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“Sleeping Volcanoes:” The Production (and Productivity) of Violence  
in Joan Anim-Addo’s *Imoinda, Or She Who Will Lose Her Name*

by

Sarah Elizabeth Bruno

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Lehigh University

April 25, 2013

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2013

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Thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in English.

“Sleeping Volcanoes:” The Production (and Productivity) of Violence in Joan Anim-Addo’s *Imoinda, Or She Who Will Lose Her Name*  
Sarah Elizabeth Bruno

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**Date Approved:** April 25, 2013

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**Thesis Adviser:** Lyndon Dominique

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**Chairperson of Department:** Scott Gordon

## Acknowledgements

This thesis project developed out of a seminar paper that I first wrote in spring 2012, in a course entitled Eighteenth Century: Writing for a Cause. I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to Lyndon Dominique, for espousing the importance of ‘writing for a cause,’ which extends beyond the classroom, for his unflagging help and good spirits, and for encouraging me to continue thinking about the intersections of literature and social justice. Of course, none of this would have been possible without the generous support of the English Department. I will always be grateful to the faculty and to my colleagues for listening to my research concerns and for providing me with invaluable feedback.

Furthermore, I would like to thank Joan Anim-Addo, Marl’Ene Edwin, and Glenn McClure for their generosity, both with their time and resources. I am fortunate to work in a setting in which collaborative efforts, such as theirs, have impacted and enhanced my understanding of my research.

Finally, I am thankful for the love and support of my family and friends—especially Adam, whose love and patience know no bounds.

Thank you, again, to everyone who contributed to my growth and development as a scholar and, more importantly, as a citizen of the world over the course of the past two years.

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## Abstract

This thesis foregrounds the significance of gender and violence in the creolization process within the Caribbean slave system, as depicted in Joan Anim-Addo's libretto, *Imoinda, Or She Who Will Lose Her Name*. Written as a reimagining of Aphra Behn's novella, *Oroonoko*, Anim-Addo's *Imoinda* contends that violence (particularly sexual violence) is an integral component of creolization. Yet, this thesis operates on an understanding of violence in which it signifies a simultaneously destructive and productive event, wherein cultures clash and meld together in order to form a new identity. This thesis further explores the ways that a libretto, as a performative genre, specifically addresses the issue of textual silence that Anim-Addo believes is inherent in Behn's *Oroonoko*. Finally, this thesis closes with a call to readers, in which the audience (like Imoinda's daughter) is charged 'not to forget' neither Imoinda's personal suffering, nor the collective history of her people.

“We sleeping volcanoes; we women...  
when we erupt, rumble  
spit stones of words; pour fires of rage  
then you know we are not stone...  
Then you may know we sleeping volcanoes  
are tender, thoughtful, suffering  
but not endlessly.” (*Imoinda* 3.5.)

Alternatively lauded and lambasted, Aphra Behn’s 1688 novella, *Oroonoko*, nevertheless remains a seminal text, not only for its longevity in academia, but also because of the various adaptations and re-imaginings that it has inspired in the 325 years since its original publication. Though some literary critics<sup>1</sup> have praised Behn for her audacity for creating a text that sympathizes with the plight of its African hero—a struggle that parallels her liminal position as a woman writer in the late seventeenth century—others<sup>2</sup> have criticized Behn for effectually silencing and then murdering Oroonoko’s counterpart, Imoinda. In fact, if one were to analyze the text for references to Imoinda’s actual speeches, then one might find Behn’s novella lacking. Yet, I would argue that Behn allows Imoinda to speak in seemingly more covert, though ultimately resonating, fashions, in which we can view Imoinda’s body (both her physicality and her actions) as text. Viewed through this lens, Imoinda’s corporeality issues its own speeches during pivotal moments in the text, which suggests that Behn does not entirely erase her presence.

Nevertheless, feminist critics, such as Joan Anim-Addo, have bemoaned the absence of a fully-fleshed out, verbalizing Imoinda—one who speaks not only of her own

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<sup>1</sup> Here, I refer to critic Janet Todd, who wrote the introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, in which Todd praises Behn as remarkable dramatist and author, who used her growing acclaim to shed light on issues not typically considered appropriate for a burgeoning female writer.

<sup>2</sup> Specifically, Joan Anim-Addo seeks to fill Imoinda’s textual silence in her libretto, which forms the crux of this thesis.



experiences within the context of colonization and slavery, but who also serves as a surrogate to birth the words of countless black slave women who endured similar trials and tribulations. If we accept the title character as the hero of Behn's *Oroonoko*, where then do we find an Imoinda who truly embodies "the beautiful black Venus to his young Mars" (Behn 16); an Imoinda who tells a story that both speaks to and against Oroonoko's narrative; an Imoinda who embodies what later authors would come to call the creolization of the trans-historical, trans-Atlantic black experience?

The answer to such a question can be found in Joan Anim-Addo's 2003 *Imoinda, Or She Who Will Lose Her Name*, a libretto that Anim-Addo claims tells "another part of the story. It is the story of becoming creolised" ("*Imoinda Birthing*" 77). As indicated, Anim-Addo's Imoinda represents the embodiment of a creolized voice. For Anim-Addo, creolization represents a historically violent, though concurrently productive, process, in which transplanted black individuals were forced to adapt to the complexities of an oppressive system. For the purposes of my argument, I read creolization as a kind of cultural seismic activity, in which the tectonic plates of multiple identities shift into and clash with one another. Even as familiar landscapes (or, to extend my metaphor, customs) are violently obliterated, other, new vistas and opportunities are simultaneously formed during the collision. In this manner, the creolized individual signifies the "sleeping volcano" (*Imoinda* 3.5.) that Anim-Addo evokes in the final scene of her libretto, an image that suggests an explosive potential—the potential to destroy, but also to simultaneously create. Though a "sleeping volcano" may appear to be passive, Anim-Addo makes it clear that the metaphorical volcano is "tender, thoughtful, suffering, but

not endlessly” (*Imoinda* 3.5.)—thus suggesting that dormancy inherently signifies a future eruption.

Though I stress the potentiality of violence in Anim-Addo’s invocation of creolization, earlier authors have focused on the inter-cultural aspect of the term. For instance, according to Edward Brathwaite, creolization refers to a predominantly cultural process, one that is “material, psychological, and spiritual—based upon the stimulus/response of individuals within the society to their [new] environment and to each other” (Ashcroft et al. 58-59). Through the process of cross-cultural interactions, a wholly new identity is formed, carrying with it new social constructs and linguistic patterns that continue to actively reinforce a burgeoning identity. In other words, Brathwaite endows a particular focus on the conflation of identities that occurs when various social and cultural groups meet and exchange new ideas, practices, and so on.

However, before delving into the particulars of how *Imoinda*’s history and the concurrent process of creolization play out in Anim-Addo’s re-imagining of Behn’s text, one must first turn to the original source in order to better appreciate how Anim-Addo’s libretto enters into the on-going conversation of *Imoinda*’s development. More importantly, we must understand how a libretto, as a performative genre, specifically addresses the issue of textual silence that Anim-Addo believes is inherent in Behn’s novella. Though Anim-Addo wishes to rescue *Imoinda* from the textual silence that she embodies in Behn’s novella, in order to resuscitate her for twenty-first century audiences, feminist critic Giovanna Covi<sup>3</sup> espouses the historical importance of Behn’s work. To

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<sup>3</sup> Giovanna Covi and Chiara Pedrotti co-translated Anim-Addo’s *Imoinda* into Italian for the first bi-lingual edition of the text in 2003. Here, I reference Covi’s article, “*Oroonoko*’s Genderization and Creolization: Joan Anim-Addo’s *Imoinda*.”

expand upon Covi's ideas, her work seems to suggest that Behn's text furthers the author's ambition to establish the legitimacy of a female author's voice. Thus, even if we do not encounter a vocalizing Imoinda, we certainly recognize the presence of a very active and vocal Behn, who serves as both the author and narrator of her novella.

### **Silence and Violence in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko***

Covi hails Behn as a revolutionary female author of the late seventeenth century, who willfully overcame the boundaries of both sex and subjection, in order to foreground the struggles of two transposed African slaves; nevertheless, she was unable to fully satisfy Covi's hopes of finding a truly liberated, equally heroic Imoinda. Covi explains that Behn could not simultaneously "give birth to realistic fiction and let Imoinda speak at the same time" (Covi 85); such was the nature of her limitations. Furthermore, given the social constraints under which Behn was working, she would not have been able to speak as openly about the violence—particularly the sexual violence—that many slaves, like Imoinda, endured. Given these restrictions, perhaps one is not surprised that Behn leaves us with an Imoinda who is, in Covi's estimation, "dismissed, effaced, and finally killed" (Covi 85) by the end of the text—a sacrifice that Behn must make in order to preserve her paramount goal of creating realistic fiction in which the audience could sympathize with the plight of the title character and his spouse.

Yet, is Behn's Imoinda really as silent as Anim-Addo and Covi fear she is? Truly, Behn's Imoinda does not render any heroic speeches in *Oroonoko*, as the title character does when stirring other slaves to participate in an ultimately failed rebellion. But I want to suggest that Imoinda's body can serve as a text in Behn's *Oroonoko*. Though she does not verbalize, as Anim-Addo's rendition of Imoinda does, Behn's Imoinda speaks

through manifestations of the suffering body, in both the ritualistic scarification that she embodies and in the mutilated corpse that she comes to represent by the end of the text.

When we first learn of Imoinda, the grieving daughter of a general who gave his life to save Oroonoko in battle, we learn that she is “a beauty that, to describe her, one need say only that she was female to the noble male, the beautiful black Venus to our young Mars, as charming in her person as he, and of delicate virtues” (Behn 16). Behn has, at this moment in the text, already praised Oroonoko’s masculine beauty, which is rooted in his unusually European features, bating his complexion; thus, one would assume that Imoinda is simply the female equivalent to him—beautiful because of her atypically classical features.

And yet, Imoinda, unlike Oroonoko, embodies the ritual scarification that Behn claims is customary among high-ranking individuals within her cultural background. Behn asserts, “Those who are nobly born of that country [the Gold Coast] are so delicately cut and raced all over the fore part of the trunk of their bodies that it looks as if it were jappanned; the works being raised like high point round the edges of the flowers” (Behn 48), thereby likening Imoinda to a beautiful, albeit feeling, object, in which her pain translates into an aesthetic pleasure for the viewer. According to critic Ros Ballaster,<sup>4</sup> “The willingness to undergo self-mutilation, to write suffering on the body as a symbol of heroism [is] a practice [that is] associated from an early stage of the text with the black woman” (Ballaster 292). Yet, I would argue that Imoinda’s scarification has much wider cultural implications, apart from the supposedly heroic acceptance of a

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<sup>4</sup> Here, I reference Ros Ballaster’s chapter in *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, which is entitled “New hystericism: Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*: the body, the text, and the feminist critic.”

physically torturous act. Rather than being a form of self-mutilation, which carries a negative connotation, I see Imoinda's scarification as the aestheticizing of pain. In the process of converting pain into a cultural marker of beauty, there is a certain acceptance of suffering, which becomes localized within the black woman's body. Thus, Behn's Imoinda does articulate a certain awareness of suffering—though in this case, the pain that is literally recorded on her flesh signifies a cultural aesthetic, as opposed to the kind of systematic torture and suffering that Anim-Addo's Imoinda endures via unsolicited sexual violence.

Yet, it is the very threat of sexual violence that ultimately spurs Behn's Oroonoko to suggest a suicide pact with his wife, "grown big as she was" (Behn 65) with child. After Oroonoko's failed rebellion and exemplary punishment, he vows to seek revenge against the colonial officials, chiefly the governor. Accepting only vengeance or death, Oroonoko worries about what would become of Imoinda in the likely event of his untimely demise. Behn expounds, "He considered, if he should do this deed, and die in the attempt or after it, he left his lovely Imoinda a prey, or at best a slave, to the enraged multitude; his great heart could not endure that thought. *Perhaps*, he said, *she may first be ravaged by every brute, exposed to their nasty lusts, and then a shameful death*" (Behn 71). Oroonoko's logic, in this moment, seems to shift first from any physical torture that Imoinda may endure as a repercussion for his actions, to a fear that she will be raped, thus bringing shame upon her, while also tainting his own honor, as it applies to his ability to protect her.

Oroonoko is understandably concerned for his lover's physical well-being, but the larger implication seems to suggest he also has a keen awareness of the sexual property

that Imoinda's reproductive capacity represents. Should Oroonoko die, he then removes what he perceives to be the only barrier that separates Imoinda from the "nasty lusts" of other men within the colonial and slave system—thus threatening her own well-being, as well as the unborn child that she carries. It does not take a great leap of imagination to infer that Oroonoko fears that their child together be supplanted by the bastard child of the governor (or any other man who threatens Imoinda's sexual vulnerability), thereby effectively severing his own lineage, while laying claim to the sexual proprietary rights that he believes should belong exclusively to him.

Thus, Behn briefly presents the threat of sexual violence—a threat that is fully and repeatedly realized in Anim-Addo's text—in order to swiftly dismiss it. Before Oroonoko can even finish conveying his fears for Imoinda, "he found the heroic wife faster pleading for death than he was to propose it when she found his fixed resolution, and, on her knees, besought him not to leave her a prey to his enemies" (Behn 71). Behn references the traditions of her characters' African culture in order to explain the joint suicide pact, for she claims that such wives "have a respect for their husbands equal to what any other people pay a deity, and when a man finds any occasion to quit his wife, if he loves her, she dies by his hand..." (Behn 71)—thus Behn is able to absolve both her own authorial culpability in Imoinda's death by claiming that Oroonoko and Imoinda are enacting their own cultural conceptions of honor and love.

As the two lovers pledge their faith to one another, Oroonoko delivers the "fatal stroke, first cutting her throat, and then severing her yet smiling face from that delicate body, pregnant as it was with the fruits of tenderest love" (Behn 72). Thus, Imoinda's corpse solidifies her transmutation into an *objet d'art*—a beautiful, but stoic, object that

speaks only through its signification and the viewer's interpretation. Having saved his beloved from ravishment and other unspeakable tortures, Oroonoko rationalizes Imoinda's murder as a painful, though necessary, escape. Sadly, despite Oroonoko's attempt to justify his actions, he cannot get the better of his grief. He keeps a constant vigil over Imoinda's "yet smiling face" and dismembered body until the narrator and her cohorts discover him—thereby preventing him from enacting the revenge fantasy that had originally spurred him to murder his wife in the first place. Oroonoko then joins Imoinda via his torturously enacted death, thus drawing both couples' lives and Behn's text to a close.

However, later critics, such as Margaret Ferguson, questioned Behn's intentions in sacrificing the pregnant Imoinda to Oroonoko's (ultimately failed) revenge fantasy—and perhaps, even to her own interests. Ferguson insists that Behn uses the trope of the tragic, star-crossed lovers in order to further her own literary purposes; she suggests that Behn capitalizes upon the death of the lovers as a plot device that ensures her own narrative will outlive even the characters with whom the reader is intended to sympathize. She writes, "In a bizarre twisting of the old trope of book as child, Behn offers her contemporary English readers, and us, too a representation of an economy in which the white woman's book is born, quite starkly, from the death and silencing of black persons, one of them pregnant" (Ferguson 26). Thus, Behn's text serves as a surrogate, or more appropriately, her narrative ensures the continuance of Oroonoko's memory, if not his lineage. Janet Todd's introduction further references criticism in which Behn's sacrifice of Imoinda is necessary to further the author's purposes. To wit, Todd writes, "Imoinda's child will not be born to give his father immortality; instead, that will come from the

narrator's description" (Todd xxxii). Thus, Behn may capitalize upon Imoinda's premature death by allowing Oroonoko's tale to live on through her words.

Yet, in Aspasia Velissariou's criticism,<sup>5</sup> the author sees the death pact and Imoinda's refusal to give birth as two of the only possible sites of resistance within the restrictions of slavery. According to Velissariou, "For Behn, a heroic death might be more preferable to a disposable life" (Velissariou 175). Furthermore, Velissariou suggests that a slave woman's refusal to give birth within the slave system "challenges definitions premising positive action as a principle inherent to agency" (Velissariou 182). In other words, the author indicates that although one normally associates survival against the odds and the decision to reproduce as the only (positive) expressions of agency within the slave system, refusing to continue the cycle can provide another, equally liberating locus of resistance.

Given the range of critical responses to *Oroonoko*, one may be unsure of where to position Behn's standpoint on Imoinda's development as a character. Though Anim-Addo mourns the loss of a vocal Imoinda, who defies the slave system by surviving and ensuring the continuance of her progeny, Velissariou asserts that Imoinda's refusal to participate in the institution of slavery signifies her defiance and agency in choosing her own (aborted) fate. Given this gamut of readings, one must admit that Behn composed an evocative text, whose power continues to resonate three centuries later.

Perhaps, one can only conclude that Behn worked under the given cultural and social limitations that dictated her role as a female author during the late seventeenth century. Though she could not offer later feminist critics the sought-after fully vocalizing

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<sup>5</sup> Namely, I am referencing Velissariou's article, "Vocality, Subjectivity, and Power in *Oroonoko* and Joan Anim-Addo's *Imoinda*."



Imoinda, she presented her readers with an Imoinda whose body speaks through acts of (both muted and graphic) violence, in which blood is substituted for language. Imoinda's ritualistic scarification and later suicide pact speak to a specific cultural position in which both Imoinda and her lover, Oroonoko, are elevated above the status of other slaves within the plantation. Hence, Behn is able to cast them as the quintessential star-crossed lovers, because they are more in line with classical tropes of nobility than the actual everyday violence (including psychological, physical, and sexual violence) that colonial powers enacted against members of the slave community. Though Imoinda and Oroonoko do both meet a graphically violent end, Imoinda's death is consensual, whereas Oroonoko believes that his torturous end is befitting of a dying warrior. In both instances, suffering is caused by the kind of grandiose violence that one can only withstand in the written text—for the protagonists must die so that the author's cause can live, in order to evoke the sympathy of her readers. Thus, Behn's text reads as a tragedy—but it is not primarily the tragedy of violence, per se; it is the tragedy of noble characters who cannot survive the debasement of their social position as slaves within an inherently degrading system.

Nevertheless, one must understand that Behn composed *Oroonoko* at a precarious moment in history, prior to both the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in the British Empire (in 1807) and the eradication of slavery as a whole (in 1833). Sadly, Behn, like her main characters, would not live to see the successful abolition of the trade or the institution; therefore, she cannot know the fate of the thousands of slaves she had sought to represent in her condensed novella. According to Anim-Addo's assessment, "What Behn does not know in 1688 is that we survived. She does not know that Imoinda

survives. The black woman is not silenced and her descendents will subsequently rewrite that ‘shared’ story” (“*Imoinda* Birthing” 80). Behn could not conceive that her cause would be taken up over three-hundred years later, by a black, female playwright from Grenada, who sought to connect Imoinda’s story to both her own transatlantic ancestry, as well as the history of transplanted African-Caribbean peoples as a whole. Thus, Behn could not imagine her Imoinda within a dialogue of creolization, because Behn’s historical position precluded her from realizing what the full implications of the creolizing process would be.

### **Tectonic Shifts: Gender and Creolization in Joan Anim-Addo’s *Imoinda***

If what we have inherited from Behn’s *Oroonoko* is the smiling corpse of a mercifully-slain Imoinda, content in her escape, then what we discover in Anim-Addo’s *Imoinda* is the survival of a black female slave character who epitomizes the many shades of the creolization process, including both the violent collisions of desires and the production of a new identity in the wake of tragedy. Though Behn leaves us with the figure of Imoinda’s seemingly muted body, Anim-Addo re-animates that figure in order to give us an Imoinda who whose back, we are told, “is a bridge” (*Imoinda* 3.5.). Just as the Chorus tells us that “bridges come in different size,/ shape and look but [there] are bridges for all that” (*Imoinda* 3.5.), Imoinda’s position as a conduit is similarly multi-faceted. Her body serves as a channel that connects one generation to the next, but she also bridges the gap between distinct cultures, thus serving as the locus of the creolization.

However, if we, like Brathwaite, define creolization as a predominantly cultural and linguistic development, then we run the risk of overlooking the biological imperative

that fuels the continuance of creolization as an ongoing process. Certainly, Anim-Addo concedes that creolization is, by nature, a (re)productive act, but she forwards an understanding of creolization that specifically focuses upon the genderized aspect of it—particularly with regard to sexual violence, which tends to be viewed as be a sex-specific crime.<sup>6</sup> For Anim-Addo, the implications (and at times, vulnerability) of gender are inherent to the way in which a creolized community develops in the Caribbean. In *Imoinda*, Anim-Addo presents a working knowledge of creolization that appreciates the centrality of the often painful, and at times unwanted, pregnancies and births that allowed an adaptable population to emerge and change, while negotiating the various barriers inherent to the slave system.

Thus, Brathwaite's conception of creolization seems somewhat anesthetized, as it ignores the pivotal role that violence plays within the history of black transnationalism. I have chosen to focus on the physical violence that Anim-Addo centralizes in *Imoinda*, namely the torture enacted upon the slave body, but more specifically, the sexual violence that Imoinda endures and survives—a graphically rendered realization of the sexual violence that Behn hints at in *Oroonoko* only to later dismiss, as her Imoinda dies before any perceived threat can be fulfilled. Yet, Anim-Addo paints *Imoinda* in all of its vivid details, extending her scope to include not only the harsh, lived realities of the Caribbean slave system, but also the hopefulness embodied by those who survived and adapted to a new environment, despite its oppressive proclivities.

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<sup>6</sup> Though, I wish to clarify that sexual violence is a universal crime, which affects a range of people, regardless of sex or gender, according to RAINN, the Rape Abuse & Incest National Network. Further information and statistics about the victims of sexual violence can be found at <http://www.rainn.org/get-information/statistics/sexual-assault-victims>.

When understood within the framework of Anim-Addo's libretto, creolization further helps to explain the manners in which transposed African individuals responded and in some cases adapted to the new experiences associated with Caribbean slave society. Though some—such as Oroonoko—cannot and do not survive the violence often associated with the acculturation process in any version of the text(s), others (Anim-Addo's Imoinda among them) do find a way to survive, against all odds, and thereby become an integral part of the Creole lineage. Imoinda's survival at the end of the libretto is of particular significance not only because she subverts the system under which she lives, but also because she actively chooses to remember the past, while literally birthing a new generation—in fact, the first generation of transplanted African-Caribbean individuals in her lineage. For Imoinda, a creolized identity allows her to remember and re-purpose the customs of her ancestry, while also melding a growing understanding of the Caribbean slave system—a system that entails violence at its very core. Rather than succumb to the violence of slavery and live in a state of perpetual victimhood, Imoinda rises above the circumstances to survive and give birth, thereby embodying a “bridge” between two conflicting, but ultimately conflating, cultures.

### **Creolization: From the Page to the Stage**

Another crucial tenet of creolization, according to Anim-Addo, is the preservation and adaptation of African customs, including other modes of bodily expressions; thus, both singing and dancing play central roles in the evocation and performance of creolization. Anim-Addo writes, “In revising this narrative, it became clear that the celebration was well overdue. I therefore embarked upon a libretto, so that my writer-ly journey led me to an opera, not the most obvious choice, but a space rich in creolising

possibilities including narrative, song and dance” (*Imoinda Birthing* 78). In an interview with Glenn McClure, the libretto’s original composer, McClure noted that many individuals see opera “as a high brow art form” (McClure)—but the beauty of Anim-Addo’s work is that she actively challenges the notion of high art by introducing a historically and socially pivotal conversation into the realm of the opera. McClure adds that the opera represents an “untapped potential for asking big questions” (McClure)—questions, such as the nature of colonial and African-Caribbean interactions, the process of creolization, and the centrality of gender in transatlantic history, literature, and art. Thus, one function of Anim-Addo’s libretto is the re-appropriation of the opera, in order to produce a dynamic space in which the audience, actors, directors, musical composers, choreographers, set designers, costumers, etc. can all participate in an inter-weaving dialogue and interpretation of the social commentary that she presents in her libretto.

Covi further adds that performativity is central to Anim-Addo’s purposes in re-writing both Imoinda’s personal history and the collective history of transposed African-Caribbean people in slavery. Covi writes, “Music is foregrounded and dance is released, clearly not because Anim-Addo aesthetically chose the opera, but because she substantially decided to liberate linguistic and bodily communication from authorial control and let all characters speak” (Covi 87). Covi suggests that Anim-Addo offers us not only a fully vocalizing Imoinda, but also an entire cast who are able to share the pluralities of their history, using a multiplicity of bodily expressions. Not only does Anim-Addo choose a libretto because it enables her to “liberate linguistic and bodily communication,” as stated, but it also lends itself to a collective performativity of individual and shared suffering. Unlike the Greek Chorus, who normally represent a

homogenous voice that echoes either the protagonist's inner struggles or the main thrust of the play, Anim-Addo's Chorus speaks to (and sings of) the tortures that *they* have endured aboard the "nightmare canoe"—their name for the slave ship—as well as within Caribbean slavery. The Chorus further asserts that the spirits of the dead "speak through our bodies" (*Imoinda* 3.5.), via song and dance, which further connects their remembrances of their African ancestry to their transplanted locale.

On a more practical level, Anim-Addo's libretto is open to multiple modes of directorial interpretation, based on its very nature as a performative piece. Once Anim-Addo released her work into the world, various individuals in the theater—including the director, musical composer, choreographer, various designers, etc.—were then able to use her words as a reference point from which they could create the so-called world of the libretto. Thus, Anim-Addo is no longer in control of the piece as its sole author, for any theatrical performance springs from a wealth of influences.

Anim-Addo's work also revolutionizes the genre of the libretto (and by extension, the opera) from a restrictive, purely Euro-centric understanding to a more comprehensive space, pregnant with possibilities. In a 2012 publication, entitled *Blackness in Opera*, editors Naomi Andre, Karen Bryan, and Eric Saylor argue that blackness in the opera is either conflated with minstrelsy—which carries its own racial and cultural connotations—or it automatically associates blackness with a generic conception of 'Otherness.' In the Introduction, the editors elucidate that,

Opera's presentation of the world has always been filtered through the lens of its time. But despite changing ideals about representing 'reality' onstage, and despite increasingly sophisticated and nuanced portrayals of black characters, there still exists the tacit assumption that the presence or portrayal of 'blackness' inherently provides an alternative to traditional (that is, white, European, or both) power

structures, even if a norm for blackness is established within the world of the opera (Andre et al. 7).

To parse the editors' postulation out further, Andre et al. suggest that opera is usually understood within the confines of a binary, in which the standard, white and/ or European power structure is situated at one end of the spectrum, with blackness or a suggestion of Otherness at the opposite end. Thus, even as Eurocentric notions interact with or balk at representations of blackness, these two ideals occur in a dichotomy, which ignores the inter-fluidity and cross-cultural exchanges that white and black interactions have always engendered. Thus, even if blackness or Otherness is ultimately endorsed within the world of the opera, it still exists within a problematic hierarchy that includes two distinct categories, both of which are vying for the superior position.

In contrast, Anim-Addo sees creolization as one venue through which opera can be expanded upon, in order to reflect a more nuanced, inclusive representation of voices and experiences. She espouses a kind of performance that eschews the potentially alienating connotations of high art, in order to create a libretto that focuses on an individual character, namely Imoinda, who simultaneously represents the pluralistic history of her people. More specifically, she wishes to present not merely a counterpart to, but a completion of, Behn's story. According to Anim-Addo, this addition to the text is necessary, because "Behn told *that* story, Imoinda's story (the story of Atlantic slavery), while keeping Imoinda silent throughout" ("*Imoinda Birthing*" 75). Anim-Addo wishes to ameliorate Imoinda's textual silence in a performance space, where a collective audience can interact with and interpret Imoinda's personal voice as well as the (similarly) collective voices of the Creolized people.

## **Trans-historical, Transnational Transactions: From Behn to Anim-Addo**

Anim-Addo is not alone in her assertion; other feminist writers have lamented the loss of a strong, pervasive female voice in Behn's text (as well as later iterations of the Oroonoko-Imoinda narrative). To wit, Ros Ballaster<sup>7</sup> claims that Imoinda essentially becomes "the mute bearer of female suffering" (Ballaster 293-294), a character whose trajectory rests upon her essentialized sex, a sex that suffers. According to Ballaster, Imoinda's presence allows Behn to "project her own hysteria and be left at liberty to write" (Ballaster 293-294), which seems to equate Imoinda with a convenient repository for Behn's unseemly, feminine emotions.

Unquestionably, Anim-Addo's libretto is involved in an important project, by insisting on the centrality of survival and the continuance of one's lineage in order for creolization to take place. However, Anim-Addo by no means suggests that creolization is an easy synthesis of cultures or ideas; in *Imoinda*, it is clear that the creolizing process involves a disruptive and often violent convergence of factors. Unlike Behn's *Oroonoko*, in Anim-Addo's libretto, Oko (her play on Oroonoko) and Imoinda do not experience the romanticized, blissful reunion that Behn awards to her lovers in Surinam. Instead, Anim-Addo focuses on the pain of separation, exploitation, and the lack of agency that typified slavery.

For instance, during Imoinda's seasoning as a house-slave, she falls victim to the Overseer's brutal whims and unabated lust. In Act Three, the Overseer demands that Imoinda disrobe in front of him and don a new frock that he bought for her—the dress, a

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<sup>7</sup> Ros Ballaster's article, "New hystericism: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*: the body, the text, and the feminist critic" explores the connections between Aphra Behn, the female author, and Imoinda, the female subject. Ballaster argues that Behn effectually uses Imoinda as a surrogate for her own 'hysteria,' which enables Behn to focus on her own craft as a writer in a predominantly masculine environment.



further signification of his possession of her person. Indifferent to Imoinda's discomfiture, he pitilessly tells Imoinda, "A man's appetite is all" (*Imoinda* 3.3.), as he pins her against a wall with the intentions of taking advantage of her. The Overseer's choice of words here—his insistence upon the satiation of his own appetites—is central to understanding the psychological violence that Imoinda suffers in tandem with the sexual violence that she likewise endures. The Overseer connects his lust to a rote biological drive, a natural instinct for which men are not expected to take any responsibility. In this equation, Imoinda is likened to a meal, the sacrificial flesh that the Overseer believes he is entitled to consume.

Though a well-timed stone, hurled through the window, thwarts the Overseer from accomplishing his malicious purpose, the audience understands that this threat signifies a perpetual system of cruelty, in which this incident reveals only one instance of violence out of many. Interestingly, this is also the only scene in which the audience witnesses Imoinda at the moment of her victimization. In a subsequent scene, we learn of Imoinda's rape first through both the physical indicator of her pregnancy (in which her body becomes the text, similarly to Aphra Behn's *Imoinda*) and then through her own words. Perhaps Anim-Addo uses the suggestion of violence (rather than the enactment of it) to indicate that some modes of torture cannot be accurately or effectively communicated onstage. Rather, Anim-Addo later places Imoinda in a position in which she is forced to verbally claim the violence committed upon her body—and in that act, she begins to *reclaim* her body and her voice from the dictation of the Caribbean slave system.

In addition to the various acts of violence that Imoinda endures, she and Oko are systematically denied the comfort of seeing or interacting with one another for the majority of the text. Denied his demand to see his wife, Oko must wait until the two are able to share a serendipitous reunion. However, it is at the moment of reconnection—the first intimate moment that the two share while fettered by slavery—that Oko discovers the evidence of the cruelty that Imoinda has had to endure during as part and parcel of her enslavement. Though Imoinda had not—or could not—speak of the sexual violence that she undergoes, her body clearly articulates her condition. To turn to the text, Oko provides a revelatory account of his feelings upon reuniting with his beloved. Oko professes,

Though these hands are less soft than they were  
and your skin's lost its sheen of ripe berry  
and the fire in your eyes burn less bright,  
I remember well. Now, let me taste you. (*They kiss*).  
What is this mound between us?  
Between us stands a mound of belly  
that was not there before. Alas!  
Imoinda, I remember you  
every part, every texture, every curve (*Imoinda* 3.4.).

Although Oko recognizes that slavery has left its mark on her body, as is manifested in her roughened hands and dimmer eyes, he is quick to proclaim that he has known her “every part... every curve.” And yet, at the moment when the two reconnect, he is shocked to feel a difference in her being—a difference that literally rises between them and cannot be ignored. Oko discovers that Imoinda no longer fits his conception of her—or rather, her *conception* is the issue itself.

Distraught, Oko tries to turn away from Imoinda, as though to shield himself from his burgeoning realization that she carries someone else's child in her womb. In this

moment, Oko's act of physically turning away from Imoinda mirrors his attempt to disavow her experiences; he therein commits an act of verbal violence against her, by not allowing her to assert her victimization. Yet, Imoinda will not let him deny her presence. Defiant, despite her own vulnerability, Imoinda reacts, "Yes! I am a slave woman; game to all!/ Don't close your eyes. It is what you see" (*Imoinda* 3.4.). Imoinda is aware of the fact that slavery has appropriated both her physical and reproductive labor. As a black slave woman with little to no recourse, Imoinda repeatedly suffers the sexual violence that those in power (namely, the Overseer and the Master) have simultaneously authorized and absolved, since this union has produced the next generation that will likewise be bound in slavery.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is the evidence of sexual violence that Oko resents the most; no longer is Imoinda solely *his*; instead, she is torn between the warring factions represented by her own desires, her master's claims over her personhood, and now, the unwanted child that grows within her. Oko's response to Imoinda's affirmation is tellingly not one of sympathy or concern for her well-being; instead, he subjects Imoinda to the further emotional violence that his rejection and resentment represent. Oko proclaims, "I will kill the bastard with these bare hands,/ then die like a man"—an assertion that reads her exploitation an affront to his masculinity. His word choice is particularly significant, because one presumes that Oko wishes to avenge the "bastard" who raped Imoinda in order to regain his honor, thus enabling him to "die like a man." Yet, Oko's words seem to carry a double connotation, as the "bastard" could also refer to the fatherless child that Imoinda carries in her womb, in which case, Oko's exclamation reads not only as a threat to the colonial powers, but also to Imoinda herself, as she

represents the site upon which (or more aptly, within which) colonial authority is executed.

Nevertheless, Imoinda remains concerned for her beloved, despite his inability to empathize with her position. When she tries to warn him to flee for his own safety, Oko callously accuses her of trying to be rid of him; he claims, “I think I know this trick. It stinks./ I’m out of the way;/ You can take lovers all you please” (*Imoinda* 3.4.). Imoinda then struggles to regain Oko’s trust—a trust that she has lost, not of her own volition, but because of her inherently vulnerable position as a black slave woman. Sadly, Oko’s only concern is with his own confused feelings of dishonor, which stem from his own disenfranchised status and the taint that he believes Imoinda’s forced infidelity reflects upon him.

In the final scene of Anim-Addo’s libretto, we are presented with the familiar death sequence—or rather, we witness a death scene that has been stripped of the romanticized, heroism that Behn offers us in the suicide pact between the two lovers. In this scene, Imoinda finds a caged Oko, whose mutilated body epitomizes the violence that colonial powers enacted against rebellious slaves. Imoinda wishes to comfort her incapacitated lover, expressing her desire to nurture and heal him. Oko, seemingly deaf to her plaintive words, rebukes her concerns, stating, “If I mean anything to you./ I must have the knife I asked for./ I am a Kromanti warrior yet” (*Imoinda* 3.5.). Imoinda, quick to accommodate her wounded lover, hands Oko a knife, before running offstage to find him some leaves with which to staunch the bleeding.

During Imoinda’s brief absence, Oko laments the loss of his former glory and the pitiful, inevitable death of a one-time war hero, proclaiming, “Come back warrior, I

command you!/ Come back! I do not fear blood./ So, all is lost; another warrior dies” (*Imoinda* 3.5.). By Oko’s estimation, “all is lost”—all, presumably meaning his freedom, but furthermore, the ability to garner greater honor as a warrior. Thus, he cannot, or will not, survive within the restrictions of the slave system, which has obliterated all traces of his former identity and stripped him of his heroic status. Oko reinstates his honor in the only way he knows how—by falling on his sword. Thus, Oko commits violence against himself, as an otherworldly, unnamed woman stands apart from the Chorus in order to bear witness to his suicide. She then sings his spirit back to the land of his ancestors; thus the unnamed woman serves as yet another figurative ‘bridge,’ which connects this world to the afterlife.

Imoinda re-enters the scene to discover her lover’s suicide, as she comes to the realization that she will never regain her lover in life, nor was she even a part of his death. Imoinda grieves, “How I’ve ached for this man/ an ache so deep, so wide./ Life a gorge cutting into my soul./ No point, no point in living” (*Imoinda* 3.5.). It is this moment when Imoinda considers her own suicide, no longer seeing any reason to live, deprived of her lover and forced to carry a child conceived in violence.

Fortunately for Imoinda, Anim-Addo enriches her libretto with a Chorus made up of women, who act as both a collective identity of a transplanted African identity as well as a support system for the grief-stricken Imoinda. Esteizme, Imoinda’s former maidservant, now her equal in slavery, tries to channel Imoinda’s anguish into a cathartic release, by encouraging her to join in the ceremonial dance, as the Chorus ushers Oko’s soul into the afterlife. Esteizme coaxes Imoinda to “Ease yourself a little. Dance” (*Imoinda* 3.5.) Imoinda, heedless of Esteizme’s advice, searches out the knife that had

once pierced her lover, thereby indicating that if she cannot have Oko in life, then she will join him in death.

However, as Imoinda hurls herself toward the cage door—toward, one might say, the manifestation of colonial control over the slave’s body—she experiences a previously unknown pain, the first pangs of childbirth. Panting, Imoinda cries, “Esteizme, take my hand./ I feel a fierce burning deep inside me” (*Imoinda* 3.5.). “It is the pikin” (*Imoinda* 3.5.), Esteizme replies. Tellingly, Esteizme uses the term ‘pikin,’ which normally carries a negative connotation, but she seems to reclaim the word from colonial authority, in order to use it as a term of endearment. A distraught Imoinda responds, “Pikin? Baby? No. I will have none./ Since I cannot have my man,/ I will not have another’s pikin” (*Imoinda* 3.5.). Here, we see the unilateral equation that Imoinda’s agony has led her to; not only does she initially insist that she will not give birth to *this* child, who has been conceived in violence; but she also declares that she will not have any children—which indicates her unwillingness to adhere to a slave woman’s status as both free labor and a reproducer of more destined laborers.

Despite Imoinda’s insistence that she can and will regain control over her body, by refusing to mother an illegitimate baby, Esteizme simply tells Imoinda that “You have no choice” (*Imoinda* 3.5.)—indicating that Imoinda’s body has essentially chosen for her, since she already in labor. Furthermore, Esteizme understands what Imoinda does not yet grasp—namely, that giving birth to a child is actually an act of defiance against the status quo, precisely because Imoinda would be choosing life when the alternative seems more appealing. Esteizme’s words, then, are meant to convey to Imoinda that she can and will survive and give birth to a child—in spite of the sexual violence that Imoinda endures at

the hands of colonial authority, in spite of the violence that Imoinda enacts earlier in the text, in which she attempts to procure an abortion via medicinal herbs, in spite of the suicide of her lover, and most importantly, in spite of the fact that her child must necessarily be born into a world of uncertainties and paradoxes—because that is the only way to lash out at a system that almost guarantees loss and death.

Yet, even as Esteizme attempts to convince Imoinda of what is at stake, Imoinda banishes the mere thought of seemingly capitulating to colonial desires. Imoinda retorts,

What life is this without choice? Birth here?  
To a pikin I would not have  
except I had been forced. What life is this?  
I will not have a pikin in whose face  
I'll see my own humiliation  
every day. It is massa's.  
Let him scrape it from this blood fed soil (*Imoinda* 3.5.).

Thus, Imoinda threatens to commit infanticide, thereby returning the child to her master and the land, whose cultivation has cost her both her freedom and her lover. Wracked by the pains of birth and the internal dilemma that she faces, Imoinda's body transcends the physical realm into a representational one. Put more aptly, Imoinda's body becomes a metonym for the process of creolization. Even as Imoinda struggles against the impending birth of a child she did not want, she simultaneously represents the space in which two cultures have violently clashed and melded together. Again, a nameless woman, separated from the collective voices of women in the Chorus, seems to understand Imoinda's psychic (and in this case, physical) tearing, for she tells the laboring Imoinda "Your back, my child is a bridge./ Push! Let it come. Let it breathe" (*Imoinda* 3.5.). Biologically, Imoinda embodies a bridge, through which the breaching child must travel in order to reach the outer world; but metonymically, Imoinda signifies

a bridge, upon whom the European colonial presence clashes with the African dispossessed slave to produce a Creolized identity.

Though the nameless woman tells Imoinda that her body must serve as a bridge that allows her child to cross into the world, Imoinda simultaneously represents a “sleeping volcano” (*Imoinda* 3.5.)—in other words, a mountain, created by colliding forces, which holds a secret, explosive power within. However, Imoinda turns her potentially destructive power against herself, by struggling against her contractions and preparing to meet death, even in a moment of birth. It is not until her scream mingles with her child’s cry that she begins to understand that that destruction and production are inextricably linked in the slave system.

Even in the moment at which the evidence of Imoinda’s violation materializes, Esteizme reclaims the child from solely representing yet another mixed-race slave, as a result of colonial, sexual violence. Esteizme announces, “A girl! And hope for new life again” (*Imoinda* 3.5.), thus indicating that Imoinda’s daughter also represents a “sleeping volcano,” who contains her mother’s disruptive power within her. However, even in a seemingly life-affirming moment, Imoinda worries about the fate of her daughter, “A girl born subject to such misery!” (*Imoinda* 3.5.). Imoinda realizes that she cannot shield her daughter from the ordeals that plagued so many slave women, including her. But Esteizme indicates that a girl child can nevertheless survive and preserve both their collective memories and their lineage.

Furthermore, Velissariou posits that Imoinda’s choice to keep the child, born of violence, enacts the “subversive appropriation of rape by the victim herself (Velissariou 170). Imoinda’s ultimate decision to keep her daughter has dualistic connotations; she not



only reclaims her body and a degree of her agency from the colonial slave system, but she also demonstrates the ability to transmute a destructive act (the sexual violence) into a (re)productive outcome. Likewise, although Imoinda cannot predict what kind of fate will befall her daughter, it is possible that her daughter may one day give birth to yet another generation, in the constantly evolving process of creolization.

Simon Bacon<sup>8</sup> further conjectures that, “In choosing life, Imoinda performs the truly abject act of incorporation, to absorb and devour... which fuses self and Other, rendering all borders and boundaries permeable and porous” (Bacon 218). For Bacon, Imoinda’s decision to accept her daughter reflects both her absorption (of the former Other) and the total erasure of boundaries between mother and child. Thus, Imoinda is no longer an isolated entity within a binary that consists of colonial bodies vs. the Other. Instead, she is the locus at which distinct identities participate in biological (as well as social, cultural, linguistic, etc.) collision and emulsion.

In the final lines of the libretto, the Chorus of women perform a first rite for Imoinda’s daughter, by calling upon the names of the great rivers of Africa to bear witness to the event—thereby actively transposing an African ceremony into a Caribbean landscape. The Chorus proclaims that Imoinda’s child will be “a baby charged not to forget” (*Imoinda* 3.5.), which indicates that the child will grow to learn about her own personal history, but more importantly, the history of her people. However, the Chorus’ resounding words also implicate the audience, so that Anim-Addo tasks those who have seen (or read) the performance to remember not only the violent history that creolization

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<sup>8</sup> Bacon’s article, “To Keep or Not to Keep?: Autonomy, Abjection, and Motherhood in Joan Anim-Addo’s *Imoinda* and Jean Pierre Jeunet’s *Alien Resurrection*,” explores the maternal abjection in situations in which the mother conceived as a result of sexual violence or a medically-induced violation.

often entails, but also the productivity that the process engenders, as new identities are formed.

Serena Guarracino speculates that Imoinda's childbirth represents "syncretism...endless metissage" (Guarracino 219). Imoinda's body is the site at which a markedly biological iteration of hybridization occurs, which enables the Creolized identity to adapt and survive. Put in other words, Anim-Addo suggests that, "Through her offspring, the black woman threatens the very balance of power which the white minority plantocracy seeks to maintain" ("Absent Presence" 68). Imoinda's birthing blurs all lines of demarcation between those in power, the planters, and those they seek to subject, the slaves. Her daughter effectively questions both social sanctions against miscegenation and beliefs that the two races are somehow biologically distinctive.

### **The Explosive Power of Violence**

Though we may grant that Imoinda effectively escapes from the romanticized tragedy of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (as well as Oko's pathetic death scene in *Imoinda*), one might wonder if Anim-Addo's libretto simply regurgitates earlier motifs that one often encounters in texts that explore miscegenational themes—specifically, the tropes of gynecological rebellion and the 'tragic mulatto' figure. I contend that Anim-Addo's *Imoinda* and, more importantly, her mixed-race daughter elude both fates, thus presenting a third category, which rests upon an individual's ability to remember past violence, but also move past it. During the birth scene, Imoinda refuses to give birth to a child unless she knows "it is a son/ to wreak rough vengeance upon a father,/ Besides, I'll have none but a warrior" (*Imoinda* 3.5.). In other words, she essentially wishes to give birth to a reincarnation of Oko—a son who will grow to be a warrior and a revolutionary in order

to avenge his mother's shame and suffering. However, the unexpected birth of a daughter forces Imoinda to envision new possibilities for her child's fate. Rather than focus on the destruction that a revolutionary son might invoke, Imoinda must imagine the production that a daughter might engender—not as a breeder of slaves, but as a preserver of collective, cultural memories and practices.

Moreover, Anim-Addo's characters avoid the tragic mulatto's fate precisely because one of the hallmarks of the tragic mulatto figure is that she cannot assimilate wholly into either white or black society. She is 'tragic' in the sense that she encompasses two, dualistic, often warring, factions simultaneously; therefore, if she is light enough, she may be persuaded to pass in the white community, so long as she remains chaste or forecloses the possibility of childbirth—which has the potential to expose her mixed ancestry in the next generation. Yet, Imoinda's daughter serves as a repository for her mother's history and the collective memories of her people. Anim-Addo's final words suggest the significance of *passing on* (either one's personal or ancestral history) rather than passing; thus, one expects that Imoinda's daughter will reinscribe the figure of the tragic mulatto into a triumphant one.

Thus, what Anim-Addo's text offers us is not simply a secondary reading that complements our understanding or appreciation of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*. Instead, she tells another part of the story—the part that history and even literary texts typically occlude, as it is the portion of the story that is often the most complex, and therefore the most difficult, to tell. Anim-Addo offers us a fully vocalizing, surviving Imoinda, as an updated response to (and an appropriation of) Behn's relatively silent Imoinda, who expresses herself in signs and significations, rather than words.

Anim-Addo also indicates the importance of the Chorus, primarily composed of women, who speak to the plurality of African- Caribbean experiences in song and dance. Without the help of this supportive network, it is likely that Anim-Addo's Imoinda could not survive in an oppressive slave society. Furthermore, the Chorus performs an initiation rite for Imoinda's daughter, to welcome her into the collective community that includes the many variants of the African-Caribbean, Creolized identity. Thus, although Imoinda's name may be lost to future generations, as the title of the libretto suggests, her memory will never be wholly forgotten in the collective history of her people.

Creolization certainly entails the production of new cultural, material, psychological, and spiritual conceptions, as Brathwaite suggests, but Anim-Addo further insists that reproduction is essential to the existence and continuance of the Creolized identity. Sadly, the biological component of creolization often carries potentially destructive, sexually violent undertones. Yet, Anim-Addo's gift as a playwright is that she is able to understand and convey the historical import of violence without allowing it to be the only take-away that the audience has at the end of the performance. Although both imagined and enacted violence plays an over-arching role in the development of the libretto, Anim-Addo sees violence not as an isolated event, but as a continuously evolving encounter between different identities, cultures, motivational factors, etc., in which the violence is a necessary (though not necessarily justifiable) catalyst for the production of previously unimaginable processes.

Finally, Anim-Addo reinscribes and reincorporates creolization into a performative space, thereby redefining the genre of the opera itself, while simultaneously implicating the audience for their participation in the production of an evolving African-

Caribbean identity. Not only is Imoinda's daughter "charged not to forget," but we, the readers and witnesses of Anim-Addo's libretto, also bear a responsibility to the text, to further explicate and expand upon our understanding of the simultaneously destructive and productive power of violence, which is integral to the production of creolization in African-Caribbean history.

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