

Recasting Africanness: Ignatius Sancho and the Question of Identity

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Abstract

The prejudice against blacks, a designation which in eighteenth-century British context describes all non-white people, including people from India, Africa and the Caribbean, is what I tag Africanness. Africanness describes the supposed inferiority of black races. It was the predominant ideology in eighteenth-century Britain that blacks are immoral and unrefined people who lack mental abilities. In *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African*, Ignatius Sancho, demonstrates his education, his Christianity, his morality, and many other traits that contradict what most Europeans assumed “Negurs” to be. This essay discusses Sancho’s demonstration of refinement and intelligence as factors that strategically situate him as a man who defines, belies and redefines Africanness to his society, setting the stage for the anti-racism discourse that followed his death.

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Recasting Africanness: Ignatius Sancho and the Question of Identity

Critics of Ignatius Sancho's *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African* agree on one thing: he is an African man of letters. Africans in eighteenth-century Britain, even up to the twentieth century, were not just black people born in Africa: they are people, as Vincent Carretta notes, whose designation is based on the dark color of their skin (anyone that is not "white"), and they include Indians and people of Mediterranean descent (*Letters* 191). Sancho considers them people in a "state of ignorance and bondage" (96). In *The Monthly Review: or, Literary Journal* (December 1783), Ralph Griffiths described the belief of "half-informed philosophers, and superficial investigators of human nature, that *Nēgers*, as they are vulgarly called, are inferior to any white nation in mental abilities" (347). The prejudice against "blacks" in eighteenth-century Britain is what I tag "Africanness." Africanness describes the supposed inferiority of "black" races. It was the predominant ideology in eighteenth-century Britain that blacks are immoral and unrefined people who lack mental abilities. In *Letters*, Sancho demonstrates his education, his Christianity, his morality, and many other traits that contradict what most Europeans assumed "Negurs" (128) to be. This he is able to do by positioning himself as an observing outsider, "a lodger" (231), a moralist "judging the practice of "your country" —that is, Britain (188), even though the country was Sancho's as well since he had lived there all his life. Through his observer and moralist role, Sancho is able to demonstrate that he is not "Savage" (188) or any of the other characteristics assumed to apply to his race. This, in my opinion, is what situates Sancho as a man on a mission to recast Africanness. This essay argues Sancho's *Letters* focus on a black man's revelation and re-presentation of blacks in eighteenth-century Britain—the lowest and most segregated stratum of British society.

The problematics of reading *Letters* as a black man's rebuttal of racial prejudice and slavery are in situating the intention of the author in a work that has been greatly influenced by, at least, the editor. *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African* (1782) is a posthumously

published collection of the correspondences of Ignatius Sancho, collected and edited by Frances Crew, with an introduction and biography by Joseph Jekyll. Crew and Jekyll were eighteenth-century British Abolitionists whose main aim was to see to the abolition of the slave trade. Crew states that “Her motives for laying them [*Letters*] before the publick were, the desire of shewing that an untutored African may possess abilities equal to an European” (*Letters* 47). In other words, Crew has edited Sancho’s *Letters*, as an evidence of the intellectual ability of a black man, to serve in the eighteenth-century British debate over the abolition of the slave trade. There is very little, if any, evidence that suggests Sancho’s intention of publishing *Letters* the way it was published. Even though Vincent Carretta in his article, “Three West Indian Writers of the 1780s Revisited and Revised,” has argued that Crew “may have censored some of Sancho’s views” about slavery and racial discrimination in *Letters* (81), the edited text still contains much detail about Sancho’s reactions to salient issues (issues like slavery and racial discrimination, for instance) that concern blacks in eighteenth-century British society. The complication of reading *Letters*, then, is in the near impossible task of distinguishing between what Ignatius Sancho had written originally and what Crew, his editor, censored, replaced, deleted and/or included, especially since only very few of Sancho’s manuscripts have been discovered. The few available have revealed a considerable number of variants between what is in the original manuscripts and what is obtainable in the edited text. Vincent Carretta’s (2015) edition of *Letters* has tried to reconcile some of these variants, but the limited number of manuscripts available leaves much undone in this regard. All quotations from *Letters* in this paper are from Carretta’s Broadview edition (2015). Due to Crew’s interventions, and while it is almost impossible to state Sancho’s exact intention of writing, the frequency and consistency of Sancho’s messages across *Letters* are highly suggestive of his efforts towards recasting Africanness.

Brycchan Carey, in his paper, “‘The Hellish Means of Killing and Kidnapping’: Ignatius Sancho and the Campaign against the ‘Abominable Traffic for Slaves,’” has discussed the possibility of Sancho writing to intentionally participate in the anti-slavery debate of eighteenth century Britain. Carey notes that even though “Sancho could not have joined a formal abolition society,” he may, however, have been conscious of the “incipient abolition movement” of the 1760s and 1770s (82), the period Sancho wrote most of his letters. To Carey, “*Letters* can thus be seen as a sustained work of sentimental rhetoric emerging from the literary tradition of anti-slavery that Sancho clearly knew well, and available as a further and persuasive text in that tradition” (93). While this argument situates Sancho as a man whose period of writing coincides with the time some of the earliest anti-slavery literature in Britain was written, it, however, does not dictate Sancho’s definitive intentions, nor should it, since Sancho died before Crew collected his letters for publication. Carey’s conclusion that *Letters* “offers many personal and political arguments against slavery, and shows some evidence of having been constructed, perhaps by Sancho himself, with those arguments in mind” (93), thus begs further research for such evidence. Sancho’s rhetoric includes his moments of direct criticism of racism and of the slave trade, his distinction between “civilized” and “native,” his stance as an outsider to English society, his determination to honour Christian principles, and his respect for general morality. Some of Sancho’s (or his editor’s) personal and political arguments will be considered in this paper, going beyond Sancho’s outcry against slavery to encompass his rebuff of racial prejudice in eighteenth-century Britain.

One of the ways Sancho speaks to eighteenth-century English society is in exposing the ignorance and hypocrisy behind slavery. Sancho writes Jack Wingrave about the ignorance of his belief in the “treachery and chicanery” (187) of the “Blacks” in Bombay, India—recall that I

have earlier stated that in eighteenth century Britain, being black simply means not being white. “Black,” in this eighteenth-century context, is therefore, a racial classification to describe the non-European people (and their descents, which may include people with mixed ancestry) from the Caribbean, African and Asian colonies of Imperial Britain. Carretta has also noted in *Letters* that “Someone born in India was as likely to be called Black as someone of African descent” (191). Sancho however, calls “Blacks” who live in their homeland, whether in Africa or South India or in the Caribbean, “Natives.” While writing to Jack Wingrave about the hypocrisy of “the practice of your country,” Sancho refers to the “acts of deception—and even wanton cruelty” of the first European settlers in India (188). Sancho reminds Jack Wingrave of the initial observation of “the first christian visitors” that the “Natives” of India were “simple, harmless people” (187). He claims these white explorers and the conniving Kings pushed the “Natives [...] to turn the knavish—and diabolical arts which they too soon imbibed—upon their teachers” (187-8). Sancho (or his editor) also claims that “your country’s conduct [Britain] has been uniformly wicked in the East—West-Indies—and even on the coast of Guinea [modern day West-Africa] (188). He asserts that the “grand objective of English navigators—indeed of all christian navigators—is money—money—money” (188). Discussing slavery in Africa, Sancho accuses the “petty Kings” in Africa of killing and kidnapping men of their own kind for these white British in exchange for “strong liquors [...] and powder—and bad fire arms” (188). Sancho here shares the blame of slavery equally between “English navigators” and the “petty Kings” in Africa. In sharing this blame equally, Sancho denounces the idea that blacks are exclusively, naturally “knavish” and “diabolical.” His argument here calls for whites’ reconsideration of their belief in the uniqueness of “Savage” qualities to Africans.

Sancho's moral words confute the belief of advocates of slavery that, in the words of Vincent Carretta, "blacks were incapable of the moral refinement allegedly displayed solely by whites" (*Letters* 33). This belief, which I tag Africanness, is debunked by the realities of Sancho's existence. Here is Sancho, a black man with intellectual abilities, who not only exhibits traits of moral refinements (Christian virtues) but also encourages others in his society to take on these traits. These traits, what can be called Sancho's Britishness, were all acquired due to Sancho's upbringing in Britain, which may explain Sancho's prejudice in distinguishing between blacks living in Africa, who he probably thinks do not have moral refinements and are influenced by their own culture and traditions, and himself—a black Briton. In distinguishing between blacks living in Africa and those living in Britain, Sancho uses different appellations. While Sancho uses names like "Black" (96), "Blacky" (75), "Negurs" (128), "Moors" (128), "Blackamoor" (206), "Nēgers"/ "Negroes" (333), "African" (262) when referring to blacks in Europe, he refers to blacks born, raised and living in Africa and Asia exclusively as "Natives" (188). Sancho does not have the best words for these "Natives." Each time he refers to them, the words that follow usually convey pity. They are the poor ones with "the tears and blood" (171) who have learnt "treachery and chicanery" among other "vices" (187) from white explorers and traders. They are "the poor ignorant Natives" who have "learnt to turn the knavish—and diabolical arts [...] upon their teachers"—their teachers being Europeans (188). They are "the poor wretched natives—[who] blessed with the most fertile and luxuriant soil—are rendered so much the most miserable for what Providence meant as a blessing" (188). "[T]he horrid cruelty and treachery of the[ir] petty Kings" (188), and the "national madness" of the people is evident in their "hellish means of killing and kidnapping" (188). Sancho calls them "Savages" (188), and any discussion about them "sours" his "blood" (188). Notwithstanding Sancho's personal

prejudice against the “Natives,” the fact that he is able to exhibit his Britishness, in itself denies the Africanness associated with blacks in eighteenth century Britain. Perhaps, the Britishness Sancho exhibits is one of the reasons why Markman Ellis (2001) sees *Letters* as exceptional. Ellis believes that “rather than being an example of assimilation, obsequiousness or mimicry, as many of Sancho’s recent critics have contended, the form and substance of Sancho’s *Letters* repeatedly declare a culturally combative exceptionalism that makes his book both transgressive and radical” (212). *Letters* is transgressive because it shows a black man’s concern for demonstrating his education, his Christianity, and his morality, among many other traits that deny what most Europeans assumed “Negurs” to be. It is also radical because it articulates anti-prejudice and anti-slavery comments, making it, in the words of Carretta, “the first published challenges to slavery and the slave trade by a person of African descent” (*Letters* 32). *Letters* thus transgresses Africanness as the ideology behind slavery and prejudice, and sets Sancho as a champion of its recast.

Sancho’s intentional act of positioning himself as an outsider passing a moral judgement against “your country” (188) is strategic. Sancho, the same man who writes fellow black Briton Charles Lincoln about the latter’s noble “spirit and true courage in defence of our country” (294), is the same man who tells Jack Wingrave and, elsewhere, Meheux about his observation of “the practice” (188) and “malady of your country” (88). He tells Mr. Rush, “I am only a lodger—and hardly that (231). In his letter to Mr. Jack Wingrave, for instance, he writes:

I am sorry to observe that the practice of your country (which as a resident I love—and for its freedom—and for the many blessings I enjoy in it—shall ever have my warmest wishes—prayers—and blessings); I say it is with reluctance, that I must observe your

country's conduct has been uniformly wicked in the East—West-Indies—and even on the coast of Guinea. (188)

Sancho has enjoyed the benevolence of British society, being one of the most successful black British in his time—one who might be expected to have far less cause to talk against the British system. Sancho had lived almost his entire life in England, yet when it comes to passing a critical comment on English society he chooses to be an outsider. His self-positioning as an outsider in Britain is, however, not an indication of his acceptance of his identity as one of the “natives” (188) of Africa. In fact, when he talks about “natives,” he, distancing himself from them, refers to them in the third person perspective— “they,” “simple, harmless people,” “the poor wretched natives,” “a people,” “their national madness,” “Savages” (188). He positions himself as an outsider to both Britain and Africa when he is about to pass a critical comment on British society in order to validate the objectivity of his observation. He may be of African descent but his English upbringing makes him less of a true “Native,” just as his colour makes him less of a true Briton, even though his qualities may prove otherwise. His upbringing, his, religion, his ideas, his education, his lifestyle all culminate in his Britishness, which makes him too English to be a “Native” of Africa, while his colour makes him a racial outsider to British society. He is thus, neither completely here nor there. Rather than a disadvantage, Sancho employs this peculiar quality in the development of his argument. He distances himself from the segregation, killings and slavery— “the uniformly wicked” practices of Englishmen in the East—West-Indies—and even on the coast of Guinea (188), just as he distances himself from the “national madness,” “horrid cruelty and treachery of the petty Kings” in Africa (188). In sharing the blame of the heinous acts in slavery equally between Africans and English explorers, Sancho establishes two things. One, the shared ignorance between the “simple, harmless people” (187) of Africa and the

misinformed or under-informed white Britons like Jack Wingrave who innocently take what they are told about Africanness at face value without much inquiry into the subject. Two, the abilities of all men to turn wicked especially when they yield to the desire for material possessions, like “money” for the British, and “liquor,” “powder” and “fire-arms” for the “Natives” of Africa (188). These two inferences demonstrate to Sancho’s readers that blacks are not naturally savages, as whites’ notion of Africanness suggests, nor are Europeans blameless.

Sancho is concerned with the motives and quality of people’s minds. His concern plays out throughout *Letters* especially when he writes to admonish his recipients. In his letter to Julius Soubise, the Duchess of Queensberry’s servant, dated Oct. 11, 1772, for instance, Sancho advises Soubise to “search into the motive of every glorious action—retrace thine own history—and when you are convinced that they [good white Britons] (like the All-gracious Power they serve) go about in mercy doing good—retire abashed at the number of their virtues—and humbly beg the Almighty to inspire and give you strength to imitate them” (95). He also tells Soubise:

Vice is a coward;—to be truly brave, a man must be truly good; [...] detest a lye—and shun lyars—be above revenge;—if any have taken advantage of your guilt or distress, punish them with forgiveness—and not only so—but, if you can serve them any future time, do it. (98)

Sancho’s advice here is for Soubise to seek to develop himself by focusing on training his mind to be truly good. Sancho’s notion of “truly good” might be unavoidably influenced by the British/Christian ideal he is familiar with as a result of his upbringing in Britain. Notwithstanding, his advice to Soubise demonstrates he values self-development. Sancho wants Soubise to study not just people’s actions but motives as well. He is of the opinion that an

individual's motive will reveal the virtues beyond just the good of the person's action. To Sancho:

the truest worth is that of the mind—the blest rectitude of the heart—the conscience unsullied with guilt—the undaunted noble eye, enriched with innocence, and shinning with social glee—peace dancing in the heart—and health smiling in the face. (73)

For a man/woman to be of a “truest worth,” therefore, he/she would have to develop his/her mind. His position here suggests every act is borne out of a motive, and motive is a thing of the mind. In other words, all actions an individual takes have the possibility of revealing the person's mind. An honourable man/woman is thus one with an honourable mind. Sancho sees slavery and prejudice, what I consider offshoots of Africanness, as revelations of the prejudice of the minds of people who practice them. He writes:

Look round upon the miserable fate of almost all of our unfortunate colour—superadded to ignorance,—see slavery, and the contempt of those very wretches who roll in affluence from our labours superadded to this woeful catalogue. (98)

The “catalogue” Sancho here talks about is the white Britons who are advocates of slavery and prejudicial in their dealings with blacks. Sancho's comments about these advocates suggest he blames these Britons for their prejudice as much as he blames “Natives” for their ignorance. Again, Sancho's notion of ignorance would have been influenced by his British upbringing that denigrates the culture of outsiders. Sharing the blame, however, repudiates these advocates' justification of slavery in Africa on the basis of their opinion on blacks' Africanness.

Similarly, Sancho believes respect should be accorded to not just any man/woman, white or black, but one deserving of such honour. Sancho's belief resonates in his letter to his close friend John Meheux, a clerk in the India Board. To Meheux, Sancho writes:

As to honours, leave it with titles—to knaves—and be content with that of an honest man, “the noblest work of God.” (143)

Sancho's words here suggest that formal honours are like titles given to knaves who don't deserve them, and that Meheux should be content to be an honest man. He emphasizes this by drawing a quotation from Pope's *An Essay on Man* 4:247: “An honest man's the noblest Work of God.” Perhaps Sancho's letter to his friend Jabez Fisher is more revealing of his belief in respecting only individuals with good minds, irrespective of race. He writes to Fisher:

I, who, thank God! Am not bigot—but honour virtue—and the practice of the great moral duties—equally in the turban—or the lawn-sleeves⁴—who think Heaven big enough for all the race of man—and hope to see and mix amongst the whole family of Adam in bliss hereafter—I with these notions (which, perhaps, some may style absurd) look upon the friendly Author—as a being far superior to any great name upon your continent. (165)

Here, Sancho indirectly calls whites who do not respect people of a lower class bigots. He considers their actions as “unchristian” as those who partake in slavery (165). He does not consider them honourable. In fact, he writes about “how very poor the acquisition of wealth and knowledge are—without generosity—feeling—and humanity” (166). An example of a person Sancho regards highly is Phillis Wheatley. To Sancho, Wheatley is the unappreciated “mind animated by Heaven,” “a genius” superior to her slave master (166). Wheatley was an African-American poet and the author of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. In the

eighteenth century, during the debate over the proposed abolition of the African slave trade, her name was as frequently mentioned as that of Sancho as proof that blacks were educable and possessed literary talents (166). Sancho respects Wheatley because she has developed her literary skills despite the circumstances of the slavery she was in. He calls her a “Genius in bondage” (165). Another person Sancho recognizes in this letter is the unnamed author of the book Fisher sent to him. The reason is simple: The “Author” has written about “the unchristian and most diabolical usage of my brother Negroes—the illegality—the horrid wickedness of the traffic—the cruel carnage and depopulation of the human species” (165). Sancho considers this presumably white¹ author “a being far superior to any great name upon your continent” (165) because of his “humane” and “friendly” attitude towards blacks. Sancho’s respect for Wheatley, the Author and Fisher, who is also white, demonstrates two things: first, respect for people should not be based on race; and second, respect for people should not be determined by class—Wheatley was, at this time, a slave, and at least Fisher, if not both of the other two, was a middle-class man. By referring to people of different race, Sancho, again, has shown that the problem is not that blacks do not possess literary abilities, but some whites have refused to see the value in the literary works by blacks like himself and Wheatley, and the virtues they exhibit by writing these works despite their deplorable circumstances. The failure of these whites to acknowledge blacks like Wheatley and Sancho as geniuses is why Sancho sees them as people “without generosity—feeling—and humanity though they are “splendid—titled—learned” (166). Presenting Wheatley as a “genius in bondage,” again, recasts the notion that blacks are not educable or do not possess literary talents—Africanness.

¹ Vincent Carretta, the editor of *Letters*, identifies this “Author” as either Anthony Benezet, a Philadelphia Quaker and abolitionist, or Granville Sharp, a leader of the Abolitionist movement —both of them are white antislavery writers (*Letters* 166).

The irony in Sancho's words is intended to challenge "the enlightened Christian" (188) to live up to the standards of Christian "Religion" by dealing fairly with blacks. His bid, as a Christian black Briton, is to enlighten Jack Wingrave who is supposed to be an "enlightened Christian" (188). He tells Jack Wingrave, "I mentioned these only to guard my friend against being too hasty in condemning the knavery of a people who bad as they may be—possibly — were made worse—by their Christian visitors.—Make human nature thy study—wherever thou residest—whatever the religion—or the complexion—study their hearts.—Simplicity, kindness, and charity be thy guide—with these even Savages will respect you—and God will bless you!" (187-8). His irony here is clear to the recipient. Jack Wingrave, in one of his previous letters to his father, had called "Blacks" "a set of canting, deceitful people, and of whom one must have great caution." In another letter, Jack had said "that the account which Mr. G—gave [...] of the natives [...] is just and true, that they ["blacks" in Bombay] are a set of deceitful people, and have not such a word as Gratitude in their language, neither do they know what it is" (190). Sancho implies that Jack Wingrave is one of the unenlightened white Christians in Britain who misrepresent Africans. Correcting this misrepresentation defines Sancho as a man concerned with recasting Africanness.

Sancho's role in recasting Africanness is evident in his mission to encourage a society guided by Christian values. Jekyll, whose "The Life of Ignatius Sancho" was published in a full edition in 1783, describes Sancho as an African man whose literary works should be read as a literary effort to "combat" the "harsh definition," "vulgar prejudice and popular insult" against his "unhappy race" (52). The "harsh definition," "vulgar prejudice and popular insult" Jekyll refers to here are all consequences of a belief I have earlier defined as Africanness. This belief, for instance, is the ideology behind racist names like "Negurs" (128). Sancho speaks of prejudice

as an inhumane phenomenon, one which is unchristian at the very least. On several occasions in *Letters*, Sancho opens the “window in his breast that the world might see his heart” (98). For instance, he tells popular Anglican minister and prolific author, William Dodd, about:

a noble act of policy, founded on true humanity, to stimulate the endeavours of every individual towards acts of benevolence, and brotherly regard for each other. Actuated by zeal to my prince, and love to my country [...] (167)

In this statement, Sancho maintains true humanity is racially unbiased, and should be the driving principle of every individual, one that should equally influence patriotism. True humanity, to Sancho, is one that does not discriminate between individuals. This point is similar to the one he discusses with banker John Spink. In his letter to Spink dated June 6, 1780, and detailing his account of the Gordon Riots, Sancho says:

I am forced to own, that I am for an universal toleration. Let us convert by our example, and conquer by our meekness and brotherly love! (272)

Sancho’s statement here demonstrates a desire to see segregation abolished, a desire that can only be achieved when people practice Christian teachings on meekness and brotherly love. While the “toleration” Sancho mentions here refers to religious toleration for British Catholics on the occasion of the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots, it is however, not unlikely for Sancho to have appropriated “tolerance” as the answer to all forms of prejudices (religious, racial, etc.). As a solution to racial prejudice, the universal toleration Sancho advocates for will be a social system that will see people of all races live peacefully with each other in mutual respect. In another instance, he tells the ex-slave Julius Soubise, “tread as cautiously as the strictest rectitude can guide ye—yet must you suffer for this—but armed with truth—honesty—and conscious

integrity—you will be sure of the plaudit and countenance of the good” (98). His advice to Soubise here reveals his belief in Christian virtues as the force of true humanity. Truth, honesty and conscious integrity are the Christian virtues Sancho believes will make Soubise a man of honour. For Mrs. H.—a woman Carretta believes might be Mrs. Howard, who was Sancho’s fellow servant while at the Montagu’s household—the Christian virtue that makes her an honoured woman to Sancho is kindness. Sancho tells Howard that “You have a pleasure in doing acts of kindness—I wish from my soul that your example was more generally imitated” (170). From the letter, though without specifics, we know that Howard is being thanked “for repeated favors” to Sancho (170). Sancho is thus extolling the Christian virtue of kindness Howard exhibits through these acts of favour—a virtue he suggests many lack in Britain, hence his wish that Howard’s kindness be “more generally imitated” (170). Elsewhere, he tells Jack Wingrave, the son of Sancho’s friend John Wingrave, the London bookbinder and bookseller:

Make human nature thy study —wherever thou residest —whatever the religion —or the complexion —study their hearts. —Simplicity, kindness, and charity be thy guide —with these even Savages will respect you —and God will bless you! (188)

The Christian virtues Sancho prescribes to Jack Wingrave are simplicity, kindness, and charity. These are virtues he believes will help him appreciate people better—especially black people, about whom Jack Wingrave has written disparaging comments. Sancho’s belief is that an individual who strictly adheres to Christian values will not only be considered honourable in the society but will also be a source of “inspir[ation]” and “strength” (98) for others in the society to do the same. Practicing these Christian values will stop people from performing acts of prejudice against blacks, and encourage them to have respect for every individual, irrespective of race. In this effort to dismantle prejudice, Sancho sets in motion a mission to recast Africanness.

Sancho appropriates verses of the Bible to reinforce his message on the equality of all races. As an evidence of the equality of all races, Sancho, with his allusion to the biblical creation story in Genesis 2, presents Adam as the progenitor of all human beings. Sancho, here, appropriates this biblical account to explain that “the whole family of Adam” includes “all the race of man” (165), and that “Heaven [is] big enough” for all “to see and mix” “in bliss hereafter” (165). Sancho also alludes to the biblical parable in Luke 10:30-37, when he compares the “titled” men in his society to “the Priests and the Levites in sacred writ, [who] passed by—not one good Samaritan amongst them” (166). In the Bible, Jesus used this parable to condemn the discriminatory attitude of Priests and Levites towards others. These people consider themselves holier and, therefore, better than the rest, but in a simple test of compassion, they failed. They failed to help a dying man, leaving him by the road side as they walked past him. Sancho seems to be drawing a parallel between the condemned discriminatory acts of the Priests and Levites, and the racial discrimination of “titled” people in his society—that is, those with wealth and power, an example of which could be “member of each house of parliament” (165). Like the Priests and Levites, these “titled” people, who are supposed to be good Christians, have also failed to have compassion for blacks. Their lack of compassion is instantiated in the “horrid wickedness of the traffic [slavery]” and their “unchristian and most diabolical usage of” blacks (165). By appropriating biblical allusions, Sancho is engaged in redefining blacks as human beings of moral and intellectual sensibilities who are as equally descendants of Adam as whites.

What is more, the letters and notes of some of Sancho’s readers in the eighteenth century testify to the influence of Sancho’s words in recasting Africanness. One man that got the crux of Sancho’s message is Edmund Rack. Rack decided to seek Sancho’s permission to publish some

of his letters “in a collection of *Letters of Friendship*” (335) “on account of the humanity and strong good sense they contain” (335). Rack writes Sancho:

MY WORTHY THOUGH UNKNOWN FRIEND,

NOTWITHSTANDING we have not any personal knowledge of each other, yet I flatter myself thou wilt excuse this address from one who equally loves and reveres a virtuous character, in whatever name, society, or class of men it is found, without distinction. I am fully persuaded that the great God, who made all the nations that dwell upon earth, regards the natives of Africa with equal complacence as those of this or any other country; and that the rewards annexed to virtue will accompany it in all ages and nations, either in this life, or in a future happier world which is to come. (335)

Furthermore, in this letter, Rack tells Sancho:

[...] there is nothing in them [the letters] that can do thee the least discredit: on the contrary, the sentiments they contain do thee great honour, and, if published, may convince some proud Europeans, that the noblest gifts of God, those of the mind, are not confined to any nation or people, but extended to the scorching deserts [uninhabited wilderness, not necessarily dry] of Guinea, as well as the temperate and propitious climes in which we are favoured to dwell. (335)

From this, it is evident Rack fully understands Sancho’s mission to recast Africanness in the minds of “proud Europeans” (335). Rack’s concluding paragraph summarises Sancho’s objective succinctly: “Mercy knows no distinction of colour; nor will the God of mercy make any at the last day” (335). From this excerpt, it is evident Rack understands Sancho’s message on a number

of things: the equality of all races, his celebration of personal Christian virtues, his position on the need for the improvement of each individual's mind, and the misconception that moral and intellectual abilities are exclusive to whites. Rack, noting the possible role publishing Sancho's letters could play in combating racism in eighteenth century Europe, decides to publish these letters in order to convince "proud Europeans" that blacks also possess moral and intellectual abilities, and that some Europeans' belief in the opposite is misguided.

Perhaps, one of the most revealing comment on Sancho's stand against racial discrimination can be deduced from the note of Sancho's friend, William Stevenson. Stevenson, a printer, bookseller, and banker in Norwich, gives us an instance of his experience with Sancho:

I have often witnessed his patient forbearance, when the passing vulgar have given vent to their prejudices against his ebon complexion, his African features, and his corpulent person. One instance, in particular, of his manly resentment, when his feelings were hurt by a person of superior appearance, recalls itself so forcibly to my mind that I cannot forbear mentioning it:

We were walking through Spring-gardens-passage [near Charing Cross], when, a small distance from before us, a young Fashionable said to his companion, loud enough to be heard, "Smoke Othello!" This did not escape my Friend Sancho; who, immediately placing himself across the path, before him, exclaimed with a thundering voice, and a countenance which awed the delinquent, "Aye, Sir, such Othellos you meet with but once in a century," clapping his hand upon his goodly round paunch. "Such Iagos as you, we meet with in every dirty passage. Proceed, Sir!" (359)

In this excerpt, the man's inability to separate the colour of Sancho's skin from the quality of his person is just one of the reasons Sancho calls him "Iago" (359). Iago, the main antagonist in William Shakespeare's *Othello*, shares many character traits with the "vulgar" and "illiberal" people Sancho detests. For instance, the manipulative tendencies of Iago can be compared to those of the "English navigators" who give the "petty Kings" of Africa "liquors [...]—and powder—and bad fire-arms—to furnish them with the hellish means of killing and kidnapping" Africans during the "abominable traffic for slaves" (188). Iago's manipulation is also analogous to the attitudes of the "titled" (166) men Sancho writes about in his letter to Fisher. Sancho's immediate response to this unnamed man, beyond showing his antipathy for racial discrimination, demonstrates his knowledge of Shakespeare—an evidence to the intellectual abilities of a black man. The manner of his response to this man also belies Africanness—whites' notion that blacks are naturally unrefined.

The career of this black Christian writer and his *Letters* can be regarded as the origin of blacks' literary involvement in anti-racism discourse. Apart from being the first black man to write against slavery in Britain, and the first black man to vote in a British election, by writing *Letters*, Sancho also opened up the possibility of blacks writing about oppression and abusive behaviour towards them. Ottobah Cugoana and Olaudah Equiano, for example, soon became famous black Abolitionist writers for their works detailing their experiences as slaves, and condemning slavery. Though many Abolitionists in eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Britain did not regard blacks as equal to whites, they did in general believe in freedom and often even equality of treatment for all people. The equality of all races is, till today, center to the message of all anti-racist movements the world over. *Letters* can thus be regarded as the first reorientation manual of Africanness by an African that demonstrates the education, Christianity,

morality, and observations of his own life. In refuting the notion that intelligence is determined by race, upholding the need for self-improvement of every man in every race, and as illustrated through Sancho's existence as an African man of letters, Sancho's *Letters* recasts the prejudices facing eighteenth-century blacks in Britain.

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