Hungry Thirsty Roots:

Imagining and Constructing Ethnic Otherness in 1800s England

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Abstract

My research is a historical ethnography of depictions of the racial and cultural other in 19th century England. I was motivated to do this research by curiosity about how cultural and racial otherness and national belonging was constructed historically. Although my work does not directly relate to modern conceptions of national belonging, I was inspired to do my research by seeing ideas about this shift during my own lifetime. My work is a historical ethnography of depictions of immigrants to England in the 1800s in various mediums. Some of the materials I used are presented as fictional by their authors, like Dracula and Goblin Market, while others are presented as nonfiction, like newspaper articles and the political cartoons of George Cruikshank. From these materials, I draw two primary conclusions. The first is that perceived racial difference is not based fully on physical differences and instead is heavily influenced by cultural factors. The second is that “foreignness” or racial difference is thought of as having a supernatural quality that presents a social, sexual, and political threat. Not being “of the nation” is construed as being inhuman, magical and sinister. My work adds the anthropological understanding of national belonging and racial identification that’s already been studied in ethnographies like Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power by Laura Ann Stoler and has implications regarding modern modes of thought about immigrants, race, and citizenship.
Introduction

“Lie close,” Laura said, 
Pricking up her golden head: 
“We must not look at goblin men, 
We must not buy their fruits: 
Who knows upon what soil they fed 
Their hungry thirsty roots?” 
“Come buy,” call the goblins 
Hobbling down the glen.

“Oh,” cried Lizzie, “Laura, Laura, 
You should not peep at goblin men.”

So writes poet Christina Rossetti in her 1862 narrative poem *Goblin Market*. A member of a family of artists at the center of the nostalgic, pastoral Pre-Raphaelite movement, Rossetti describes two young sisters being menaced by animal hybrid “goblin merchant men,” who pressure them in broken English to “come buy” their exotic fruits. One of the sisters, Laura is tempted by the fruit, and pays the goblins for it with a lock of her “golden” blonde hair with disastrous consequences. The process of eating the fruit takes on a sexual, sensual quality in Rossetti’s writing and afterward Laura is addicted to the magical fruit like it’s a drug.

The scene of the strange, alien fruit market would have been a recognizable one to British urban dwellers at the time of *Goblin Market*’s publication. It wasn’t goblins that sold oranges on the street, though; it was simply whichever group of immigrants was newly arrived and poorest. During Rossetti’s lifetime, the orange vendors in England shifted from being comprised primarily by Eastern European Jews to newer, poorer

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1 Roe

2 Endelman, 92
waves of Irish immigrants; the image of a fruit vendor would have been synonymous with poverty and racial otherness as it was defined then. I seek to answer the question of what was going on culturally with immigration in England at this time that would prompt Goblin Market, and other similar works that depicts inhuman, sexually dangerous immigrant figures to be written? What is the context of this work? What did immigration threaten in the British imagination?

I’m using media from the 1800s as my data for this research. England at this point in history was transforming into a different kind of nation, a nation with industrialized cities and growing immigrant populations. The media produced in England at this time, both “high art” like literature and poetry and less elevated things like political cartoons, reflected a discomfort with the increased presence of non-English people in England. Some of these pieces of media express their views in very explicit terms, like the racial caricatures of prolific nineteenth century cartoonist George Cruikshank. Others depictions of foreign presences in England are more subtle, measured and ambiguous in nature, like the inhuman and predatory eastern Europeans that populate Bram Stoker’s famous horror novel *Dracula*.

My method of analysis is historical ethnography, with my analysis of my primary materials informed by historical texts.

My argument is that a combination of the industrialization of England, the arrival of new waves of immigrants, and the growth of a new eugenic model of race encouraged by its imperialism abroad created wide spread fears of immigration. These fears were primarily that (1) a culturally and racially diverse England would be generally unpleasant or unsafe, (2) that undesirable racial mixing would occur, and (3) that a foreign takeover

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3 Williams, 142
of England’s government would take place. I also argue that distinguishing between "races" is in part based upon culture rather than appearance.

My work builds upon previous scholarship on England and immigration, as well as works on empire and race, in the nineteenth century. I add to Ann Laura Stoler’s work on the latter in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* and with Jeffrey Weinstock’s analysis in *Circumcising Dracula*.

**Notes on Race and Difference**

Before I delve into depictions of race, I would like to clarify what I am speaking about when I say race. I do not mean the American conception of race, which is determined primarily by continent of origin and skin color, with a few exceptions for people with religious and cultural differences which are considered extreme enough to place them outside of their normal racial categories. Sometimes, when we talk about racial difference in the modern day United States, we refer to these differences which are constructed from religious and cultural differences, for the sake of clarification, as ethnicity. However, I found that referring to some combinations of physical and cultural difference as race, and others as ethnicity, in my writing, raised more questions than it answered and obscured more than it clarified. For this reason, all of these differences are referred to as racial differences for the sake of simplicity.

**The Social Construction of Racial Markedness**

While looking at art from this time period, I noticed is that some European ethnicities seem to have been considered racially different in the works I’m looking at,
while others were not-- and not in the way one might expect. I define socially constructed “racial difference” in this context as being depicted with specific, exaggerated features, both in caricature and non-caricature images, that are different from depictions of English people. I noticed that images of Scottish people in political cartoons were drawn with smooth, unexaggerated features, while images of Irish people in this other political cartoon, depicted with ape-ish looking, lumpy, bumpy faces. These two groups are very similar to each other in appearance in the modern American view, but they’re portrayed as completely different from each other. The racial markedness ascribed to different racial groups does not have a direct correlation to how different in appearance I’ve been socialized to believe various groups are; the model of racial difference is a different one. In addition to this, racial difference is depicted as existing in an almost magical, almost demonic way; in the drawings of George Cruikshank, interracial unions take on a demonic meaning and in works of fiction like Dracula and Goblin Market.

Imperialism as a Background for Xenophobia

Everything that took place culturally back in England can’t be removed from it’s presence abroad, as an imperial power. Imperialism, by its nature, forces the colonizing power to reckon with identity. Merely encountering the people colonized brings race to the forefront of the minds of colonizers. In order to draw a distinction between self and non-self, nation and outsider, a strict defining of race is needed to avoid the lines of belonging being blurred. This is described as a phenomenon among Dutch colonists in Java in Stoler’s Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power, but my research engages with
the flip side of this cultural development. Instead of being concerned with differentiating between the self and the other abroad, I’m concerned with how that differentiation occurs back home. What happens when the racial and cultural other comes back home, in a time when clear definitions of us versus them are vital to the functioning of the imperial state? Believing that English people were inherently superior to the rest of the world was not just a feature of colonialism; the whole psychology that made colonization morally tolerable to colonizers required this belief. The pieces of writing and illustrations that I’ve looked at are not directly about colonialism, but the background of colonialism contextualizes the racial world view that these works express.

Public Space

One of the concerns expressed through English media during this time period is that an immigrant presence in England would lead to disorder or unrest or, if not
something that extreme, then just a general reduction in the quality of life for English
people living amongst their non-English neighbors. There’s a lot of depictions and
descriptions of rowdiness in the streets, bad noises, bad smells coming along with an
immigrant presence in England. The early verses of *Goblin Market* invoke this idea of
immigrants creating disorder and nuisance; the goblins are unpleasantly noisy and
harass the two girls in the poem to “Come buy, come buy” the fruits they’re vending. An
1824 political cartoon depicts a more violent disruption than the annoying noise in
*Goblin Market*. It depicts a group of Irish women with the apelike faces tossing a group
of British soldiers in the air. The soldiers fly up and down helplessly; in this model, a
non-English populace living in England makes law enforcement impossible. Or, if it
doesn’t declare it to be outright impossible, the cartoon at least suggests that
maintaining the peace requires more force then is being used; the soldiers are depicted
as being partially at fault for being ineffective and emasculated by the masculine women
they encounter.

**Women And Men**

The second kind of concern expressed in media from this time regarding
immigration is fears that immigrants will have sex with British women, or vise versa.
One might think that fears about racial mixing only really came along later in the 1800s,
when Francis Galton named the concept of eugenics and described race and heritability
in a mix of scientific and pseudoscientific terms⁵, but this isn’t true. Galton’s ideas about
the importance of keeping racial purity in England reflected already established ideas;
he just restated them and justified them using new scientific terms. The concept of

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⁵ Galton
eugenics was not invented out of thin air; they were formed and influenced by the way race, sex and racially purity were already thought about.

This sexual, “race-mixing” fear around immigration shares some overlap with the quality of life fear; there are a fair number of political cartoons where the two overlap. A 1791 print entitled *Traffic* mixes these two themes by sneaking sexual imagery into a non-sexual scenario; two caricatured jewish used clothes sellers thrust their wares upon a British maid while one of them accidentally sticks his hand through a hole in the crotch of a pair of pants, both illustrating the poor quality of what they’re selling and transforming his hand into a phallic symbol. Their intrusion on the public space transforms into a sexual intrusion.

The line between the threat to public space and the sexual or procreative threat is also blurred in Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*. The goblins begin by just being a loud, unpleasant disruption of the public space but they progress to being sexual figures when Laura eats the fruit they’re offering. The way she is described as eating the fruit is unsubtly linked to sex acts (and almost too explicit for me to quote); she sucks “their fruit globes fair or red” until “her lips were sore.”

Although *Goblin Market* is poetry and generally considered a higher form of art than the explicit sexual cartoons that I encountered in my research, beneath it’s surface veneer of autumnal fantasy imagery is very much the same as these cruder, less elevated pieces of media. Laura engages in socially unacceptable sex acts with socially unacceptable partners and afterwards is a ruined woman.

Dracula’s relationship with the British women in the novel, Lucy and Mina, is depicted in a similar manner. In the passage where we see him forcing Mina to drink his
blood, the process of consumption through the mouth, as in *Goblin Market*, is used as a stand in for sex, only in this case its consumption of blood rather than fruit. The Count “(gripes) her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom,” which the novel characterizes as having “a terrible resemblance to a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink.” As in the case of *Goblin Market*, the transgressive eating bears a resemblance to oral sex and, afterward, the woman involved is ruined.

In these fantasy stories, the tainting of the woman who engages in an unacceptable union like this is reversible through magical means; Laura's wiser sister Lizzie goes back to the goblins and purchases more fruit which reverts Laura to her healthy previous state and Mina is ultimately cured of her vampirism when Count Dracula is killed. However, whether or not the real life “tainting” of women who engage in real unacceptable interracial sex is reversible isn’t totally clear. Dirty cartoons that depict women really engaging in these unions suggest a permanent tainting and ruining with no magical fix like the ones in *Goblin Market* and *Dracula*.

In one such cartoon, *A Harlot's Progress*, we see a young British woman being permanently tainted by first having sex with a foppish British Colonel, then progressing from there to becoming a prostitute for a Jewish pimp, who's cultural otherness is a counterpoint of the illustration. The scene of the brothel is “exotic” looking; it includes a monkey knocking over a table and a small black boy dressed in a turban. In many ways it closely resembles the harem of women the Count keeps in *Dracula*; there's a recurring theme in this type of work of an imagined oriental east being depraved in ways that are unknown in the west.
The caption reads: *Robbed of her Chasity and honest frame-The Col’el, Satan like, deceives the Dame-But Beauty never wants Vot’ries (sic?) yet; Now with a rich, gay Keeping Jew sh’as met-Practiced in vice, the modest air no more is seen; she laughs at what she blushed before-Spurns at her keeper with his jealous (Pale?); and snaps her fingers-Sir, I care not That-Thus when debauch’d the Sex forever burn in lawless fires; Virtue know’s no return-Dishonor never gives a second blow-And once a whore, she ever more will be so.*

These images of pieces of media, both those that engages in magical metaphor and those that don’t, seem to serve a double purpose. They act overtly as a warning, and covertly, as a sources of titillation at the taboos depicted.
Men and Women

Media where English men have unacceptable sex with non-English women (and, sometimes it’s suggested by certain works, men) have a different connotation than media in which the opposite occurs. When it’s the man who’s foreign and the woman who’s English, often the situation is non-consensual; the man or the monster meant to represent a man forces himself upon her or pressures her by holding financial power over her. The end result of is that afterwards the woman is “ruined,” permanently in non-magical depictions, temporarily in fantasy depictions.

When it’s a English man who’s performing the transgression, he’s not considered “ruined” in the same way; he is not transformed or made sick in a magical way like the women in *Dracula* or *Goblin Market* and he doesn’t become a permanently socially lowered sexual captive like in *A Harlot’s Progress*. However, he is held more personally
responsible for having done something wrong. These images often use the idea of having sex with black women as a short hand for being immoral.

In one cartoon by caricaturist and illustrator George Cruikshank, *How Happy I could be With Either* (Image #3), dated 1817 to 1819, a white cleric stands between two female caricatures, one white and one black, with his eyes cross outward to look at each of them at once. They seems to be almost poised pre-threesome. The incorrect racial choice of partner is an indictment of every aspect of the clergy in this cartoon. In the gender reversed scenarios with English women and non-English men, the sexual encounter is portrayed as an unfortunate thing that happens to a girl or woman who otherwise might have led a good, morally upstanding life. When it’s an English man and a non-English woman, the encounter is a consequence of his amorality and not the other way around.

Cruikshank seemed to be a fan of drawing these interracial threesomes. In another Cruikshank cartoon, *Susanna and The Two Elders* (Image #4), a rabbi and a cleric sandwich a black woman, apparently a prostitute; all three are depicted with caricatured features. The rabbi gestures to the cleric in a “come join me” way. There’s a fascinating element to this that isn’t present in anything else I’ve come across; it directly shows a racial hierarchy between the three figures present. The rabbi character has a double identity of someone who is sexually transgressing below his racial status by having sex with the black prostitute and is also a person below the racial status of the cleric who he’s inviting.
him to join him in a threesome. Because he’s framed as both convincing someone to engage in transgressions and someone who has been lured into racially transgressive sex himself he reveals his own status as somewhere intermediate between the black and British figures.

**Politics**

The final fear about immigration to England is the fear of England being ruled by people who are not English. Bram Stoker introduces this fear at almost the very beginning of *Dracula*. Johnathan Harker discovers that the Count has a private library of books about English law and culture. When he asks the Count why he has these books, *Dracula* responds that he is studying English language and culture so that when he
comes to England, he will not be considered inferior for being foreign. Indeed, Dracula reveals, because he is a nobleman in his native Transylvania, he would prefer to be considered a superior by the English too, when he arrives in England, the way he is by the Transylvanian peasantry. He has “been so long master that (he) would be master still.” He is not content to just come to England, he wants to be a social superior to the native English with, it is implied, the same kind of political power that being nobility grants him back in his home country. This fear is also present in political cartoons.

Sometimes black people are the subject of this type of political fear, like in a George Cruikshank cartoon that depicts a group of politicians engaged in an interracial orgy with a group of black women, representing disloyalty to the white, British people. However, the vast majority of illustrations which focus on the political fear represent a belief in Jewish control over governmental figures. Circumcision of Christian members of the nobility and government are a common theme in these illustrations; unlike the orgy with women, representing corruption, here the Brits are in a way emasculated or dominated by Jews; the active parties in the political and sexual domination are different.

One such image, The Circumcised Gentiles; Or, A Journey to Jerusalem (Image #5), imagines a newly circumcised, regretful British member of government going on a hellish pilgrimage to Jerusalem. With him are two Jews, one carrying “circumcision salve” who speak in caricatured German inflected broken English. One declares that “me am naturalize (to England)” and refers to the circumcised Brit as his “Bruder.” They’re depicted as having the helpless English government under their thumb, quite literally in a hold by the penis, which allows them to immigrate and become naturalized
as English citizens. Not only are they becoming citizens by force and coercion, they are marked by their stereotypical speech as fundamentally foreign and unsuitable as citizens.

Another, subtler illustration of this theme is a 1847 British cartoon, credited to Sir Frank Lockwood, with an inscription underneath reading *Lotinja quite/the gentleman at/the Hebrew Ball*. The caricature is drawn with a smug, sleepy look and is dressed in evening wear with cartoonish little “shining” lines emanating from a button of his waistcoat as though mocking the fact that he’s wearing a waistcoat. His expression, his
caricatured ugliness, and the ill fit of his clothes indicates some contempt from Lockwood.

The fact that he is dressed in fancy, western looking clothing is framed as a humorous, unsuccessful imitation of the English upperclass, much in the way Dracula is framed as imitating the English in a threatening way.
Conclusion

In these pieces of media, race and national belonging take on qualities of good and evil, magical and every day. National concerns regarding who is acceptable as a citizen are embodied through the media, both high brow and low brow, of the time and the particular fears related to immigration are very specifically named and shown through these various forms of art. Because popular understanding of immigration, race, and citizenship remain relevant globally, understanding how conceptions of these concepts were formed and reproduced in past societies can help us understand ourselves and our own societies.
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