

Toya Mary Okonkwo

Dr. Mona Narain

Black Atlantic

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Tigers and Imoinda

“Through the centuries the tiger has been used as a symbol of man’s deepest fears, desires, and aspirations. It is universally feared as a powerful predator and man-eater, yet admired for its beauty, courage, and strength” (Sunquist 344). When reading Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, I was immediately drawn to the idea of the tigers as metaphoric interpretations of Imoinda and Oroonoko. Upon some preliminary reflection and further research into existing scholarship on this fascinating novella, connecting the tigers with the main heroine and hero seems to be an avenue worth exploration. I also saw this animal as a connective tissue to link the black Atlantic with Indian oceanways. Tigers (*Panthera tigris*) are not indigenous to Suriname or the Americas. In fact, they are only found in countries that comprise present day Asia. As such, it would stand to reason that the tigers of *Oroonoko* have either been transported from their natural habitats into a new world, or these creature have been misnamed by the invaders who seek to conquer the land with their known knowledge and intelligence of the world. Either of these explanations would lend support to the idea that these tigers can be read at metaphors for the title character and his love.

In *Wild Cats of the World*, Mel and Fiona Sunquist, tell us that the *Panthera tigris*, beyond its symbolic importance in global histories, is a big cat of the wild and is distinguished most obviously by its size, the largest of living felids, and stripes, as opposed to the spotted markings of other big cats (345). The tiger has an indigenous ecology “across Asia from eastern Turkey and the Caspian Sea... to Manchuria and the Sea of Okhotsk” (346). Author of *The Big Cats and Their Fossil Relatives*, Alan Turner, draws a similar map for the natural distribution of tigers. “The tiger has a historical distribution that stretched from the Caspian Sea in the west through India and southeastern Asia (including Indonesia) to northern China and Siberia” (73). Thus, the tigers of *Oroonoko* require further explanation and research to fully understand what Behn means when she says, “Sometimes we wou’d go surprising, and in search of

young tigers in their dens, watching when the old ones went forth to forage for prey” (Behn 46). My research thus far has not unearthed any relevant information that tigers were transported through Atlantic ocean-ways. There were incidents of tigers in England at royal courts, and it is also well-documented that the British engaged in the Indian tradition of tiger-hunting. Thus, a direct line of the British knowing about tigers (*Panthera tigris*) is provable, and we must conclude that Behn’s “tigers” are actually another big cat that is indigenous to Suriname, likely a jaguar or ocelot. That Behn, a British author, is using the misnomer *tiger* (an animal only found in Asias, but known to the British) to describe the big cats that are being hunted in her Surinamese setting can offer some proof of the British as unlikely carriers of culture connections between two vast waterways that are forged through the institution of human trafficking and slavery.

In his article, “Asia Out of Place: The Aesthetics of Incorruptibility in Behn's Oroonoko,” Chi-ming Yang seeks to excavate the Asian influences and aspects of Oroonoko. He plainly states, “I argue that the text's awareness of a global system of commercial and cultural exchange between East and West is encoded in two material practices it features—lacquerwork, or “japanning,” and royal tiger hunts—each of which invokes in condensed form the world of the East Indies. In *Oroonoko*, both are indigenous to a forest typically read as a space of encounter between the three worlds of Europe, Africa, and America” (237). Yang also points out that tigers are not indigenous to Suriname and gives brief overview of the tigers’ existence in the novella as “a proxy figure for Oroonoko and Imoinda” (247). My understanding of the Asian aesthetic align quite closely with Yang’s primary argument, and I can see a third explanation for Behn’s “tigers” with his idea that they are *mythical*. “The tiger, at once real and mythical, marks and tests the boundary between the arable land and the forest, the human and the animal” (247). His reading, perhaps, offers readers a link to see parts of *Oroonoko* with a magical realism influence. With this in mind, I would differ with Yang and find his mythical tigers to be very real in the form of Oroonoko and Imoinda —transported creatures who have had to adopt to a new environment, have attempted to adapt, have developed their own habitat in the natural environment, but who are hunted and bothered at every turn by the people who cargo-ed them across ocean-ways, involuntarily ripped from their home, and re-named to fit the understanding of the Western knowledge. If they are indeed mythical, then this can open lines of commentary on the realism of the entire novel and what Behn’s narrator

(an unidentified white woman) intended by telling this story of mythical and epic (a heroic man, long voyages around the globe, and courtly love) proportions.

The article, “‘Frightful Spectacles of a Mangled King’: Aphra Behn's ‘Oroonoko’ and Narration through Theater” by Marta Figlerowicz offers readers an understanding of the second tiger that Oroonoko kills as a foreshadowing of his own death. “When, on rare occasions, our perspective on Oroonoko is narrowed down to his direct interactions with the narrator, his actions take on an allegorical meaning, laden with the narrator's knowledge of his future. This allows her to read into whatever he does foreshadowings of his fate; most evidently, the pierced, scarred heart of the tiger he kills becomes a prophecy of his painful death” (329). I would extend the foreshadowing that Figlerowicz mentions to also include Imoinda. As the first tiger that Oroonoko slays in the novel is a female trying to protect her cubs from the immoral and overreaching claws of the human hunters, Imoinda is also trying to protect her unborn child from the immoral clutches of the slave institution and in the end she dies at the hand of Oroonoko. However, I also wonder how far the argument could be extended to see the tiger deaths as reverse metaphors for Oroonoko and Imoinda. As Imoinda is given such a small voice in this story, the readers know that Oroonoko is nearly obsessed with protecting his unborn child from the clutches of slavery. So, it could be that he is more closely represented in the slaying of the first tiger. Dying at the cost of protecting the young. And Imoinda is the last tiger. The one with a heart that has been shot full of bullets at least seven times, but she still perseveres and is almost impossible to kill, except at the hand of her beloved. Imoinda, while not an epic hero, suffers many of the same trials as Oroonoko and has to develop a resilience in her heart and body to withstand the onslaught of unimaginable horror that slavery has brought upon her being and body.

Works Cited

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