COUNTENANCING HISTORY: MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT, SAMUEL STANHOPE SMITH, AND ENLIGHTENMENT RACIAL SCIENCE

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In sketches of life, a degree of dignity, which distinguishes man, should not be blotted out; nor the prevailing interest undermined by a satirical tone, which makes the reader forget an acknowledged truth, that in the most vicious, vestiges may be faintly discerned in a majestic ruin, and in the most virtuous, frailties which loudly proclaim, that like passions unite the two extremities of the social chain, and circulate through the whole body.

Mary Wollstonecraft

As most historians of feminist thought observe, the early nineteenth-century reception of Mary Wollstonecraft’s challenge to male cultural hegemony suffered at the hands of her scandalous biography. By naturalizing feminine passivity and subordination, anti-Jacobin ideologues such as T. J. Mathias and Richard Polwhele cast Wollstonecraft as a mind come “unsex’d,” a woman who “O’er humbled man assert[s] the sovereign claim, / And slight[s] the timid blush of virgin fame.” However, in “Mary,” an often neglected lyric found in the 1805 Pickering manuscript, William Blake counters the public censure of Wollstonecraft by granting the outcast a voice of mournful inquiry:

Some said she was proud some calld her a whore
And some when she passed by shut to the door
A damp cold came o’er her, her blushes all fled
Her lilies & roses are blighted & shed

O, why was I born with a different Face
Why was I not born like this Envious Race
Why did Heaven adorn me with bountiful hand
And then set me down in an envious Land

In response to her own questions, Blake’s heroine resolves to “humble [her] beauty” and forsake the balls and public entertainments where her charms were once celebrated as the “return [of]
Golden times”; however, her self-abnegation only brings a charge of
madness from those who behold her “plain neat attire,” a testament
to the double bind of eighteenth-century gender propriety. Mary
finally succumbs to the delusional state that is projected onto her, and
the text ends with only the narrator’s eulogistic voice speaking for the
heroine’s saintly physiognomy:

With Faces of Scorn & with Eyes of disdain
Like foul Fiends inhabiting Mary’s mild Brain
She remembers no Face like the Human Divine
All Faces have Envy, sweet Mary, but thine

And thine is a Face of sweet Love in despair
And thine is a Face of mild sorrow & care
And thine is a Face of wild terror & fear
That shall never be quiet till laid on its bier

What interests me about Blake’s lament is the text’s insistence that
the subject’s face is at once a site of ideological conflict, the mark of
her difference, and the source of the narrator’s poetic consolation.
The memorialization of Wollstonecraft’s visage at the end of the
poem is an answer to the “[f]aces of scorn” that consolidate masculine
prerogative; yet there is another figure haunting the lyric, for Mary’s
plaintive questions concerning her “different face” have a precursor
in Blake’s own private correspondence. On 15 August 1803, charges
of sedition were brought against the poet after an altercation with a
soldier who Blake forcibly removed from his garden. In his deposi-
tion, Private John Schofield claimed that during their scuffle Blake
cursed the king, chided England’s military prowess, and boasted that
Napoleon could “be master of Europe in an hour’s time” should he
wish to be. In a letter written the following day, Blake explained to
his friend Thomas Butts how “this contemptible business” had
produced considerable paranoia in Blake’s neighborhood: “Every
Man is now afraid of speaking to or looking at a Soldier.” The fear of
the gaze here is not incidental, as Blake illustrates: “Perhaps the
simplicity of myself is the origin of all offenses committed against me
. . . I have found it! It is certain! that a too passive manner,
inconsistent with my active physiognomy had done me much mis-
chief.” The letter ends with the poetic predecessor to Mary’s strange
lament:

O why was I born with a different face
Why was I not born like the rest of my race
When I look each one starts! when I speak I offend
Then I'm silent & passive & lose every Friend

Then my verse I dishonour My pictures despise
My person degrade & my temper chastise
And my pen is my terror, the pencil my shame
All my Talents I bury, and Dead is my Fame.

Here Blake muses that his countenance announces his politics even before his tongue can speak them, and interestingly, he sees the physiognomic equivalent of silence in “passivity,” a formal stillness (like the “quieting” of Mary’s face) that shunts political consciousness and retards imaginative production. Blake’s figuration suggests that the face-to-face encounter operates as the most fundamental of political sites, and furthermore, that writing functions metonymically as a form of symbolic “facing.” Reading “Mary” through Blake’s own personal appeal to countenance suggests that the question of Wollstonecraft’s face is already a political formulation, complicit in a broader project of emancipatory writing.

What I want to suggest is that Blake’s identification with Wollstonecraft goes beyond bearing the badge of persecuted radicalism; rather, the central question of “why was I born with a different face?” insists on a version of self-presence that is overdetermined, estranged, inassimilable, and—given the question that immediately ensues (i.e. “why was I not born like this envious race”)—marked as racially other. By the last decade of the eighteenth century, the concept of race had coalesced under the auspices of Enlightenment natural history and had become politically charged in the wake of the San Domingo slave revolt in 1791 and persistent Parliamentary debates over abolition in the late 1780s and early 90s. That Wollstonecraft participated in the broadening discourse of race should come as little surprise to scholars of the late eighteenth century, for as Moira Ferguson has ably demonstrated, Wollstonecraft consistently invokes abolitionist rhetoric in her critique of patriarchal hegemony, exploiting the affective force of juxtaposing the domesticated woman and the subjugated African. Similarly, even the most cursory glance at the catalogue of books Wollstonecraft reviewed for the radical Analytical Review suggests how conversant she was with Enlightenment discussions of race; not only did she provide commentary on a host of travelogues and natural histories between 1788 and 1797, but Wollstonecraft reserved particularly lavish praise for one of the largely forgotten texts in the history of the racial sciences,
Samuel Stanhope Smith’s *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species* (1787, expanded second edition in 1810). Smith, a Presbyterian minister and the president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton), set out to “establish the unity of the human species, by tracing its variety to their natural causes,” specifically the influence of climate, geography, and social custom on the human anatomy. Like many of the accounts of racial heterogeneity that arose in the period, Smith’s treatise posits the countenance as a preeminent site for thinking through the naturalization of racial characteristics, but given that Smith’s theory of monogenesis is predicated on the anatomy’s adaptation to geographic change over time, the face promises a kind of evolutionary narrative of man’s historical migrations.

As I will argue below, Blake’s gesture toward the “face of the other” read onto Wollstonecraft’s public persona is consistent with Wollstonecraft’s own attempts to understand racial and cultural difference in physiognomic terms. Like Blake, Wollstonecraft understands the face-to-face encounter as always already political, the first instance of what might be called cultural interpellation. In order to measure the impact of the reading of racialized countenance in the period, I want to examine a travel narrative that pointedly *does not* chronicle a journey into the interiors of Africa or the Orient, and yet *does* participate in the structural and epistemological imperatives that permeate the represented encounter with the racially other: Wollstonecraft’s *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796). Viewed through her reading of Stanhope Smith’s hypothesis, Wollstonecraft’s *Letters* suggests how pervasive the intertwined questions of human difference and political history have become in the aftermath of the French Revolution, as well as how eighteenth-century travel discourse is deeply encoded with colonialist structures of knowledge and power. What is dictated by the ideological variables operating in the immediacy of colonial encounter in a text like William Paterson’s *Narrative of Four Voyages in the Land of the Hottentots and the Kaffirs* (1789) has become for Wollstonecraft a powerful ideational apparatus for representing European interests, even when those interests do not cross colonial boundaries. Wollstonecraft’s Scandinavian excursion operates like an inversion of the African adventure, a journey into the heart of whiteness through which Wollstonecraft can meditate on the (failed) promise of historical progress and the limits of human adaptability. In order to facilitate an ethnographic reading of the *Letters*, I want to
first briefly outline how Enlightenment natural science hastened a new discussion of race and suggest how Smith and Wollstonecraft participated in the dialogue.

I. "VESTIGES FAINTLY DISCERNED IN A MAJESTIC RUIN," OR THE FACE OF RACE

The latter half of the eighteenth century witnessed the virtual remapping of human difference. In her study of travel writing and transculturation, Mary Louise Pratt argues that the emergence of "natural history as a structure of knowledge" worked to consolidate what she calls "planetary consciousness," a promise that the entire globe in all its heterogeneity would eventually succumb to categorization.\(^\text{13}\) Attempting to construct a taxonomy expansive enough to account for the empirical spoils of the age of exploration, Enlightenment scientists such as Linnaeus, Buffon, and Blumenbach used their authority as naturalists to underwrite their claims as anthropologists: like specimens of flora and fauna extracted from foreign locales and reorganized according to one of many totalizing classificatory systems, the wondrous tales of exotic men and women offered naturalists ample evidence of the need for a correspondent taxonomy for discerning and managing (and, by extension, symbolically civilizing) human variance. While there were certainly rudimentary theories of racial difference dating back to Hippocrates and Aristotle (often predicated on variations in climate and geography), it wasn't until the eighteenth century that a comparative racial physiology developed.\(^\text{14}\) In particular, the period produced what Michel Foucault calls "the nomination of the visible," a new lexicon for registering and thinking through heterogeneity as it is empirically manifest: not surprisingly, the physical markers of human diversity soon yielded to an abstract human calculus (e.g. Camper's studies of prognathism and "facial angle," Gall and Spurzheim's phrenology, Jean-Joseph Sue's mathematical physiognomy).\(^\text{15}\) As one intellectual historian recently put it, the concept of race "gradually mutated from its original sense of a people or single nation, linked by origin, to its later sense of a biological subdivision of the human species," or more specifically, to "an innate and fixed disparity in the physical and intellectual makeup of different peoples."\(^\text{16}\)

Yet there was still considerable debate over how this emergent grammar of otherness was to be deployed, and how science, philosophy, and theology together were to account for racial and national difference. Inquiries into the origins of human diversity consolidated

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around two distinct hypotheses: *monogeny* and *polygeny.* Monogenesis represents a faithful adherence to scriptural precedent, whereby humanity originates from a single source and racial dissimilarities (and the modern concept of race itself) are a product of a migration away from edenic perfection. For most, monogeny describes a model of degeneracy, a tragic falling off from undivided beginnings that originates in Noah’s curse on the descendants of Ham, while others, unwilling to offend the presumed sense of order and economy in nature, stress human adaptability as a sign of God’s grace and read into the plastic human body the possibility of remediability. Polygenesis, on the other hand, posits that different races constitute different species. The resultant theory of “Co-Adamism” became the ideological scaffolding for the supposition that the “darker races” are inherently, irredeemably inferior. Both models read racial diversity as a graduated continuum, but polygenesis insists that the designation of skin color represents a fixed and ordained mark of biological distinction rather than historical adaptation. Indeed, where monogenists often argued for the powerful effects of environment on a malleable human anatomy, the polygenist thesis tended to aestheticize the hard (i.e. structural) lineaments to scientifically encode European standards of beauty and nobility. Typical of this valorization is Charles White’s *Account of the Regular Gradation in Man* (1799), and his paean to the refinement of the Caucasian features:

> Ascending the line of gradation, we come at last to the white European; who being most removed from the brute creation, may, on that account, be considered as the most beautiful of the human race. No one will doubt his superiority in intellectual powers. . . . Where shall we find, unless in the European, that nobly arched head, containing such a quantity of brain, and supported by a hollow conical pillar, entering its centre? Where that perpendicular face, the prominent nose, and round projecting chin? Where that variety of features, and fulness of expression; those long, flowing, graceful ring-lets; that majestic beard, those rosy cheeks and coral lips?

White’s schema is typical of the polygenist hypothesis, which, undergirded by the emerging geometry of the human head that calibrated everything from the width of the brow to the texture of the hair, sought to construct a graduated hierarchy of human variation from European to Hottentot to orangutan.

Perhaps the most frequently cited instance of polygenetic thought appears in a footnote to David Hume’s essay “Of National Charac-
ters." In his critique of contemporary accounts of national character, Hume takes exception to any system that depends on "physical causes," by which he designates "those qualities of the air and climate which are supposed to work insensibly on the temper, by altering the tone and habit of the body," and instead argues for an understanding of culturally specific behavior based on "moral causes," or culture itself (e.g. "the nature of government, the revolutions of public affairs, the plenty or penury in which the people live, the situation of the nation with regard to its neighbors, and such like circumstances"). Hume's essay is instructive, if only because his cultural relativism does not preclude him from maintaining "an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men." In a footnote added in 1753, Hume uses the margins of his text to delimit the margins of the civilized world:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the Whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual, eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the Whites, such as the ancient Germans, the present Tartars, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. . . . In Jamaica, indeed, they talk of one Negro as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly.

This last speculation—according to Henry Louis Gates, a reference to Francis Williams, a Cambridge educated poet who wrote verse in Latin—perhaps best captures the ideology of polygenesis: conceived as a biological mandate, racial inferiority is irremediable, and the best a non-European can hope for is a denatured form of mimicry. Hume's African is delimited by his conspicuously dark skin, his one artless signifier (e.g. "no arts, no sciences"), and as the critique of parroting reveals, this emphasis on a transparent and reliable sign assures the enlightened European observer that inauthentic racial behavior is easily detectable. As Gates notes, here race has emerged as a resolute and "ineffaceable quantity, which irresistibly determined the shape and contour of thought and feeling as surely as it did the shape and contour of human anatomy."

Where Hume's hypothesis begins and ends with his dissatisfaction with environmental accounts of racial divergence, Samuel Stanhope Smith's Essay takes as its central premise the correspondence be-
tween geography and complexion: “In tracing the globe from the pole to the equator, we observe a gradation in the complexion nearly in proportion to the latitude of the country.”23 These complexional zones are constructed according to what Smith calls “the law of climate,” an environmental influence that works inexorably in laying the “ground” for the bearing, appearance, and cultural status of the body:

[W]hen heat or cold predominates in any region, it impresses, in the same proportion, a permanent and characteristic complexion. The degree to which it predominates may be considered as a constant cause of the action of which the human body is exposed. This cause will affect the nerves by tension or relaxation, by dilation or contraction—It will affect the fluids by increasing or lessening the perspiration, and by altering the proportions of all the secretions—It will particularly affect the skin by the immediate operation of the atmosphere, of the sun’s rays, or of the principle of cold upon its delicate texture. . . . To suggest at present a single example.—A cold and piercing air chafes the countenance and exalts the complexion. An air that is warm and misty relaxes the constitution, and gives some tendency, in valetudinarians especially, to a bilious hue.

While Smith insists that “national features, like national manners, become fixed, only after a succession of ages,” he imagines physiology as plastic and assimilative, the foundation of the environmentally constructed constitution augmented by familial inheritance, social custom, and even the subject’s sympathetic bonds with those who surround him. In order to counter the fixed conception of race represented by polygenetic theory and to give credence to his theory of adaptation, Smith introduces a number of tales of human mutability, including that of “a young Indian . . . brought from his nation a number of years ago to receive an education in this institution [College of New Jersey]” whose once evident savagery is “sensibly diminishing”: “[His native features] seem, the faster to diminish in proportion as he loses that vacancy of eye, and that lugubrious wildness of countenance peculiar to the savage state, and acquires the agreeable expression of civil life. The expression of the eye, and the softening of the features to civilized emotions and ideas, seems to have removed more than half the difference between him and us.” As both a marker of cultural specificity and site of subjectivity, the face is, for Smith, subject to the impressions of history and culture, which together work like an anatomical forge to “melt down the whole into one uniform and national countenance.”24
Smith’s “scientific” defense of the literal authenticity of Genesis (what he calls “the verity of Mosaic history” in his 1810 “Advertisement”) and his cartography of racial difference not only participate in the reorganization of vision/knowledge that characterizes the transition from natural history to the emergent human sciences delineated by Foucault in *The Order of Things*, but also implicitly addresses the question of a nascent American identity, for if racial and national character are contingent upon environmental conditions, then the occupation of a “new world” could hold the literal promise of Crevecoeur’s “new man.”25 Smith is clearly sanguine about the evolutionary possibilities evident in the American topographies of land and body, noting that the United States “occupy those latitudes that have ever been most favourable to the beauty of the human form,” a circumstance that suggests America’s Hellenic promise: “When time shall have accommodated the constitution to its new state, and cultivation shall have meliorated the climate, the beauties of Greece and Circassia may be renewed in America.”26 Not surprisingly, in his second edition Smith maps out that which is presumed here and elsewhere in the original *Essay*, that Greece occupies the geographical standard from which all races have deviated, a region where “the human person is so often seen to display that perfect symmetry of parts, and those beautiful proportions, which most clearly correspond with the original idea of the Creator.” Animated by a strange melding of climatological evolution and democratic principles, Stanhope Smith’s America stands as a corrective to radical heterogeneity and the implicit hierarchies of difference instantiated at the sight of the body. In particular, Smith relishes narratives of physiognomical change regarding what he calls “the improvement of the negro visage”:

there is reason to believe that, if these people were perfectly free, and were admitted to all the civil privileges of their masters, they would, in a short period, have few of the distinctive traces of their African ancestors remaining, except their complexion. In the state of New Jersey, where the hardships of slavery are scarcely felt, we see great numbers of negroes who have the nose as much raised from the face, the forehead as well arched, and the teeth as perpendicularly set in their sockets, as the whites.27

In other words, Smith understands race as a constructed means of accounting for visual difference and the diachronic limitations of the eye, and given its fluidity over time, Smith necessarily dismisses the
systematic racial taxonomies that his precursors eagerly contrived (Buffon enumerated six racial classifications, Blumenbach five, Linnaeus and Leibnitz four). Significantly, Smith’s monogenesis represents one of the last models for thinking through race symbolically before the ascendancy of nineteenth-century biology, which according to Robyn Wiegman “assigned to ‘man’ a new sphere of specificity” and determined race as “an inherent and incontrovertible difference of which skin was only the most visible indication.”

Given the teleological promise of Smith’s America, I want to turn now to how his theory of the unity of the species becomes an intervention into global history and indeed asks us to recontextualize the immediacy of the face-to-face encounter with the culturally other. The protean body that Smith assumes represents a kind of evolutionary narrative of man’s historical migrations away from an originary moment that was (not surprisingly given the college president’s biases) white and civilized, and it is this plasticity that subtly threatens to deconstruct familiar cultural binaries. As Smith remarks:

Mankind are forever changing their habitations by conquest or by commerce. And we find them in all climates not only able to endure the change, but so assimilated by time, that we cannot say with certainty whose ancestor was the native of the clime, and whose the intruding foreigner.

Moreover, in the expanded 1810 second edition of the Essay, Smith suggests how the mind can “pass along the minute gradations which serve to reunite [complexional extremes]” and thus comprehend “the result of the actions of the same physical laws in successive climates, or positions of the human race,” thereby confirming in every moment that there is “but one species from the equator to the poles.” The historical erasure of the native/foreigner distinction troubles the very logic of Enlightenment travel writing, predicated as it is on the writing of the rest of the world as ethnographically other: within Smith’s schema the European encounter with the African is an occasion for a rapprochement with history that is always threatened by the false consciousness of racial determinism. Smith reserves some of his most bilious rhetoric for “the bulk of travellers who travel without the true spirit of remark” and who thus make cultural claims without adequately surveying the radical possibility of the native bodies they encounter. Entranced by “the first objects that meet their view in a new country,” European travelers “recite with exaggeration” all that they’ve seen, and as a result “they judge from particular
instances, that may happen to have occurred to them, of the stature, the figure and the features of a whole nation.” Furthermore, by gazing through “the prejudices of ideas and habits contracted in their own country,” these chroniclers insist on reifying difference and therefore remain blind to the universal commensurability of all peoples implicit in the subtleties of individual physiognomies. 30

While Smith’s treatise, in the words of his twentieth-century editor, “scarcely took England by storm,” it nonetheless met with considerable acclaim in Joseph Johnson’s Analytical Review, a liberal digest of contemporary print culture that offered a commentary for the general reading public on cultural, political, literary, and scientific topics. 31 Although all the reviews that Johnson commissioned were published anonymously (many were signed with only a single initial), Janet Todd makes a compelling case that Mary Wollstonecraft is the author of a December 1788 review of Stanhope Smith’s Essay, signed “M.” 32 For Wollstonecraft, Smith’s version of monogeny addresses a visceral need to identify with the other. She begins her review by noting that “those who feel lively emotions wish to know if the same string vibrates in another bosom—if they are indeed tied to their species by the strongest of all relations, fellow-feeling—in short, if the world without resembles that within,” and aided by Smith’s model, she can confidently assert, “The untutored savage and the cultivated sage are found to be men of like passions with ourselves.” Wollstonecraft appropriates the language of sensibility here in order to bridge imaginatively and philosophically the divide between the variegated body and the promise of “a similarity of minds discernible in the whole human race” (W, 7:50), a version of the sympathetic politic she would subsequently deploy in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman to negotiate the paradoxes of Enlightenment femininity.

Quoting liberally from Smith’s treatise (and the review is one of the longest she wrote for Johnson’s periodical), Wollstonecraft reveals her partiality for physiognomic reading and concomitant historical speculation. Smith’s claims are often posited as “the verdict of common sense,” so much so that a long passage on the constrictive effects of cold weather on the face is framed as that which “could not have escaped the most superficial observer,” and the monogenist’s discussion of “habits of the body” is authorized as that which “the naturalist will allow to have great force” (W, 7:53, 51). In particular, Wollstonecraft is drawn to the historical ramifications of the monogenetic account, quoting Smith on both the breakdown of the native/foreigner distinction and the teleological impetus of Smith’s historical model:
In the philosophy of human nature, it is worthy of observation, that all national changes, whether moral or physical, advance by imperceptible gradations, and are not accomplished but in a series of ages. Ten centuries were requisite to polish the manners of Europe. It is not improbable that an equal space of time may be necessary to form the countenance, and the figure of the body. (W, 7:52)

As I will explore in my reading of Wollstonecraft’s Letters, the implicit gradualism of Smith’s historical project becomes consolation for Wollstonecraft after her residence in Paris during the Terror, but as her subsequent writings for the Analytical Review illuminate, Wollstonecraft consistently evinces a working knowledge of contemporary racial historiography and myth. For instance, in her May 1789 review of The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano . . . Written by Himself, she condemns the accumulation of “philosophic whims” and colonialist ideology that insists on African inferiority yet refuses to invoke Equiano’s text as an antidote to the “stigma” of racism, noting only that his narrative “place[s] him on a par with the general mass of men who fill the subordinate stations in a more civilized society” (W, 7:100).33 At the same time, Wollstonecraft employs some of her most caustic rhetoric in her denunciations of the mercantile depredations that have sullied African innocence, most tellingly in her 1797 review of Le Vaillant’s New Travels into the Interior Parts of Africa, by the Way of the Cape of Good Hope, a travel narrative that she unabashedly gushes over. According to Wollstonecraft, Vaillant’s ostensible purpose is to “wipe off part of the odium thrown on the character of the hottentots,” a people who traditionally occupied the most savage station on the by now finely calibrated evolutionary scale, and Wollstonecraft applauds any re-evaluation of the “various disgusting tales [which] have served as the basis of yahoo satires on mankind, written by men who wish to insinuate, contrary to all experience, that it is the nature of man to degenerate rather than improve” (W, 7:479). Where Hume cautioned against any kind of racial ventriloquism that aspires to the “eminence” of the European ideal, Wollstonecraft regularly inverts the terms of assessment: the natives are at worst “untutored” and more often perceived as “the well-meaning, affectionate inhabitants” of an edenic land, while the slave merchants are “men debased by a sordid traffic,” “rapacious whites, from whose bosoms commerce has eradicated every human feeling,” and “half-civilized men . . . unfit to be entrusted with unlimited power” (W, 7:479, 480, 481). If, as Pratt argues, much late eighteenth-century travel writing deploys “strate-
gies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony—a rhetorical structure Pratt calls the “anti-conquest”—Wollstonecraft seeks to demystify these operations: no travel is innocent, no moment of cultural contact free of politics.34

To read Wollstonecraft’s commentaries on various exploratory narratives is to begin to understand the complexity of Western expansionist ideology and the discursive practices that encode and authorize the ambitions of economic and cultural empire. Not unlike Smith’s censure of myopic travelers, a uniform charge in Wollstonecraft’s reviews is the lack of empirical evidence and sound judgment on the part of the travel narrators: too often, in her view, the “practice of relating marvelous circumstances” is dependent on “hear-say accounts of opinions or customs” rather than eyewitness reportage. As a result, “these circumstances were argued upon as facts by those metaphysical romancers, who wished to prove that morality had no foundation in the natural dispositions and affections” of the native (W, 7:480). Wollstonecraft continually warns that the sloppy management of one’s cultural claims can propagate misconceptions that become proverbial wisdom for a European readership eager to fill in the blank spaces on the map. In other words, to travel and to write is to accept a complex of responsibilities concerning the representation of the other. As she writes in a 1789 analysis of William Thomson’s *Mammuth; or Human Nature Displayed on a Grand Scale; in a Tour . . . into the Inland Parts of Africa*:

> In sketches of life, a degree of dignity, which distinguishes man, should not be blotted out; nor the prevailing interest undermined by a satirical tone, which makes the reader forget an acknowledged truth, that in the most vicious, vestiges may be faintly discerned of a majestic ruin, and in the most virtuous, frailties which loudly proclaim, that like passions unite the two extremities of the social chain, and circulate through the whole body. (W, 7:105)

With this passage in mind, I want to turn to Wollstonecraft’s own travel writing concerning Scandinavia in order to trace the efficacy of models of racial designation in the discursive construction of native/national identity as they are broadly conceived: in other words, how does one read the “majestic ruin” of the fall from civilized whiteness?
Where Wollstonecraft’s polemical writings are firmly situated in the complexities of social acculturation within a compass of urbane (and urban) life, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* occupies the borderlands, the author gravitating toward scenes of brute physical isolation, never lingering long in the company of others.³⁵ With their restless mapping out of geographic, cultural, and emotional terrain, the Scandinavian letters attempt to construct and articulate the unfettered female subjectivity that Wollstonecraft sees as the epistemic foundation of what she calls elsewhere “a revolution in female manners,” but as Wollstonecraft makes clear, the very act of overseeing one’s own experience in the world is not unencumbered by questions of gender privilege.³⁶ In her opening letter, Wollstonecraft confronts the animus toward women who evince an interest in natural history: after an afternoon spent exploring the rocky coastline of Norway, telescope in hand (“a retreat where strangers, especially women, so seldom appear”), Wollstonecraft inquires after the rugged landscape with the lieutenant who has given her room and board, only to find she has transgressed a kind of empirical and discursive propriety: “At supper my host told me bluntly that I was a woman of observation, for I asked him men’s questions” (*L*, 15). The author’s apparent intrusion into the masculine field of cultural documentarian is a shaping force in the narrative that ensues, and as I hope to show, initially through an interrogation of one of the text’s organizing tropes—“the face of the country”—Wollstonecraft consistently challenges the economy of subject/object relations by insisting on the cultural prerogative of a “woman of observation.” This face, which operates at once politically, topographically, and ethnographically, constructs a symbolic intersubjective encounter with the environment as a crucial site of individuation and thus resonates with the imperatives of Stanhope Smith’s racial environmentalism.³⁷

Given that Wollstonecraft continually reminds her readers that she is unfamiliar with the native languages and must therefore rely on a gestural language, it should come as little surprise that the face becomes for her an expressive marker of race, class, sensibility, and compatibility. For instance, in letter 22 the author finds surprising promise in the signifying anatomy of the peasantry:

The people struck me, as having arrived at that period when the faculties will unfold themselves; in short, they look alive to
improvement, neither congealed by indolence, nor bent down by wretchedness to servility. . . . I had formed a conception of the tyranny of the petty potentates that had thrown a gloomy veil over the face of the whole country, in my imagination, that cleared away like the darkness of night before the sun. As I saw the reality, I should probably have discovered much lurking misery, the consequence of ignorant oppression, no doubt, had I had time to inquire into particulars; but it did not stalk abroad and infect the surface over which my eye glanced. Yes, I am persuaded that a considerable degree of general knowledge pervades this country; for it is only from the exercise of the mind that the body acquires the activity from which I drew these inferences. (L, 178–9)

As we can see from the shift from the bodies of the rustics to the metaphorical “face of the whole country,” Wollstonecraft has a more intricate investment in the reading of countenance than simply a form of communicative practice. The eye “glances” over the mutual topographies of lineament and landscape in order to “infer” national character from the visible superficies. While “the face of the country” is a commonplace in the critical discourse of the picturesque, Wollstonecraft moves beyond formalist terminology in the Letters, for her engagement with the rural landscape is often organized like a face-to-face encounter with another consciousness, a consciousness inscribed on what she calls “unwrought space.” Landscape is, in a sense, always already peopled in Wollstonecraft’s text, thereby admitting access to a greater sympathetic rapport, because its visual pleasures depend upon an organization of perceptual information akin to understanding more immediate and interpersonal cultural intercourse.

For instance, early in the fifth letter Wollstonecraft segues from a brief discussion of the “leading traits of character” discernible in a stranger’s countenance, to a reflection on “the most uncultivated part of the country,” a transition that ultimately leads to a conflation of two diverse modes of reading visible surfaces, landscape, and physiognomy:

Still I believe that the grand features of Sweden are the same every where, and it is only the grand features that admit of description. There is an individuality in every prospect, which remains in the memory as forcibly depicted as the particular features that have arrested our attention; yet we cannot find words to discriminate that individuality so as to enable a stranger to say, this is the face, that the view. We may amuse by setting the imagination to work; but we cannot store the memory with a fact. (L, 37–38)
Here the confusion of faces and views is consistent with Wollstonecraft’s representational melding of her experiential claims, but it also marks her persistent interest in delineating national and native character by merging the physiognomies of the land and its people.40 With each new geographic location Wollstonecraft stresses the correspondence between figure and ground, often ascertaining the progressive degrees of “cultivation” by measuring the divergence between the two, so that along the rocky coast of Rusoer “the character of the inhabitants is as uncultivated, if not as picturesquely wild, as their abode” (L, 103), while the city of Christiana possesses “none of the graces of architecture, which ought to keep pace with the refining manners of a people—or the outside of the house will disgrace the inside” (L, 125). Rather than constructing a Wordsworthian landscape that subsumes or effaces the individual, Wollstonecraft sees the relationship between landscape and the subject as complementary, the distinction between “face” and “view” so negligible as to be incommunicable (“we cannot find words to discriminate”). This equivalence suggests that the recurrent personification in the Letters—the “fantastic heads” (L, 42) of rocky outcroppings, the countryside’s “face of joy” (L, 108), the “bosom of the noble river” (L, 192), topography as “the bones of the world” (L, 42)—functions as something more than figurative embellishment; indeed, it is a “medium of exchange” that orients Wollstonecraft geographically, culturally, and, as we will see, historically.41

What might be called Wollstonecraft’s sympathetic ecology—eliciting “fellow feeling” from each environment she inhabits, no matter how barren or sterile the view—finds its most expressive site in the individual faces of the Scandinavian people. Acknowledging that her “favorite subject of contemplation [is] the future improvement of the world” (L, 182), Wollstonecraft repeatedly reads a prophetic narrative of progress into and through the countenances she encounters, confessing rapturously (and not incidentally, echoing both Blake and Milton) that “I love sometimes to view the human face divine, and trace the soul, as well as the heart, in its varying lineaments” (L, 36). Writing from Tonsberg, for instance, she recounts an entire dinner party with the mayor’s family conducted by way of a “conversation of gestures,” concluding that, “Though I could not speak Danish, I knew that I could see a great deal: yes, I am persuaded that I have formed a very just opinion of the character of the Norwegians, without being able to hold converse with them” (L, 78).42 Here and elsewhere, Wollstonecraft posits the countenance as
a supplement to, and often a corrective of, the verbal anecdote: “the phrases were awkwardly transmitted, it is true; but looks and gestures were sufficient to make them intelligible and interesting” (L, 15). As a reader and defender of Stanhope Smith’s environmentalism, Wollstonecraft diligently records the correspondence between physiognomic signs and cultural practices, so that discrete features like a peasant’s poor teeth or an indolent girl’s downy complexion often function like crude ideologemes, the discrete features of a broader ideological reading inscribed on the native body.

Despite her frequent staging of face-to-face encounters, Wollstonecraft evinces a decided uneasiness with traditional physiognomics, the science of divining inscrutable spiritual qualities from the visible testimony of the body’s exterior. In chronicling the hack work she did in the 1780s, William Godwin notes in his Memoir that she “made an abridgment of Lavater’s Physiognomy, from the French, which has never been published.”43 The original work in question, Johann Lavater’s Physiognomische Fragmente (originally published in 1775–78), was the most systematic outline of physiognomy to date and was a popular sensation in Europe during the last decades of the century, but in her Letters Wollstonecraft suggests that the Swiss clergyman turned physiognomist’s reputation was based on something more than his discernment with regard to faces.

In letter 21, Wollstonecraft visits with Count Bernstorff, the strong-willed minister of Denmark who managed the regency during King Christian VII’s depravity. She describes the king as a “puppet of a monarch, moved by the strings which count Bernstorff holds fast,” and thus a mere “machine of state . . . the effigy of majesty” (L, 154). On the other hand, Bernstorff earns Wollstonecraft’s approbation as a man of prudence, “tenderly careful of his reputation,” the “real sovereign” of the state. In the midst of her discussion of the count, Wollstonecraft inserts a surprising critique of Lavater and his science:

I suppose that Lavater, whom he [Bernstorff] invited to visit him two years ago, some say to fix the principles of the Christian religion firmly in the prince royal’s mind, found lines in his face to prove him a statesman of the first order; because he has a knack of seeing a great character in the countenances of men in exalted stations, who have noticed him, or his works. Besides, the count’s sentiments relative to the French revolution agreeing with Lavater’s, must have ensured his applause. (L, 171)

Wollstonecraft’s accusation of partiality in Lavater’s system is consistent with her characterization of Bernstorff as a man preoccupied

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with his public stature and would perhaps befit any scientist seeking patronage and influence. However, the insinuation that Lavater's readings are subject to political suasion undermines the integrity of the physiognomist's professed neutrality. Lavater's science seeks to construct a subject position from which a careful observer/connoisseur can detect and assess the authentic features of a static, accessible figure, aiming for a neoclassical ideal whereby every visual detail is absorbed into typology, every blemish absorbed as form. In theory the visual economy is perfectly monological: there are no reciprocated gazes, no mutable features, no challenges to the authority of the physiognomic eye. On the other hand, Wollstonecraft's accusation that Lavater can exchange Bernstorff's "great[ness]" of countenance for privilege and patronage inserts the body's meaning into a complex of transactional politics, a masculine network of power, privilege, and reputation. According to Lavater, the physiognomic eye is active, penetrating, irrefutable, and, most significantly, masculine, or as he writes, "Man surveys and observes—woman glances and feels." It is not hard to see that the inflexible codification (and commodification) of the body-as-object in Lavater's science is anathema to Wollstonecraft's broader feminist project, wherein she strives to liberate those genteel women who have become "slaves to their bodies," women socialized to reproduce the corporeal signs of chastity, sensibility, and propriety. Furthermore, since Lavater focuses almost exclusively on the immutable hard features of the countenance, his version of the legible body conflicts with Wollstonecraft's circumstantial account of an adaptive body that manifests symptomatic signs of cultural identification.

Given her critique of Lavater's physiognomic practices, it becomes increasingly clear that the reading of the face is, for Wollstonecraft, a political act: history itself is countenanced in every face-to-face encounter with the other. For instance, after complaining of the prevalence of sycophantry and fraud in Christiana, the narrator flees to "open air" ("always my remedy when an aching-head proceeds from an oppressed heart"), only to confront "the sight of . . . slaves, working with chains on their legs"; in response, Wollstonecraft remarks that the melancholy scene "only served to embitter me still more against the regulations of society, which treated knaves in such a different manner, especially as there was a degree of energy in some of their countenances which unavoidably excited my attention, and almost created respect." Interestingly, the paragraph that immediately follows her grudging appeal to the slave countenance visually
seeks out a challenge to those “regulations of society” that perpetrate injustice: “I wished to have seen, through an iron grate, the face of a man who has been confined six years, for having induced the farmers to revolt against some impositions of the government” (L, 122). The same gaze that discovered signs of “energy” beyond the sentimentalized aspect of misery turns to linger over the face of a local insurgent that moved hundreds of Norwegian farmers to contest taxation. Having avowed that “the inhabitants of Denmark and Norway are the least oppressed people of Europe” (L, 66), Wollstonecraft not only locates signs of this emancipatory ethos in the signifying body, but consistently reads these signs as heralds of a projected universal history that is gradually unfolding: “The Norwegians appear to me a sensible, shrewd people, with little scientific knowledge, and still less taste for literature: but they are arriving at the epoch which precedes the introduction of the arts and sciences” (L, 63). I want to turn now to the ways in which Wollstonecraft situates her northern tour within both contemporary European political history, as well as the history of man’s biological and climatic circumstances.

While the ostensible reason for Wollstonecraft’s trip was to serve as Gilbert Imlay’s business envoy in a legal suit, Wollstonecraft suggests from the opening letter onward that her tour of the northern countries is an antidote to her experience in Paris during the Terror: “I gazed around with rapture, and felt more of that spontaneous pleasure which gives credulity to our expectation of happiness, than I had for a long, long time before. I forgot the horrors I had witnessed in France, which had cast a gloom over all nature” (L, 14). Wollstonecraft had arrived in France in December 1792 eager to witness history’s bold new turn. But like many of her radical expatriates who flocked to Paris during the buoyant early nineties, she was astonished by the bloody and precipitous reversal of fortune, and, as an English émigré during war, barely escaped arrest by the French government in the fall of 1793. Her letters home as early as that first December capture the uncanny presence the events in France would have on Wollstonecraft’s consciousness: in a note to her publisher Joseph Johnson she describes the sight of Louis XVI being led through the streets under heavy guard, an image that haunted her very attempts to write, for as she explains to Johnson, “once or twice, lifting my eyes from the paper, I have seen eyes glare through the glass-door opposite my chair, and bloody hands shook at me.”47 In part to exorcise these demons, Wollstonecraft chronicled her reflections on the French turmoil in An Historical and Moral View of the

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French Revolution (1794), which argues that the Terror followed from an incautious rush to act on the spoils of revolution by a people unprepared for the responsibility of revolution itself. Despite her critique of the momentary failings of the revolutionary project, Wollstonecraft opens the Historical and Moral View reaffirming her belief in a teleological understanding of history, citing the nascent American republic as an instance of evolutionary progress amidst signs of degeneracy: “the anglo-americans appeared another race of beings, men formed to enjoy the advantages of society, and not merely to benefit those who governed; the use to which they had been appropriated in almost every state; considered only as the ballast which keeps the vessel steady, necessary, yet despised.” Like much English Jacobin writing of the period, Wollstonecraft’s discourse emplots the events in France and America within an historical narrative that begins with “the infancy of man, his gradual advance towards maturity, his miserable weakness as a solitary being, and thecrudeness of his first notions respecting the nature of civil society,” and concludes when “[r]eason has, at last, shown her captivating face, beaming with benevolence; and it will be impossible for the dark hand of despotism again to obscure its radiance.” While the Scandinavian letters lack the political urgency and immediacy of the French Revolution writings, they subtly operate to regain lost philosophical and political ground for Wollstonecraft, who, demoralized by the failed promise of France, turns to a version of histoire de la longue durée to reimagine the project of civilization.

Much of the critical commentary on the Scandinavian letters has focused on Wollstonecraft’s conscription of sensibility in the service of a critique of gendered subjectivity, allowing the author to move between the imperatives of a “woman of observation” and those of the sentimental heroine. But Wollstonecraft’s rapprochement with history after her residence in Paris is a powerful shaping force in her construction of sympathetic bonds, as when she laments, “How frequently has melancholy and even misanthropy taken possession of me, when the world has disgusted me . . . I have then considered myself as a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind;—I was alone until some involuntary sympathetic emotion, like the attraction of adhesion, made me feel that I was still a part of a mighty whole, from which I could not sever myself” (L, 17). It is this “involuntary sympathetic emotion,” with its centripetal force, that Wollstonecraft paradoxically seeks in her solitary rambles, an attempt to reanimate her fidelity to “simple fellow feeling” by naturalizing the
construction of self-in-the-world in and through her predominate metaphor, the “face of the country.” Sweden, Norway, and Denmark are, significantly, politically neutral countries in the war between England and France, and as Mary Favret points out, “they seem poised at the threshold between feudal and industrial societies, between monarchy and democracy, between superstition and enlightenment,” thus providing a fitting ground for reconsidering the trajectory of European history. In her advertisement to Letters, Wollstonecraft pledges to supply “a just view of the present state of the countries I have passed through” (L, 5); however, it becomes readily apparent that Wollstonecraft understands this “present” as situated in a discernible universal history within which Sweden, Norway, and Denmark occupy a privileged position. For instance, she begins the fifth letter with reflections that might easily have appeared in Stanhope Smith’s Essay eight years earlier: “convinced, by repeated observation, that the manners of the people are best discriminated in the country,” the author decides against a trip to Stockholm, concluding that,

the inhabitants of the capital are all of the same genus; for the varieties in the species we must therefore, search where the habitations of men are so separated as to allow the difference of climate to have its natural effect. And with this difference we are, perhaps, most forcibly struck at the first view, just as we form an estimate of the leading traits of a character at the first glance, of which intimacy afterwards makes us almost lose sight. (L, 37)

Not only does Wollstonecraft employ the classificatory terminology of the natural historian in this passage, but by grounding national character in climatic variation, she ostensibly puts into operation Smith’s environmental account of human difference. Significantly, it is in the immediacy of the visual encounter that character is reliably determined, before the errors of subjective “intimacy” set in, an observation that corresponds to the willful detachment of the philosophic traveler that Wollstonecraft advocates in her reviews. Wollstonecraft is undoubtedly aware that she resides in the homeland of Linnaeus when she comments that “Sweden appeared to me the country in the world most proper to form the botanist and natural historian: every object seemed to remind me of the creation of things, of the first efforts of sportive nature,” to which she concludes, “When a country arrives at a certain state of perfection, it looks as if it were made so” (L, 40).
Remarkably, Wollstonecraft’s vision of the northern regions as a site of origin provokes her to contrive her own crude model of global history:

So far from thinking that the primitive inhabitants of the world lived in a southern climate, where Paradise spontaneously arose, I am led to infer, from various circumstances, that the first dwelling of man happened to be a spot like this which led him to adore the sun so seldom seen; for this worship, which probably preceded that of demons or demi-gods, certainly never began in a southern climate, where the continual presence of the sun prevented its being considered as a good; or rather the want of it never being felt, this glorious luminary would carelessly have diffused its blessings without being hailed as a benefactor. Man must therefore have been placed in the north, to tempt him to run after the sun, in order that the different parts of the earth might be peopled. Nor do I wonder that hordes of barbarians always poured out of these regions to seek for milder climes, when nothing like cultivation attached them to the soil; especially when we take into view that the adventuring spirit, common to man, is naturally stronger and more general during the infancy of society. (L, 43–44)

Wollstonecraft’s makeshift theory of sun deprivation and the history of global migration is fascinating in part because it insists on seeing the immediate present as a trace of lost origins (“the first dwelling of man happened to be a spot like this”), while insuring that that prehistory is rooted in a crude Germanic and Caucasian past. In privileging a heliotropic impetus for the gradual peopling of the globe, Wollstonecraft suggests that environmental conditions not only delimit native character but are fundamentally connected to the history of racial and cultural difference. According to Wollstonecraft, a speculative venture such as this is a duty incumbent upon the philosophic traveler, “whose works have served as materials for the compilers of universal histories” (L, 48), and after pointing out ways in which travel writers often overdetermine “local circumstances,” she concedes that “those writers who have considered the history of man, or of the human mind, on a more enlarged scale, have fallen into similar errors, not reflecting that the passions are weak where the necessities of life are too hardly or too easily obtained” (L, 49). Finally, asserting that “the spirit of inquiry is the characteristic of the present century,” Wollstonecraft projects that the “great accumulation of knowledge” that will naturally ensue will “destroy the factitious national characters which have been supposed permanent, though only rendered so by the permanency of ignorance” (L, 49).

Wollstonecraft’s deconstruction of the notion of national character
is, significantly, a form of revisionism or self-editing. In the nineteenth letter she reminds her reader that “my principal object has been to take such a dispassionate view of men as will lead me to form a just idea of the nature of man,” a view that “do[es] not pretend to sketch a national character; but merely to note the present state of morals and manners, as I trace the progress of the world’s improvement.” But Wollstonecraft admits that this perspective is newly emergent, and that “I believe I should have been less severe in the remarks I have made on the vanity and depravity of the French [in An Historical and Moral View], had I traveled towards the north before I visited France” (L, 161). Just as her Scandinavian text retraces the cultural premises that impel her critique of French “depravity,” Wollstonecraft posits that northern Europe offers a primer in the larger Enlightenment project of touring history: “If traveling, as the completion of a liberal education, were to be adopted on rational grounds, the northern states ought to be visited before the more polished parts of Europe, to serve as the elements even of the knowledge of manners, only to be acquired by tracing the various shades of different countries” (L, 162). Here Stanhope Smith’s racial schema has literally been mapped onto Wollstonecraft’s meditation on European history, the projected traveler left to “trace” the variegated shades that constitute a version of European identity that is differentiated like race. Racial difference has become metaphorical, or perhaps more precisely, the classificatory norm of whiteness yields to the imperatives of a symbolic racial science that understands cultural identification as historically and geographically determined. Whiteness, disclosing its various shades, reveals its mottled past. Importantly, Smith and Wollstonecraft both write before what Wiegman calls the “ascendancy of biology,” whereby the concept of race came to signify “a rather stable and primary characteristic for defining the nature of the body, both its organic and ontological consistency.” As a result both Smith’s Essay and Wollstonecraft’s travelogue see in the construction of racial and cultural otherness a symptomatic relation to historical change: race is not yet a reasonably stable signifier, but rather functions as a system of symbolic values used to emplot the progressive history of civilization.

As Blake intuited in his representation of Wollstonecraft’s “different face,” the imperatives of physical variance, troped in Blake’s verse as racial difference, are complicit with an emergent politics of history in the late eighteenth century. Where the protagonist and the speaker of Blake’s lyric reclaim the “face” (and, by extension, character and

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politics) as a stay against radical alienation, Wollstonecraft’s own preoccupation with reading countenance in *Letters* suggests that these native faces function as an antidote to political despair, offering the traveler a means of tracing in a single glance the “present state of manners” as well as the historical trajectory of the world’s gradual “improvement.” The philosophical impact of Wollstonecraft’s Scandi-navian excursion is perhaps best measured in the cautionary tale she appends to her published text. Noting that “the meliorating manners of Europe” have expedited “the increasing knowledge and happiness of the kingdoms I passed through,” Wollstonecraft nonetheless warns that there are still many “prejudices . . . which only time can root out” (*L*, 197). She closes then with an admonition:

An ardent affection for the human race makes enthusiastic characters eager to produce alteration in laws and governments prematurely. To render them useful and permanent, they must be the growth of each particular soil, and the gradual fruit of the ripening understanding of the nation, matured by time, not forced by an unnatural fermentation. And, to convince me that such a change is gaining ground, with accelerating pace, the view I have had of society, during my northern journey, would have been sufficient, had I not previously considered the grand causes which combine to carry mankind forward, and diminish the sum of human misery. (*L*, 198)

These “grand causes,” here clearly differentiated from the “unnatural fermentation” that characterizes the French Revolution, act inexorably on the manners, minds, and bodies of a populace and compel the organic discourse and the quietist politics of Wollstonecraft’s final passage. The text thus ends in consolation, playing out in global terms that internal drama that Wollstonecraft herself described in her first letter home, worth repeating if only because it consolidates so poignantly the deep structures of the author’s faith in history: “I have considered myself as a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind;—I was alone, till some involuntary sympathetic emotion, like the attraction of adhesion, made me feel that I was still part of a mighty whole, from which I could not sever myself” (*L*, 17).

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**NOTES**

1 Mary Wollstonecraft, review of William Thomson’s *Mammuth; or Human Nature Displayed on a Grand Scale; in a Tour with the Tinkers into the Inland Parts of Africa*, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, 7

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3 See Mary Poovey’s *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984), 3–47, for an overview of what Poovey calls “the paradoxes of propriety” in Wollstonecraft’s age, central to which is the notion that female modesty is a puzzlingly ambiguous sign: “For a modest demeanor served not only to assure the world that a woman’s appetites were under control; it also indicated that female sexuality was still assertive enough to require control. That is, even as modesty was proclaimed to be the most reliable guardian of a woman’s chastity—and hence the external sign of her internal integrity—it was also declared to be an advertisement for—and hence an attraction to—her sexuality” (21).


5 Quoted in Erdman, *Prophet Against Empire*, 406.

6 Blake to Thomas Butts, 16 August 1803, in *Complete Poetry and Prose*, 733.

7 One of Blake’s biographers, Alexander Gilchrist, notes that “down to his latest days . . . [Blake] would jokingly urge in self-defense that the shape of his forehead made him a republican”; see *The Life of William Blake* (London: Everyman, 1942), 80.

8 Moira Ferguson, *Colonialism and Gender from Mary Wollstonecraft to Jamaica Kincaid: East Caribbean Connections* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993), 8–33. For example, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Carol Poston (New York: Norton, 1988), Wollstonecraft writes, “Why subject [women] to propriety—blind propriety, if she be capable of acting from a nobler spring, if she be an heir of immortality? Is sugar always to be produced by vital blood? Is one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subject to prejudices that brutalize them, when principles would be a sure guard, only to sweeten the cup of man?” (144–45).

9 Wollstonecraft ends her review: “We cannot dismiss this article without expressing the pleasure the perusal has afforded us; it is certainly a very interesting subject; whatever tends to make visible the wisdom of the Supreme Being in the world we
inhabit, is of the utmost importance to our happiness; the gratification of curiosity, when excited by trivial objects, is undoubtedly pleasant; but in this instance it is a fresh support to virtue’ (W, 7:55).


11 Interestingly, Wollstonecraft does cite Blake’s figure of “the human face divine” in her Scandinavian letters. She ends letter 4, for instance, with “[s]till I love sometimes to view the human face divine, and trace the soul, as well as the heart, in its varying lineaments”; see Letter Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, ed. Poston (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1976), 36; see also 181. Hereafter abbreviated L and cited parenthetically by page number.

12 A great deal of my understanding of the rhetorical and ideological presuppositions shaping eighteenth-century travel literature is indebted to Mary Louise Pratt’s Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (New York: Routledge, 1992). Interestingly, Wollstonecraft’s Letters could be said to structure its narrative around the kind of “contact zones” Pratt highlights and might well be viewed as “autoethnography,” another of Pratt’s idiosyncratic but no less compelling terms.

13 Pratt, Imperial Eyes, 9.


18 In July 1792, Benjamin Rush, a preeminent figure in late eighteenth-century American medicine, argued before the American Philosophical Society that the dark skin of the African derived from leprosy. Given that albinism was considered a disease by physicians of the period, Rush contended that pigmentation is susceptible to profound alteration when the body is inflected: since leprosy often darkens the skin and is hereditary, Rush postulated that the negro suffered from a form of congenital leprosy that had lost its virulent, infectious traits.

19 Quoted in Greene, 70–71.

Hume, 213. This passage is actually a revision of Hume’s emended footnote, the original of which evinced a more committed participation in the discourse of polygenesis. The footnote originally began: “I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation” (I’ve marked significant changes in italics). The original footnote is cited in John Immerwahr’s discussion of Hume’s revisions, “Hume’s Revised Racism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53 (1992): 481–86.


Smith, *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species* (Philadelphia: Robert Aiken, 1787), 4. Of climatological theories, Hume writes, “If we run over the globe, or revolve the annals of history, we shall discover everywhere signs of a sympathy or contagion of manners, none of the influence of air or climate” (209). His assuredness is countered by Smith’s own emphatic claims: “But I remark, with pleasure, whether this theory be well founded or not, the fact may be perfectly ascertained that climate has all the power to change the complexion which I suppose, and which is necessary to the present subject.—It appears from the whole state of the world—it appears from obvious and undeniable events within the memory of history, and from events even within our own view” (*An Essay* (1787), 17–18).

Smith, *An Essay* (1787), 6–7 (“the law”; “ground”; “[W]hen heat”), 8 (“national”), 60–61 (“a young”; “sensibly”; “[His native”], 25 (“melt”). Smith also relates the changes manifest in a young servant girl’s physiognomy after she is lifted out of “abject poverty” to become a domestic in Smith’s household: she has become “in the space of four years, fresh and ruddy in her complexion, her hair long and flowing, and she is not badly made in her person” (55). By the time Smith published his expanded second edition in 1810 he was able to include the strange and increasingly famous case of Henry Moss, “a negro in the state of Maryland, [who] began, upwards of twenty years ago to undergo a change in the colour of his skin, from a deep black, to a clear and healthy white” (*An Essay* [1865], 58).

Smith, *An Essay* (1965), 3. See Jordan’s instructive introduction to Smith’s reprinted second edition of the *Essay* for a discussion of how Smith’s treatise engages the “ethnographical laboratory” that is early America (xxviii). Smith’s portrait of the early American landscape is typically one of miasmic swamps and suffocating forests that emit a fog of unwholesome gasses which, by way of epidermal absorption or common respiration, subtly alter the body’s constitution. For a discussion of Foucault and natural history’s turn to “the body as the locus of identity and difference,” see Wiegman, 27–30; see also Nancy Leys Stepans and Sander Gilman’s “Appropriating the Idioms of Science: The Rejection of Scientific Racism,” in *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance*, ed. Dominick LaCapra (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991), for a discussion of how nineteenth-century African-American scientists resurrected Christian monogenism as an antidote to increasingly racist paradigms in evolutionary thinking (80–84).

Smith, *An Essay* (1787), 43.

Smith, *An Essay* (1965), 69 (“the human”), 105–6 (“the improvement”; “there is”). In the first edition of the *Essay* Smith similarly attributes to climatological

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influences a marked change in those who have been forcibly transported from their homelands, citing that “Africans who have been brought to America are daily becoming, under all the disadvantages of servitude, more ingenious and susceptible of instruction” (77). See Stanton for a discussion of the politicization of Smith’s environmental theories (11–12).

29 Wieck, 31.


31 Jordan, introduction to An Essay (1965), xvi.

32 According to Todd’s prefatory note to volume 7 of Works, “Johnson invited Mary Wollstonecraft to write for the Analytical Review in 1788 at its inception, and she continued reviewing for it until she left for France in December 1792. She probably wrote for the early issues and by June 1789 seems to have been contributing well over thirty reviews to an issue.” (14). Todd details the various debates concerning the ascription of specific reviews to Wollstonecraft, and concludes that those essays that are signed “M,” “W,” and “T” are likely examples of Wollstonecraft’s early magazine work; in fact, comparing her private correspondence (where Wollstonecraft often remarked on what she was currently reading) to a list of the reviews that appear in the Analytical Review suggests that the articles signed “M” are consistently Wollstonecraft’s.

33 Interestingly, Wollstonecraft sounds much like Smith in this brief review, even as she is deferring a discussion of environmental monogeny: “How they are shaded down, from the fresh colour of northern rustics, to the sable hue seen on the African sands, is not our task to inquire, nor do we intend to draw a parallel between the abilities of a negro and European mechanic” (W, 7:100).

34 Pratt, Imperial Eyes, 7.

35 The motivations behind Wollstonecraft’s excursion through Scandinavia are as complex as the text that arises out of that excursion. Letters is a generic amalgam, an epistolary travelogue superimposed on a series of love letters, ultimately disguising what one critic calls a “romantic quest . . . resembl[ing] Wordsworth’s later pilgrimage in search of reintegration of self, nature, and society” (Mitzi Myers, “Mary Wollstonecraft’s Letters Written . . . in Sweden: Toward Romantic Autobiography,” Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture 8 [1979]: 166). The most pragmatic, but least textually present stimulus for the journey is Wollstonecraft’s role as Gilbert Imlay’s envoy. Imlay was involved in blockade running, using the neutral northern ports in Scandinavia and Hamburg to supply revolutionary France with vital goods during the war with England, a direct and audacious breech of Britain’s Traitorous Correspondence Bill of 1793. In 1794 Imlay’s ship, the Maria and Margaretha, reportedly sank off the coast near Arendal, its cargo of sterling silver hijacked. In response, Imlay brought a suit against the twenty-five-year-old Norwegian captain (Peder Ellefsen) and sent his lover Wollstonecraft as his legal representative with the authority to intervene in the conduct of the suit and perhaps reach an amicable settlement before the criminal proceedings dragged on. Throughout her travels Wollstonecraft carried a document drawn up by Imlay designating her “Mary Imlay, my best friend and wife,” a textual extension of the fictional marriage they perpetuated while living in Paris during the Terror. All of this begins to suggest how thoroughly implicated is the author’s textual persona, engaged in a political, legal, and sentimental performance that governs both the nature of her experiences and
the manner in which she represents them. Of course, almost all of the biographical treatments of Wollstonecraft’s life discuss the commercial implications of her travels, but two that make this angle central are Per Nystrom’s *Mary Wollstonecraft’s Scandinavian Journey*, trans. George R. Otter (Gothenburg: Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of Gothenburg, 1980), 22 and following; and Mary Favret’s chapter “Mary Wollstonecraft and the Business of Letters,” in her *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics, and the Fiction of Letters* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 96–132.

36 Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 45.

37 The two best studies of “the face of the country” as a trope in literary and aesthetic works of the period remain Pratt’s “Scratches on the Face of the Country; or, What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushmen,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 199–43; and Frances Ferguson’s *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 129–45. Ferguson reads William Gilpin’s picturesque descriptive tours through the lens of Michael Fried’s work on theatricality and absorption and claims Gilpin “moves toward a version of landscape drawing as portraiture” (142). This allows her to argue that landscape’s “face” ostensibly interpellates the viewer. It is worth noting that the phrase does appear in Smith’s treatise as well (see for instance 62–63).

38 Wollstonecraft was quite conversant with picturesque landscape theory and wrote reviews of three separate works by Gilpin, including a 1789 commentary in the *Analytical Review* on his *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, etc. Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, Made in the Summer of the Year 1770* (W, 7:160–64; see also 196–98, and 455–57). For a study of the role of the picturesque in Wollstonecraft’s Scandinavian narrative, see Jeanne Moskal, “The Picturesque and the Affectionate in Wollstonecraft’s *Letters from Norway,***” *Modern Language Quarterly* 52 (1991): 263–94.

39 This imaginative peopling of barren panoramas reaches an apex when Wollstonecraft’s ruminations turn Malthusian (two years before *On the Principle of Population*): “This view of this wild coast, as we sailed along it, afforded me a continual subject for meditation. I anticipated the future improvement of the world, and observed how much man had still to do, to obtain of the earth all it could yield. I even carried my speculations so far as to advance a million or two of years to the moment when the earth would perhaps be so perfectly cultivated, and so completely peopled, as to render it necessary to inhabit every spot; yes, these bleak shores. Imagination went still farther, and pictured the state of man when the earth could no longer support him. Where was he to fly to from universal famine? Do not smile: I really became distressed for these fellow creatures, yet un-born” (*L*, 102).

40 The coalescence of faces and views noted above is sentimentalized in a later passage in which Wollstonecraft interiorizes her relationship with nature, creating a nostalgic landscape that is sublime in both its “tremendous” physical presence and in its emotional reach:

When a warm heart has received strong impression, they are not to be effaced. Emotions become sentiments; and the imagination renders even transient sensations permanent, by fondly retracing them. I cannot, without a thrill of delight, recollect views I have seen, which are not to be forgotten,—nor looks I have felt in every nerve which I shall never more meet. The grave has closed over a dear friend, the friend of my youth; still she is present with me, and I hear her soft voice warbling as I stray

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over the heath. Fate has separated me from another, the fire of whose eyes, tempered by infantine tenderness, still warms my breast; even when gazing on these tremendous cliffs, sublime emotions absorb my soul. And, smile not, if I add, that the rosy tint of morning reminds me of a suffusion, which will never more charm my senses, unless it reappears on the cheeks of my child. Her sweet blushes I may yet hid in my bosom, and she is still too young to ask why starts the tear, so near akin to pleasure and pain? (L, 58–59, my emphasis)

The immediacy of the observed prospect becomes the picturesque canvas for the portrait of faces remembered (Wollstonecraft’s late childhood friend, Fanny Blood, her daughter, Fanny Imlay, Imlay himself), as each temporal and spatial shift in the passage projects a new face. Significantly, the narrator recalls not only “views I have seen,” but concurrently “looks I have felt,” a reminder to the reader that there is always a reciprocity of visual exchange embedded in Wollstonecraft’s aesthetic.

41 W. J. T. Mitchell understands landscape as a “medium of exchange” in his essay “Imperial Landscape,” in Landscape and Power, ed. Mitchell (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), 5–34. In his introduction to the collection, Mitchell writes, “Landscape as a cultural medium thus has a double role with respect to something like ideology: it naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site” (2).

42 Of the young women she meets (“several very pretty faces”), Wollstonecraft notes: “As their minds were totally uncultivated, I did not lose much, perhaps gained, by not being able to understand them; for fancy really filled up, more to their advantage, the void in the picture. Be that as it may, they excited my sympathy; and I was very much flattered when I was told, the next day, that they said it was a pleasure to look at me, I appeared so good-natured” (L, 79).

43 Godwin, 226.

44 It is worth noting that Lavater directs some of his most impassioned and far-reaching rhetoric toward “princes and judges” for whom the science of physiognomics should become a part of jurisprudence: “Physiognomy will render torture unnecessary, will deliver innocence, will make the most obdurate vice turn pale, will teach us how we may act upon the most hardened”; see Johann Casper Lavater, Essays on Physiognomy, trans. Thomas Holcroft (New York: R. Worthington, 1880), 411–12. For a discussion of the ways in which Lavater was read and deployed by the English Jacobins, see my “Godwin, Lavater, and the Pleasures of Surface,” Studies in Romanticism 35 (1996): 73–97.

45 Lavater, 402.

46 Barbara Stafford has described the physiognomic subject (often captured in silhouette) as “[h]elplessly immobilized in a camera obscura—like a pinned live or a clamped dissected frog—the sitter was turned into a victim. The young woman under study was converted into a natural history specimen destined for narrow and searching scrutiny by a concealed viewer” (Body Criticism: Imagining the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991], 98). Wollstonecraft discusses the reduction of women to their bodily signs in Vindication, 43–44. Wollstonecraft evokes images of women who cultivate delicacy to the point of sickness, weigh down their persons with adornments, and grow so languid that “weakness of body will not permit them to suckle their children” (Vindication, 178–
The extent of the unvindicated woman’s preoccupation with her physical enervation reflects her commitment to the cult of beauty: her body thus serves as a visual demonstration of the virility of the social practices that construct her presence.

47 Wollstonecraft to Joseph Johnson, 26 December 1792, in Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft, ed. Ralph M. Wardle (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979), 227. It is important to note that on the day Wollstonecraft observed him from her window, Louis was en route to his trial on the opening day of the defense. In his Memoir, Godwin describes how Wollstonecraft virtually stumbled upon a public execution in Paris, in which “the blood of the guillotine appeared fresh on the pavement,” and how a prudent bystander warned her of her carelessness and “intreated her to hasten and hide her discontents” when “the emotions of her soul burst forth in indignant exclamations” (244). Claire Tomalin provides the most thorough biographical account of Wollstonecraft’s years in France in The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft (New York: New American Library, 1974), 118–74.

48 Wollstonecraft, An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution, in Political Writings, ed. Todd (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1993), 304, my emphasis.


50 Favret, 99.

51 See Reginald Horsman, “Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism in Great Britain Before 1850,” in Race, Gender, and Rank, 77–100, for an exploration of the eighteenth-century preoccupation with England’s teutonic racial history.

52 The notion of national character in Wollstonecraft’s Letters is always susceptible to modification. At the end of her opening letter Wollstonecraft recounts a distressing scene that implicitly ascribes causality to the face: “I saw the first countenance in Sweden that displeased me, though the man was better dressed than any one who had as yet fallen in my way. An altercation took place between him and my host, the purport of which I could not guess, excepting I was the occasion of it . . . The sequel was his leaving the house angrily; and I was immediately informed that he was a custom-house officer. The professional had indeed effaced the national character, for living as he did with these frank hospitable people, still only the exciseman appeared—the counterpart of some I had met with in England and France” (L, 17–18, my emphasis). Here the economic encroaches on and “efface[s]” the national character, foreshadowing the way in which the letters that follow will grow increasingly critical of the kind of commercialism in which Imlay himself is implicated. In fact, Wollstonecraft utilizes this same rhetoric in her private correspondence with Imlay, differentiating between her lover’s “commercial face” and his “best looks,” the latter of which “lend me the sympathetic tears you excited”; see Collected Letters, 264.

53 Wiegman, 30.