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The rise, development, and circulation of the slave narrative

In the late eighteenth century, important cultural and philosophical changes facilitated the rise of antislavery movements. These developments are rich, complex, and usually fall under the rubric of “Enlightenment” ideology. The historian David Brion Davis has identified three of them. One was the rise of secular social philosophy, based on humanitarian principles and contractual terms for human association and government, found in such thinkers as Baron Montesquieu and John Locke, which drastically narrowed the traditional Christian rationale for slavery as the natural extension of the “slavery” of human sin.¹ Another important development was the rise of sentimentalism in the eighteenth century, which, related to evangelical religion, popular fiction, and urban cultures of refinement, raised the importance of the virtues of sympathy and benevolence as well as the cultural refinement accompanying them. A third development, especially important in the 1790s, was the proliferation of more radical and revolutionary ideas about natural rights vis-à-vis state and social forms of authority.

The slave narrative first emerged during the 1770s and 1780s in the context of these transatlantic political and religious movements which shaped the genre’s publication history, as well as its major themes and narrative designs. These late eighteenth-century works reveal what Paul Gilroy calls the “transcultural international formation” of the “Black Atlantic” – that fluid geographical area encompassing the West African littoral, Britain, British America, eastern Canada, and the Caribbean – through which black subjects traveled as free persons and as slaves.² The conditions and contexts for publishing these early narratives were in many ways unique. Evangelical Christian groups often sponsored and oversaw their publication. By the 1780s, new political organizations, like the English Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (1787) and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (1775/1784), dedicated to the abolition of the slave trade, also played a role in encouraging and publishing these narratives.

These religious and political groups helped to shape the language and themes of the eighteenth-century slave narrative: they helped to influence the genre's treatment of the black protagonist's physical and spiritual journey. Not until the organization of more radical antislavery societies in America during the 1830s and 1840s, which now called for the immediate emancipation of slaves, did the genre turn its energies upon Southern plantation slavery. Such an important change did not entirely nationalize or secularize the slave narrative, but it did produce new literary conventions, rework traditional ones, and effectively standardize all of them to the point where the slave narrative was an easily imitated – and sometimes forged – literary form. While earlier narratives were published, read, reviewed, and reprinted as much for their religious as racial experiences, the antebellum slave narrative sharpened its focus and became an increasingly popular and effective political means of fighting slavery.

Slave narratives cannot be reduced to these different ideological influences, but they do creatively engage the expectations of these groups in order to create cultural spaces in which the project of self-representation takes place. Whether actually writing or only orally relating their lives, slave narrators drew on multiple discourses as a way of cultivating such complex identities that lay ambiguously within and without contemporary norms.

Context, genre, theme

The first black autobiographers largely wrote within the norms of “civilized” or “Christian” identity – one that was more often than not associated directly with “Englishness.” The *Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (1760) appropriates such a civilized persona. The narrative, which recounts Hammon's thirteen-year odyssey of shipwreck and captivity in the Caribbean, contrasts his self-image as a “free” English subject with his presumably barbaric captors, Native Americans or the Spanish in Havana. The *Narrative* concludes with Hammon's fortuitous rediscovery of his “good Master” Winslow on board a ship bound from England to New England, and his symbolic reunification with him. Hammon leaves the terms of his “service” to Winslow deliberately ambiguous as a way of being able to access the language of English liberty, which was especially resonant for British and British American readers during the Seven Years War (1754–63), and to thereby legitimize himself by exploiting the period's anti-Catholic fervor and assuaging anxieties about slave unrest in Massachusetts.³ By manipulating this ideal of the rights of Englishmen, moreover, Hammon suggests the kind of thinking that, a decade later, would underlie the famous decision by Lord Mansfield

in the case of James Somerset (1772). This case ruled on the complaint of a black slave who had traveled to England with his master and did not wish to return to the West Indies. The Court ruled, albeit reluctantly, that slavery was incompatible with English liberty and that slaves who set foot in England were, in effect, free.

The genres upon which Hammon draws also suggest important historical realities about the publication, popularity, and expectations of the early slave narrative. One should recognize that, unlike the antebellum slave narrative, eighteenth-century narratives were more generically fluid. They were published and read as many things at once. The generic field includes spiritual autobiography, the conversion narrative, the providential tale, criminal confession, Indian captivity narrative, sea adventure story, and the picaresque novel. In Hammon's case, the publication history suggests that it was read as an Indian captivity narrative and an adventure story, and one that also "proved" the piety and loyalty of African Americans. The Boston publishing firm of Green and Russell (who were associated with Fowle and Draper, the leading publishers of captivity stories) took a chance on Hammon not out of antislavery convictions but out of a belief in the market potential of a picaresque tale of captivity. Edited by an English Methodist minister, John Marrant's *Narrative* similarly exemplified the edifying faith of its black subject, but its tale of captivity – already an established popular genre by the 1780s – significantly contributed to its popularity and continual republication between the 1780s and 1810s. (Until recently, it was republished in anthologies of Indian captivity narratives.) *The Life and Confession of Johnson Green* (1786) describes another autobiographical genre related to the slave narrative: the criminal conversion narrative, often published in broadside form. Many of these texts displayed an uneasy tension between evangelical didacticism and titillating commercial value.

The early slave narrative drew as well on less marketable genres. If we take a larger view of the development of the slave narrative, between the 1770s and 1830s, we see a genre arising not only from religious and popular contexts but also along with important kinds of political writing that directly took up the issues of race and slavery. Ever since the 1770s, for example, the political petition was an important antislavery genre that, like the slave narrative, critiqued slavery in terms of natural rights and humanitarian principles. The famous petition by a slave named Belinda to the Massachusetts legislature in 1782, for example, asked for compensation from the seized estate of her former Loyalist master. The petition was re-published in 1787 in Mathew Carey's *The American Museum, or Repository of Ancient and Modern Fugitive Pieces, Prose and Poetical*. Her petition employs two strategies that will become staples to the antebellum slave narrative: the sentimental

drama of the slave trade's disruption of the African home, and the moral bankruptcy of social law compared with natural law. As with the works of Marrant and Hammon, generic classification here becomes messy. Political writing overlaps with and is animated by sentimental autobiography – the slave's story of the loss of family and home.

Slave narratives that drew on the context of political writing found similar expression in essays and epistles that were published as pamphlets or in newspapers: Caesar Sarter's "Essay on Slavery," which appeared in 1774 in *The Essex Journal and Merrimack Packet*, Benjamin Banneker's famous letter to Thomas Jefferson, Daniel Coker's *A Dialogue Between a Virginian and an African Minister* (1810), and James Forten's *Letters from a Man of Color* (1813), which was written in response to a proposed Pennsylvania state law prohibiting further immigration of free blacks. "We hold these truths to be self evident," Forten declared, "that God created all men equal . . . is one of the most prominent features in the Declaration of Independence and in that glorious fabric of collective wisdom, our noble constitution." These early works, written by ex-slaves as well as freeborn blacks, blend personal experience with political polemic, lending political arguments the emotional weight of autobiography, and providing a source of political arguments for the developing slave narrative.

The early slave narrative, however, might be read as a religious genre. With some exceptions of course – *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa* (1798), for example, which has an almost exclusively economic focus on the slave's capacity to buy his own freedom – virtually all of these early narratives were as much stories of spiritual as bodily captivity and liberation. Why was this so? Rhetorically, of course, the languages of spiritual and physical liberation overlapped considerably. The ability of black autobiographers to signify on religious and political registers simultaneously lay largely in the elasticity of the language they used. The Bible itself provided a crucial source of the language of liberation – of salvation – that could be construed by black writers in highly creative ways. One could easily place, for example, the passage from 2 Corinthians 3:17 ("Now the Lord is that spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty") as the epigraph to most of the major slave narratives from the late eighteenth century.

But the material and economic realities of publication provide the most important context for understanding the religious qualities of early slave narratives. Evangelical groups like the Methodists and Baptists, who emphasized the central importance of the individual's "new birth" (and which, as Africanists have noted, resembles the West African tradition of ecstatic soul possession), took an interest in black autobiographies because of their

spiritual value in disseminating religious ideas and thereby converting souls. These groups often assumed the role of publisher – the agent financing and taking risk on publication.

This was true of *An Account of the Life of Mr. David George, from Sierra Leone in Africa*, which was published in *The Baptist Annual Register* (London, 1793). The title page informs readers that the narrative was “given by himself in a Conversation with Brother Rippon of London, and Brother Pearce of Birmingham.” It begins by stating that he was “without knowledge” of God and that his African parents “had not the fear of God before their eyes.” Similarly, *Memoirs of the Life of Boston King, a Black Preacher. Written by Himself, during his Residence at Kingswood School* was published in the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* (London, 1798). Other autobiographies, such as *A Brief Account of the Life, Experience, Travels, and Gospel Labors of George White, an African* (1810), *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher*, and *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Reverend Richard Allen* (1833), recounted the dual stories of physical and spiritual liberation as well as their subjects’ newfound identities as itinerant preachers and their ensuing struggles with established religious authorities. These works were, in one sense, the heirs to earlier religious writing by Briton Hammon, Phillis Wheatley, and Ukasaw Gronniosaw.

With strong ties to evangelical interests, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukasaw Gronniosaw an African Prince* (1772) is arguably the first narrative that directly addresses the evils of slavery. Like Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems*, the first edition of the *Narrative* was dedicated to the Countess of Huntingdon, the leader of a prominent Methodist religious group in England. It was first published in Bath in 1772, and over the next two decades republished in Bath as well as Dublin, Ireland, and Newport, Rhode Island.⁴ The fact that it was published in serial form in the *American Moral and Sentimental Magazine* in 1797 suggests that the *Narrative*’s autobiographical tale of enslavement and liberation was, at least for some readers, meaningful in terms of its thematic structure of religious conversion – its preface, after all, emphasizes the passage from African heathenism to Protestant Christianity. Gronniosaw’s *Narrative* also emphasizes the virtue of benevolence that was so important to the evangelical style of piety. It ends bitterly with his lament about his poverty, which in effect takes readers full-circle to the *Narrative*’s preface: “Reader, recommending this Narrative to your perusal, and him who is the Subject of it to your charitable Regard.”

By the end of the eighteenth century, then, the demonstration of one’s religious conversion and Christian feeling was an important convention of

the slave narrative. This development registers the institutional and cultural forces shaping the very meaning in these writings of “liberty” and “slavery.” Evangelical Protestantism provided many of the categories and tropes through which black autobiographers – whether they were speaking or writing – fashioned “civilized” identities for public consumption. Even a thoroughly worldly slave narrator like Olaudah Equiano makes sure to demonstrate his spiritual path to religious salvation; like much of the period’s Methodist writing, he emphasizes the importance of dreams and visions to his spiritual life. The portrait of Equiano on the frontispiece of the *Interesting Narrative* shows him holding a bible opened at Acts 4:12 (“Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved”). And, as in many black writings during this period, the famous itinerant minister George Whitefield makes an important appearance in the *Interesting Narrative*, which further strengthens Equiano’s religious credentials and thereby his authority as a writer.

The politics of abolition

Another crucial context shaping the slave narrative during this early period was the rise of organized antislavery movements. From the early 1770s until 1807, when the slave trade was abolished in Britain and the USA, new political organizations assailing the African slave trade were quite active on both sides of the Atlantic.⁵ Organizations like the English Abolition Society lobbied Parliament as well as American colonial (and later state) assemblies to abolish the slave trade. They were truly transatlantic movements, insofar as their members corresponded vigorously with one another across national boundaries. They also supported and patronized the work of black writer-activists like Equiano and Quobna Ottobah Cugoana. These organizations significantly generated a great deal of antislavery literature: books, pamphlets, epistles, institutional reports and proceedings, published sermons and orations, as well as a lot of visual and iconic materials meant to sentimentalize the plight of African slaves. Composed largely, though not exclusively, of Quakers and humanitarians, these groups helped to form a kind of transatlantic print culture, which overlapped with those of evangelicalism, political radicalism, and popular culture.

Antislavery print culture provided the slave narrative with flexible rhetorical strategies and helped to sharpen its political focus. Its growing influence on the slave narrative is apparent, for example, in the dedication of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789) to the English Parliament. Here Equiano openly connects the writing of autobiography to the politics of abolishing the African

slave trade. Similarly, Cugoano's two major works, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1787) and *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1791), are explicitly shaped by antislavery politics and provided perhaps the most radical assault on the African slave trade and West Indian slavery by any writer, white or black, during this era. Cugoano is careful to frame his arguments within the context of the larger antislavery culture. The title of Cugoano's first work culls from English abolitionist Thomas Clarkson's *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1785); the latter work expressly acknowledges the English abolitionists Granville Sharp and William Wilberforce. Cugoano's prose style, moreover, reveals the radical turn in contemporary antislavery politics. Cast in the language of the jeremiad, his outraged tone is far more apparent than, for example, either Gronniosaw's or Marrant's. (This radical approach likely contributed to the fact that his works were not advertised or reviewed in Britain.)

The changing political culture of abolitionism also opened up more ideological room in the slave narrative for secular arguments. The early writers Hammon and Gronniosaw, for example, did not make extended economic arguments against the slave trade or slave-keeping – these would have been out of step with the personae they wished to create for themselves and the constituencies to which they were appealing. By contrast, Equiano, writing later in the 1780s, drew upon Enlightenment authorities to argue against the economic rationale for slavery. The *Interesting Narrative* echoes Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) as it analyzes the potential advantages for the British economy of converting slave labor into free labor. Equiano's use of personal experience and empirical observation lent further force to this argument.

Slave narratives also pursued the antislavery strategy during this period by reinterpreting Locke's philosophy about natural rights. Whereas proslavery writers traditionally justified slavery according to "natural" rights to property, antislavery writings re-possessed Locke's ideas to argue for the absurdity of equating human beings – who inherently possessed the right to life – with material possessions. This was certainly true of a wide array of British and British American writers, including, for example, Thomas Paine, Anthony Benezet, Clarkson, and Granville Sharp. Black writers like Venture Smith, John Marrant, and James Forten took such an argument and pushed it even further, both logically and emotionally, calling upon the rhetorical power of personal experience. Indeed, part of the interest in Smith's life lay in his prodigious capacity for work, his ability to mix his labor with the land, and thereby purchase his liberty.

In keeping with this major shift in antislavery polemic was the slave narrative's central proposition about the full humanity of the African. The genre made extensive use of a wide array of Christian and Enlightenment philosophy that posited the singular nature (or what is known as the "monogenist" view) of humanity as well as the moral responsibility to uphold humanitarian ideals. Phillis Wheatley's famous autobiographical poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," employs the language of salvation (albeit with complex layers of irony) to achieve this racial theme. Other antislavery writers, white and black, were aware of and employed the biblical evidence found in Acts 17:26 ("And hath made of one blood all nations of men"). In contrast to Wheatley, Equiano draws upon secular racial theorists of the Enlightenment such as John Mitchill to make a case for the singular view of humanity.

During the 1830s and 1840s, changes in abolitionism drastically affected the thematic and formal features of the slave narrative. Partly in reaction to colonization movements in Britain and America, abolitionism became more radical and more organized in the antebellum era. The rise of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in 1831, and its heir, the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) in 1833, under the leadership of William Lloyd Garrison, changed the political direction of antislavery politics. Even though the AASS was often condemned for its radical beliefs – the immediate emancipation of all slaves, non-violent resistance, moral suasion as opposed to political negotiation, and the proslavery character of the US Constitution – the Garrisonians helped to shift the center of political gravity in American antislavery. Its newspaper *The Liberator* became an important public forum for disseminating ideas. By the late 1830s, however, the abolitionist movement in America had fragmented into different organizations, like the American and Foreign Antislavery Society, due largely to social and gender issues dividing conservative religious members from others. Many other antislavery constituencies, moreover, like the Free Soil Movement and the Liberty Party, simply lacked the moral and religious commitment to helping African Americans. Notwithstanding these political divisions, the movement as a whole created an expansive antislavery print culture. There were now many more – and more widely circulating – abolitionist periodicals, newspapers, and yearbooks: the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, the *American and Foreign Antislavery Reporter*, the *Anti-Slavery Record*, the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, and the *Herald of Freedom*, to name only a few. Renowned slave authors like Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and Henry Bibb, for example, also became active in the abolitionist press and published or edited periodicals of their own.

The impact of these changes was immense on the slave narrative. The central abolitionist project of exposing the evils of the Southern plantation (and the false paternalistic myths supporting it) became the absolute priority of the antebellum slave narrative. The genre now focused, often with painstaking vigilance, on the actual, daily conditions of slave life, because abolitionist readers and publishers desired – indeed required – that kind of detailed evidence. A good example of this is the *Narrative of James Williams* (1838), which was edited and transcribed by the poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier. Its preface and appendices, written and compiled by Whittier, are nearly half as long as Williams's story, and they densely document the horrors of plantation life. Sandwiched between this editorial apparatus, the Williams narrative (which was later withdrawn because of controversy over its authenticity) unsurprisingly duplicates this emphasis.

So the antebellum slave narrative came of age in the context of the abolitionist obsession with “evidence” and the new documentary compendia meant to fill that role. In this sense, the slave narrative has a reciprocal relation with influential antislavery documentaries like Theodore Dwight Weld's *American Slavery As It Is* (1839) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853). It borrows from them and provides factual material for them, so that these genres inter-animate one another, and the major rhetorical tropes of antislavery circulate freely in both of them. Many of the narrative and thematic conventions, which were apparent yet not fully developed in eighteenth-century works, take shape in this period – the depravity of Southern planters and the irrepressible fact of sexual miscegenation, the hypocrisy of Southern Christianity, scenes of brutal whipping and torture, rebellious slaves who are murdered, and the strategic mechanisms by which the plantation maintains what Douglass called the “mental and moral darkness” of enslavement – and all become standard fare.

These conventions were usually rehearsed orally before they appeared in print. The abolitionist lecture circuit was an important development shaping the style and content of the antebellum slave narrative. Most slave narrators made their names as speakers before they became writers per se. Some – Douglass, William Wells Brown, J. W. C. Pennington, Samuel Ringgold Ward, to list a few – were known just as much as orators as writers. Indeed, many entered into the world of print because of their powers in oratory (which was a largely masculine mode of expression in this era). Some – Douglass, Brown, William and Ellen Craft, Henry “Box” Bown – even gained international renown by traveling to Britain and Europe and giving public lectures about the evils of slavery. We should remember, however, that Garrisonian abolitionists themselves were never considered a “mainstream” political group, principally because they believed the Constitution was a

proslavery document and a “covenant with death.” Even though radical abolitionists were out of step with most Americans, their forceful message about the evils of Southern plantation slavery was effective over time. Most importantly, the abolitionist forum became a vitally important arena of expression for ex-slaves. Abolitionist newspapers and periodicals published and reviewed as many, if not more, oral testimonies against slavery and ex-slave speeches as “written” narratives.⁶

However, the abolitionist meeting also put limits on black expression in public and literally staged their bodies for public consumption. Ex-slaves were asked only to state the basic “facts” of their lives; they sometimes bared their backs as texts that “proved” their stories. These dramatic conventions only further heightened the stakes for African Americans of establishing their own voices as speakers and as writers. As Douglass puts it in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, during the abolitionist meeting William Lloyd Garrison “took me as his text.” The abolitionist forum provides a crucial rhetorical context – the limitations of voice, the bounds of propriety, the humility of self-presentation – for evaluating the slave narratives during this period. Important slave narratives from this period self-consciously stage scenes of speaking and wield tropes of utterance to counter the constant prospect of being silenced.

If the politics of slavery were, as we might expect, central to the slave narrative in the antebellum period, the narrative continued to express religious ideas and employ Christian tropes about the nature of enslavement and liberation. One central reason for this is that antebellum culture was still highly religious; evangelical institutions exerted significant influence on the world of antebellum publishing. Religious reading continued to play a major role in most Americans’ lives: bibles, religious primers, devotional handbooks, psalters, hymnals, and John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* still were standard fare. The framing devices editors used to portray ex-slaves continued to emphasize moral virtue and Christian feeling. For example, the preface to *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper* (1837), written by the British evangelical and antislavery activist Thomas Price, notes how Roper continues his religious education so that “he will be eminently qualified to instruct the children of Africa in the truths of the gospel of Christ.” The *Narrative*’s publication in effect fulfills this financial goal. Roper’s patron, John Morison, was an English evangelical, who obviously influenced Roper’s presentation of himself as the biblical Joseph, the victim of slavery who eventually forgave his oppressors. The traditional intertwining of physical and spiritual journeys, moreover, continued to characterize the genre. In *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (1860), William Craft likens his journey north to the allegorical

protagonist of *The Pilgrim's Progress*: "I thought I might indulge in a few minutes' sleep in the car; but I, like Bunyan's Christian in the arbour, went to sleep at the wrong time, and took too long a nap."

Publication and reception

From the outset, the slave narrative appears to have been a popular genre on both sides of the Atlantic, though exact sales figures for eighteenth-century narratives are more difficult to calculate. We do know, however, that between the 1770s and 1810s the narratives of Gronniosaw, Marrant, and Equiano went through multiple editions and apparently sold quite well. These works were published in London and, with the advent of provincial printing in the eighteenth century, later re-published in places like Dublin and Edinburgh (and sometimes in America). The source of their appeal lay in a number of factors: an evangelical reading market, the motifs of captivity and enslavement, the allure of sea narrative and high adventure, and, often, the allure of the exotic. Most importantly, these narratives were able to combine multiple genres – spiritual autobiography, travel narrative, ethnography, political commentary – as well as religious, sentimental, and gothic discourses. They were flexible enough to appeal to various readerships simultaneously.

Perhaps this is the reason for the financial success of Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*. As Vincent Carretta has shown, Equiano was commercially savvy enough to keep the copyright to the *Interesting Narrative*, rather than allowing a publisher (usually a bookseller) to assume the risk of printing costs.⁷ Later African American ex-slave narrators like Henry Bibb pursued the same strategy. Equiano also marketed the *Interesting Narrative* through subscription, which was not an uncommon strategy at this time (Ignatius Sancho's and Cugoano's works were published in this way), since it significantly decreased financial risks. The *Interesting Narrative* subsequently went through thirteen editions in the first five years after its London publication in 1789. It was re-published in 1791 in New York and was translated into Dutch, German, and Russian. By 1850 it had gone through thirty-six editions.⁸ By comparison, Marrant's *Narrative* went through (perhaps) ten printings in 1785, the year of its initial publication, and almost forty by the middle of the nineteenth century.⁹ The economic potential of this genre was such that even smaller publishing houses sometimes participated in re-publishing those works that had proven their market value. When Gronniosaw's work was re-published in Salem, New York in 1809, it was re-titled simply *The Black Prince* (adapting the phrase "an African Prince" from its original, lengthy title), a move that suggests a different kind of marketing strategy.

The literary world of eighteenth-century London reviewed works by black writers in general seriously though not always positively. Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) and *The Letters of Ignatius Sancho, an African* (1782), for example, generally upheld standards of morality and cultural refinement and were less politically volatile. In contrast, the writings of Equiano and especially Cugoano were more radical, and the mainstream English press often cast doubt on the plausibility of these and other narratives in terms that were particularly condescending about the possibilities of black authorship. For example, *The Monthly Review* disparagingly noted of the *Interesting Narrative* that "it is not improbable that some English writer has assisted him in the compliment, or, at least, the correction of the book: for it is sufficiently well-written." The *Gentleman's Magazine* claimed the *Interesting Narrative* was "written in a very unequal style," but offered this praise together with the negative assertion that "there is no general rule without an exception." These magazines also critiqued the authenticity (and even the interest) of Equiano's and Marrant's accounts of their religious conversions. The critiques in general are more than tinged with racial hostility, but they may also reflect the cultural friction between secular and evangelical reading publics at this time.

We might even broadly re-conceive the term "review" as it affects early black writing in general and the slave narrative in particular. Traditional reviews of writers like Equiano and Marrant were only one kind of discourse evaluating early black writing. Indeed, the prefatory material framing – and legitimating – these works functioned as promotional reviews. There is probably no better example of this than the preface that the minister William Aldridge wrote for John Marrant's *Narrative*, which highlights the interest of Marrant's Indian captivity and simultaneously asks readers to read that captivity as a spiritual allegory of the soul. Even as editors lowered the bar for the writing skills of "uncultivated" or "untutored" minds, they nevertheless made the case for the value of these works. This was especially resonant at a time when the "literary" was associated with "letters" generally and was never separated from writing's moral edification.

Expanding the category of the review, however, cuts both ways. David Hume and Thomas Jefferson disparaged black writing in important philosophical and historical works like Hume's "Of National Character" (1764) and Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785). Hume likened the Jamaican poet Francis Williams to a "parrot," and Jefferson infamously debunked the quality of Wheatley's poems and even used her as an example testifying to the inferiority of Africans in general. Their comments did not go unanswered, however. Writers as diverse as Gilbert Imlay and the French prelate Abbé Gregoire publicly came to the defense of Wheatley,

Equiano, and many others. The important idea here is that the “review” of the slave narrative, whether a traditional review or in the form of prefatory material, was a highly politicized form. Literary evaluation and the politics of race and slavery were deeply enmeshed in one another: judgments of the aesthetic value of the slave narrative were inseparable from transatlantic debates over the morality of the African slave trade and the nature of the African.

Between the 1770s and 1840s, however, the slave narrative became part of an emerging, capitalist literary market, and the genre was promoted and reviewed accordingly. This is to say that the rising popularity of the slave narrative was due as much to the changing conditions of print capitalism as to the rising tide of abolitionist sentiment. The publishing industry in America underwent expansive changes at the same time that abolitionist groups were promoting the publication of slave narratives to advance their political cause. A number of factors contributed to the development of a modern book industry in America: larger publishing firms, with greater resources to finance and market their products; changes in the technology of printing, which decreased costs, controlled prices, and enabled far greater levels of production; improvements in transportation routes and distribution techniques; and marketing strategies that targeted expanding readerships on an increasingly national scale. All of these changes have complex histories and did not occur quickly. But they did change the economic conditions under which slave narrators, publishers, printers, and abolitionist patrons all operated.

The genre was also affected by the emergence of modern publishers in America. These firms assumed the risk of financing print and distribution costs, and they were often more concerned with the genre’s market potential than its political efficacy. Abolitionist societies, however, sometimes assumed the role of publisher – the AASS financed the publication, for example, of Douglass’s first autobiography and the *Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave* (1847). But the publishing history of other narratives suggests their status as commercial ventures. For example, after the enormous success of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), and her subsequent suggestion that her characterization of Uncle Tom was taken in large part from *The Life of Josiah Henson* (1849), John and Henry Jewett re-published Henson’s narrative in 1858 as *Truth Stranger Than Fiction: Father Henson’s Story of his Own Life* – and included a new preface by Stowe herself to enhance its marketability. This was also true of *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball* (1836), which went through nine US editions, two British editions, and one German edition. As with Henson’s autobiography, however, its popularity

took off when it was (misleadingly) re-titled *Fifty Years in Chains; or the Life of an American Slave* (1859) and packaged in a more attractive binding. By the eve of the Civil War, then, the slave narrative had become simultaneously a more mature literary form and a more sensationalist print commodity.

In light of these changes, antebellum narratives enjoyed much greater sales than had earlier slave narratives and reached audiences beyond the pale of radical abolitionism. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), for example, sold 5,000 copies in four months and 11,000 copies in two years, and Solomon Northrup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) sold 27,000 copies in two years. The popularity of these narratives extended beyond America. Most popular slave narratives were soon reprinted in Britain, and many were translated into other languages and published in Europe. Douglass's *Narrative* underwent nine British editions in the 1840s and was also re-published in Ireland as well. William Wells Brown's *Narrative* had a London edition and was later translated into Dutch. *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (1838) was first published in London and then in Philadelphia, and represents perhaps the most Anglicized slave narrative of this period; it went through ten editions in twenty years, selling more than 20,000 copies.¹⁰

Editorial decisions continued to shape the rhetorical and thematic designs of the slave narrative. Black writers negotiated political and economic forces in order to tell "free" stories. Perhaps the most extreme case of this is *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831), edited by Thomas Gray, which was published immediately after Nat Turner's Rebellion in order to discredit Turner as a fanatic and to suppress future slave insurrections. But, to a lesser extent, the same issues of editorial manipulation were present in narratives sponsored by antislavery constituencies. Witness the difficult relationship between Garrison and Douglass, whose second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, published in 1855, was in many ways an open break from Garrison's mentorship. Its preface, written by an African American physician, openly addressed the problems Douglass experienced in asserting his independence among white abolitionists. Published in Boston in 1849, the first edition of Henry "Box" Brown's narrative was edited and transcribed by the abolitionist Charles Stearns, who subjected the text to stylistic excesses, overblown rhetoric, and melodramatic commentary. Its title suggests as much: *Narrative of Henry Box Brown who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box Three Feet Long and Two Wide Written from a Statement Made by Himself. With Remarks upon a Remedy for Slavery. By Charles Stearns.* In 1850, however, the newly empowered Fugitive Slave Law forced Brown to flee to England, where he set up (much to the dismay of British abolitionists) his own traveling exhibition of his famous escape, complete with the

eponymous box in which he had escaped. The second edition of his autobiography, published in Manchester in 1851, presents a more compact and stylistically controlled work, due to Brown's editorial control. It was entitled simply the *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*.

During the antebellum period, when the political stakes of the slave narrative's authenticity became intensified, antislavery reviewers usually defended the veracity of the slave narrative as well as the moral character of the slave narrator. Such praise often relied on available cultural tropes and set the terms through which slave narrators reconstructed their own identities. Lydia Maria Child, for example, included a letter from Amy Post in the first edition of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) that praised the protagonist as a "naturally virtuous and refined" slave woman with "a natural craving for human sympathy." Reviewers, moreover, generally took a pragmatic attitude toward the genre, evaluating its ability to combat slavery in the USA. One of the most famous reviews of slave narratives in this period was Ephraim Peabody's, which appeared in 1849 in the *Unitarian Christian Examiner*. While heaping praise on Douglass, Josiah Henson, and others, Peabody still cautioned that Douglass's "mode of address" (read: his anger, wit, and irony) was "likely to diminish, not only his usefulness, but his real influence."¹¹ An anonymous review of Charles Ball's autobiography, appearing in *The Quarterly Anti-Slavery Magazine*, was happy about this "simple" and "plain" narrative composed by a writer "who is no more than the recorder of facts detailed to him by another."

Reviewers were highly self-conscious about the subject of race in light of the rise of pseudo-scientific theories about racial difference, which were related to the fields of natural history, ethnology, and phrenology (the study of human traits according to the configuration of the human skull). Even the best-intentioned reviewers, however, reveal racial condescension that often takes the form of romantic primitivism – the idea that "native peoples" were more virtuous since they were removed from the corrupting influences of modern society. When slave narrators like Harriet Jacobs confessed moments of their own moral weakness, we should remember they did so in the midst of an abolitionist culture that readily figured African Americans as culturally deficient. Even in antislavery circles, representations of the "poor slave" often had primitivist tendencies that reflected some form of the "noble savage" trope noted above. The editor of Venture Smith's *Narrative* likened him to a Benjamin Franklin in a "state of nature"; antebellum admirers of Douglass similarly attributed his oratorical and literary gifts to the same sources. Reviewing Douglass's *Narrative* in the *New York Tribune*, for example, Margaret Fuller praised it as "simple, true, coherent, and warm with genuine feeling." Arguing against racial prejudice, Fuller nevertheless

noted the African race's "peculiar element" – its "talent for melody, a ready skill in adaptation and imitation, [and] an almost indestructible elasticity of nature." This was supposed to be a compliment.

By the 1850s reviews of major slave narratives also registered the importance of the genre to American literary culture. The period between the American Revolution and Civil War was characterized by chronic laments about America's literary reputation, and was punctuated by famous declarations of national cultural independence by Emerson, Whitman, and others. As a form of increasingly popular, distinctly American autobiography, the slave narrative further enabled this national cultural project. Not all reviewers embraced the genre as a high form of literature, and sectional and racial politics continued to shape all literary evaluations. Yet even pragmatic and condescending reviewers like Peabody recognized the capacity of the slave narrative to stand as an "American" literary genre in the eyes of the literary world. What further enhanced this literary reconfiguration was the romantic cachet the slave narrative possessed – its scenes of isolation, suffering, and solitary flight from the barbarities of society – that suited well romantic culture's thematic motifs and master tropes. Even the ways in which these narratives were prefaced and packaged suggest their modern literary appeal. As the preface to the *Narrative of Henry Bibb* (1849) demonstrates, the book was presented as much for picaresque adventure as for antislavery themes. The "Opinions of the Press" that Bibb included for promotional purposes contained praise from magazines like the *New York Evangelist* ("a work adapted to produce . . . proper Christian sympathy") and *The Liberator* (a work of "thrilling interest"). The slave narrative's entrance into this literary and commercial culture produced tensions in its literary development. While adhering to higher principles, the slave narrative had to compete in an increasingly capitalized and modern print culture; while abdicating the role of professional "writer" who merely sought money, the slave narrator nevertheless was conscripted into the modern "American" literary scene.

NOTES

1. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975).
2. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
3. See Robert S. Desrochers, Jr., "'Surprising Deliverance'?: Slavery and Freedom, Language, and Identity in the Narrative of Briton Hammon, 'A Negro Man'" in *Genius in Bondage*. Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould, eds. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2001), pp. 153–74. See also John Sekora, "Red, White, and Black: Indian Captivities, Colonial Printers, and the Early African American

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- Narrative” in *A Mixed Race: Ethnicity in Early America*. Frank Shuffelton, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 92–104.
4. See Vincent Carretta, ed., *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996).
 5. See Philip Gould, *Barbaric Traffic: Commerce and Antislavery in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).
 6. See John W. Blassingame, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977).
 7. Vincent Carretta, “‘Property of Author’: Olaudah Equiano’s Place in the History of the Book” in Carretta and Gould, *Genius in Bondage*, pp. 130–52.
 8. See Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds., *The Slave’s Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
 9. See Adam Potkay and Sandra Burr, eds., *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995).
 10. See Yuval Taylor, ed., *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1999). 2 vols.
 11. Davis and Gates, *The Slave’s Narrative*, p. 24.