Reclaiming Memory’s Terra Incognitas: Uncovering the Self in Frances Burney’s The Wanderer

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Abstract
Exploring Memory’s Terra Incognitas explores two narrative concerns in Frances Burney’s The Wanderer: Juliet’s opacity as a heroine and her troubling entrance in the novel disguised in blackface, only to be later revealed as white and British. This project argues that both Juliet’s lack of interiority and racial instability represent Burney’s sensitivity to changing notions of the self at the end of the 18th century. Drawing on Dror Wahrman and Joseph Roach’s recent work on historical notions of the self, theater, performance, I suggest that Burney’s maligned last novel represents a generic achievement in the history of the novel, but also displays a profound awareness of the challenges of representing and remembering minority, especially black, narratives of the self in history. Individual chapters investigate The Wanderer’s response to the challenge of testifying to the slave revolt in Haiti, to the “bleaching” of Imoinda on stage in Thomas Southerne’s adaption of Aphra Behn’s novella, and to the quotidian meaning of the Mansfield Decision in a culture saturated by an already complex consumer and colonial past.

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After surveying Burney’s visual technique in relation to the dominant thematic concerns in recent scholarship, this study considers the manner in which the novelist’s anxiety about her critical and social receptions heightened her self-consciousness and influenced her self-expression in literature and in life. As Gina Campbell contends, a woman’s determination to publish a text ‘undermined her moral authority’ and modesty. Burney’s overt preoccupation with her ‘image’ and reputation made her particularly attentive to the strictures on language when depicting the interplay Frances Burney was an English novelist, diarist, and playwright best known for her novel ‘Evelina’. This biography of Frances Burney provides detailed information about her childhood, life, achievements, works & timeline. She began working on her last novel, ‘The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties’ in the 1790s. It took her several
years to complete and was finally published in 1814. Frances Burney’s best known work is the novel ‘Evelina or the History of a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World’ which revolves around the life of an unacknowledged, but legitimate daughter of a dissipated English aristocrat. A witty satire of a wealthy young girl’s life in 18th century England, the novel is described as a “landmark in the development of the novel of manners” by ‘Encyclopedia Britannica’.