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From Oroonoko Tobacco to Blackamoor Snuffboxes: Race, Gender and the Consumption of Snuff in Eighteenth-Century Britain

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Abstract: This essay investigates the circulation of the trope of the Black body in visual and textual representations of tobacco consumption, both smoked and taken as snuff. I look at the ways in which tobacco advertising depicting the type of snuff for sale or representing enslaved Africans working on plantations articulated notions of race and coloniality. I then show that snuffboxes can be seen as material counterparts in the dissemination of racist ideology in the eighteenth century. The gender-defining practice of taking snuff is studied in relation to colonial politics using a selection of texts and a material corpus of rare extant “Blackamoor” snuffboxes (depicting the black body and face) that have not yet received scholarly attention. I argue that through female agency, the use of Blackamoor snuffboxes normalised slavery by integrating it in the cultural rituals of British sociability through a process of material aestheticisation.

Keywords: snuff and snuffboxes; tobacco; Oroonoko; black body; 18th century material culture; gender construction



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1. Introduction

The rise of transatlantic colonial exchanges in the eighteenth century led to an increase in tobacco consumption, either smoked or taken as snuff—the pleasures of the pipe and of the nose spread rapidly among aristocratic and middle-class circles.¹ Whilst smoking was a masculine activity, taking snuff was shared by women and men alike. Snuff and smoking became associated with the public sphere and rituals of sociability in metropolitan culture.² The colonial origin of tobacco and its association with indentured labour connected these fashionable practices with imperial politics, and material culture was a powerful site for the display of this relation. The circulation of the trope of the Black body on tobacco-related artefacts discloses the complexities of the social consumption of tobacco. Recent scholarship has shown how pervasive the fashionable representation of the African body was in European visual and decorative art.³ “Blackamoor” figures appeared profusely in ornamental porcelain compositions or as motifs on useful artefacts such as sugar bowls, candle holders and tables. As Adrienne Childs has pointed out, using the Black body as ornament reveals a complex entanglement of “race, slavery, and representation in European material culture”, (Childs 2010, p. 159).

In this essay, I wish to unearth the ways in which the economic and colonial implications of taking snuff or buying tobacco were fashioned into an aesthetic of blackness deployed in decorative artefacts, advertising print culture and fiction. I contend that the fashion for snuff allowed for an erasure of the inhumanity of colonial politics, as it subsumed and incorporated slavery in the cultural rituals of British sociability through a process of aestheticisation and commodification: customers could buy the ornamental Black body on snuffboxes or on tobacco paper. Focusing on the image and use of the snuff-box in material fictions and visual culture, I propose to analyse the latter as a metonym for

race and colonial trade, and suggest that its manipulation added gendered considerations to the underlying racist ideology.

The material corpus of eighteenth-century European and British snuffboxes is vast,⁴ as is the body of texts dealing with tobacco consumption. For the purpose of my argument, I have chosen a methodology that will solely deal with objects—mostly British—and texts that are linked to the visual representation of Black enslaved people and expose colonial discourses and practices. I will investigate the representation of blackness through two particular types of tobacco-related “things”: printed advertisements (textual and visual) and “Blackamoor” snuffboxes. The first section of this paper focuses on the mercantile materialisation of race in printed advertising, to show that the consumption of advertisements as much as that of tobacco contributed to shaping racial ideology. Challenging Anne McClintock’s claim that “[i]n the eighteenth-century, the commodity was little more than a mundane object to be bought and used”, (McClintock 1995, p. 208) and that the Victorian period saw the rise of commodity-driven economies, I contend that imperial exchanges were materialised in “things” that were consumed as early as the eighteenth century, and that tobacco advertising and the manufacture of snuffboxes can be seen as early manifestations of “commodity racism”, (McClintock, p. 209) as they shaped discourses on racial difference.⁵ In the second section, the male fashion for taking snuff will be analysed as a social ritual that retained a political implication, wherein the expression of male gentility intersected with coloniality. The last section attempts to interpret the rare (and hitherto unexplored) material archives of Blackamoor snuffboxes in light of the connection between race, coloniality and female agency in the consumption of snuff.

2. Materialising Race and the Black Body in Tobacco Advertising

In an advertisement published in the *Daily Courant* on 28 November 1723, Benjamin Betts, a London tobacco salesman and snuffmaker, promoted the quality of the Virginian “Oronooko [sic]” snuff he sold at the Virginia Coffee-house “in St Michael’s Alley in Cornhill, near the Royal Exchange”:

ORONOOKO SNUFF: By Wholesale or Retail, at 6 s. per Pound, with an Allowance to those that sell it again. Note, Although the beautiful Colour and fine Flavour of this Snuff is so very extraordinary as to create a Suspicion that it is the Effect of Art, yet Gentlemen may depend upon what they have at the Place to be Nothing but Tobacco in its utmost Purity, without the least Adulteration. (*Daily Courant* 28 November 1723, p. 2)

The Virginia Coffee house, also known as the Virginia and Maryland Coffee house, later renamed the Virginia and Baltick Coffee house in 1744, was a meeting place for merchants, sea captains and ship owners engaged in trade routes across the Baltic sea for the commerce of fur, and across the Atlantic for the shipment of cargoes of tobacco. Benjamin Betts aptly chose this place to operate his business. Despite the slightly different spelling used by Betts in the *Daily Courant*, “Oronooko snuff” refers to a particular variety of tobacco produced in Virginia.⁶ Etymologically, the term originates in the Orinoco River north of Suriname. In the Chesapeake Bay, the cultivation of tobacco in Virginia and Maryland had become the staple of the colonial economy by the eighteenth century. In an essay entitled “on Tobacco culture”, dated 4 May 1784, Thomas Jefferson distinguished Oronoko tobacco from the Sweetscented variety, both produced in Virginia:

In Virginia two species of tobacco are cultivated, very distinct from each other. They are called Oronoko and Sweetscented. The first is the hardiest and of the greatest produce; the last of the most delicate flavour. I think it used to sell about an eighth higher than the Oronoko. All other names given to our tobaccos are arbitrary and particular; every plant of tobacco going from Virginia being in fact of one of the two kinds already mentioned. (Jefferson [1784] 1953, p. 209)

The name Oronoko is also reminiscent of Aphra Behn’s title for her novella *Oroonoko; Or the Royal Slave* (1688) and Thomas Southerne’s eponymous play (1695). In Behn’s work,

Oroonoko is an African prince who is taken captive by English sailors and slavers and is transported to Surinam with other African men and women destined to be enslaved. Recent scholarship has discussed Behn's choice of giving the hero of the story the name of a tobacco plant as a way to reference the transatlantic colonial trade of tobacco (Iwanisziw 1998, pp. 75–98; Athey and Alarcón 1993, pp. 425–27). If the name of the main protagonist has been investigated in light of Virginian Oroonoko tobacco in the colonial context of slavery in the seventeenth century, the role that the literary figure might have played in the cultural imagination of eighteenth-century Oroonoko consumers and in the metropolitan marketing strategies used to sell this product has received little attention. I contend that urban smokers and snuff takers were highly likely to know, and possibly to have read or seen, the novella and/or the play, and that the commodity and its eponymous character connected colonial geography, literature, consumption and material culture, not necessarily on a conscious level, but through the strong associations of ideas in consumers' minds.⁷ The *Daily Courant* advertisement quoted above emphasises the “beautiful colour” of snuff, “so extraordinary” as to raise doubts about its purity and lead to suspicions about possible additions of dyes and flavours, a common practice for aromatic snuffs that were often enhanced with floral fragrances such as rose, lavender, jasmine or bergamot. Behn's novella similarly emphasises the exceptionalism of Oroonoko by linking his majesty and noble status to his black complexion, of “polish'd jett” (Behn [1688] 1997, p. 13). The colour of both character and commodity acts as a marker of quality: Oroonoko's humanity and virtues find a counterpart in the material qualities of snuff. Behn's work ends with Oroonoko's torture and execution after the slavers find that he led a rebellion of enslaved men and women in Surinam. Whilst being tortured, Oroonoko is seen calmly smoking a pipe, almost impervious to excruciating pain. The African prince is depicted engaged in a practice shared by white British males in sociable circles. Numerous trade cards of tobacco sellers superimposed smoking Native Americans or hybridised African–Indian princes with smoking European gentlemen, creating a form of proximity between self and other without, however, erasing the racial hierarchisation implied.

Tobacco advertising trade cards, together with snuff and tobacco wrap paper, form a rich printed material that join transatlantic history and the history of consumption together. As Catherine Molineux has demonstrated, trade cards represented various facets of the colonial production of tobacco. They emphasised British maritime power, as well as planters' authority over enslaved labour forces in the colonies, always with a view to praising the “pleasures of the smoke” (Molineux 2007, pp. 327–76). A vast majority of trade cards produced in England and in American colonies depict enslaved African men (women do not generally appear on them) working on tobacco plantations under the surveying scrutiny of a planter. Sometimes enslaved Africans appear on their own, without the planter's presence. “Martin's Best Virginia”, a trade card of a tobacco seller in Bloomsbury market in London (Figure 1), shows slaves cultivating tobacco without a white presence to oversee them, except for the white gaze of the consumer, who thus turns into the planter's substitute, on top of being the recipient of indentured labour. The marketing strategies of tobacconists revealed an imperial ideology through material appropriation: when the planter is not present in the card, the customer takes possession of the geography as purchaser of the product. The master's presence, however, reinforces the racist views of the period. A trade card kept at Colonial Williamsburg (Figure 2) clearly establishes a racial hierarchy between the white planter, symbolically positioned in the foreground, at the head of the plantation, clothed and sheltered from the sun by an African slave, enjoying the fruit of slave labour amidst barrels of tobacco, and the naked slaves in the background holding hoes to dig up tobacco leaves, their eyes turned toward their master in the foreground.

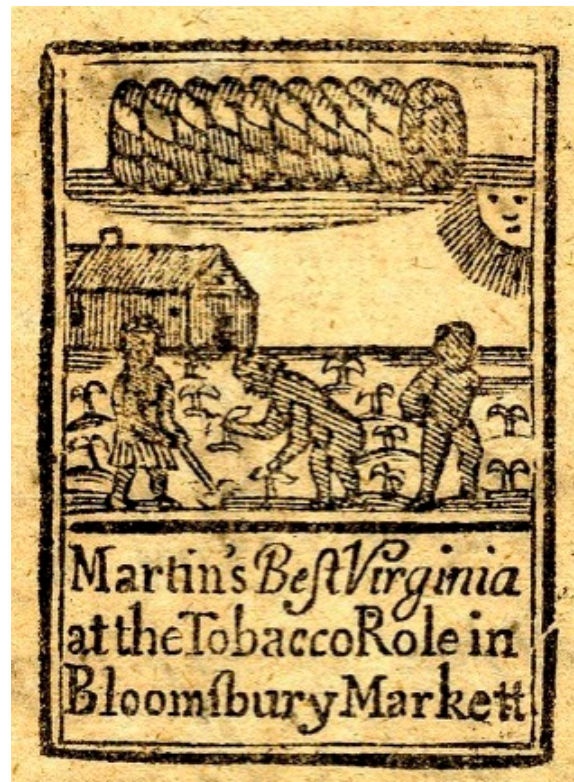


Figure 1. Tobacco paper with advertisement for Martin's Best Virginia; woodcut, 58 mm × 42 mm (2006, U.390). © The Trustees of the British Museum, London.

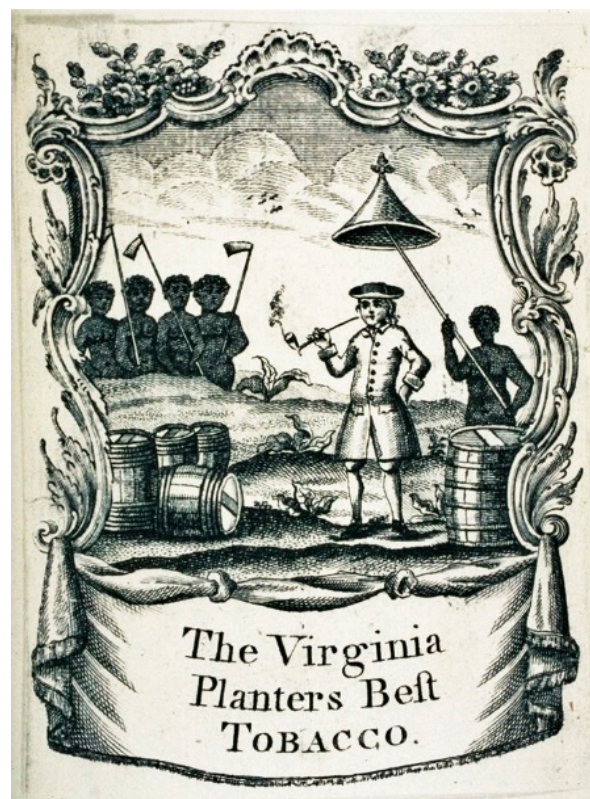


Figure 2. A tobacco label, The Virginia Planters Best Tobacco, 18th century (NW0046). Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Public domain.

Racial hierarchy is clearly established here between white supremacy and Black submissiveness. If the efficiency of the planter's managerial skills is underlined, white gentlemanly identity is equally stressed, as the overseeing master appears in the clothes of a gentleman, smoking being associated here with the masculine sphere of sociability in coffee house culture. On rare occasions, some cards underlined the violent subjugation of indigenous people, as illustrated by a card made for a salesman named Gaitskell, for his shop located at Fountain Stairs in Rotherhithe. The card represents Captain John Smith, president and head of Virginia's council, "the first Englishman who went ashore in Virginia", as he is taking the Virginia King of Paspanegh prisoner (Lemire 2018, pp. 233–46; Molineux 2012, pp. 146–77). This image of the violent seizing of the man and his territory echoes the treatment inflicted on Oroonoko by the white sailors in Behn's eponymous work. However, another meta-narrative glosses over the initial violent colonial beginnings of tobacco production. A range of surviving trade cards presents a commonality between Indian kings, white planters and metropolitan smokers. Former slave turned salesman Ignatius Sancho advertised, for instance, his "best Trinidad" on a card (Figure 3) showing a commercial alliance between a white British merchant and a Native American king for the cultivation, and most importantly the shipment, of tobacco to Britain (the ship is waiting to be loaded with freight). In the background, a sailor is seen transporting a bale of tobacco. Here, Sancho chose to create a proximity between the natives and the British in order to defeat the French (the merchant pierces a shield with French *fleur de lys*) in a context of intense commercial rivalry. A sense of commercial fraternity emerges from the card, stressed by the Indian's sartorial dignity and nobility (he is dressed with breeches, wearing buckled shoes, and the only attributes of his difference are his tattoos, feathered headdress and belt).



Figure 3. "The Wish", tobacco-paper for (Ignatius) Sancho's Best Trinidad, at No. 19 Charles Street, Westminster, c. 1774–80, D,2.3877, etching (D,2.3877). © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Other cards created a sociable fraternity between black and white males. Catherine Molineux has pointed out that there was a great "variety of imagined encounters" represented on trade cards, some showing "provocative images of homosocial relationships with black smokers", (Molineux 2007, p. 337). Black and white smokers enjoying a moment of conviviality around the smoking and drinking table "reflected the plant's symbolic significance in some Atlantic interactions as a medium for establishing fraternal relationships". Molineux further analyses the joint presence of Black people and white smoking revellers:

“the use of the royal black male in the tobacco papers promoted and sanctioned tobacco consumption as well as the consumer’s entry into illicit relations with black heathens”, (Molineux 2007, p. 375). The iconography of Blacks on trade cards and wrap paper is diverse and encompasses “black royalty, feathered black tradesmen, fellow black smokers, or relaxed black laborers”, which offers various representations of the “ideologies of empire, the social experience of smoking and the cultural meanings of tobacco in late Restoration and Georgian London”, (Molineux 2007, p. 330). Ignatius Sancho’s trade card exemplifies the gap between his anti-slavery views and his commercial use of the fraternal image, which irons out the problematic colonial origins of the product for sale at his shop. Snuff, however, took British men and women a step further away from black smokers. The snuffbox, a typically Western artefact, acted as a powerful machine to integrate the politics of race and colonialism.

3. Snuff, Colonial Economy and the Representation of Male Gentility

The snuffbox became a daily accessory in the genteel paraphernalia of men from aristocratic and middle-class circles, as well as from the business world (Walvin 2017, pp. 67–70). Snuff functioned as a marker of social distinction and masculine genteel sociability. The popularity of snuff is made apparent by its ubiquitous presence in men’s pockets, from the humble coachman to the royal figure. Lord Chesterfield, writing to his son, advised him not to fall into the trap of being a beau or a fop, but to allow himself the possession of one snuffbox to partake in rituals of sociability, including snuff sharing: “Lastly, there is another sort of expense that I will not allow, only because it is a silly one; I mean the fooling away your money in baubles at toy-shops. Have one handsome snuff-box (if you take snuff), and one handsome sword; but then no more very pretty and very useless things”, (Lord Chesterfield Letter 121, 8 November 1750).⁸ Although Chesterfield warns against the possible threat of the snuffbox as a superfluous ornament and a symbol of idleness, he does recognise the snuffbox as a necessary accessory in the belongings of a gentleman, no less important than an ornamental sword.

Similar to its smoked counterpart, snuff was also associated with maritime trade and colonial expansion. Poems on snuff, despite their deceptively light-hearted tone, often celebrated English implantations in colonial Virginia, and English navigators’ ability to rival the Spanish empire in the Atlantic. This is the case in Robert Southey’s poem *Snuff* (1799), which maps out a global colonial geography from the Americas to India:

What are Peru and those Golcondan mines,
To thee, Virginia? Miserable realms,
The produce of inhuman toil, they send
Gold for the greedy, jewels for the vain.
But thine are common comforts! –To omit
Pipe-panegyrics and tobacco praise,
Think what a general joy the snuff box gives
Europe, and far above Pizarro’s name
Write Raleigh in thy records of renown! (Southey 1799)

The city of Golconda, in Southern India, was an important centre for trading diamonds taken from the mines in the surrounding region. Southey compares the power of the Spanish and British empires in the Atlantic world, and crowns Britain’s superiority over the Spanish empire for its tobacco plantations in its colonies in North America before the latter gained independence. Two renowned explorers—and historical figures—are thus compared: Walter Raleigh, who founded the colony of Virginia, and the Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro, who led the Spanish conquest of the Incan Empire. In the poem, the gold and silver mines of Peru, together with precious gemstones from South America and diamonds from India, pale in comparison with tobacco. The poem presents

the precious metals and gems as typical vanities and worldly pleasures, emphasising slave labour in the mines, but glosses over the intensive slave labour required in the tobacco plantations to facilitate the pleasure of pipe-smoking or snuff-pinching, choosing instead to marvel at the economic benefits of having a presence in North American colonies. The focus on snuff and the delicate handling of the snuffbox allows for a form of visual erasure of slave labour and a transformation of its abomination into praised social consumption practices:

A delicate pinch! oh how it tingles up
The titillated nose, and fills the eyes
And breast, till in one comfortable sneeze,
The full collected pleasure bursts at last!
Most rare COLUMBUS! Thou shalt be for this,
The only CHRISTOPHER in my calendar!
Why, but for thee, the uses of the nose
Were half unknown, and its capacity
Of joy.

Colonial politics is reduced to the gesture of pinching snuff, as if global exchanges were meant for the pleasure of the senses; colonialism is subsumed under new sociable tobacco rituals.

Fiction also provides an insight into the fashion for such an accessory and its colonial undertones. In Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, the narrator, Lemuel Gulliver, a sea surgeon, carries a snuffbox with him during his voyage. The snuffbox is discovered by the Liliputians and described as a formidable object of curiosity:

In the left pocket we saw a huge silver chest, with a cover of the same metal, which we, the searchers, were not able to lift. We desired it should be opened, and one of us stepping into it, found himself up to the mid leg in a sort of dust, some part whereof flying up to our faces set us both a sneezing for several times together.⁹

Here the smallness of the snuffbox, one of its distinctive qualities as a portable object that can be pocketed, shared, exchanged and carried, is enlarged and magnified under the Liliputians' eyes to underline its luxuriousness and particular status as a curiosity. The silver box, compared here to a "silver-chest", indicates the value of the object and thus its symbol as a marker of social status. As an item of property, it is meant to define Gulliver's social condition to the reader, and attributes gentility to his middle-class status. Gulliver's snuffbox can also be read as one of many signs of coloniality that circulate in the satirical travel narrative. Perceived as an intruder and potential invader, Gulliver has his snuffbox carefully examined, for the object appears here as a symbol of one of Britain's popular social customs. The description of the snuffbox parodies first encounter scenes between Europeans and non-European others, often mediated by material discoveries. Snuffboxes reflected the social identity of their bearers, and indicated rituals of sociability and cultural politeness that were carried beyond European borders. During James Cook's first circumnavigation more than two decades later, several episodes recounted the stealing of clothes and objects in Tahiti.¹⁰ The islanders showed eagerness to discover the material possessions of the crew. The surgeon William Munkhouse's snuffbox and the naturalist Solander's spy glass disappeared from their owners' pockets, as recorded in Cook's journal: "Notwithstanding the care that we took, Dr Solander and Mr Monkhouse had each of them their pockets picked: The one his spy glass and the other of his snuff box", (Cook 2003, p. 41). It is highly likely that these objects stood as signs of European male identity in the eyes of the Tahitians.

Smoking and taking snuff fashioned male consumers' aristocratic or mercantile identities. Snuff brought a sense of sophistication to the consumption of tobacco as it required the performativity of the snuffbox. Elihu Yale's personal snuffbox (Figure 4), in the collection of the Yale Center for British Art, is an example of the ostentatious function of snuffboxes as markers of their owners' social identities. It was made by John Obrisset, a renowned medalist, carver and goldsmith who specialised in work on silver horn and tortoiseshell. Shared around individuals, passed from hand to hand in the course of conversation, snuffboxes were meant to be seen. Yale travelled to India at the age of twenty-three and served as a clerk in the East India Company's settlement of Fort Saint George in Madras (now Chennai), where he eventually became governor and amassed a colossal fortune of nearly £200,000 through private trade in diamonds. His personal small accessories, such as costly rings and snuffboxes, spoke of his social and professional successes (Scarisbrick and Zucker 2014, pp. 83–97). In a painting in the collection of the Yale Center for British Art, Yale appears with a party of gentlemen in what seems to have been a painting commemorating Yale's daughter's marriage.¹¹ Yale and his guests share a moment of conviviality, drinking Madeira wine, smoking, and taking snuff. The scene displays a wealth of precious and foreign commodities brought to England by global trade: an Indian diamond, mounted on Yale's ring, Madeira wine, and other portables, such as snuffboxes, pipes and tobacco. The wine is poured by an African slave, himself an exotic commodity, who wears a metal collar around his neck, identifying him as enslaved.



Figure 4. John Obrisset, snuffbox, c. 1705–28, 1.4 × 8.3 × 6.5 cm (1788.1). Yale University Art Gallery; Gift of Ezra Stiles. Public domain.

Yale's snuffbox made by Obrisset and the two snuffboxes appearing on canvas deliver a message about his successful career. Acting in the same fashion as a portrait, the snuffbox's cover is inset with a portrait in profile of Elihu Yale, whilst on the reverse of the snuffbox, Yale's coat of arms is represented, a sign of his gentility and wealthy social position. The snuffbox presents a physical portrait as much as a social one. Yale appears in profile in a genteel manner, wearing a wig, elegantly dressed. The snuffbox is made of tortoiseshell, a precious material from Africa and also from the Caribbean area. It is also made of precious silver, which links it to the Americas and gives an imperial undertone to its fabrication, reminding us that the global origin of the object's manufacture reflects Yale's global success story and biography. Snuff, a product of colonial labour in North American colonies, is thus connected to Iberian mining empires in South America and to the European exploitation of West Indian waters through its container, the snuffbox, which can be regarded as an imperial object.

Snuff also held a more concealed relation with indentured labour. A comparison between tobacco trade cards that advertised both smoking tobacco and snuff, and trade cards only advertising snuff, reveals that the advertisement of snuff tended to focus on urban consumption, its purchase, use and social scope, rather than on the image of the tobacco plantation in colonial Virginia. Marketing strategies emphasised the use of the snuffbox and the ritual of pinching or sniffing, rather than the distant colonial geography suggested on trade cards for smoking tobacco. One reason for the disappearance of the image of the Black slave or Indian prince from cards advertising snuff might be linked to the nature of snuff. As refined, ground tobacco, snuff took its consumers away from the raw material (the tobacco leaf) and was endowed with cultural significance of politeness and sophistication. One trade card depicts the interior of a tobacconist's shop in Covent Garden in London, where a gentleman, standing next to an elegantly carved rococo stool, can be seen tasting different varieties of snuff offered by the salesman (Figure 5). The inside of the shop displays various snuff containers, and focuses on the business of snuff over the counter, with the customer fully absorbed in the exclusive pinching of various snuffs. Elegance and politeness appear as distinctive features of the fashion of taking snuff, displacing the sense of fraternity with Black “heathens” to the construction of a cultural practice bonding together the elite and merchant circles of British society. Snuffboxes, snuff graters, and snuff containers evoked domestic consumption rather than foreign geographies.

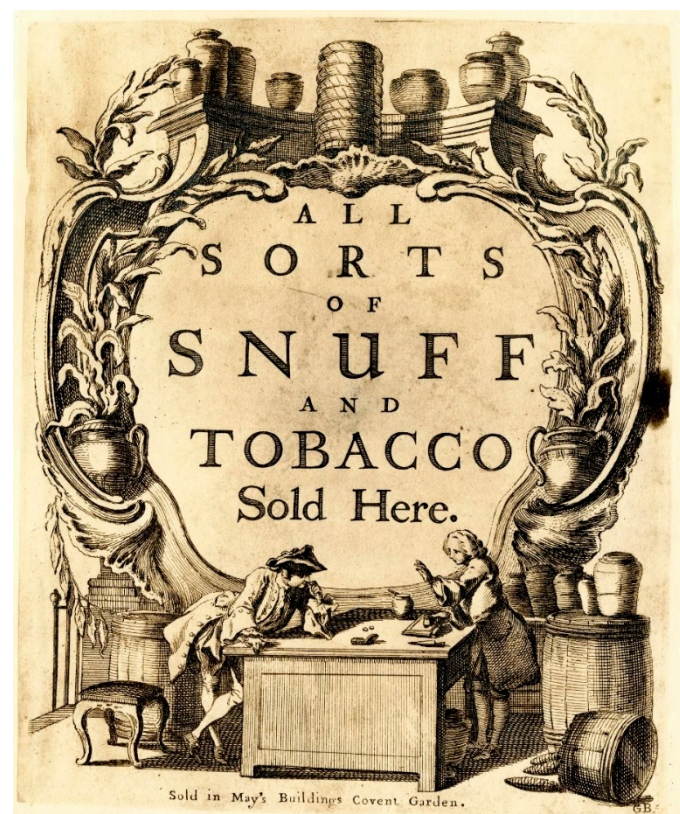


Figure 5. Trade card for May, tobacco and snuff seller. Eighteenth century (Heal, 117.115). © The Trustees of the British Museum.

However, some trade cards still retained their association with slave labour in an open way. The salesmen John and Simon Cater, who owned a shop at the “Black-Moor’s Head” (Figure 6), chose to keep the iconography that had circulated and defined most tobacconists’ shop signs. I have been able to trace the source of the print’s iconography and its circulation on the lid of a snuffbox depicting the face of an enslaved African in profile wearing a collar and a pearl earring (Figure 7). This snuffbox embodies the metonymy

between the possession of enslaved bodies and the consumption of tobacco. The snuffbox's black colour evokes the slave's complexion and gives material shape to the symbolic appropriation of the Black body that can be held, literally, in one's hand. One visual difference between the print and the snuffbox seems to reinforce the idea that the snuffbox allowed its owner to perform the symbolic gesture of colonial domination as they opened and closed the snuffbox to take a pinch. On the print, the enslaved African wears a pearl earring, a classical attribute found in the representations of Blacks during the Renaissance, but no other sign of his bondage appears. On the lid of the snuffbox, the figure has returned to his enslaved condition, as attested by the prominent presence of the collar. The handling of the snuffbox allows, therefore, for a constant "holding by the collar" of the slave figure.

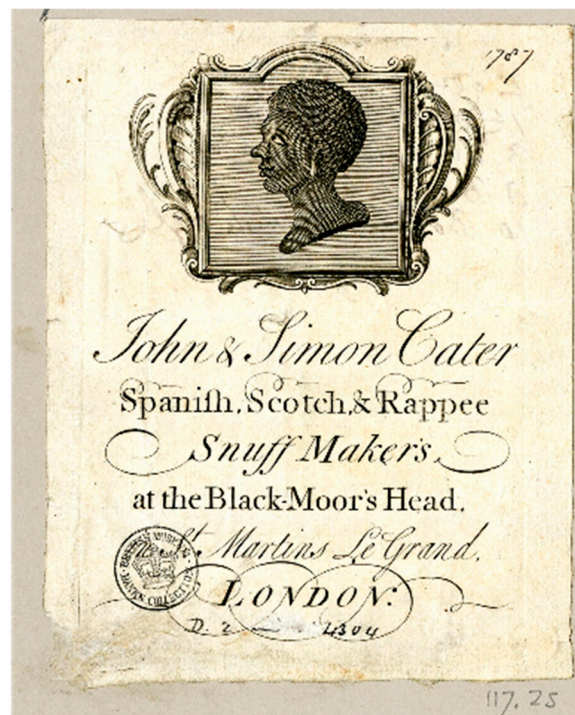


Figure 6. Trade card of John and Simon Cater, snuff makers (Banks, 117.25). © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 7. John Obrisset. Snuffbox or tobacco box, 8.10 × 10.20 cm (1889,0702.14). © The Trustees of the British Museum.

The first appearance of the image of the African figure may be the famous Drake jewel (Figure 8) presented to Sir Francis Drake by Elizabeth I in the winter of 1586–87.

The intaglio reverse side represents either the face or a Roman emperor or empress and that of an African emperor side by side. The jewel had a significant public value since Drake appears donning the jewel in a portrait by Gheeraerts the Younger. As scholarship on the jewel has underlined, the imperial connotation carried by the jewel is revealing of Elizabeth's desire to establish England as a colonial power over the globe. It also reflects the high esteem and status conferred upon the explorer by Elizabeth. Kim F. Hall has argued that such court jewels functioned as "racially coded signifiers of aristocratic identity in the late sixteenth century", (Hall 1995, p. 213), and suggested that the double profile cameo is a "reference to Drake's success over the Spanish" during his capture of Santo Domingo and Cartagena. The transformation of the image of the African emperor into that of a Blackamoor figure and an enslaved Black attendant in the advertisement and the snuffbox reveals the ways in which political ideas were incorporated into racial iconography and the crafting of artefacts. From initially standing as a symbol of "Drake's imperial and navigational prowess with his masculinity", (Hall 1995, p. 222), the image then circulated with more pronounced imperial and racial undertones in the material culture of 18th century England (Bindman and Gates 2011, p. 40).



Figure 8. The Drake Jewel given to Sir Francis Drake by Elizabeth I probably in the year 1586. Victoria and Albert Museum via Wikimedia. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Drake_Jewel.JPG. Accessed on 10 June 2021.

We may offer a hypothesis about the identity of owners of such objects.¹² Proud colonial planters constitute one plausible category. A copy of the same snuffbox, kept at the Victoria Gallery and Museum of the University of Liverpool, was bequeathed by the Horsfall family, a well-known and established Liverpool dynasty. Charles Horsfall (1776–1846), who became the Mayor of Liverpool in 1833, was a wealthy merchant whose fortune was the result of his trade with West Indian islands, and investments in plantations in Jamaica (where he had a sugar plantation on Knowsley estate in Jamaica) and British Guiana (New Hope Estate). The archives of the museum reveal that he owned sixty-nine slaves in 1823. Despite the absence of written evidence to support the claim, it seems likely that the snuffbox may have belonged to Horsfall. The possession of such an object in the family establishes a strong link between the family's business success and fortune, social recognition, and involvement in enslaved labour. The last section of this study turns to texts and visual materials that link women's snuff-taking habits with expressions of coloniality. Female consumption and shopping habits led to the integration of this imperial product into the world of fashion.

4. “Labour to Support a Female Nose”: Women, Race and the Consumption of Snuff

As attested in numerous conversation pieces and visual satires, such as William Hogarth’s *Harlot’s Progress* and *Marriage à la Mode*, the commodification and exploitation of the Black body featured in the domestic economy of wealthy households, through the mediation of female agency. Black servants were fashionable and exotic accessories in wealthy families, and attended to the tea ceremony, becoming a part of the tea paraphernalia. Their blackness worked as a differentiation marker, serving to enhance the whiteness of their masters: the complexion of Black attendants was used time and again in still-lives and conversation paintings as a racialising tool. Black attendants often appeared as orientalised Blackamoors in visual documents, wearing their masters’ livery, their head donned with an ornamental feathered turban (Dabydeen 1987). The Blackamoor figure allows savagery (associated with Blackness) to be domesticated and integrated into the female supervision of the household. Tea constituted a staple of female consumption, and the tea table became one important locus for female sociability; likewise, snuff and the use of the snuffbox became conversational accessories in female assemblies. I would like to suggest that actual black attendants and snuffboxes can both be construed as commodities that connect the colonial narrative of tobacco history to its social consumption.

One particular snuffbox in the collection of the Greenwich Maritime Museum offers considerations on material intersections between gender and race (Figure 9). This anonymous snuffbox contains a secret miniature inside its lid, revealing a mistress or courtesan standing next to an enslaved Black page boy. The snuffbox reveals a form of voyeurism linked to consumption in which the woman is subjected to the male gaze of the lover and benefactor. As the man opens the lid to take a pinch of snuff, his eyes become titillated by the image of his mistress. The snuffbox’s olfactive and visual pleasures are a promise of other earthly pleasures that the woman’s overt eroticism clearly alludes to. The snuffbox is his, as much as the woman, whilst the slave is hers. A sense of entrapment emanates from this snuffbox, as pointed out by Beverly Lemire (Lemire 2018, pp. 243–45). The enslaved African and the woman are both held captive, metaphorically, by the male hand. The snuffbox reveals the cultural functions of the domesticity of women and their control by the male gaze and male hand, as well as the fashioning of their image. Yet, if the snuffbox entraps and commodifies both Black attendant and woman, it also reveals the role of female agency in transforming Black identity, turning it into the fashionable decorative motif of the exotic Blackamoor. The snuffbox underlines the role of women as discrete mediators between colonial exchanges and cultural pleasures who contributed to transforming the horrors of slave labour into the sophisticated practice of snuff-taking. In the vast process of the cultural accommodation of transatlantic colonial trade, tobacco and its enslaved cultivators were reduced to ground snuff ready to be kept in a fashionable box in male and female pockets; transatlantic exchanges were transposed into portable commodities.



Figure 9. William Hutchinson, snuffbox. Silver glazed, ivory; 24 mm × 75 mm × 58 mm (ZBA2452). National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, Michael Graham-Stewart Slavery Collection. © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

In September 1774, a poem entitled “The Negro and the Snuff-box” appeared in the *Sentimental Magazine, or, General assemblage of science, taste, and entertainment*. If the text seems a somewhat labored yet entertaining miscellany, destined to fall into oblivion, it provides an interesting insight into the ways material culture reveals the role of female agency in the domestication of slavery and consumption of colonial products. In the poem, a lady sends her Black attendant, Mungo, to town in order to buy snuff and refill her empty snuffbox. Mungo is modelled after the eponymous character from Isaac Bickerstaff’s *The Padlock* (1768) and shares with the latter his inclination for drunkenness and railing. On being sent on an errand to Richmond that requires crossing marshes and fields, Mungo expresses his reluctance to comply with the order and curses both his mistress and the snuffbox. Here, the empty snuffbox stands as a symbol of the slave’s entrapment. Mungo is shown with the same attributes as his dramatic counterpart, prone to alcohol drinking, undignified, while the text emphasises the woman’s disdainful authority towards her servant:

“Go, Mungo,” Caelia said, “you lazy clown,
Go, take this snuff-box, haste to Richmond town.”
Mungo approach’d, low mutt’ring, “What a pox!”
Yet bowing, took the silver, and the box.
[. . .] Harsh thought tumultuous rose:
What labour to support a female nose?
Detested custom! Nauseous to the sense!
Meant heav’n for this its riches to dispense?
Enrag’d, the rebel negro took his stand,
The box and silver pois’d in either hand
“D___mistress! Such curse stuff her nostril cram!
Me money wiser spend – me buy dear dram.
Box, foolish ting! Me fain thee throw away;
But ‘fra’d some angry cane my shoulder pay.”
“Peace, varlet,” quoth the box with awful sound, [. . .]
“Since such the pleasure of thy gen’rous dame,
Dar’st thou presume her lawful taste to blame?
Allow’d thy sole delight, thy thirst to lave,
What! Barr’d the lady, and indulg’d the slave?”
(*Sentimental Magazine, or, General assemblage of science, taste, and entertainment*,
September 1774, p. 414)

For the historian of material culture, Mungo’s cues offer an implicit allusion to indentured labour. Mungo laments over the “labour” that is required “to support a female nose”, an allusion to his errand that can be extended to the slavery business in tobacco plantation, seen as a “detested custom”. Mungo’s desire to “throw away” the snuffbox can be read as a cry for emancipation. Snuff constitutes a liability for colonial slave labour. Endowed with animate functions, the poem morphs into an it-narrative in which the box speaks to Mungo, and reiterates his submissive enslaved status, refusing to “bar the lady and indulge the slave”. The slave’s domestic rebellion must therefore be crushed to satisfy the desire and pleasure of white consumers. Many material fictions and poems of the period underline the ways in which the snuffbox enhances the whiteness of female pinching hands, concealing the labour of black hands: “the snuff-box then with double charm/ Improv’d the lovely belle/ At once display’d the lilly arm/ And ravish’d with its smell” (*Gentleman’s Magazine*

December 1746, p. 662). The gesture and performance of pinching snuff aestheticises and subsumes colonial tobacco cultivation, thereby normalising the politics of empire. In a poem published in the *Ladies' Magazine or Universal Entertainer* in 1750, transatlantic trade is aestheticised in the social performance of snuff-taking, which erases the Black body to display the whiteness of the female pinching hand, whose complexion is compared to alabaster:

The hand like Alabaster fair,
 The sparkling Diamond's Pride,
 Can ne'er so gracefully appear,
 If Snuff should be deny'd.
 . . . Ev'n Commerce (Name of sweetest Sound
 To ev'ry *British* Ear)
 Must suff'ring droop, shou'd Snuff be found
 Unworthy of our Care.
 The smallest Pinch of Snuff we take
 Helps trade in some Degree
 Think that in granting my Request
 You benefit Mankind.

("A Young Lady's Reasons for taking Snuff, sent to a Gentleman who dissuaded her from it," *Ladies' Magazine or Universal Entertainer*, 22 September 1750, vol. I, p. 363)

One particular category of snuffboxes, "Blackamoor snuffboxes", weaves a metonymic association between slavery, snuff consumption and femininity. These snuffboxes were designed in the shape of a Blackamoor's face, with their lids imitating oriental headdress.¹³ Although the surviving examples of these snuffboxes are scarce, they are traces of the way these fashionable objects glossed over slavery and tobacco cultivation by remodelling the figure of the slave under the acceptable fashionable image of the decorative orientalisised Blackamoor that circulated on printed material and in the decorative arts, notably in ceramic production. The popular and prolific enamel production centre in Staffordshire made such snuffboxes around 1750–60, as attested by some surviving examples. Although there is no archival evidence to suggest that these snuffboxes would have been destined for female hands only, the hypothesis that this would have been the case does not appear too speculative, given the link between Black servants and female stewardship in the domestic sphere. Not unlike the caressing gesture of the woman toward the young enslaved black boy in William Hogarth's *Taste in High Life*, the handling of the miniaturised Blackamoor's face-turned-snuffbox can be understood as a gesture of appropriation, domination and domestication of colonial exoticism.¹⁴ The graceful handling of the blackamoor snuffbox can be seen as an extension of imperial mastery displaced from colonial territory to domestic interiors and metropolitan places of sociability. Snuff and the serving Black body construct a colonial congruence that the Blackamoor snuffbox encapsulates. This elaborate racial artefact erases the morally and humanly problematic origin of tobacco production through orientalisation, as it focuses on the figure of the metropolitan turbaned Black slave to replace that of his enslaved counterpart from the colonies. The colonial enslaved labour force of Virginia has been fashioned into small, colourful articles of fashion that offers a familiar type of exoticism. As pointed out by Adrienne Childs, "ornamental blackness" was popular as a decorative pattern that served as a status marker in princely homes, and also reinforced the ubiquitous domestic presence of Black servants in orientalisised clothes (Childs 2010, p. 174).¹⁵ Indeed, Blackamoor statuary was popular in numerous decorative functions, such as supports for candlesticks, vases and pot-pourris, and it could be made of porcelain, stone or wood.

The Staffordshire enameled Blackamoor head snuffbox alludes to the same visual rhetoric deployed in articles of decoration of the luxury commodity market, such as the porcelain figures of Blackamoor servants that were popular throughout Europe and decorated female interiors. Let us turn to a hard-porcelain composition from the Meissen manufactory depicting a lady having chocolate, attended to by her Black page, surrounded by attributes of femininity such as a fan, a flower *porte-bouquet*, and a porcelain chocolate service (Figure 10). The figures have their faces turned towards each other, in a way that emphasises the lady's stewardship and authority over her Black servant, who is looking up to her. The whiteness of the porcelain of the lady contrasts with the blackness of her Black attendant, whilst the colours create a harmony between the mistress and his commodified attendant. In a similar fashion, the snuffbox invites us to reconstruct the handling of the object by white female hands as a social performance of both colonial and metropolitan power over the enslaved. Staffordshire enamelled snuffboxes would have amplified chromatic contrasts between white hands and the black skin of the Blackamoor figure.



Figure 10. Johann Joachim Kändler Lady with attendant, Meissen Manufactory, ca. 1740, 64.101.59a, b. The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Public domain.

Another example of a dazzling Blackamoor snuffbox demonstrates the subversive aestheticisation of slavery through material culture. This snuffbox, kept at the Cooper Hewitt Museum, is a prime example of the transformative cultural powers of snuffbox manufacturing (Figure 11). The box is made with precious materials and exudes luxury: the Blackamoor head is made of carved amethyst topped with a moonstone turban donned with several gems, cut diamonds, rubies, turquoise and emeralds applied on gold. The lid is made of amethyst, finished with gold sides and hinges. This costly, highly elaborate object, perhaps of French manufacture, focuses the viewer's attention on its status value, whilst playing with the convention of the exoticised Blackamoor of a wealthy household. Although the black complexion is suppressed by the material iridescence, the snuffbox's racial ideology is nonetheless exposed in the context of the conspicuous consumption of luxury goods. The wealth required to possess a slave is mirrored in the richness of materials used to craft the snuffbox.



Figure 11. Snuffbox in the shape of a moor's head. Previously owned by James A. Garland; France; amethyst, gold, silver, cut diamonds, rubies, emeralds, turquoise, moonstone, platinum, (1967-48-19). Cooper-Hewitt Museum. Public domain.

5. Conclusions

Snuff and the snuffbox functioned as cultural tools of domestication and symbols of the accommodation of transatlantic slave labour and tobacco cultivation, transforming economic interests into culturally significant material symbols of luxury, fashion and sociability. Snuff entailed social rituals, fashioning urban and gender identities around ideas of politeness and conspicuous consumption that moved snuff takers a step away from the fraternity of smoking Indians and Africans. Although the repertoire of eighteenth-century snuffboxes goes well beyond models representing Black servants, the Blackamoor brand provides a compelling insight into the circulation of racist ideas in material culture, and can be seen in continuity with printed racial advertising.

Both tobacco advertising ephemera and racialised snuffboxes legitimised the colonial economic system and encouraged it, as they transformed the horrendous reality of indentured labour into a material aesthetic of blackness on surfaces (objects and paper) that could be consumed, appropriated and pocketed. Black servants, or “Blackamoors” as they were called, who attended families in domestic interiors, were conflated with their material counterparts shown on the lids of snuffboxes. Their heads also served as an ornamental trope to design the vessels in which to carry snuff, the ground tobacco cultivated via slave labour. These “Blackamoor” snuffboxes focused on the figure of the orientalist domestic slave and shifted the representation of slavery from the colonies to Britain. Slavery was thus displaced from the margins of the metropolis to its centre, and in the process, was accommodated, in the form of accessories, into the British performance of smoking and taking snuff.

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Notes

¹ See (Walvin 1997, pp. 72–84; Norton 2008, pp. 187–91). For a history of smoking, see (Brooks 1952; Apperson 2006).

² See (Tullett 2019, p. 133; Friedman 2016, pp. 41–49).

- 3 See in particular (Bindman and Gates 2011; McGrath and Massing 2012; Lafont 2019; Thomas 2019).
- 4 See, for instance (Le Corbeiller 1966).
- 5 The link between empire and the culturally significant consumption of imperial foodstuffs is discussed in (Bickham 2008, pp. 71–109).
- 6 For more information on the history of tobacco and its circulation in Spanish and European empires, see (Norton 2008; Hardin 2006, pp. 137–58; Goodman 1993).
- 7 For a development on the commercialization and commodification of British culture, see (Brewer 1995, pp. 341–62).
- 8 <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3361/3361-h/3361-h.htm>, accessed on 28 December 2020.
- 9 Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*. [https://bookspublicdomain.com/MoreGreatSelections/The-Project-Gutenberg-eBook-of-Gulliver\T1\textquoterights-Travels,-by-Jonathan-Swift.html](https://bookspublicdomain.com/MoreGreatSelections/The-Project-Gutenberg-eBook-of-Gulliver/T1\textquoterights-Travels,-by-Jonathan-Swift.html), accessed on 3 March 2021.
- 10 See for example (Salmond 2009).
- 11 For several analyses of the painting, see <http://collections.britishart.yale.edu/vufind/Record/1665331> (accessed on 10 June 2021).
- 12 To the best of my knowledge, only three records of this type of snuffbox survive in museums' collections worldwide.
- 13 For an example of a Staffordshire enamel blackamoor-head snuff box, see <https://www.sothebys.com/fr/auctions/ecatalogue/lot.810.html/2014/interiors-mellon-n09247> (accessed on 10 June 2021).
- 14 For an analysis of the representation of the commodification of Black servants in Hogarth's work, see, for instance (Schotland 2009, pp. 147–63; Bindman 2001, pp. 260–69).
- 15 For an analysis of the figure of Blacks in statuary, see (Levenson et al. 2015).

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