge of *nyama*" it does not necessarily imply Cartesian mastery, but rather a psyche—upon which the logos necessarily depends." [29] Although attempting to veer from a strictly Western critical lineage, Wise's conception of *Nyama* appears to evoke the anti-humanism of post-structuralist theory in its assertion of the psyche as "blowing wind before it come mind". [30] Moreover, the idea that *Nyama* (and in the Griot's case we might say specifically language) can "destroy those who wield it" also brings to mind Derrida's notion of writing as a *pharmakon*—"which acts as both remedy and poison"[31]. This is a particularly relevant allusion since the *Nyamakala* have historically been associated with tasks involving poison, including the "poisoning of arrow tips"; *as well* as being known as "masters" of medicine and language.[32] Dominique Zahan, for example, describes griots as being able to both "gift" and "derange" [33] through language and the recital of *balemani*— which is a narrative which traces the genealogy of a person, animal or plant.

As previously stated, the point of these comparisons is not to stake a claim for the "modernity" or theoretical depth of pre-Platonic, Mande thought, but rather to untangle the knots of Park's representations of orality and in doing so offer a fresh reading. When considering the "Bambarran" man's bodily absorption of text, for example, we can veer from subordinating the incident entirely to Greek philosphy and work to include considerations of *Nyama*. For the *Nyamakala*, there is no world, no ideas, which are not first a matter of bodily spirit and thus the "Bambarran" man returns the text *inside* the blood-filled body, or to use Wise's words the "blood-filled receptacle".

[29] Christopher Wise, "Nyama and Heka: African Concepts of the Word", *Comparative Literature Studie*s 43, No. 1-2 (2006), 19.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Derrida, 70.
[32] Wise, 27.
[33] Dominique Zahan, *La Dialectique du verbe chez les Bambara* (Paris, 1963) 141; See also Barbara G. Hoffman, "Power, Structure, and Mande jeliw" in David C. Conrad and Barbara E. Frank, ed. *Status and Identity in West Africa: Nyamakalaw of Mande* (Indiana, 1995), 40.

This reading takes on further resonances when considering *Nyama* in relation to bodily fluids. Charles Monteil calls *Nyama* “a fluid common to all nature”[34] while Youssouf Cissé describes it as meaning life, spirit, or endowed with animated spirit— “a flux that obeys the will of the soul”[35]. In another etymology, Bokar N’Diaye writes that it means manure, filth, or feces—the world’s energy and material, returned to the body to be regurgitated again.[36] The concept of *Nyama* is also, then, an “occult materialism of the body”[37], and so it seems less surprising that the “Bambarran” man swallows text to vitalize its power.

This context also provides insurgent ways of reading other parts of Park’s text, such as when the “religious opinions of the negroes” are addressed. In describing the conclusion of a “short prayer” which is recited at new moon, Park describes how the “pagan natives…spit upon their hands, and rub them over their faces”, before reducing the act to Christian analogy: “This seems to be nearly the same ceremony which prevailed among the heathens in the days of Job”.[38] However, by incorporating a different (and indeed previously repressed) knowledge system or critical lineage, an alternative reading is made possible, particularly when considering how the saliva of the *Nyamakala* is believed to possess curative properties because it is infused with *Nyama*.

Similarly, Park’s description of how “all the natives of this part of Africa consider the “art of writing as bordering on magic” (92) is also worth reconsidering in relation to both *Nyama*, and the Egyptian conception of *Heka* to which it is related. According to Park, whether “Bushreen” or “Kafir”[Muslim or Pagan], it is not in the “doctrines” of prophets but rather “in the arts of the magician that…confidence is placed.” The observation at once reifies a “native” infatuation with the written word but also suggests a primitive inability to conceptualise it in rational or intellectual terms. Similar to the scenario with the “Bambarran” man, Park refrains from outright moral or intellectual judgement, but his oppositional treatment of “magic” and rationality—in relation to the written word—once again reflects a hierarchical relativism.[39]

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[34] Charles Monteil*, Les Bambara du Ségou et du Kaarta* (Paris, 1924) 121. .
[35] Youssouf Cissé, “Notes sur les sociétés de chasseurs Malinké,” *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 34, No. 2 (1964) 193.
[36] Bokar N’Diaye, Les castes au Mali (Bamako, 1970), 14.
[37] Wise, 32.
[38] Park, Ch. XI
[39] A similar juxtaposition between “magic” and rationality occurs when Park explains his compass to his “native” captor: “Ali now looked at the compass with redoubled amazement; turned it round and round repeatedly; but observing that it always pointed the same way, he took it up with great caution, and returned it to me, manifesting that he thought there was something of magic in it, and that he was afraid of keeping so dangerous an instrument in his possession” (151).

True to Wane's idea of "epistemic resistance", however, we might disrupt this reductive relativism and incorporate wider knowledge systems. For example, Bird, Kendall, and Tera recount an experience in which a Malian *jail-muso* (female griot) stated that a defining characteristic of the *Nyamakala* is the ability to manifest *majigi*, the Mande word for "magic". The Egyptian word *Heka* is the etymological precursor to the Greek *mageia*, or magic, and it [*Heka*] signifies "magic power, divine creative energy [...] vital potential, [and] mysterious efficacy." In terms of the etymology of *Heka* itself, Wise reminds us that in Egyptian theology, "the creator god Ammon-Ra creates all other gods by an act of speech, or the breath of this god brings forth the universe" while Ammon-Ra's oldest son is believed to be created by virtue of his [*Heka*] or "magic".[40] In its associations with breath, the body, and the spoken word as a magical fluid voided from God, the Mande concept of *Nyama* is in much closer dialogue with the Egyptian *Heka* than any Greek conceptions of language. Thus, while Park's descriptions of "natives" who see language, and specifically writing, as "bordering on magic" might well have been intended as strategically reductive, or at best a Romantic by-product of "primitive" fascination, we can in fact trace a rich critical lineage which speaks to those conceptions in a manner that disrupts a conventional Western or Euro-centric reading.

Ironically, the idea of writing as *bordering* on magic—not quite speech, nor breath or magical bodily fluid—is rather appropriate in this Sahelian context. There is, for the *Nyamakala* at least, no objective universe for the written word to reflect, since it already saturates the realm of the ontological; or in base terms, writing lacks the magical properties which speech inherently possesses. Of course, it is highly doubtful that Park intended this linguistic allusion, but that is besides the point of a decolonial untangling of narrative knots.

To close this section, I will turn to address another significant moment in Park's narrative that engages with but also problematizes Pratt's formulation of "autoethnographic expression" in relation to print and West African orality. Having set off for a "distant village" outside of Sego, a "weary and dejected" Park is welcomed by the "great hospitality of a negro woman" (188) and the "female part of her family" who, despite their astonishment at his presence, resume their task of "spinning cotton" into a "great part of the night" (196):

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[40] Wise, 21.

> They lighted their labour by songs, one of which was composed extempore; for I myself was the subject of it. It was sung by one of the young women, the rest joining in a sort of chorus. The air was sweet and plaintive, and the words, literally translated, were these.—"The winds roared, and the rains fell.—The poor white man, faint and weary, came and sat under our tree.—He has no mother to bring him milk; no milk to grind his corn. *Chorus*. Let us pity the white man; no mother has he, &c. &.c". Trifling as this recital may appear to the reader, to a person in my situation, the circumstance was affecting in the highest degree. (196-7).

Sometime between Park's departure from Africa and the publication of his narrative, fragments of this "translation" were acquired and rewritten by the Whig political organizer, socialite, and activist Georgina Cavendish, the Duchess of Devonshire (1757-1806). A distant cousin of Charles James Fox (1749-1806), Cavendish was an ardent supporter of Whig politics, advocating for liberty against tyranny, women's rights, and renowned for hosting politically radical salons.[41] Titled "A Negro Song. From Mr. Park's Travels", the Duchess' adaptation was set to music by Italian composer G. G. Ferrari and appeared as a "Postscript" to the first edition of Park's *Travels*. Introducing the song, Park explains how the Duchess thought "so highly of this simple and unpremeditated effusion, as to make a version of it with her own pen" , and further describes how the "plaintive simplicity of the original is preserved and "improved" (196). With overtones of feminist identification ("And ah, no wife, or mother's care") (3) and a Romantic vogue for primitivism ("But ever in his heart will bear/Remembrance of the Negro's care") (11-12), the song adheres to the conventions of Romantic-era abolitionist songs, and has also been described as one of the first "translations of the traditional West African practice of turning event into oral history, on the spot, as it happens".[42]

By way of "epistemic resistance", I will close by interrogating the notion of this song as an "unpremeditated effusion", and in doing so problematize the idea that its transcription into print was an act of "preservation". In the first instance, it is worth noting that the women described by Park are weavers, or *fina,* situated just outside "Sego, the capital of Bambarra"; and so we can

[41] Indeed, her political astuteness and charismatic influence in the campaign of Fox provoked much outrage among her contemporaries, as evident in the outpouring of pamphlets, essays, and caricatures that ridiculed the Duchess's supposed improprieties. See Amelia Rauser, " The Butcher-Kissing Duchess of Devonshire: Between Caricature and Allegory in 1784", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* Vol. 36, No. 1 (2002): 23-46.

[42] Marsters introduction to *Travels*, 2

almost certainly infer that they are part of the *Nyamakala*. Importantly, it also worth noting that the content of West African oral epics, though partially "fixed" in broad narrative features, can vary enormously. Scholarship in the area generally concurs that the oral form avoids stasis as it continually evolves, depending on the speaker, time, or situation. Jack Goody notes:

> Such variants to my mind should not be regarded as art of a definitive cycle, for that exists only when inventiveness has stopped and the epic has been circumscribed in text, but rather as part of an expanding universe around a narrative theme.[43]

In this view, the printing of "A Negro Song. From Mr. Park's Travels" does not *preserve* anything, but rather circumscribes, stifles, and repudiate the song's "expanding universe". Moreover, the idea of the women singing a primitive, "unpremeditated effusion" can also be unpacked through greater attention to the lineage and narrative threads of West African oral epics, as well as the diversity of contexts and forms in which they are reproduced. Where Park demonstrates a Romantic enthusiasm for a song which is apparently "composed extempore", this is a failure to consider the oral form as an organic process which adapts and evolves around him. We can trace, for example, threads between Park's representation of the song and the Monzon epic cycle of the Bambara. In the episode *Da Monzon of Ségou*, a "female master-singer" warns a weary stranger, Thiéma, against rebelling against Da Monzon, the King of Ségou. Upon visiting Ségou, Thiéma is subsequently imprisoned, with his ultimate fate remaining a mystery: "Only the Niger River, is said, knows the full story".[44] Similarly, Park arrives at the woman's lodgings at risk of imprisonment after being warned not to stay at "Segu" [Ségou] by the King of Bambarra's chief advisor: "I must not presume to cross the river without the king's permission. He therefore advised me to lodge at a distant village" (195). Here, the traditional oral form is not unaffected, nor erased, but rather *in dialogue* with this European stranger, the written word, and colonial imposition more broadly. Encountering Park, the women live out the stories of the ancestors in ways that sustain, resist, and create anew. In this way, indigenous peoples "resist colonial erasure" in the very face of it, even *within* this colonial text.[45]

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[43] Jack Goody, Myth, Ritual, and the Oral (Cambridge University Press, 20212), 10.
[44] Daniel P. Biebuyck, "The African Heroic Epic", *Journal of the Folklore Institute* Vol 13, No. 1 (1976), 9.
[45] Sium and Ritskes, 8.

I want to conclude this section by briefly considering this incident in relation to Pratt's conception of autoethnography" or "autoethnographic expression". In her highly influential study *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Pratt employs these terms to refer to "instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer's terms".[46] For Pratt, autoethnographic texts "differ from what are thought of as "authentic" or autochthonous forms of self-representation" and usually involve "partly collaborating with appropriating the idioms of the conquerer…merging or infiltrating them to varying degrees with indigenous modes".[47] Autoethnographic expression, Pratt suggests, is a widespread phenomena of the contact zone, and is "important in unravelling the histories of imperial subjugation".[48] There is much work to be done on how colonial and postcolonial literary productions in West Africa both reacted against and adhered to the conventions of European Romanticism in a manner that might be deemed "autoethnographic expression".

However, here, I want to destabilize the term, or at the very least point out s how it was not only the colonized (or soon-to-be colonized) who appropriated idioms as a form of self-expression. In the incident described above, Park, in what might be considered an inverse form of "autoethnographic expression", appropriates the idioms of a rich epic tradition, and uses them to ideologically mediate the superiority of his own position. He collaborates with the oral tradition, engages with its form, and infiltrates it into a more familiar mode by printing the ballad.

Crucially, however, the printed version is described as "improved", and any formal, literary, or idiomatic debt is erased or reduced to being an act of "preservation". In acknowledging this "inverse autoethnography", we can help to redress the balance of knowledge systems, forms, and indeed begin the work of "epistemic resistance" within close reading practices.

II. Colonial Knowing: Park and The Politics of Romantic Orality

In this section, I would like to offer a possible reason for Park's detailed engagement with West African oral cultures by engaging with wider contextual debates about the "death of orality" and

[46] Pratt, 9.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.

"primitivism" in Romantic-period Scotland. Park's *Travels* has caught the attention of Romanticists in recent years, partly due to the shift in focus from the canonical "Bix Six" poets to a wider range of forms, texts, and ideas.[49] Furthermore, Romanticism's long-overlooked interrelations with British imperial culture has led scholars such as Nigel Leask, Saree Makdiski, Alan Richardson, Sonia Hofkosh, and more recently Nikki Hessell and Manu Samriti Chander to highlight, in different ways, how both the period and critical term [Romanticism] must be seen as inseparably or dialectically related to the global culture of colonialism and empire building.[50] With specific regards to *Travels*, Tim Fulford and Debbie Lee have suggested it "fed the imagination" of Romantic writers, helping to nourish "the creative self on a diet of imperialism".[51] Elsewhere, Elizabeth Bohls outlines how Park's "Romantic Exploration" is mediated by "the politics of the British slave trade debate"[52], and Ashton Nichols puts forth how "his [Park's] travelogues helped to shape a powerful Romantic discourse that offers Western ideological assumptions in the guise of geographical objectivity."[53] Following this work, I also wish to situate *Travels* as a Romantic text, but further suggest that placing it within a specific body of Scottish Romanticism helps us to understand its atypically detailed engagement with oral cultures. Moreover, I suggest that the Scottish Romantic context serves a useful caution against approaching orality as an endangered relic of cultural "authenticity", which is important to note when considering precolonial West African cultures and knowledges in the latter half of this essay.[54]

One consequence of the shift towards a broader, more inclusive Romanticism has been the emergence of Scottish Romantic Studies as a sub-field, with work by Murray Pittock, Leith Davis, Ian Duncan, Janet Sorenson, Katie Trumpener, Dafydd Moore, Elizabeth A. Bohls, and most recently Gerard Lee McKeever mapping out distinctly Scottish conceptions of Romantic culture,

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[49] See for example The Bigger Six Collective, "Coda: From Coteries to Collectives*", Symbiosis: Transatlantic Literary & Cultural Relations* 23, no.1 (2019), 139-140.

[50]Allan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh, ed. *Romanticism, Race, And Imperial Culture, 1780-1834* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1996), 'introduction', 5. See also Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* (Cambridge, 1992); Saree Makdisi, *Making England Western: Occidentalism, Race, and Imperial Culture* (Chicago, 2014); Nikki Hessell, *Romantic Literature and The Colonised World: Lessons from Indigenous Translations* (Basingtoke and New York, 2018); and Manu Samriti Chander*, Brown Romantics: Poetry and Nationalism in the Global Nineteenth Century* (Lewisburg PA, 2017).

[51] Tim Fulford and Debbie Lee, "Mental Travelers: Joseph Banks, Mungo Park, and the Romantic Imagination", *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 24, no. 2 (2002), 113.

[52] Elizabeth Bohls, "Romantic Exploration and Atlantic Slavery: Mungo Park's Coffle", *Studies in Romanticism* 55, no. 3 (2016), 365.

[53] Ashton Nichols, "Mumbo Jumbo: Mungo Park and the Rhetoric of Romantic Africa", in Richardson and Hofkosh, ed. *Romanticism, Race, And Imperial Culture, 1780-1834*, 94.

[54] See Newell, 59.

and critiquing the "anglocentric underpinnings"[55] of mainstream Romantic studies. The case for considering distinctive national or even "Regional Romanticisms" is complex, ongoing and beyond the scope of this article. [56] For the purpose of approaching orality in Park's text, it is more important to highlight three issues which, according to Bohls, are essential to understanding Scottish Romantic writing: the politics of language, the role of orality, and the antiquarian activity aiming to fix oral literature in print. As Bohls summarises:

> Language in its oral form, spoken or sung as folk tales or ballads, took on special significance for Scottish Romanticism. Eighteenth-century Scotland combined a highly literate population, due to its strong system of parish schools and flourishing universities, with a rich oral culture in Scots and Gaelic. The project of capturing oral heritage in written form garnered widespread interest among Romantic intellectuals. [57]

By evoking Scottish orality in print, contemporaries of Park, such as Burns and Scott, not only challenged the dominance of English letters but also consolidated (or "imagined" in Benedict Anderson's terms) an "authentic" sense of Scottish national identity within post-1745 Britain.[58] However, these literary constructions of orality were complicated by those in Scotland who sought to benefit from Britain's imperial opportunities and needed to shake off the "primitive" associations of its feudal past.[59] As Penny Fielding notes, Scotland simultaneously began to advertise itself "as an unusually literate nation…[whose citizens] may also be useful in running British interests abroad."[60] A 1784 petition for the relief of Parish Schoolmasters, for example,

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[55] Ian Duncan, Leith Davis, and Janet Sorenson, "Introduction", in Ian Duncan, Leith Davis, and Janet Sorenson ed., *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2004), 2.
[56] See for example Dafydd Moore, Devolving Romanticism: Nation, Region and the Case of Devon and Cornwall", *Literature Compass* 5, no.5 (2008): 949-963; and Gerard Lee McKeever's British Academy-funded project *Regional Romanticism: Dumfriesshire and Galloway, 1770-1830* - https://regionalromanticism.glasgow.ac.uk/ [accessed 01.05.20].
[57] Elizabeth A. Bohls, *Romantic Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh, 2013), 95.
[58] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [1983], 2nd edn. (New York, 1991). See also Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, 1997). As Trumpener notes, the symbolic power of bards and oral traditions helped to define national identity in Britain's peripheries (Scotland, Ireland, and Wales) at a time when it was under threat from "internal colonialism" (8).
[59] See Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689—c.1830* (Cambridge, 1993).
[60] Penny Fielding, *Writing and Orality: Nationality, Culture, and Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction* (Oxford, 1996), 9.

describes the "common people of North Britain" as possessing "a degree of education, both in morals and in letters, unknown to any other subjects of the same rank in the British empire".[61] In this view, literacy was transforming the lower classes of Scotland and could combine with their "hardy and resolute" qualities to produce citizens who would "both command and obey" as servants of the British Empire.[62]

It is my contention that Park himself was caught between the trappings of imperial opportunity and fears over the "death of orality" in Scotland, particularly since he was, according to his 1815 biographer John Whishaw, "very familiar with the songs of his own country, and could repeat the principal of them by heart".[63] While literacy afforded Park's rise from humble Selkirk beginnings to highly-educated associate of Joseph Banks, such examples of social mobility also triggered concern among poets, writers, and antiquarians. For example, the Scottish ballad collector Willliam Motherwell suggested that the combined agencies of industrialization and literacy might even eradicate oral culture, describing how "the changes which…the manners and habits of our peasantry and laboring classes, with whom song has been cherished, have undergone, are inmimical to its further preservation.'[64] This familiar view among ballad collectors and theorists of the late eighteenth century has been traced by Paula McDowell, who persuasively argues how the "modern secular notion of oral tradition" began to emerge in the period, contributing to knowledge hierarchies between forms.[65]

Tensions and interrelationships between literacy, "improvement", imperial culture and orality were thus inherently bound up in Park's text.[66] That is, his exoticized representations of orality participated in debates closer to home, and further analysis of Whishaw's biography helps to reveal this. Significantly, Whishaw placed great emphasis on Scottish education, dedicating a special appendix to the topic in the same manner that James Currie did for Robert Burns in his

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[61] Anon., "Memorial for the Parish-schoolmasters in Scotland", *Scots Magazine* 46 (1784), 4.

[62] Ibid.

[63] John Whishaw, *The journal of a mission to the interior of Africa, in the year 1805. By Mungo Park. Together with other documents, official and private, relating to the same mission. To which is prefixed an account of the life of Mr. Park.* (London, 1815), fn105.

[64] William Motherwell, *Minstrelsy: Ancient and Modern* (Glasgow, 1827), 102.

[65] Paula McDowell, *The Invention of the Oral: Print Commerce and Fugitive Voices in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 30.

[66] Recent work has discussed the concept of "improvement" as the animating principle behind Scotland's post-1707 project of modernization, a narrative both shaped and reflected in the literary sphere. See Alex Benchimol and Gerard Lee McKeever ed., *Cultures of Improvement in Scottish Romanticism, 1707-1840* (New York and London, 2018).

highly influential "Life of Burns"(which was clearly used as a biographical blueprint). [67] Referencing Currie, w describes how the "system of public instruction" established in Scotland had exerted a "remarkable" change in "national character". According to their biographers, it was this remarkable change that enabled the likes of Burns (from Mount Oliphant Farm, Ayrshire) and Park (from Foulshiels Farm, Selkirkshire) to successfully rise above their tenant-farm stations.[68] Whishaw was also keen to stress how Park's brother-in-law, James Dickson, "improved" his circumstances considerably; starting out as a humble gardener but going on to co-found the Linneaean Society of Britain where he became acquainted with Joseph Banks.[69]

However, Whishaw also alludes to Park's fascination for Scottish orality and traditionary culture. Most significantly, Whishaw describes a friendship that formed between Park and Walter Scott in 1804, not long after the latter had published *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*—an anthology which conjured Scottish orality in print through its evocation of balladeers, minstrels, and medieval street-criers such as "Mussel-mou'd Charlie".[70] According to Whishaw, a "sincere and cordial" friendship formed between Park and Scott, due to their congenial "tastes and habits":

> The Border Minstrelsy, both of ancient and modern times, was the object of his [Park's] patriotic admiration; and he cherished a fond recollection of the tales, traditions, and ballads, by which the whole of that classic region of Scotland, and more especially the banks of the Yarrow, his native stream, are so remarkably distinguished.[71]

If Scott's antiquarian ballad collecting exemplified a Romantic nostalgia for primitive Scottish orality, Park, it seems, turned to the colonial horizon in search of oral "authenticity".[72] Thus, his

[67] James Currie, ed. *The Works of Robert Burns; With an Account of His Life, and a Criticism of His Writings*, 4 vols. (Liverpool, 1800).
[68] Whishaw directly cites Currie in his appendix, and both stress the role of Scottish education on "improving" their biographical subjects. Currie's biography is notoriously problematic for its fabrications, but also reveals tensions between literacy, social mobility and imperial expansion. For further commentary on this see Arun Sood, *Robert Burns and The United States of America: Poetry, Print, and Memory* (London and New York, 2018), 60-72.
[69] It was Dickson who introduced Park to Banks. This aspect of natural history is, of course bound up with colonial endeavor and "exploration". See for example Kay Anderson, "Science and the Savage: The Linnean Society of New South Wales, 1874-1900", *Cultural Geographies* 5, no.2: 125-143.
[70] For further analysis see Leith Davis and Maureen N. McLane, "Orality and Public Poetry" in Ian Brown ed. *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature: Enlightenment, Britain and Empire (1707-1918)* (Edinburgh, 2006), 125-133.
[71] Whishaw, 101.
[72] This phenomenon was also apparent among poets, as discussed in James Mulholland, *Sounding Imperial: Poetic Voice and the Politics of Empire, 1730–1820* (Baltimore, 2013)

representations of orality were implicitly rendered “primitive”, if also “original and passionate” in the sense of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.[73] At one point, Park describes how the “poets of Africa” are “in great measure exempted from the neglect and indigence which, in more polished countries, commonly attend the votaries of the Muses (250-251).” Like Scotland’s ancient bards—Park even refers to “*Jill kea*” as “itinerant bards” (251)— the “noblest part” of the “singing men’s” work was to “recite the historical events of their country, hence, in war, they accompany soldiers to the field…to awaken in them a spirit of glorious emulation (252).” Here, Park’s description of griots is mediated by his search for an “authenticity” that was lamentably lost in his (“more polished”) homeland, but remained available in the present, “primitive” state of West Africa. Therefore, his adherence to the protocols that emerged within Scottish Romantic writing reveals the subaltern subjectivity of his representations, as well as explaining their frequency.

Interesting as this may be, it does not get us much closer to answering whether or not it is possible to reclaim indigenous agency and knowledge from *within* these representations. However, the Scottish Romantic context does serve a useful caution as we approach the question. Specifically, we should hesitate before redressing instances of orality in Park’s text as if they were an endangered species whose peculiar qualities have been obscured by the mechanisms of print, colonialism, “modernity”, or Western scholarship in general. It remains important to avoid Romantic trappings of “authenticity” when considering how to incorporate different knowledges into literary analyses, particularly since it has become increasingly popular to defend or “preserve” non-Western cultures and world views. Malidoma Patrice Somé notes the powerful irony of this scholarly trend:

> But while the West is engaged in a great debate about what it means to preserve culture, the indigenous world is aware that it has already lost the battle. It seems obvious to me that as soon as one culture begins to talk about preservation, it means that it has already turned the other culture into an endangered species…the culture’s own reality has already been superseded by the “fashionable” modernity.[74]

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[73] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, trans. John H. Moran (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1966)

[74] Malidoma Patrice Somé, *Of Water And The Spirit: Ritual, Magic, And Initiation In The Life of An African Shaman* (New York, 1994), 3-4.

Arif Dirlik goes further in reminding us that [postcolonial] societies "once theoretically condemned to premodernity or tradition" have gone on to "make their own claims on modernity on the bases of those very traditions, as filtered through experiences of colonialism.[75] My own approach seeks to avoid claims of "authenticity", or "modernity" based on "authenticity", when discussing non-European knowledge systems in relation to orality. Colonial imposition cannot be undone, and it is therefore important to draw distinctions between the work of reclamation and the impossibility of complete return. Wane suggests that reclamation, rather than a return to some precolonial past or search for "modernity", should focus on "integrating non-Western knowledges into the academy".[76] This study on writing, print, and orality has demonstrates—by travelling fluidly between Deconstruction, Mande conceptions of language, and indigenous praxis—that different forms of knowledge must co-exist if we are to take steps towards decolonizing literary scholarship.

Conclusion

In her 2013 article "[Re]Claiming my Indigenous knowledge: Challenges, resistance, and opportunities", Njoki Wane rhetorically concludes: "Is there space for Indigenous knowledges in the academy?" While Wane answers with an uncompromising yes, she acknowledges that a profound challenge lies in getting the academy to "recognise and validate the legitimacy of indigenous knowledges"[77] as central to the future of research, pedagogy, and the delivery of education. As this article has demonstrated, the incorporation of different forms of knowledge, and continuing deconstruction of knowledge hierarchies is important for the study of Romantic-period literary productions. If "Re/claiming multiple ways of knowing" can be a "transformative force for social change", then our preconceived notions of literary periods, movements, texts, and their defining characteristics will continue to evolve, as demonstrated by much of the Bigger Six-led scholarship in the field of Romantic literary criticism.

However the hard work remains to be done. If we are truly to incorporate wider knowledge systems—*particularly* around orality—then the next step is to go beyond recognition and

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[75] Arif Dirlik, "Our Ways of knowing – and what to do about them" in Arif Dirlik ed. *Pedagogies of the global: Knowledge in the human interest* (Boulder, 2006), 3.
[76] Wane, 102.
[77] Wane, 102.

academic validation by experimenting with different research methodologies that go beyond printed materials. The colonial unpicking of Eighteenth-century texts can be significantly enriched through consultation with indigenous communities, and better involving them in teaching, scholarship, and the academy more broadly. This is not only important for the future health of the discipline, but also, as Dawn Morgan notes, has large implications for living indigenous people in that

> we risk reproducing the myths of their subordination, destruction, or disappearance despite evidence of their continuous presence in our communities and classrooms, and our inability or lack of interest in attracting them to advanced studies in the field.[78]

Contestations over how to access indigenous knowledges within the colonial archive are ongoing. But there is little doubt that dominant narratives are being ruptured, and wider knowledges consulted. With regards to print and orality in the Romantic period, I hope that this case study offers some small contribution towards deconstructing colonial ways of coming to know, as well as constructing alternatives that might offer fruitful avenues of decolonial inquiry in the field, particularly through highlighting the need for future collaboration, and the related legitimizing of different ways of knowing.

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[78] Dawn Morgan, "Indigenous Perspectives in Eighteen-Century Literature", *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 33, No. 2 (2021), 211.