

IMAGINED LITERACIES:  
RACE AND READING IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICAN LITERATURE

By  
LUCAS BLOCK BARTON

A dissertation submitted to the  
School of Graduate Studies  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Graduate Program in Literatures in English

Written under the direction of

Meredith L. McGill

And approved by

---

---

---

---

New Brunswick, New Jersey

October 2018

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Imagined Literacies: Race and Reading in Antebellum American Literature

By LUCAS BARTON

Dissertation Director:

Meredith L. McGill

*Imagined Literacies* argues that antebellum ideologies of racial difference—the ways that early Americans sought to draw clear, fixed distinctions between people of different races—were reflected in, and themselves changed to reflect, new representations of black readers and black reading practices in mainstream literature. Black readers became increasingly visible within American society in the early nineteenth century. While writing by white Americans often featured representations of black people reading, most of those representations were directed towards a white reading audience, drawing a sharp implied distinction between the readers they addressed and those whom they claimed to represent. But written depictions of black readers frequently undermined such an easy distinction between address and representation, as their authors struggled to reconcile the potential co-presence of black and white readers with the various ideas of racial difference (including narratives of biological, cultural, and ontological difference) that regulated other interactions between black and white Americans.

As white writers sought to balance the egalitarian implications of mass literacy with the hierarchical relationships generated by ideas of racial difference, and as black writers sought to position reading as a potential (although not unqualified) avenue towards self-determination, each group grappled with foundational questions about what

a democratic reading public would look like. Those conversations centered on the idea of shared texts: texts whose social significance lay as much in their ability to be circulated between reading audiences of different races as it did in their ideological content. By reading works of fiction by Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Montgomery Bird, and Harriet Beecher Stowe alongside circulating texts such as abolitionist pamphlets and the *Liberia Herald*, I argue that shared texts were an important tool for imagining and articulating the status of black readers in an American reading public. In the process, I show how ideas of race and reading developed in concert with one another in the years leading up to the Civil War.

## **Acknowledgements**

This dissertation could not have been completed without the advice, input, and support of countless people. I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee, Doug Jones, Michelle Stephens, and Jonathan Elmer, for their support of the project at various stages. Particularly acknowledgements are due to my director, Meredith McGill, whose guidance has been crucial to conceiving and developing this project. Over the past seven years, Meredith has been a constant source of warmth and humor as well as academic rigor, and her suggestions, questions, and encouragement are the foundation on which this project stands.

This project builds on countless conversations and classes with the faculty at Rutgers, including Stéphane Robolin, Brad Evans, Myra Jehlen, Mukti Mangharam, Chris Iannini, David Kurnick, Nicholas Gaskill, and Ann Jurecic. In dissertation workshops led by Lynn Festa and Emily Bartels, I received sharp, helpful feedback that got me through some of the more tortuous sections of my argument. Special thanks are due to Cheryl Wall, Evie Shockley, and the administrators, graduate assistants, and student attendees of the Rutgers English Diversity Institute; over the course of the three summers, REDI provided a much-needed reminder of what the academy could be at its best. In addition, this project builds in many ways on conversations with James Holstun from the University at Buffalo, whose classes showed me what could be gained (and what was at stake) from rigorous critical analysis, and without whose friendship and mentorship I would never have made it this far.

I would like to thank the Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for the dissertation fellowships that allowed me to complete this

project. Chapter 3 of this project relied on substantial archival research at the Library of Congress, and that research was supported as well by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. I would also like to acknowledge the librarians and archivists at the Library of Congress, without whose assistance I would never have even known where to begin looking. In addition, various parts of this dissertation have been graciously received by audiences and readers at the Northeast Modern Language Association and C19 conferences.

Finally, I need to thank the many colleagues and friends whose presence has helped shape this dissertation. Cheryl Robinson and Courtney Borack are not only lovely and kind individuals, but also the only explorers intrepid enough to navigate the vast Rutgers bureaucracy. Isaac Cowell, Julie McIsaac, Melissa Parrish, and Alicia Williams were the first people to read and respond to the earliest drafts of this project, for which I cannot thank them enough. This project has been sustained through innumerable coffee breaks and graduate lounge conversations with some of the sharpest and most insightful scholars of American literature I'll ever have the privilege of knowing, including Emily Banta, Lauren Kimball, Alex Leslie, Rebecca Lipperini, Dan Malinowski, Ariel Martino, Tasia Milton, Michael Monescalchi, and Tim Morris. In different ways, this project bears the impress of countless friends. Among my best memories of graduate school are countless hikes and board game nights with Erin Kelly and Alvin Chin. Danielle Allor, Alyssa Coltrain, Teddy Cully, Lech Harris, and Caroline Pirri have all made the last four years feel like an adventure. Melissa Bobe, Robert Palmer, and Erik Wade have been sources of friendship and inspiration since I first met each of them at the start of it all. Special thanks are due to Amanda Rae Rosado, whose conversations and feedback have

pulled me out of many a logical quagmire, and Kate Ladenheim, who has somehow always been available despite our frequently incompatible schedules.

I'd like to thank my parents, Maxine Block and David Barton, for their love and support as I've immersed myself in this project. I'd like to thank Buster, whose lack of opposable thumbs and flare for the dramatic have never prevented him from being an excellent writing companion. And finally, I'd like to thank Stephanie Hunt, who has been a source of emotional and intellectual support throughout the years; who has talked through, listened to, and proofread this project many times over; and who was the first person to inform me that otters hold hands when they sleep so they don't float away from one another.

## Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	vii
<b>Introduction: Black Readers and Shared Texts</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Historical Contexts: Reading Revolutions in Antebellum America</i>	10
<i>Methodologies I: Tracing the Impress of Black Literacy</i>	25
<i>Methodologies II: Theorizing the Shared Text</i>	34
<i>Chapter Outline</i>	43
<b>Chapter 1: Readers in the Rue Morgue: Public Literacy and Poe's Animal Other</b>	<b>51</b>
<i>The Curator of the Absent Texts</i>	62
<i>The Beast of Cuvier</i>	75
<i>Incorporating the Absent Other</i>	89
<b>Chapter 2: "Sendary Papers": The Anti-Slavery Pamphlet and the Composite Reader in <i>Sheppard Lee</i></b>	<b>99</b>
<i>'Deranged from apprehension': Imagining Abolitionist Print</i>	110
<i>Reading, Possession, and Identity in Sheppard Lee</i>	126
<i>Bird's Composite Reader</i>	136
<i>"Sendary Papers" and Mass Reception</i>	145
<b>Chapter 3: "As sable now as when we left the United States": The <i>Liberia Herald</i> and Black Readers at a Distance</b>	<b>155</b>
<i>"To the Colony Also": Forecasting the Herald</i>	169
<i>"Which Africk scans": Reprinting the Liberia Herald</i>	179
<i>Colonial Authority and the Temple Arguments</i>	191
<i>The African Newspaper and the Literary Marketplace</i>	200
<b>Chapter 4: Uncle Tom's "literary cabinet": Bible Ownership and the Abolitionist Imagination</b>	<b>210</b>
<i>The Bible Question</i>	221
<i>Frederick Douglass and the Fantasy of the Reading Slave</i>	231
<i>Reception Studies and the Enslaved Reader in Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>	243
<i>Improper Property</i>	254
<i>Black Letters / A Place to Call My Own</i>	264
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>276</b>

## Introduction: Black Readers and Shared Texts

Do you understand, friend, as well as read this book? for many can read the words well who cannot get hold of the true and good sense. “O, massa,” says he, “I read the book much before I understand; but at last I felt pain in my heart; I found things in the book that cut me to pieces.”

**Ambrose Serle**

**“The Happy Negro” (American Tract Society, 1814)**

Before long, notes were often slipped into my hand. I would return them, saying, “I can’t read them, sir.” “Can’t you?” he replied; “then I must read them to you.” He always finished the reading by asking, “Do you understand?”

**Harriet Jacobs**

***Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)**

*Imagined Literacies* shows how antebellum ideologies of racial difference—the various beliefs that clear, fixed distinctions could be drawn between people of different races—were reflected in, and themselves changed to reflect, new representations of black readers and black reading practices in mainstream literature. Black readers became increasingly visible within American society in the early nineteenth century. While writing by white Americans often featured representations of black people reading, most of those representations were directed towards a white reading audience, drawing a sharp implied distinction between the readers they addressed and those whom they claimed to represent. But written depictions of black readers frequently undermined such an easy distinction between address and representation, as their authors struggled to reconcile the potential co-presence of black and white readers with the ideas of racial difference (including narratives of biological, cultural, and ontological difference) that regulated other interactions between black and white Americans.



Throughout this dissertation, I argue that the underlying contradictions of American society played out in representations of black reading. As white writers sought to balance the egalitarian implications of mass literacy with the hierarchical relationships generated by ideas of racial difference, and as black writers sought to position reading as a potential (although not unqualified) avenue towards self-determination, each group grappled with foundational questions about what a democratic reading public would look like. Those conversations centered on the idea of shared texts: texts whose social significance lay as much in their ability to be circulated between reading audiences of different races as it did in their ideological content. A category rather than a genre, nearly any kind of printed matter—ranging from natural historical treatises and Bibles to more ephemeral texts like newspapers and pamphlets—could operate as a shared text. In *Imagined Literacies*, I show how shared texts became an important tool for imagining and articulating the functions of black readers in an American reading public; in the process, I show how ideas of race and reading developed in concert with one another in the years leading up to the Civil War.

The democratizing possibilities of sharing texts plays out in Ambrose Serle's "The Happy Negro," a religious tract that describes a meeting between "an English gentleman" and an enslaved "middle aged Negro" on a plantation. In the manner of all Englishmen in such a position, the visitor asks his new acquaintance "whether his state of slavery was not disagreeable to him, and whether he would not gladly exchange it for his liberty." But the enslaved man doesn't take the bait: rather than describe the suffering of a slave, he describes the happiness of a Bible reader. "I have a good Massah," he replies, "who teach me to read; and I read good book, that makes me happy." Suspicious of his

happiness, the Englishman presses further: “Do you understand, friend, as well as read this book?” But the enslaved reader’s answers—“I found things in that book that cut me to pieces”—prove that his happiness is no mere façade, but the result of careful Christian introspection. The two are soon lost in “that inexpressible glow of Christian affection,” and when they finally part, the white man promises his friend “that neither the color of his body, nor the condition of his present life, could prevent him from being my dear brother in our dear Saviour.”<sup>1</sup> Separated by race and circumstance, the two men nevertheless become one, disparate souls brought together by the power of reading. In the process, the inequality of slavery temporarily disappears; in fact, the enslaved man’s description of his “good Massah” posits that the right kind of reading can make slavery into a Christian institution, one that levels out the differences between otherwise hierarchized individuals. The Bible links the Englishman, the enslaved, and the slaveholder into a reading network.

While the tract qualifies its egalitarian sensibility with its positive depiction of slavery, its provenance suggests that its author was less invested in elevating the downtrodden than in humbling the privileged. “The Happy Negro” was one of hundreds of tracts published by the American Tract Society and distributed by colporteurs—dedicated evangelical couriers—across the country. A colporteur would visit a house, interview its residents, and then share whatever tract seemed most relevant to the situation at hand. Dubious readers might receive “The Warning Voice,” for instance, while more amenable subjects might get “’Tis All for the Best.”<sup>2</sup> For its part, “The Happy

---

<sup>1</sup> Ambrose Serle, Esq., *The Happy Negro* (The American Tract Society: 1814).

<sup>2</sup> “Sketch of the Origin and Character of the Principal Series of Tracts of the American Tract Society” (New York: American Tract Society, 1859), 1-2. Collected in Edwin S.

Negro” seemed to speak best to genteel readers who had more in common with the unnamed narrator than the titular slave. In the case of one “respectable Physician, who had long been an avowed infidel,” the tract so convinced him of his errors that he “collected his deistical books at home, and those which he had lent to his neighbours, and committed them to the flames,” having “found the Bible infinitely better.”<sup>3</sup>

To members of the American Tract Society, this narrative was a testament to the Bible’s power, as well as that of the tract form more generally. But it also speaks to the power that narratives of black reading had over white antebellum readers. The physician’s startling (and rather melodramatic) conversion is directly enabled by the explicitly hierarchical relationship between his status, that of a free and “respectable white man,” and that of the enslaved reader. This very imbalance is at the heart of the question, “Do you understand?” As asked, the question appears intended to test the slave to whom the question is addressed, but it rebounds back onto his white observers—both those within the story and those reading the tract itself—as they realize how much they can learn from the figure of the “Happy Negro.”

In Serle’s tract, the question “Do you understand?” inaugurates a fantasy that reading-in-common can bridge the experiences of enslaved black and sympathetic white readers. But both question and fantasy take on a much more troubling valence in Harriet Jacobs’ slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), which shows how narratives of literacy could be tools to contain and restrain the agency of the enslaved.

---

Gaustad, ed., *The American Tract Society Documents, 1824-1925* (New York: Arno Press, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> “Fifth Report: May 26, 1819,” in *Proceedings of the First Ten Years of the American Tract Society* (Boston: Flagg and Gould, 1824), 54-62, 60-61. Collected in Gaustad, *The American Tract Society Documents*.

When Dr. Flint (a pseudonym for Jacobs' real owner, James Norcom) asks Jacobs "Do you understand?," it carries an explicit sexual menace. What does Harriet Jacobs "understand"? Only sixteen years old at the time, Jacobs understood that her master had identified her as his next conquest. Moreover, she understood that her own literacy, acquired in early childhood from a mistress who was "a kind, considerate friend," made her vulnerable to Flint's desires. He had caught her practicing her writing, and had come "to the conclusion that such an accomplishment might help to advance his favorite scheme."<sup>4</sup>

As Jacobs presents it, her literacy is the source of her vulnerability. Facing coercion and anticipating rape, she saw only one option to counter that scheme: to deny Flint, she must deny her own literacy. That denial in no way turns the slaveholder from his goals, but by leveraging his perception of Jacobs' literacy against her status as a slave, it forces Flint to redirect his efforts. When Jacobs claims that she can't read his notes, Flint declares "then I must read them to you." When reading his notes aloud fails to win over Jacobs, he opines about "the happiness" that she "was so foolishly throwing away" and threatens her with "the penalty that finally awaited [her] stubborn disobedience." As his language slips from happiness to "penalty," Flint acknowledges the barely-obscured power dynamics behind his fantasy of courtship. By forcing the slaveholder to articulate those conditions, Jacobs' "I can't read them, sir" dispels the boundary separating the prospect of romance from the promise of rape. The slaveholder can try to win his slave over only because he believes, in the end, that her choices are his.

---

<sup>4</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 34.

The relationship between Jacobs and Flint plays out through explicitly material practices of textual circulation; in particular, the contrast between Flint's self-fantasy as a romantic suitor and his barely-concealed threats of rape takes physical form in his notes. Written by the slaveholder and "slipped into [Jacobs'] hand," the missives index a particularly intellectual fantasy of romance: the idea that readers of a shared text also share a kind of intimacy, one that constitutes its own erotic relationship. Flint's notes try to compel Jacobs to participate in a performance of mutual romance constructed around a belief that secret circulation can construct new affective ties between master and slave. In turn, Jacob's assertion that she cannot read the notes comprises a counter-performance: having claimed for herself the role of the illiterate slave, she cannot be coerced into acting as a secret paramour. When Jacobs says she "can't" read the letters, she refers both to her performance of illiteracy and her motivating refusal to participate in the performance of courtship. Like the narrator of "The Happy Negro," Flint believes that Jacobs' literacy has created a connection between slave and slaveholder; Jacobs feigns illiteracy in order to refuse the terms of that connection.

Jacob's efforts to resist Flint show just what was at stake in the idea of 'understanding' between black and white readers. I don't mean to suggest that Flint either does or does not believe that Jacobs can read, nor that Jacobs seeks to convince him one way or another. Much the contrary: to the extent that Jacobs' denial works to rebuff Flint's advances, it does so by galvanizing the twin poles of literacy and illiteracy, creating a space of uncertainty between the two positions which Jacobs can inhabit. In that context, Flint's menacing inquiry—"Do you understand?"—resonates far beyond its initial condescension. The question is a trap for Jacobs: it asks whether Jacobs

understands both the contents of his notes and the material implications of circulating such notes, with the insinuation that such an understanding would mark her as already being sexually compromised. The question is also a threat, asking whether Jacobs understands the circumstances of his desire and the consequences of refusal. But the question is finally an admission of uncertainty: while it assumes that Jacobs *might* not understand Flint, it directly announces that Flint *does* not understand Jacobs, no matter how much he purports to desire that understanding.

It would be difficult to find more contrasting perspectives on American slavery than “The Happy Negro” and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: one depicts slavery as a benign institution that can generate spiritual equality, while the other reveals the institution to be little more than a vehicle for lust and brutality. But the strange overlap between them at the moment of interrogation—“Do you understand?”—shows how black life in antebellum America was conditioned by white observers’ ideas and anxieties about black literacy. Flint’s efforts to exploit Jacobs’ literacy as a tool to create a secret avenue of intercourse, in both senses of the word, comes across as the nightmarish version of the celebratory belief that literacy could be a force of equality between black and white Americans. And Jacobs’ denial of literacy shows the stakes of that belief, as she navigates the complex imagined literacy Flint reads into her body while resisting the “happiness” he claims to offer: refusing, in short, to be a ‘happy negro.’ The relationship between them—one in which ownership and coercion seek to disguise themselves as affection and courtship—is built directly on the questions of whether, and how, the two are not only able to read one another, but are able to locate their own agency in relation to the written messages that circulate between them. This troubling dynamic reveals the role

that literacy and circulating texts were imagined to play in organizing relationships of chattel slavery in nineteenth century America.

*Imagined Literacies* argues that the years between 1820 and 1855, a span framed by “The Happy Negro” on one end and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* on the other, constituted a period of intense anxiety about the ties between race, reading, and social participation. This dissertation’s focus is not restricted to the way that enslaved readers came to be represented in the white literary imagination, but will rather examine the way that the presence of free black and enslaved readers alike reshaped popular ideas of how reading operated within a democratic society. In the chapters that follow, I explore the ways in which discourses about race intersect with ideas about the uncertain reaches of circulating print; in each instance, the interactions between readers and shared texts generate a new field of possibility for situating black Americans within a larger reading public.

In titling this dissertation *Imagined Literacies*, I am consciously using an anachronistic term. The word “illiteracy,” meaning unfamiliarity with letters or the inability to read and write, has been in use since the late seventeenth century. But its counterpart, “literacy,” only appeared in the early 1880s, well beyond the scope of this dissertation. Its late appearance is largely due to its vagueness. If the strict opposite of illiteracy is the ability to read, then “literacy,” as Patricia Crain notes, constitutes precisely those nebulous fields of, “among other things, ideology, culture, identity, power, pleasure, aspiration, and historical context” that exceed the practice of reading

even as they become affixed to it.<sup>5</sup> If reading as a verb expresses fairly clear actions, literacy as an adjective indexes a kind of sociality defined in reference to those actions.

Yet it is precisely that contrary and nebulous nature that makes the term important for understanding this period of American history. As a term, “literacy” imposes teleology onto practice, so that moments of reading instead become episodes within a larger narrative of an individual reader’s self-determination. In Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” scenes of reading orient white readers towards a future safe from the violence of the illiterate animal, while in contrast, a fateful encounter with an abolitionist text in Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Sheppard Lee* steers enslaved readers into a maelstrom of revolution. Different readers of the *Liberia Herald* understood the newspaper to be a benchmark in either the integration or segregation of black writing and the larger category of ‘literature,’ while Uncle Tom’s ability to read the Bible also marks his inability to be owned by human masters. But while these narratives vary tremendously in their attitudes towards black literacy and mass circulation, they all intertwine the act of reading with the process of defining racial difference. This dissertation is about the set of spectacular possibilities that antebellum Americans imagined would result from reading and sharing texts across racial boundaries. In one sense, it is about the process through which black reading came to be imagined as what we now call literacy. But it is also about how that idea of literacy itself led Americans to rethink, in subtle as well as dramatic ways, the meaning of race. This project shows how changing ideas of reading suggested new types of social proximity between black and

---

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Crain, “New Histories of Literacy,” in *A Companion to The History of the Book*, ed. Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 467-479, 467.



white Americans, as well as how antebellum writers adapted their understanding of racial difference in response to that proximity.

### **Historical Contexts: Reading Revolutions in Antebellum America**

The story told in *Imagined Literacies* begins in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, an era when transformations in print technology and education intersected with a growing discourse of black self-determination and anti-slavery activism. The dynamic visions of black literacy at the center of this dissertation emerged in dialogue with ideas about white literacy.<sup>6</sup> In order to understand how black literacy came to be imagined by black and white writers in the 1820s-1850s, it is necessary to understand the changing ideas about reading and writing in the decades leading up to that moment. This story has no single starting point, and in its broadest sense, ideas of racial difference explored in this dissertation date back at least to the Enlightenment—the era when the liberal theorization of the social contract also generated what Charles Mills refers to as the subsequent “Racial Contract,” the conditions under which nonwhite peoples were demarcated as exceptions to the terms of the social contract.<sup>7</sup> But this

---

<sup>6</sup> Dana Nelson Savino argues that literacy and culture are reciprocal, such that “the white concept of white literacy in early America can be said to have shaped white institutional stances toward black literacy during the antebellum period.” “The Word in Black and White: Ideologies of Race and Literacy in Antebellum America,” in *Reading in America*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 140-156, 142.

<sup>7</sup> Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 11-13. Mills argues that, as imagined by enlightenment philosophy (with particular reference to the writings of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant), the social contract takes its meaning in “the crucial human metamorphosis... from ‘natural’ man to ‘civil/political’ man,” a change which hypothetically affects all people; as the social contract manifests in the Racial Contract, though, “the crucial metamorphosis is the preliminary conceptual partitioning and corresponding transformation of human populations into ‘white’ and ‘nonwhite’ men.” Insofar as the rhetoric of temporal difference (the civil as opposed to

dissertation posits that the idea of racial difference took on new meaning in the wake of America's "reading revolution," defined by Barbara Hochman as "a transformation of reading habits in both Europe and the United States early in the nineteenth century when a significant 'print culture' came into being with the help of new technology that facilitated paper-making, printing, distribution, and marketing."<sup>8</sup> While the idea of a single reading revolution oversimplifies a series of complex social transformations that can be traced back to the mid-eighteenth century, it nevertheless remains a useful shorthand to express a shift in the way that Americans related to the printed word in the early nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

---

the not-yet civil) came to describe a theory of racial difference (the white as opposed to the nonwhite), Mills argues, the terms of the Racial Contract meant that "the moral and juridical rules normally regulating the behavior of whites in their dealings with one another either do not apply at all in dealings with nonwhites or apply only in a qualified form" (11). As a process of racialization, the Enlightenment ideal of equality between men became an exercise in identifying which men could, and which could not, be considered equal.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Hochman, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution: Race, Literacy, Childhood, and Fiction, 1851-1911* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 7. Hochman's definition draws from a number of prior definitions, most prominently David D. Hall, "Uses of Literacy in New England: 1600-1850," in *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 36-78.

<sup>9</sup> Reinhard Wittmann casts doubt on the idea of a single coherent reading revolution, and instead attributes new reading practices in Germany and France to a series of changes over the course of the eighteenth century, including the rise of a *bourgeoisie* middle class; the growth of a literate working class (indexed by both the emergence of popular novels such as *Pamela* and an increase in the printed word in everyday life more broadly, in the form of urban posters, public notices, etc.); an increased emphasis on "useful reading" following the enlightenment, which saw a rise of "moral weeklies" (*Moralische Wochenschriften*) in Germany, and their equivalent forms in Britain (the *Spectator*, *Tatler*, and *Guardian*); and growing numbers of booksellers and publishers. "Was there a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?," in *A History of Reading in the West*, eds. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 284-312.

In the late 1700s, most literate Americans practiced what David Hall describes as “traditional literacy,” referring to its continuity from early modern European traditions. Traditional literacy had four main characteristics: it prioritized learning to read before learning to write; it emphasized memorization and reading aloud as pedagogical practices; it meant that most readers had access to a limited number of texts (“a Bible, psalmbook, primer, and catechism,” as well as almanacs); and it meant that, beyond that limited selection, a select few popular books (“steady sellers”) which circulated widely were guaranteed “an extremely long life among the reading public.”<sup>10</sup> These beliefs and restrictions constituted a culture of “intensive” reading, in which most readers would return to a small number of books multiple times, and so generate an implicitly deeper and more personal connection to the texts that were available to them.

But that culture of intensive reading soon gave way to “extensive” reading practices, as the early nineteenth century saw a number of technological and cultural developments that allowed books to be produced and circulated at lower costs and in greater numbers than ever before. Two institutional developments in particular served as engines for the cultural shift from intensive to extensive reading: the emergence of American Bible and Tract Societies and the passage of the Post Office Act of 1792. The American Bible and Tract Societies, which sought to publish and disseminate religious texts to every family in America, were themselves a response to the increasing production of secular texts, and their project was informed by evangelical fears that Christianity might fall by the wayside in the changing world of post-revolution America if Christian texts weren’t sufficiently available to the masses. As David Paul Nord and Paul Gutjahr

---

<sup>10</sup> David Hall, “Uses of Literacy,” 57.

have demonstrated, these societies accelerated the rise of mass print: in competition with private publishers, they created a thriving infrastructure for new and imported technologies that enabled texts to be printed faster and in larger numbers than were ever before conceivable.<sup>11</sup> The advent of steam powered presses allowed printers to produce pages at up to five times the rate of hand presses, while stereotyping technology meant they could produce popular texts without the time- and labor-intensive practice of resetting type for each print run. At the same time, the new availability of machine-made paper meant that large print runs could be produced at a relatively low cost.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, the US Postal Service responded to growing demand for printed matter, particularly newspapers, by expanding its own field of operations. The Post Office Act of 1792 established the Post Office and affirmed Americans' right to privacy in posted correspondence, but it also established cheap rates for newspaper shipping and helped establish a pattern of growth that would continue in the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Between 1816 and 1841, the number of postal officers employed by the government more than quadrupled, while the number of letters and newspapers they delivered quintupled from fifteen million in 1820 to eighty million by 1840.<sup>14</sup> The early nineteenth century was a time of unprecedented textual production in American history, one in which newspapers proliferated in every major city; political and religious organizations alike worked to disseminate their ideology across the country in the form of tract and pamphlet

---

<sup>11</sup> David Paul Nord, "The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815-1835," *Journalism Monographs* 88 (May 1984); Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Paul Gutjahr, *An American Bible*, 12-15.

<sup>13</sup> Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 31-34.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 3-4.

campaigns; and popular non-fiction texts and novels competed with one another (and a myriad of Bible editions) for the attention of a seemingly-fickle reading public.

The shift from “intensive” to “extensive” reading is important not because it speaks to a universal paradigm shift, but rather because it indexes the emergence of a new set of ideas about how reading signified social belonging. As Hall notes, these terms don’t speak to universal truths about American audiences: “in any given period of time, readers had available more than one representation or ideology of reading, texts, and writing,” so these terms are more useful for thinking about “whether and how changes in the system of book production and distribution, especially the changes associated with new technologies and business practices emerging in the nineteenth century, affected the practices of readers.”<sup>15</sup> In Europe, Reinhard Wittmann argues, the ability to read was no longer strictly tied to social status: “[t]he class to which people belonged scarcely determined their access to reading any more,” while the emergence of popular genres resulted in a “homogenization of reading tastes [that transcended] former class boundaries.”<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that class boundaries in any way disappeared as a result of increased literacy and access to print, but rather that reading’s status as an index of class changed, bringing with it a new understanding of who could participate in a reading public.

America saw a similar phenomenon, as the flourishing of newspapers and cheap print suggested new avenues of public participation. Michael Warner diagnoses “[t]he difference between the private, interested person and the citizen of the public sphere” in

---

<sup>15</sup> David Hall, “Readers and Reading in America: Historical and Critical Perspectives,” in *Cultures of Print*, 169-187, 185-86.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 290, 302.

eighteenth century America as primarily a function of an individual's political capital—capital which manifested through print. Warner argues that participation in the print public sphere required that writers be able to both print their views *and* expect them to be received by readers as impersonal (that is, to be read “*not as a relation between themselves as men, but rather as their own mediation by a potentially limitless discourse*”).<sup>17</sup> While Warner's focus on print as abstract and impersonal elides the role of personal performance in public writing, it nonetheless remains a useful model for understanding how political authority became tied to print culture. It also explains one reason why the expansion of print in the early nineteenth century encouraged observers to imagine a concurrent transformation of national identity. In *Democracy in America* (1835), Alexis de Tocqueville wondered at the normalcy of reading in America, saying that “[a]nyone wishing to ascertain the state of education among the Anglo-Americans” should take two perspectives: “If he concentrates upon the learned, he will be surprised at how few there are; if he counts up the uneducated, the Americans will strike him as the most enlightened nation in the world.”<sup>18</sup> As de Tocqueville presents it, mass print in America is an equalizing force in both directions: it draws attention to the nation's limited avenues for higher learning, but it also creates a far more self-conscious and literate working class than any that could be found in Europe. In the process, mass print

---

<sup>17</sup> Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 43. Warner argues that the legitimation of a writer's standing in the print public sphere hinged on his ability to negate his own presence in their writing—their ability, in short, to be perceived as impersonal. I use “his” in this context intentionally: as Warner notes, this negation was available only to specific writers, those “persons defined by whiteness, maleness, and capital” (42).

<sup>18</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America and Two Essays on America*, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 353.

decouples reading from an elite status, allowing the reading public to be a democratizing space—at least in theory.

In practice, the relationship between the reading revolution and democracy was more complicated, particularly as it related to black readers. For free blacks, the rise of mass print facilitated the rise of a black middle class and the subsequent development of a black print sphere. But while increased access to print and literacy were a symbol of progress for free black communities, they also created very material dangers for the enslaved. The rise of mass print also coincided with a proliferation of violent antislavery uprisings in the wake of the Haitian Revolution—particularly those of Denmark Vesey (1822) and Nat Turner (1831)—that led white authorities throughout the South to crack down on any sign of reading among the enslaved. To recognize the reading revolution's impact on black readers, in short, requires that we understand it not as one process, but rather as two separate revolutions with very different impacts.

Free black communities predated the rise of mass print, particularly in northern metropolises such as Philadelphia and New York City.<sup>19</sup> Precise literacy rates among free black communities are unclear and tend to be conjectural, although historians often estimate them to be significantly lower than in comparable white populations.<sup>20</sup> But scholars generally agree that black social life in the early nineteenth century was still

---

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Otter describes the scale and impact of Philadelphia's free black community in *Philadelphia Stories: America's Literature of Race and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). For an account of New York's free community, see Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> As an example of this sort of conjecture, Leonard Curry examines census information and job applications from the nineteenth century to estimate that "less than two percent of all employed black males" in 1850 had jobs requiring some amount of alphabetic literacy. *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850: The Shadow of the Dream* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 22.

characterized by the circulation of print, whether it was read by individuals or read aloud in public.<sup>21</sup> The rise of mass print generated new models for African American social advancement, and free black communities participated in the reading revolution through the formation of both black literary societies and the black press.

Black literary societies embodied black middle-class aspiration, offering members new ways to engage with American culture at large while filling important gaps in an education system that was generally focused on white Americans. Those societies were often segregated by gender: women's literary societies were designed to teach literacy at a basic level, while men's literary societies offered an alternative to institutions of higher learning that generally refused to admit African American students.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, as Elizabeth McHenry argues, the breadth of black literary societies "reveal[s] their members' determinations to achieve the rights of citizens in the United States": the societies "challenged [their members] to develop the skills that were essential to fulfilling the responsibilities of citizenship and achieving the promise of American democracy that ensured full participation for all."<sup>23</sup> In other words, black Americans understood reading as an act of self-determination, one that would allow them to situate themselves within the sphere of American cultural and civic participation.

---

<sup>21</sup> Grey Gundaker argues that in addition to alphabetic literacy, "African-descended early republicans" practiced multiple forms of social activity that "involved production, distribution, consumption, interpretation, and evaluation of print," including "adapting vernacular practices to alphabetic literacy while drawing on older ideologies of inscription and interpretation, some traceable to west and central Africa." "Give Me a Sign: African Americans, Print, and Practice," in *An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840*, eds. Robert A. Gross & Mary Kelley (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 483-494, 483-485.

<sup>22</sup> Erica L. Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 53.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 19.



Literary societies were one important component of what Jacqueline Bacon has described as the rise of a black “national consciousness,” when African Americans sought to span the divides between black and white public spheres. Another was the emergence of a black press.<sup>24</sup> The first African American owned and edited newspaper, *Freedom’s Journal*, appeared in New York in 1827. Editors John Brown Russwurm and Samuel Cornish began publishing the paper with the explicit goal “to make our Journal a medium of intercourse between our brethren in the different states of this great confederacy.”<sup>25</sup> While *Freedom’s Journal* only lasted two years, it successfully opened a new channel of black public discourse: the decades following it saw the publication of dozens of major black newspapers, including New York’s *Colored American*, Philadelphia’s *Christian Recorder*, and Frederick Douglass’ *North Star*, published in Rochester (later titled *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*).<sup>26</sup> But *Freedom’s Journal* also embodied the contradicting demands placed upon black public writing. Most of the loudest voices debating slavery and emancipation belonged to white activists, which meant that movements like American colonization—the practice of sending emancipated

---

<sup>24</sup> Bacon identifies the black “national consciousness” as an extension of a black “community consciousness” of the eighteenth century: as Bacon presents it, black communities in the nineteenth century had grown stable enough that their members could begin theorizing those communities as participants within a larger discourse of national identity. Jacqueline Bacon, *Freedom’s Journal: The First African-American Newspaper* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 20-22.

<sup>25</sup> “To Our Patrons,” *Freedom’s Journal* (New York City), March 16 1827. For more information on *Freedom’s Journal*, its editor John Brown Russwurm, and its ties to American colonization, see Jacqueline Bacon, *Freedom’s Journal*; Winston James, *The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm: The Life and Writings of a Pan-Africanist Pioneer, 1799-1851* (New York: New York University Press, 2010) and Adam Lewis, “‘A Traitor to His Brethren’? John Brown Russwurm and the *Liberia Herald*,” *American Periodicals* 25, no. 2 (2015): 112-123.

<sup>26</sup> Martin E. Dann, editor, “Introduction,” *The Black Press: 1827-1890* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1970): 11-32, 19-20.

people to the Liberia colony—maintained popular support among many abolitionists despite significant opposition from black Americans. The editors of *Freedom's Journal* tried to bridge those black and white publics: they promised to be “devoted to the dissemination of knowledge among our brethren, and to their moral and religious improvement,” but also hoped to “plead our own cause” to white readers.<sup>27</sup> Russwurm and Cornish didn’t just want to appeal to a black audience: they envisioned a vehicle through which a black audience could enter into a dialogue with an implicitly white American reading public.

The rise of mass print affected all branches of American society, and for free black readers it created new avenues for cultural self-determination. Had that been the only intersection between the reading revolution and black Americans, it would still be a compelling story: a rising tide that lifted all boats, albeit to wildly disparate heights. But the reading revolution was far from the only revolution to take place in antebellum America, and in conjunction with the slave insurrections that characterized the era, it had severe ramifications for any enslaved people who read, or even were thought to read.

Prior to the nineteenth century, literacy education for enslaved people was not as controversial as it would become closer to the American Civil War. While some colonies and states had injunctions against teaching slaves to write, anti-literacy laws focused on reading were limited to a few specific states until the 1830s, when they become much more common.<sup>28</sup> This was largely for religious reasons. American evangelicals

---

<sup>27</sup> "To Our Patrons," *Freedom's Journal* (New York City), March 16 1827.

<sup>28</sup> Some slave codes, like those of South Carolina and Georgia, imposed penalties against those who taught enslaved people to read as early as 1739. However, this was more the exception than the rule. E. Jennifer Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 243. By 1834,

emphasized the importance of reading the Bible as an essential aspect of Christianity, particularly in the wake of the Great Awakening, and so denying literacy outright was generally thought to be un-Christian behavior. Accordingly, while literacy remained relatively rare, those free and enslaved blacks who learned to read—either from individual teachers or from dedicated organizations like London’s Society for the Propagation of the Gospel—were generally seen as exceptional but not exceptionable.<sup>29</sup>

But that changed in the 1820s and 1830s, an era of unprecedented black revolutionary action. Slave revolutions were by no means new to the nineteenth century, dating back nearly to the origins of chattel slavery itself. In 1526, for instance, a group of enslaved Africans joined with Native Americans to fight against Spanish colonizers in what would later become South Carolina, and various protests and attempted uprisings were semi-regular occurrences in the colonies (particularly Virginia and South Carolina) throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As a rule, those early slave revolutions were successfully suppressed.<sup>30</sup> But the implications of slave revolutions changed at the turn of the century, when the Haitian revolution (1791-1814) ended not with a return to the colonial status quo, but instead with the massacre of the white population of Saint-Domingue and the establishment of the Haitian republic.<sup>31</sup>

---

in addition to those two states, some form of anti-literacy laws were in place in Alabama, Louisiana, Missouri, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Virginia. Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 216.

<sup>29</sup> E. Jennifer Monaghan offers a brief history of black literacy education in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in “Literacy Instruction and the Enslaved,” *Learning to Read and Write*, 241-72.

<sup>30</sup> Herbert Aptheker, “Early Plots and Rebellions,” *American Negro Slave Revolts: 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (New York: International Publishers, 1993), 162-208.

<sup>31</sup> The most influential account of the Haitian Revolution as a political phenomenon remains C. L. R. James’ *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San*

The Haitian revolution created an atmosphere of anxiety around the possibility of slave rebellions within the United States. Suddenly, slave revolutions threatened much more than lives: they threatened to upend the civic order. Those white American anxieties became affixed to ideas of black literacy and mass print in the wake of two high profile slave insurrections. In 1822, an attempted uprising in Charleston, South Carolina was uncovered before it could begin. City officials blamed the conspiracy on freeman Denmark Vesey. Popular accounts of the rebellion drew particular attention to Vesey's use of printed texts such as pamphlets and newspaper articles to convince slaves to rebel against their masters. As I will show in my second chapter, these accounts were part of a larger effort by pro-slavery activists to disavow the agency of enslaved Africans by blaming resistance on circulating texts produced by predominantly white antislavery activists.

That pro-slavery focus on literacy as the cause of rebellion was further galvanized in 1831, when enslaved preacher Nat Turner led the bloodiest slave rebellion in the United States through Virginia's Southampton County. That rebellion left dozens of slaveholders and their family members dead—and left many more afraid of what the next rebellion could bring. “The Confessions of Nat Turner” was the most popular account of the Southampton uprising: a pamphlet published shortly after the event containing both a description of the rebellion and an account of Turner's life as he related it to white lawyer Thomas R. Gray. “The Confessions” draws particular attention to Turner's literacy as a

---

*Domingo Revolution: Second Edition Revised* (New York: Vintage Press, 1989). More recent scholarly accounts include David Patrick Geggus, *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001) and Phillip Kaisary, *The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination: Radical Horizons, Conservative Constraints* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014).

source of wonder. Turner reported “no recollection whatever of learning the alphabet,” but claims that when shown a book, he “began spelling the names of different objects”; later, he notes, he availed himself of every opportunity he could find of “looking at a book.”<sup>32</sup> As presented in “The Confessions,” Turner’s uprising was a natural consequence of his rebellious reading.

To many, literacy appeared to be the common thread linking the Vesey and Turner rebellions, and anti-literacy laws exploded throughout the South. The decades following 1822 saw statutes barring people from teaching enslaved people to read or write pass in Louisiana, Mississippi, and North Carolina. Alabama, Georgia, Missouri, South Carolina, and Virginia took their laws even further by criminalizing any sort of education for all African Americans, whether free or enslaved.<sup>33</sup> Under anti-literacy laws, any white person who tried to teach reading or writing could be subject to substantial fines or jail time. People of color faced much harsher consequences: anyone who tried either to learn or to teach others to read faced not only legal punishment (generally a combination of whipping and fines), but also risked being seen as a potential instigator of

---

<sup>32</sup> Nat Turner and Thomas R. Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents*, ed. Kenneth S. Greenberg (New York: Bedford Books, 1996), 45.

<sup>33</sup> Georgia and South Carolina passed new additions to antislavery laws in 1829 and 1834 respectively. Mississippi passed its antislavery statute in 1823, the year after Vesey’s uprising. Between 1830 and 1831, Alabama, Louisiana, and North Carolina passed new laws; Missouri was comparably much later, as it didn’t bar literacy education until 1847. Notably, Virginia passed its first statute barring slaves from participating in “any SCHOOL for teaching them READING OR WRITING” in 1819, prior to Vesey’s insurrection; an 1831 act modified the rule to penalize white instructors as well as enslaved learners. Heather Williams, *Self-Taught*, 203-210.

rebellion and subject to subsequent extra-legal violence.<sup>34</sup> While many continued to read, and to learn how to read, they did so largely in secret.<sup>35</sup>

The fear of enslaved readers that characterized early nineteenth-century discourse on slavery points to the other way that the reading revolution impacted black readers, both free and enslaved: it also led to an increase in popular representations of enslaved Americans. The rise of mass print was perhaps the biggest single factor that propelled antislavery sentiment to the mainstream, as immediate abolitionists (those calling for the immediate emancipation of America's enslaved peoples) challenged both pro-slavery advocates and gradualist emancipationists (moderates who believed slavery should end as part of a slow process) in the form of newspapers, tracts, and books. As Trish Loughran argues, immediate abolition drew much of its power from exploiting the ties between print technology and America's growing national culture industry, even as it disrupted that national culture by logging a sustained "geopolitical critique of the nation as an integrated space."<sup>36</sup> By the 1830s, immediatist members of William Lloyd Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society (or AASS) had developed a substantial enough print infrastructure that they could send millions of antislavery pamphlets and periodicals

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 203-213.

<sup>35</sup> It's difficult to know with precision how many enslaved people were able to read prior to the Civil War, although Christopher Hager argues that somewhere between five and ten percent of the enslaved population may have had some degree of reading and/or writing literacy. *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 45-46.

<sup>36</sup> Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 309-310. As Loughran puts it, "immediate abolition actively theorized the world-historical conditions that made its own material production possible," offering "an excellent vantage point from which to view the rise of a national culture industry and the subsequent fragmentation of that culture into a variegated field of consumption."

throughout the country, including to the heart of the slave South.<sup>37</sup> Garrison himself—a white Massachusetts newspaper editor—was in many ways the figurehead for New England abolitionists, calling for an immediate end to slavery (in contrast to more moderate appeals for gradual emancipation) every week from the pages of his newspaper, the *Liberator*.

No single figure embodied the contradictions of abolitionist print culture more fully than Garrison. On the one hand, he printed writing by black abolitionists in the *Liberator*, reprinted the work of writers of color such as David Walker’s *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, and famously endorsed figures such as Frederick Douglass and Frances Harper, using his fame to boost theirs.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, Garrison was interested in black voices only so long as they agreed with his sentiments on slavery: he mercilessly mocked African American supporters of colonization and condescended to black abolitionists in general. Frederick Douglass’s relationship with the AASS ended in a much-publicized schism between the two owing, in the words of black abolitionist James McCune Smith, to the Society’s refusal to “delve into the mind of a colored man for capacities which the pride of race led them to believe to be restricted to their own Saxon blood.”<sup>39</sup> For black writers and readers alike, abolitionist print culture generated new possibilities as well as new constraints for black public participation.

---

<sup>37</sup> Circulation numbers appear in the *Third Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (New York: William S. Dorr, 1836), 35.

<sup>38</sup> For a substantial account of Garrison’s (largely successful) efforts to generate an abolitionist print public, see Robert Fanuzzi, *Abolition’s Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), particularly the Introduction and Chapter 2, “Garrisonism and the Public Sphere.”

<sup>39</sup> “Introduction” to *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 1994), 129. Examples of Garrison’s antipathy to colonizationists can be seen in Beverly C. Tomek,

The early nineteenth century was a transformative era for American reading practices, but one that also transformed the idea of what role reading could—or should—play in defining American democracy. In the North, the growing print industry meant that America was increasingly seen as a nation of readers. But while the rise of mass print theoretically created the conditions for Northern free people to participate in a larger national reading public, it also led to Southern black readers, both free and enslaved, being criminalized and marked out as a threat to society at large. At the same time that free black communities in America struggled to make their voices heard, free and enslaved black readers in the South desperately hoped to stay under the radar of pro-slavery authorities who were eager to uncover any evidence of revolutionary (or readerly) sentiment. *Imagined Literacies* explores the intersection of these reading and representational phenomena—the rise of the free black middle class, the fear that enslaved readers might rebel against the peculiar institution, and the various pro- and anti-slavery imaginations that grew up around those events—in a period when the circulation of mass print placed black readers in the contradictory position of being both hyper-visible and invisible.

### **Methodologies I: Tracing the Impress of Black Literacy**

The asymmetry between how black readers and white readers were perceived in antebellum America is illustrated in a recurring trend among black authors, whose writings frequently had to acknowledge, either directly or indirectly, the presence of

---

*Colonization and Its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery in Antebellum Pennsylvania* (New York: New York University Press, 2011) and Adam Lewis, “‘A Traitor to His Brethren’?” (2015).



white readers—including those hostile readers who might doubt their very claim to humanity. Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects* (1773) opens with a series of testimonials affirming the authenticity of her writing, promising that “She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them”; similar testimonials are a defining generic trope of the slave narrative.<sup>40</sup> A more contentious example of the address to hostile readers occurs in David Walker’s *Address to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829-1830), which occasionally adopts a second person voice to refer to pro-slavery readers. Walker’s form of address can shift, even within individual paragraphs, from the invocation of an oppressive group (“Do the colonizationists think to send us off without being reconciled to us?”) into a direct address to that group (“Now let us reason—I mean you of the United States, whom I believe God designs to save from destruction, if you will hear”) into rhetorical threats

---

<sup>40</sup> Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: A. Bell, Bookseller, 1778): 7. For more on the use of authenticating materials in slave narratives, see Robert Stepto, “I Rose and Found My Voice: Narration, Authentication, and Authorial Control in Four Slave Narratives,” in *The Slave’s Narrative*, eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 225-241. Stepto argues that these testimonials were part of the slave narrative’s “authenticating machinery” which validated both the writer’s identity and their claim to have suffered under slavery. At the same time, he argues that the testimonials are characteristic of the “*eclectic narrative form*” of the slave narrative, in which the voice of the enslaved is often subordinated to other authenticating authorities (225-226). Daphne Brooks has challenged that reading, however, noting (with specific reference to the *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*) that enslaved authors could incorporate authenticating documents into a series of self-assertive performances of freedom. Daphne Brooks, “The Escape Artist: Henry Box Brown, Black Abolitionist Performance, and Moving Panoramas of Slavery,” in *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 66-130. Susan Ryan argues that this authenticating performance is characteristic of the larger scope of antebellum writing, reading the slave narrative testimonial as part of an authorial trend of using paratextual material to generate moral authority among black and white authors alike. Susan M. Ryan, “Paratexts and the Making of Moral Authority,” in *The Moral Economies of American Authorship: Reputation, Scandal, and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Marketplace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 55-84.

against that group (“And wo, wo, will be to you if we have to obtain our freedom by fighting”).<sup>41</sup> By calling upon “you Americans” directly, Walker eliminates the possibility of a voyeuristic position for white readers. And in a particularly striking instance of addressing multiple audiences, Frederick Douglass refuses to tell readers of his *Narrative* (1845) how he escaped, writing that such accounts “do nothing towards enlightening the slave, whilst they do much towards enlightening the master”—a qualification that not only makes a practical argument against indiscreet reporting, but also forcibly reminds sympathetic readers that they are not the only audience reading the book.<sup>42</sup>

In each of these examples, black authors deploy paratextual materials and/or rhetorical techniques to draw attention to the fact that physical texts bridge their multiple audiences. But while scholars have studied how early black writers use a variety of tactics to anticipate and address a variety of white readers, the relationship between white writers and black readers remains severely understudied: could white writers have been wholly unaware of the possibility of black readers? Throughout this dissertation, I will demonstrate the various ways that white writers imagined the presence of black readers through the figure of the shared text. To understand why this constitutes an intervention in the study of antebellum literature, however, it is important to acknowledge that there

---

<sup>41</sup> David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, ed. Peter P. Hinks (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 71-73. For Walker's target black audience, these shifts in address suggest Walker's use of apostrophe elsewhere, such as his call upon God at the end of Article II: “*Oh! my God, have mercy on Christian Americans!!!*” (36). But these shifts in address are not wholly rhetorical, as they also address a very real antagonistic white readership. For more on Walker's rhetoric, see Peter P. Hinks, “Introduction” to *David Walker's Appeal* and Marcy J. Dinius, ““Look!! Look!!! at This!!!!”: The Radical Typography of David Walker's Appeal,” *PMLA* 126, no. 1 (Jan 2011): 55-72.

<sup>42</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, in *Autobiographies*, 31-102, 84-85.

are many reasons it might be tempting to affirm that white writers might simply have ignored the presence of black readers.

A long scholarly and authorial tradition understands black experience in the United States as a tactical navigation of various modes of being alternately seen and not seen by a dominant white gaze, both in the moment of individual interactions and as a reflection of historiographic practices that have tended to downplay or altogether omit black experiences from narratives of American life. The most iconic formulation of black in/visibility comes from W. E. B. Du Bois, who describes the experience of being black in America as the self-conscious observation of a society designed for a different set of eyes. “The Negro,” he writes, “is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world.” Du Bois famously defines this second sight as “this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”<sup>43</sup> Du Bois’ theory of blackness doubles as a theory of cultural literacy, one in which black observers must understand themselves as active readers. In Du Bois’ model, black Americans must be able to occupy two contradictory readerly personas—that of the dominant white culture and that of the black observer whose viewpoint that culture ignores (but whose movements that culture polices)—and modify their behavior accordingly. In short, black Americans must be able to read the world around them as well as exercise control over how they themselves are read.

In Du Bois’ model, the social divisions between black and white Americans manifest in the form of different interpretive practices; as such, that model can be useful

---

<sup>43</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986), 357-548, 364-65.

for thinking about critical accounts of black readers in the nineteenth century, which tend to isolate black and white reading practices from one another. One instance of this can be seen in Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey* account of "Signifyin(g)" as a major black American rhetorical form. In contrast to "signification" in "normal speech" (the idea that words map onto a clear intended meaning), Signifyin(g) refers to the set of rhetorical actions (ranging from the semiotic [metaphor, punning, irony] to the sonic [rhyming, repetition]) that transform the field of "normal speech" into a field of play.<sup>44</sup> Signifyin(g) could be a form of resistance: by challenging the meanings of speech, it also highlights the division between black and white perceptions of language. As an example of Signifyin(g) as a response to slavery, Gates cites Frederick Douglass' description of singing among the enslaved, who "would sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone." Gates argues that this tonal confusion constitutes a deliberate use of "antiphonal structures to reverse their apparent meaning, as a mode of encoding for self-preservation."<sup>45</sup> While the primary thrust of Gates' intervention was to recognize the complex rhetorical tactics underlying African American speech, and so recognize the agency of enslaved people in opposition to chattel slavery, his emphasis on self-preservation also poses an important reminder that black people (particularly, but not exclusively the enslaved) were often incentivized to obscure their ability to read.

---

<sup>44</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Signifying Monkey and the Language of Signifyin(g): Rhetorical Difference and the Orders of Meaning," in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism: 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 49-96, 56-58.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 73.

Recent historical scholarship on black literacy has taken up the work of uncovering those obscured histories.<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth McHenry's *Forgotten Readers* examines communal reading practices among free black communities in the early nineteenth century, intervening in the familiar narrative she calls the "Douglass 'model' of black literacy": one in which reading is "a solitary or individual activity with an explicit directive to write as its ultimate goal."<sup>47</sup> By shifting her focus onto black literary societies and newspapers, McHenry shows how literacy became an important tool for community building. Where McHenry's book recasts black literacy as a communal activity, Eric Gardner's *Unexpected Places* resituates those communities within the nation at large. By tracing the activities of black readers across the nation in places like St. Louis and California as well as more familiar locales like Philadelphia, Gardner models a "polycentric approach" toward African American literature, drawn from W. Lawrence Hogue, in place of a centralized model of black literary production in which "southern stories told in bound books that were written by blacks in the urban Northeast and published in one of the handful of urban Northeast centers of activism."<sup>48</sup> In the process, he resituates black readers as part of a trans-continental diasporic network.

These critics have revealed the ways in which black readers came to seem invisible, either intentionally or as a result of historiographic practice. However, they

---

<sup>46</sup> Other important writers on African American literacy include Duitsman Cornelius, *"When I Can Read My Title Clear": Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991); Phyllis M. Belt-Beyan, *The Emergence of African American Literacy Traditions: Family and Community Efforts in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004); and Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, 12-13.

<sup>48</sup> Eric Gardner, *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth-Century African-American Literature* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009), 12-14.

have failed to provide a satisfying theory for the ways in which black readers were visible to white writers and readers. *Imagined Literacies* specifically intervenes in the critical narrative of invisibility and occlusion surrounding black literacy by examining the ways that figurations of black readers circulated in writing by white writers. In doing so, this project is in dialogue with the work of literary scholars who have begun to explore the status of black readers in the public imagination. For example, Christopher Hager has described how Harriet Beecher Stowe drew inspiration from the letters of the enslaved Thomas Duckett, although Hager's definition of literacy largely refers to the act of writing.<sup>49</sup> Barbara Hochman's work on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is particularly useful for its conception of the intersection of racial discourse and popular literature. Hochman demonstrates the ways in which Stowe derived elements of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from popular iconography surrounding enslaved readers, even as "she constructed her black characters on the model of white ones."<sup>50</sup> While these readings comprise small parts of larger projects, they nevertheless begin to sketch out the field that I will explore over the course of this dissertation, which shows how the impress of black readers on the white imagination led to new formulations of national and racial identity.

My understanding of that impress is heavily inspired by the interpretive model put forth in Toni Morrison's foundational *Playing in the Dark* (1992), which argues that representations of black characters and figures of darkness in American writing did more than indicate the physical presence of Africans in America, and were in fact a foundational tool for the construction of an American national psyche. Morrison argues

---

<sup>49</sup> Christopher Hager, "Black Literacy in the White Mind," *Word by Word*, 25-53.

<sup>50</sup> Barbara Hochman, "Imagining Black Literacy: Early Abolitionist Texts and Stowe's Rhetoric of Containment," in *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution*, 51-77.

that American ideologies of whiteness and citizenship took their shape in relation to a “carefully observed, and carefully invented, Africanist presence.” For Morrison, the Africanist presence refers to “the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people”; this understanding of the impact of black Americans on white writing offers a useful framework to understand how individual representations operate as part of a larger discursive idea of race.<sup>51</sup> Through a series of readings of canonical texts (as well as more obscure texts by canonical authors), Morrison argues that white writers developed their own ideas of whiteness and national identity in relation to ideas of blackness, which became “the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity.”<sup>52</sup> According to Morrison, American literature is shaped by the trifold construction of blackness as the background against which whiteness is made visible, the yardstick against which white civilization and civility can be measured, and the battlefield upon which whiteness can prove itself.

*Playing in the Dark* has been instrumental to the larger critical project of cultivating a palimpsestic reading of black history, one in which the cultural production associated with European and white American political authority could be recognized as containing the traces and legacies of those non-white actors and presences against which whiteness is defined. In nineteenth-century Americanist scholarship, this project was driven by such critics as Eric Sundquist, whose *To Wake the Nation: Race in the Making*

---

<sup>51</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 6-7.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 44.

*of American Literature* (1993) reframed the historicist continuities that have been used to divide African American and American literary traditions, and Saidiya Hartman, whose *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997) showed how performances of racialized power (or “scenes of subjection”) implicated seemingly mundane or ordinary interactions between black and white Americans in the larger history of antebellum racist practice.<sup>53</sup> These palimpsestic readings also worked in dialogue with efforts to expand the scope of American literary criticism, and particularly the Black Atlantic and Circum-Atlantic methodologies of writers such as Paul Gilroy, Joseph Roach, and Ian Baucom, who sought new ways to make visible those figures, spaces, and histories which had been lost or submerged within dominant historical narratives of chattel slavery and colonial expansion.<sup>54</sup>

This dissertation aims to perform a similar kind of scholarly work for black literacy, which I argue was not simply a footnote to the rise of the American reading public, but was in fact foundational to popular conceptions about the function of both reading and racial difference in antebellum society. *Imagined Literacies* contributes to a recent focus on black participation in antebellum political thought, characterized by the work of scholars such as Ivy Wilson and Doug Jones, who show how new modes of black public participation in the nineteenth century changed mainstream conceptions of democracy and theatricality, as well as the recent *Early African American Print Culture*

---

<sup>53</sup> Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>54</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).



anthology, which explores the extent to which black Americans participated in the cultural and technological transformations that defined the early nineteenth century.<sup>55</sup>

This dissertation contributes to this field by arguing that the shared text—the idea that the circulation of print could bridge readers across geographic, social, and racial divides—became a crucial figure for imagining the status of black readers in the early nineteenth century. In the process, this project places African American and Black Atlantic criticism in conversation with recent arguments about the role of print circulation in shaping individuals’ conceptions of themselves as either belonging to, or being situated against, larger discursive structures of national and racial identity.

## **Methodologies II: Theorizing the Shared Text**

My primary figure for understanding the antebellum imagination of enslaved readers is the shared text: the text whose social significance lies in its ability to circulate between readers, and particularly between audiences of different races or social status. The category of shared texts reflects circulation, rather than generic or formal characteristics: at varying points throughout this dissertation, I will identify books, pamphlets, newspapers, and religious texts as shared texts. The abolitionist pamphlet in *Sheppard Lee*, for instance, that defines itself as “An Address to the Owners of Slaves” even as it is actually read by enslaved people constitutes a shared text; so does the *Liberia Herald*, which addresses itself to black and white audiences across vast geographic and

---

<sup>55</sup> Ivy G. Wilson, *Specters of Democracy: Blackness and the Aesthetics of Politics in the Antebellum U.S.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Douglas A. Jones, *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014); Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein, eds., *Early African American Print Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

political divides.<sup>56</sup> In each of my chapters, I will examine the way that certain texts become figured as shared texts, and the way that the encounter with those texts generates new social possibilities for their readers. Because of the concept's importance to this project, it's thus worth taking a moment to account for what I understand the shared text to signify.

My understanding of the shared text draws heavily on the pedagogy of Jacques Rancière, and is particularly inspired by his conception of the text as the “third thing” in the relationship between a teacher and a student—that is to say, as the object that generates a relationship between two individuals. He writes:

In the logic of emancipation, between the ignorant schoolmaster and the emancipated novice there is always a third thing – a book or some other piece of writing – alien to both and to which they can refer to verify in common what the pupil has seen, what she says about it and what she thinks of it. The same applies to performance. It is not the transmission of the artist's knowledge or inspiration to the spectator. It is the third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them, excluding any uniform transmission, any identity of cause and effect.<sup>57</sup>

Rancière's use of the term “emancipation” does not refer to practices of slavery and abolition, but rather to educational practices: he defines an ‘emancipated’ pedagogy as one in which the schoolmaster cedes his interpretive authority by refusing to assert mastery over a text. (For a schoolmaster to be “ignorant” is thus a positive attribute.) While I will talk more about Rancière's understanding of pedagogical hierarchies in my first chapter, for right now I simply want to draw attention to the way he defines the relationship between texts and readers as a triangular one.

---

<sup>56</sup> Robert Montgomery Bird, *Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself*, ed. Christopher Looby (New York: New York Review Books, 2008), 362.

<sup>57</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Trans. Gregory Elliott (Verso: New York, 2009), 14-15.

Rancière imagines that reading can be an egalitarian experience, but that experience does not depend on a pre-existing egalitarian relationship. Much to the contrary, the readers in Rancière's example—either schoolmaster and novice or artist and spectator—are not inherently symmetrical; far from it, each relationship implies a hierarchy between interpretive positions. Nevertheless, the book (or performance, or work of art) generates a kind of interpretive equality precisely because it introduces a third figure that cannot be incorporated into that hierarchy, an entity with its own agency and will, legible to both readers but beholden to neither. To recognize a text as a shared text, we must understand it to be more than a medium: it is not just a vessel through which writers or readers can make themselves understood to one another, but a channel through which the relationships between readers and writers take on new, uncertain form.

While I derive much of my understanding of the shared text from Rancière's theory of emancipated pedagogy, however, I want to challenge the egalitarian impulses of that model. Because Rancière adopts the teacher-student or artist-audience relationship as his primary focus, his idea of textual agency is dependent on the agency of the readers in question: a text can function as a "third thing" only if its readers agree to treat it as such. In contrast, Rancière argues, if one reader attempts to assert their interpretive dominance, he argues, the relationship is no longer emancipatory but stultifying, as the agency of the text itself disappears in the face of a pre-existing power relation. (As I shall discuss in my first chapter, Rancière's model of stultification is itself a useful heuristic for understanding antebellum print culture, but it is one best understood as a response to the shared text.) By displacing the idea of the "third thing" into a print public—that is to say, by shifting terms from the "third thing" to the shared text—I want to draw attention to the

way that textual agency operates between readers whose interpretive agency is qualified by their inability to control how (and by whom) texts come to be shared. In particular, I want to situate the shared text as a figure that could intervene in pre-existing ideologies of racial difference precisely because of its significance to both political and intimate interpersonal relationships.

In its most abstract form, the idea of the shared text lies at the heart of the public and political formations articulated by Benedict Anderson and Michael Warner.

Anderson defines the historical rise of print and the establishment of print language as “the embryo of the nationally imagined community,” precisely because those processes allowed individual readers to “gradually bec[o]me aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field, and at the same time that *only those* hundreds of thousands, or millions, so belonged.”<sup>58</sup> For Anderson, the circulation of print is the tool that makes it possible to generate a mass cultural whole out of a collection of individuals who would otherwise not interact with one another: it makes it possible for a reader to begin imagining themselves as one component of a larger social apparatus.

Warner clarifies this in an Americanist context, arguing that the idea of public life in the early American republic was generated by two perceptions about printed texts. On the one hand, “in their readability they held tangible promise of a universal mutual recognition”; they carried the charge of transmitting political and social information between readers. On the other hand, though, that “mutual recognition... was not an interaction between particularized persons, but among persons constituted by the

---

<sup>58</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism: Revised Edition* (New York: Verso, 2006), 44.

negating abstractions of themselves.”<sup>59</sup> For Warner, writers and readers could identify themselves with a larger print public sphere only insofar as they were able to dissociate themselves as individuals and adopt an “impersonal” identity as part of a larger, abstract public.

Warner’s theory of the print public sphere is particularly useful insofar as it emphasizes what was at stake for those who didn’t have access to print. Warner notes that these processes of impersonality and abstraction that allowed access to the public sphere were not available to everybody, particularly on the grounds of race. Warner reads early white authors’ transcriptions of black dialect as a way of marking off the written word as an intrinsically white space, such that “[w]hite colonists early learned to think of themselves as inhabiting the pure language of writing and to think of blacks as inhabiting a dialect, a particularized speech, that expressed their racial nature.”<sup>60</sup> As such, the dissociation of black dialect from grammatical English in early writing indexes both political power—who does and doesn’t have access to print—as well as the idea of white supremacy.

To some extent, both Anderson and Warner overstate the ties between print and nationality: scholars such as Meredith McGill have argued that the markets and communities generated by print circulation frequently exceeded the bounds of the nation.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, they offer useful models for understanding how the circulation of

---

<sup>59</sup> Michael Warner, *Letters of the Republic*, 61-62.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>61</sup> Meredith McGill argues that prior to the emergence of international copyright, literary nationalism existed in uneasy tension with a culture of reprinting that refused to adhere to national boundaries. As McGill argues, critical practices that attend exclusively to the “foundational anxieties of literary nationalism” risk obscuring a concurrent “literature defined by its exuberant understanding of culture as iteration and not origination.”

printed matter becomes a tool to imagine new forms of social unity. The irony of these models, however, is that just as individuals become subsumed into anonymous or impersonal collective wholes, so too do individual texts become subsumed into the larger fields of Anderson's "print-capitalism" or Warner's "print public sphere." By highlighting the shared text, I hope to bridge the division between printed text as a tool to generate political communities and the physical book as an object that carries a particular significance when shared between individuals.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., offers the "Talking Book" as one model for thinking about sharing texts as a way of demarcating power relations between individuals. Gates identifies the talking book as "the ur-trope of the Anglo-African tradition," a figure of reading that he identifies as first appearing in a 1770 slave narrative (*A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself*) and recurring in African American literature through the twentieth century.<sup>62</sup> In general, the trope depicts a subjugated person (generally an enslaved African or a Native American) who assumes that a prayer book or a Bible speaks directly to its reader; when the subjugated person tries to get the book to talk to them, it responds with silence. In this trope, authority—either legal or spiritual—adheres to those people to whom the book talks.

Gates' account of the trope in Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* is particularly revealing. In that text, Equiano sees his master reading, and feels "a great

---

Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 4.

<sup>62</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, 143.

curiosity to talk to the books”; when he tries, the book is silent.<sup>63</sup> In this scene, Gates argues, the book is one of several objects (along with a portrait and a watch) which “Equiano endows... with his master’s subjectivity,” and which reflects Equiano’s own status as an “object” under slavery. In turn, Gates posits, Equiano’s own ability to read and write means that he ceases to be an object: “[i]f the master’s voice endows his objects with reflections of his subjectivity, then the representation, in writing, of the master’s voice... serves to enable the object [Equiano] to remake himself into a subject.”<sup>64</sup> The Talking Book, for Gates, both encodes the power dynamics undergirding slavery and embodies the possibility of black self-determination.

Gates’ idea of the Talking Book informs my understanding of the shared text insofar as it identifies one way that politicized, but still interpersonal, relationships manifest in specific circulating texts at the moment of reading. But while that trope imagines the text as a way to encode relationships of power, it’s limited to readings of texts as means of asserting power over others—that is, as technologies that inscribe the differences between readers’ positions. In contrast, a substantial field of criticism has drawn attention to the ways that sentimental fiction sought to generate political power by compelling individual readers to reimagine their own civil participation, encouraging them to identify themselves as similar to other populations as well as other readers. That work began with Jane Tompkins’ argument that sentimental literature should be considered political literature in *Sensational Designs* (1986), and persists through work by scholars such as Lauren Berlant, who has argued that sentimental writing seeks to

---

<sup>63</sup> Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 68. Qtd. in Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, 168.

<sup>64</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, 170.

generate “pain alliances” between readers and subjects, and Faye Halpern, who argues that sentimental women’s writing drew on classical rhetoric and oratorical tradition to encourage readers to identify with one another.<sup>65</sup>

My understanding of shared texts as a tool to negotiate the intense interpersonal relationships between readers draws heavily from Gillian Silverman’s conception of readerly “communion,” which emphasizes “the ability of reading to produce experiences of mental and bodily contact” in the context of a variety of relationships: “between reader and author, between reader and character, and... between like-minded readers.”<sup>66</sup> Silverman reads popular nineteenth century texts such as conduct manuals, novels, and slave narratives alongside antebellum readers’ descriptions of encounters with those texts, arguing that affective engagements with physical texts worked to generate imagined, exclusive relationships with other readers—relationships that played a “rich role... in a subject’s psychic life, both in assuaging feelings of isolation and in forging new vistas of relationality” (5). Silverman particularly emphasizes the way that “the book interfaces physically with the reader, affecting the body with its weight, texture, size, and smell,” such that “the sense of cohabitation produced by reading is... produced by the

---

<sup>65</sup> Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Lauren Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” *American Literature* 70 no.3 (Sep. 1998): 635-668; Faye Halpern, *Sentimental Readers: The Rise and Fall of a Disparaged Rhetoric* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013). Other key studies on sentimentality include Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Joseph Fichtelberg, *Critical Fictions: Sentiment and the American Market, 1780-1870* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003); and Martha C. Nussbaum and Alison L. LaCroix, eds., *Subversion and Sympathy: Gender, Law, and the British Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>66</sup> Gillian D. Silverman, *Bodies and Books: Reading and the Fantasy of Communion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 5. All subsequent citations in text.



sensual reality of the book itself” (7). In the process, she offers a profound reminder that the circulation of print was a physical as well as a political process.

Silverman challenges the assumptions of anonymity and alienation that inform earlier accounts of readerly participation in a national public. In contrast to Benedict Anderson’s argument that modern nations thrive by engendering “community in anonymity” or Michael Warner’s vision of “impersonal” reading as the dominant reading practice of the early republic—models, it should be noted, that draw largely on newspapers and other seemingly ephemeral texts—Silverman argues that circulating books generated profound feelings of imagined intimacy with other readers, and “could supersede actual social relations as the primary locus of affective experience and the preferred medium of libidinal exchange” (16).<sup>67</sup> To place printed texts at the center of national identity, Silverman suggests, is to recognize the extent to which the anonymous political body is comprised of countless individuated reading bodies.

Each of these models—the ‘third thing,’ print-capitalism, the print public sphere, the Talking Book, and readerly communion—theorizes some aspect of the shared text: its democratizing or equalizing potential, its power to enforce social hierarchies, or its role in generating intimate imagined relationships between those who contact it. I draw them together in order to argue that the idea of the shared text that undergirds America’s antebellum print public draws its power precisely from its ability to inhabit any number of these possibilities at the same time. In the chapters that follow, I will examine the ways that shared texts generate new social possibilities at the moment they are imagined to bridge black and white readers. In particular, I am interested in how the shared text’s

---

<sup>67</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 36; Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic*, xiii. Qtd. in Gillian Silverman, *Bodies and Books*, 15.

egalitarian implications run up against the social hierarchies that inform its circulation between black and white reading audiences. In this dissertation, I argue that reading brings people together, but not necessarily in harmony: this dissertation is just as interested in how reading brought people together in dissonance, creating new forms of proximity while unsettling others.

## **Chapter Outline**

*Imagined Literacies* traces the emergence of black literacy as an issue in mainstream white thought and writing. In order to do this, I have adopted a two-part methodology. The first half of my dissertation focuses on the ways that two white authors, Edgar Allan Poe and Robert Montgomery Bird, try to reconcile the emergence of black readers within a discursive framework that assumes reading to be an exclusive characteristic of white society. The second half of my dissertation, focusing on the *Liberia Herald* and Bible circulation, examines black and white writers in conversation with one another about the changing roles of black readers. By breaking my dissertation up in this way, I hope to first show some of the imaginaries generated around the idea of black literacy before then exploring how those imaginaries shaped the conditions for black public participation in the nineteenth century.

The texts I study imagine—and at times fear—what happens when hierarchical relationships between racialized bodies are reconfigured as relationships between readers. In the process, they reveal the extent to which ideologies of race and discourses of democratic reading developed in tandem with one another. In each chapter, I situate specific shared texts within a series of discourses (biological science, abolitionism,

colonization, and Christian spirituality) that mediated ideas of racial difference in the antebellum United States. I then place those texts alongside specific accounts of reading those texts, from sources both fictional (short tales and novels) and non-fictional (reviews and autobiographical slave narratives). In the novel *Sheppard Lee*, for instance, black and white narrators become indistinguishable from one another after they encounter an anti-slavery pamphlet; elsewhere, an editor of the *Liberia Herald* editorial reminds mainland readers that black literacy hadn't obliterated racial difference, declaring "we are as sable now as when we left the United States."<sup>68</sup> In this way I show how changing conditions of circulation—new possibilities that texts *might* circulate to new readers—interacted with formal literary elements of address and narration.

I should note that, while there may be certain sequential links between my chapters, I am more interested in understanding the 1820s-1850s as a milieu in which black reading became a cultural force in the white imagination than I am in crafting a strictly chronological narrative about the rise of black readers. While each of my chapters generally focus on one or two texts within a short window of publication, each chapter contains its own historical narrative that spans a much larger period of time; for instance, chapter 4 generally focuses on the work of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe in the late 1840s and early 1850s, but also contextualizes their writing in debates about evangelical Bible circulation dating back to the late eighteenth century. Moreover, the figures and events laid out in my introduction (the rise of mass print, the growing power of abolitionist sentiment, the emergence of the black middle class, and the era of revolution spanning the Haitian Revolution through the uprisings of Denmark Vesey and

---

<sup>68</sup> *Liberia Herald* (Monrovia), July 10 1835.

Nat Turner) all play out in different combinations across different chapters. Rather than attempting to tell a purely sequential narrative that emphasizes historical causality, I've organized my chapters to tell a narrative about how black readers came into focus in the years preceding the Civil War.

A story about black readers coming into focus must logically begin with those readers being unseen. My first chapter, "Readers in the Rue Morgue," reads Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) as a conscious effort in unseeing black readers. Poe's tale imagines a world shaped by print circulation, one in which social authority derives from knowing the right texts to read as well as the right way to read them: Poe envisions his heroic detective, C. Auguste Dupin, as a curator who can guide his fellow white Parisians (as well as Poe's own readers) to the truth through the tortuous pathways of conflicting newspaper testimony and misleading forensic evidence that risk obscuring that truth.

Dupin reveals the truth by invoking a new shared text, one that the tale promises is "sufficiently well known to all": the Baron Georges Cuvier's *Animal Kingdom* (1817), an influential natural historical taxonomy that demonstrates the murderer to be a "large fulvous Ourang-Outang of the East Indian Islands."<sup>69</sup> While Poe proffers Cuvier's text as the lynchpin of both his dramatic climax and the reading community that forms throughout the story, Cuvier also offers a taxonomic model that informs Poe's imagined Parisian society: a society that's split between those who can read natural histories and those who are the subject of them. Reading both Poe's story and Cuvier's *Animal Kingdom* through Ranci re's theories of emancipated and stultified pedagogies, I argue

---

<sup>69</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn (New York: Library of America, 1984), 424.

that textual circulation and communal reading practices become implicated with scientific racism in Poe's fantasy of an authoritative white reading public—a fantasy that's all the more troubling for a tale published in Philadelphia, the heart of one of America's most prominent free black communities. Poe negatively defines black public participation through a series of denials and exclusions. In the process, he invites his readers to understand themselves as part of a homogenous white audience, one defined by curated collective knowledge of key shared texts (newspapers and natural histories) and identified in opposition to an illiterate and racialized Other.

But as I show in my second chapter, Poe's confidence that circulating texts could be used to benefit white authority was in many ways outweighed by widespread anxieties about the emergence of a black reading public. My second chapter, "Sendary Papers," explores the fear of black readers in popular responses to anti-slavery tracts. Cultural and technological developments in the 1820s and 1830s led to a rise in printed antislavery material, causing many white Americans to fear that 'incendiary publications' (as such material came to be known) would be read by slaves and incite them to revolt against their masters. But responses to abolitionist writing also drew attention to their detrimental effects upon slaveholding readers, whom one concerned writer described as becoming "deranged from apprehension." I argue that as proponents of slavery increasingly feared the psychological impact of antislavery print on slaves and slave-owners alike, they also imagined new types of social and cultural proximity between free white and enslaved black readers.

That chapter examines historical responses to abolitionist writing in the wake of the Vesey and Turner rebellions, including court statements, newspaper articles, and

personal letters, alongside the depiction of “sendary papers” in Book VI of Robert Montgomery Bird’s novel *Sheppard Lee* (1836). I argue that the novel’s most spectacular figure, an illiterate black slave possessed by the spirit of a literate white slaveholder, embodies the unpredictable intersections between the multiple audiences of incendiary writing. The resulting composite reader—at once white and black, free and enslaved, literate and illiterate—shows how the transgressive circulation of abolitionist pamphlets forced white writers to reimagine the connections between racial categories and reading publics. In reckoning with mass abolitionist circulation, Americans had to reframe the relationships between white and black subjects not in terms of the perceived distances between races, but rather by the similarities between readers of shared texts.

While my second chapter shows how mass circulation transformed the relationships between black and white readers in close proximity, my third chapter explores how mass circulation could impact ideas of race at a distance. In “Black Readers at a Distance,” I read the *Liberia Herald* as a shared text, one that shows how the institutional effort to distance black Africans and white Americans in fact enabled black newspaper writers to inhabit new roles within American periodical culture. Published in the 1830s and 1840s by black editors living in the Liberia colony, the *Herald* was an important vehicle to speak to a wide range of audiences—both inside and outside of the colony. But the paper’s editors also struggled to respond productively to the desires of those readerships. Both supporters and opponents of colonization read the *Herald*, and mainland arguments about the ethics of colonization produced heated debates over the paper’s literary merit. These debates meant the *Herald*’s editors had to address colonization’s predominantly white supporters, its black and white opponents, and its

Liberian constituents—a shifting economy of audiences that prioritized international interests over those of local black readers.

By reading the *Herald's* archives alongside a range of critical and fictional responses to the newspaper, I show how the combination of political turmoil and geographic distance generated new ways for perceiving and representing black reading. But I also show how the paper's strange avenues of circulation and reprinting left Liberian and American writers struggling to fit the newspaper—and its varied and often oppositional readerships—into preconceived notions of racial hierarchies. In the process, I argue that the *Herald's* practices of formal address and transatlantic circulation encouraged Americans to imagine a new mode of black reading and writing: one in which black Liberian and mainland American audiences could perceive themselves as simultaneously geographically distant and socially proximate.

In my first three chapters, I show how the public presence of black reading collectives suggested new possibilities for imagining black and white Americans as members of the same reading public. In my final chapter, “Uncle Tom’s ‘literary cabinet,’” I explore the possibilities and limits of that public imaginary in writings on the Bible by the two most celebrated chroniclers of American slavery, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick Douglass. I begin that chapter by exploring the ways that Bible circulation societies constructed the idea of an American reading public, while at the same time identifying black readers as exceptional to that reading public. In that context, I read the depiction of Bible reading in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* alongside concurrent debates between Douglass and other prominent formerly-enslaved abolitionists (specifically Henry Bibb, Henry Highland Garnet, and Samuel Ward) to show how both Douglass and Stowe

defined the possibilities of black freedom with reference to ideas of reading—and owning—the Bible.

I argue that Douglass and Stowe strategically conflate reading with ownership to generate very different critiques of chattel slavery. While Douglass indicts abolitionists for focusing on Bible distribution rather than immediate abolition, implying that they care more about the freedom of texts than the freedom of people, Stowe depicts the Bible as an agentive object capable of challenging slavery through its material circulation. But that circulation requires Stowe to conflate the physical text with the body of her enslaved hero. Stowe participates in a larger trend in antebellum writing of appealing to textual circulation, specifically that of the Bible, as a model for imagining the status of enslaved people in an American public that was increasingly oriented around reading. In so doing, Stowe generates a fantasy of black emancipation that doesn't challenge the idea that black bodies can be made property, but instead seeks to renegotiate the property claims placed upon those bodies. Finally, I conclude that chapter by reading Frances Harper's poem "Learning to Read" as an attempt to recast Stowe's visions of black literary ownership to speak to the possibilities of Reconstruction.

Throughout *Imagined Literacies* I posit the circulating or shared text as a literary category that allows us to see the ways that acts of sharing and transferal between readers could produce and transform a given text's meaning. My dissertation shows how black and white Americans navigated the anxieties attendant to belonging in unclear and dynamic reading publics, arguing that as specific authors and editors imagined texts to circulate between different reading publics, they also imagined new models for relationships between black and white Americans. The decades preceding the Civil War



constituted an era of epistemological experimentation, as black and white Americans alike tried to situate one another within a developing national identity. This dissertation argues that the idea of black readers was central to those experiments, and central to the development of nineteenth-century American literature.

## Chapter 1: Readers in the Rue Morgue: Public Literacy and Poe's Animal Other

In the society of man [the most perfect animals] become either corrupted or improved, and are susceptible of emulation and jealous: they have among themselves a natural language, which, it is true, is merely the expression of the momentary sensations, but man teaches them to understand another, much more complicated, by which he makes known to them his will, and causes them to execute it.

**Georges Cuvier**

***The Animal Kingdom* (1817; trans. 1831)**

“Read now,” replied Dupin, “this passage from Cuvier.”

**Edgar Allan Poe**

**“The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841)**

In February of 1841, Edgar Allan Poe was hired to edit book reviews for *Graham's Magazine*, a move that would propel both the writer and the literary magazine to greater fame over the next year.<sup>1</sup> As if to cement the ties between the two, the first issue after Poe's hiring featured “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”—not only the longest contribution to that issue at thirteen two-column pages, but the single longest non-serial prose piece published in the entire 1841 volume of *Graham's*.<sup>2</sup> Poe draws attention to that length when he introduces the titular “Murders.” Two women, Madame and

---

<sup>1</sup> I.M. Walker, editor, “Introduction,” *Edgar Allan Poe: The Critical Tradition* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986): 1-63, 28. For more on the concurrent fame of *Graham's Magazine* and Poe, see Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1930: Volume 1* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 344.

<sup>2</sup> Poe may have been incentivized to expand his story out of deference to *Graham's* liberal pay. When George R. Graham purchased *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* from William E. Burton, he inaugurated a new era of higher pay for magazine writers. Poe's salary for “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” was \$56, or a little over \$4 per prose page. John Ward Ostrom, “Poe's Literary Labors and Rewards,” *Myths and Reality*, ed. Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV (Baltimore: The Edgar Allan Poe Society, 1987), 37-47, 39. That was still significantly less than the \$11 per page paid to Nathaniel Parker Willis, but significantly more than the \$3 per page Poe had previously commanded at *Burton's*. Frank Luther Mott, *American Magazines*, 507-508.

Mademoiselle L'Espanaye have been found dead: the latter strangled and thrust up a chimney, the former nearly decapitated and thrown from a fourth-story window. But rather than describe the crimes, Poe's unnamed narrator recedes from view for nearly a quarter of the story, and instead transcribes "Extraordinary Murders," a fictional newspaper report from "an evening edition of the '*Gazette des Tribunaux*.'"<sup>3</sup> Over the course of two articles (which take up nearly three *Graham's* pages), a nameless reporter details both the scene of the crime—a bloody razor, tufts of human hair, the scattered contents of the apartments—and the conflicting witness and police reports that spring up in the crime's aftermath.

By briefly transforming the pages of *Graham's Magazine* into a faux-newspaper article, Poe appeals to the idea of mass circulation in order to bridge the world of his fiction with that of his readers. Poe's deferral of narration invites his audience to conflate their own experiences of reading "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" in *Graham's* with the narrator's diegetic experience of reading about "Extraordinary Murders" in the fictional *Gazette*. In strictly temporal terms, the narrator synchronizes his experience of reading the newspaper with that of his audience: the fictional articles must be read in something approximating real time.<sup>4</sup> The *Gazette des Tribunaux* becomes a meta-textual

---

<sup>3</sup> "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," *Graham's Magazine* 18, no. 4 (April 1841): 166-179, 169-171. While "Extraordinary Murders" is a fictional article, the *Gazette des Tribunaux* was a real newspaper. Richard Kopley argues that Poe's version of the paper reflects local American papers (particularly the *Philadelphia Saturday News*) more than any specific French paper. Richard Kopley, "'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' and *The Philadelphia Saturday News*," *Edgar Allan Poe and the Dupin Mysteries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 27-44.

<sup>4</sup> Poe breaks from this model only at the scene's conclusion, when his narrator paraphrases the evening edition's notice that a suspect, Adolphe Le Bon, had been arrested. The narrator concludes this further citation by noting, however, that "nothing

shared text, one that forges a connection between characters within the tale and readers outside of it.

At the same time that the *Gazette* invites readers to situate themselves within the tale, it also establishes their inability to perceive that which that isn't written. Poe draws attention to these limits when his narrator joins the detective, C. Auguste Dupin, in examining the scene of the crime. While "Dupin scrutinize[s] every thing—not excepting the bodies of the victims," the narrator's account is strikingly devoid of content: he sees "nothing beyond what had been stated in the '*Gazette des Tribunaux*.'"<sup>5</sup> The narrator cedes empirical observation to citational awareness. He can perceive the room—and can thus describe it in his narration—only to the extent that it reflects a text he has already read.

Poe's narrator draws attention to the ways that circulating texts shape perception. In this moment, Poe is less interested in the creation of knowledge than he is in the ways that knowledge can—or cannot—circulate. The author uses his narrator's failed observation to withhold information from his reading audience, while Dupin does much the same thing within the narrative: the tale later reveals that the detective had found a number of key clues in the apartment, none of which he makes known to the narrator. The limited narration is symptomatic of the narrator's inferior interpretive capacities as compared to those of Dupin, and it serves the immediate purpose of preventing Poe's readers from seeing more than the narrator perceives. But the forcible alignment of

---

appeared to criminate him, beyond the facts already detailed," establishing that all relevant evidence had been provided by the previously transcribed reports (411).

<sup>5</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," in *Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn (New York: Library of America, 1984), 397-431, 413. All subsequent citations in text.

narratorial and readerly perspectives also dramatizes the ways that mass print circulation generate relationships between readers. Because the narrator can see only what he has read about in the *Gazette*, and because Poe's audience has read the same article, the scene stages a moment of near-perfect overlap between real-world reading and the narrator's diegetic vision.

To the extent that Poe collapses his readers' viewpoint with that of his narrator, it is in the interest of marking both perspectives as subordinate to those of the author and the detective. Poe puts forth a theory of readerly sympathy here, but he does so not to envision a world in which all readers are equal; on the contrary, Poe's sense that a shared text can generate understanding between its readers undergirds his belief in curation as a means to establish a social hierarchy. Poe admits as much in his opening excursus on board games, which imagines two individuals—a skilled player of chess, and a skilled player of draughts (or checkers)—sitting down to play a game of whist. The chess player, while familiar with a more *complex* game, is limited by his sense that success requires only that he “have a retentive memory” and “proceed by ‘the book’” (399). The draughts player, familiar with a game whose possibilities are much more limited, holds the advantage, for he knows “the limits of mere rule”—knows, that is, that his success depends not on his knowledge of the rules, but rather on his ability to “[throw] himself into the spirit of his opponent” by reading his opponent's behavior and mannerisms (398). As Poe puts it, “the necessary knowledge is that of *what* to observe” (400). Victory depends not on being able to ‘proceed by the book,’ but rather on being able to proceed beyond the book: that is, not just on knowing what to read, but knowing how to use the information generated by acts of reading.

In this chapter, I examine the way that Poe presents the ability to read as both the fountainhead of social authority and the precondition for societal participation. The differences between readers generate a hierarchy within Poe's tale. At the top of that hierarchy are those (like Dupin) who can read books and people according to the same set of rules. That hierarchy descends according to interpretive skill, with those who are aware of their limited perception (the narrator/his audience/the police) in the middle, and the prefect (who has a way 'of denying that which is, and explaining that which is not') at the bottom.<sup>6</sup> As if to demonstrate this primacy of reading, Poe structures the plot of his tale around practices of print circulation and interpretation. Despite the lurid promise of the title, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is more concerned with the processes through which actions can be explained and knowledge can be generated than it is with the murders themselves. In Barthesian terms, the tale is a hermeneutic drama rather than a proairetic one; it is utterly uninterested with events as they occur and focuses instead on the reconstruction of events after they have already happened.<sup>7</sup> That act of reconstruction is made possible through the interactions between circulating texts (including books,

---

<sup>6</sup> Poe quotes Rousseau's *Julie, or the New Heloise* to describe the prefect: he has a way "de nier ce qui est, et d'expliquer ce qui n'est pas" (431).

<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes argues that narratives are shaped by the interaction of "five major codes under which all the textual signifiers can be grouped." The "hermeneutic code," referring to processes of generating and resolving uncertainty, entails the "various (formal) terms by which an enigma can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense, and finally disclosed"; the "proairetic code" refers to action, and so "is more empirical than rational," indicating the process through which events in the narrative unfold. *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 19. As it applies to "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Peter Thoms notes that the murders ("the crucial *action*" that drives the plot) take place offstage, such that "much of the story unfolds as a kind of *inaction*, as a meditation on the absent event." In place of this action, Poe instead proffers "first, the textual responses of the reporters [in the *Gazette*] and second, the speculations of Dupin." Peter Thoms, *Detection and Its Designs: Narrative & Power in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Detective Fiction* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998), 48.

newspaper articles, and classified ads) and the detective, the reader skilled enough to decipher the truth from within that mass of knowledge. For Poe, the rise of mass circulation promises a world hierarchized by reading ability, in which widely read polymaths (like Poe or his surrogate Dupin) curate texts for a society of readers who can only proceed ‘by the book.’

That curation entails citing an important text or withholding information about an important text, often at the same time. “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” is quite literally bookended by two publications: a “very rare and very remarkable volume” that brings Dupin and the narrator together, and a “passage from Cuvier” that reveals the murderer’s true identity to be a “large fulvous Ourang-Outang of the East Indian Islands” (424). Unlike the *Gazette Des Tribunaux*, which is reproduced in full and at length, those two texts are consciously obscured: the “very rare and very remarkable volume” is never named, and “the passage from Cuvier” is named but only paraphrased, its contents decreed “sufficiently well known to all” (424).

This chapter examines the interplay between public knowledge and textual elision in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” to show how Poe’s fantasy of a reading public requires careful regulation of shared texts: regulation of both what texts people read and what kinds of people are understood to read them.<sup>8</sup> I argue that this regulation takes the form of two strategies of interpretation in “The Murders of the Rue Morgue.” First, Poe teaches readers to identify themselves as participants in a non-democratic hierarchy of readers in which they require the guidance of the detective, a master reader; second, he

---

<sup>8</sup> Peter Thoms evocatively describes the detective tale as “a story about making a story,” in which the detective functions as an “authorial figure” who organizes seemingly disparate information into a coherent and compelling narrative. *Ibid.* 1.

encourages readers to recognize the presence of those who are so far below the general public that they cannot be contained within the terms (the human, the criminal, the madman) that the narrator initially posits to make sense of them. Ultimately, the role of the detective is to teach his followers (which is to say his fellow readers) how to accomplish this act of recognition.

These strategies speak to Poe's understanding of the social importance of reading, but they also inform the racial logic undergirding "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." Both of these interpretive strategies—the reader's need to recognize their own position in a hierarchy of readers, as well as their need to recognize the limits of that hierarchy—manifest through Poe's references to circulating texts, and particularly his citation of the Baron Georges Cuvier's popular natural history, *The Animal Kingdom* (1817). First, as the source of an influential taxonomy of species, *The Animal Kingdom* provides the origins of the tale's criminal Ourang-Outang, a creature out of place in Parisian society, as well as the evidence to identify the murderer as such. Second, it serves a double purpose as a shared text: Poe asserts that Cuvier's work is "familiar to all" as a way of interpolating *Graham's* reading audience into a wider reading public. By reading "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" alongside Cuvier's text, I argue that Poe places Cuvier's taxonomy at the foundation of his imagined society: one hierarchized by reading ability, but nevertheless sharply divided between those who have access to public knowledge and those, like the racialized Ourang-Outang, who are the subjects of that knowledge.

By opening a dissertation on imagined black readerships with a chapter on "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," I don't mean to suggest that Poe's Ourang-Outang constitutes an explicit reference to African Americans in particular, but rather that Poe



uses the figure of the ape to amalgamate a host of ideas of racial difference (biological racism, physiognomic difference, cultural difference) into a single figure. In this regard, I am consciously drawing on the critical tradition of reading “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” as a tale shaped by coded meanings, particularly in reference to ideas of race and racial difference. The last three decades of Poe scholarship have been largely informed by Toni Morrison’s famous declaration that “[n]o early American writer is more important to the concept of American Africanism than Poe,” and “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” has received particular attention for its portrayal of the inhuman ape.<sup>9</sup> Due to the tale’s clear binary between detective and killer, Nancy Harrowitz has read “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” as a conflict between agonistic forces: the French detective, the avatar of reason, civilization, legality, humanity, and/or whiteness, rises up to mitigate the threat of the Ourang-Outang, who stands for the forces of unreason, savagery, criminality, animality, and blackness.<sup>10</sup> Ed White suggests that Poe’s epistemological project of uncovering the truth derives from popular anxieties about slave uprisings, arguing that “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” with its tale of the foreign Ourang-Outang assaulting a white domestic space, remolds the phenomenon of the antebellum slave rebellion into a form that can be more easily controlled by white authorities.<sup>11</sup> And Elise Lemire has read the tale as part of a larger antebellum trend of representing apes as sexually voracious stand-ins for black Americans, showing how

---

<sup>9</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 32.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy A. Harrowitz, “Criminality and Poe’s Orangutan: The Question of Race in Detection,” in *Agonistics: Arenas of Creative Contest*, eds. Janet Lungstrum and Elizabeth Sauer (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 177-195.

<sup>11</sup> Ed White, “The Ourang-Outang Situation,” *College Literature* 30, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 88-108, 88.

Poe's Ourang-Outang encodes a series of anxieties about miscegenation and interracial rape.<sup>12</sup>

This chapter builds on these readings by exploring how the racial logic of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" intersects with Poe's specific concerns about the rise and function of mass print. From his early years as an editor and critic for the *Southern Literary Messenger*, where he sought to define and disseminate Southern literature as an alternative to the literary circles of the North, to his later attempts to establish a literary magazine of his own, Poe's career was defined by his efforts to understand and organize a uniquely American reading public. As Terence Whalen argues in *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses*, Poe's writing was always informed by conflicting interests as he sought to balance artistic ideals ("Beauty" in poetry and "Truth" in fiction) with political economy (the need generated by capitalism to please, or appease, 'the masses').<sup>13</sup>

Poe's concerns about a literary market whose greatest heights will always be constrained by the vast majority of its readers echo his unease about American society writ large, a concern embodied by Poe's fascination with what Jonathan Elmer calls "the social limit." Drawing on Homi Bhabha's theory of "liminality," Elmer defines the social limit as a function of the shift from monarchy (which locates power as above the reach of the people) to mass democracy: "when [the] figure of social power is no longer a

---

<sup>12</sup> Elise Lemire, "Combating Abolitionism with the Species Argument: Race and Economic Anxieties in Poe's Philadelphia," in *Miscegenation: Making Race in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 87-114, 109.

<sup>13</sup> Terence Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 85-86. Whalen suggests that these forces can be understood dialectically through the idea of a "Capital Reader." The "personification of the peculiar logic that accompanied the new publishing industry" of antebellum America, Whalen argues that Poe imagined the Capital Reader as the embodiment of the process through which certain texts exist and thrive, while others fail: a figure who is "not a mere market analyst but rather a polymath blessed with limitless productivity" (10, 14).

monarch but the sovereign people, what was formerly a transcendent boundary becomes folded into the social whole and becomes an immanent limit.” The “social limit” marks precisely the point at which the representational praxis of society breaks down, when the failure of the individual and the society to accurately coincide with one another results in a set of paradoxes “exposing the self as social, unnervingly plural, and the social as self, uncannily singular.”<sup>14</sup> For Poe, understanding the relationship between the individual and democratic society required the latter to be recognized as a type of fiction, one whose claim to represent its constituents *en masse* reveals its own failure to encompass any of its constituents as individuals.

But I argue that “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” constitutes a rare effort in Poe’s fiction to reconstitute society in contrast to the figure of the threatening outsider. That society takes the form of a reading public, a public realized as a result of a set of statements—specifically Dupin’s instruction to “Read now” and his later denial that “Asiatics [or] Africans abound in Paris”—that place specific and unrealizable limits on what it means to participate in such a public. In my first section, I examine the role of the detective as a figure whose authoritarian power is derived from curatorial practices, the ability to control what audiences do and do not read. I draw on Jacques Rancière’s theory of *abrutissement* to show how Poe deploys “the passage from Cuvier” as the climax to a story of community formation: a narrative which finds the detective, a curator of circulating texts, as the pinnacle of an emergent reading hierarchy that encompasses Poe’s fictional Paris and his Philadelphian readers alike. I then examine how that story of reading-in-common interacts with Poe’s elisions when citing Cuvier. I argue that Poe

---

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Elmer, *Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture, and Edgar Allan Poe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 19-20.

uses the idea (popularized in natural history and political writing) of the Ourang-Outang as a figure that transgresses the boundaries separating humans from animals in order to teach readers to recognize the failings of an overly expansive vision of humanity.

(Throughout this chapter, I will be using the spelling “Ourang-Outang”—the term used by both Cuvier’s English translators and Poe—in order to maintain the cultural specificity of my argument, which is less concerned with the real ape we know as the orangutan than it is with the scientific, social, and racial narratives which eighteenth and nineteenth century authors projected onto that creature.) Finally, I show how those two seemingly disparate aspects of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”—its vision of a reading public and its appeal to ideas of species difference—shape Poe’s representations of race and class difference. Ultimately, I argue that Poe uses the idea of textual circulation to generate a fable in which the threat of the racialized Other can be contained and curtailed through the formation of a reading public.

By reading “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” alongside *The Animal Kingdom* as shared texts whose meaning derives from their ability to move between readers, this chapter shows how Poe theorized the careful regulation of print circulation as a way to generate and sustain a white reading society in the face of demographic transformation. “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” embodies the imagined ability of shared texts to construct a community of readers, both in its narrative of communal re-assemblage in the wake of violent crime and in its status as a circulating short story that invites readers to situate themselves within its world of texts. But by locating violence in the the Ourang-Outang and explicitly disavowing the possibility of “Asiatics” or “Africans” appearing within the narrative, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” also makes that fantasy of

regulation contingent on the absence of non-white actors—which is to say, non-white readers—from the world of the story. Poe’s tale models not only how antebellum print circulation allowed the spread of racist ideology, but also how that ideology intersected with the technology of mass print to encourage readers to imagine reading itself as an exclusively white practice. In “Rue Morgue,” reading is the basis of human society, one with no place for those who cannot be imagined to read.

### **The Curator of the Absent Texts**

“The Murders in the Rue Morgue” remains one of Poe’s most celebrated and iconic tales, as much for its cultural significance as one of the earliest Western detective stories (the tale introduces the figure of the detective in a narrative organized around processes of logical deduction, processes that Poe called “ratiocination”) as for the ways that it fails to adhere to the conventions of that genre (rather than a human killer as the tale intimates, the titular “Murders” are committed by an inhuman animal, such that events which appear criminal instead turn out to have natural causes). Upon its initial publication in *Graham’s*, and its 1843 re-publication (along with “The Man That Was Used Up”) in the first volume of *The Prose Romances of Edgar Allan Poe*, the tale was received, in the words of one reviewer, as “one of the most enchanting, finished, and powerful fictions that we have for a long time read.”<sup>15</sup> In a pseudonymous review of his own work, Poe explained this fame, noting that in contrast to more literary tales like “The Fall of the House of Usher,” ratiocinative tales like “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Gold-Bug” were particularly popular “with the mass,” owing to “their

---

<sup>15</sup> “Unsigned review in the *Pennsylvania Inquirer*, 26 July 1843,” in Walker, *The Critical Heritage*, 132-33, 133.

unbroken interest, novelty of the combination of ordinary incident, and faithful minuteness of detail.”<sup>16</sup> As described here, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” couldn’t have been anything but a success.

But what did success “with the mass” really mean for Poe’s tale? In 1843, an anonymous writer reviewed *The Prose Romances* for the Philadelphia *Saturday Courier*. The review opens by asking, “Is there a man, woman, or child, ‘read up,’ as they phrase it in American Literature, who is unacquainted with Edgar A. Poe? We take it for granted that there is not.” In that spirit of taking things for granted, the article constantly asserts the universality of the author’s fame:

That Edgar A. Poe, has a peculiar mind, everybody admits. That he is original, all know. That he is learned – very learned – is equally well established. That he is one of the severest of critics, none deny – but many have felt. That he is one of the very best of the American Critics, we think only a few would undertake to deny.<sup>17</sup>

The review’s staccato rhythm operates by constantly presenting a quality of Poe only to verify it by describing the familiarity of that quality. While the article praises Poe, and “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” its emphasis ultimately subordinates the author’s quality to that more important factor, celebrity. Anybody reading this article, the reviewer implies, already knows what it has to say.

Yet the review qualifies this universality, noting that when “[c]ontrasted with that excellent and plain – yet eloquent and pathetic story teller T. S. ARTHUR [Timothy Shay Author, sentimental author and Associate Editor of the *Saturday Courier*] – Mr. Poe loses in comparison, so far as the applicability of his Tales is concerned, for the very general

---

<sup>16</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “*Tales by Edgar A. Poe*,” in *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 868-873, 871.

<sup>17</sup> “Notice in the Philadelphia *Saturday Courier*, 29 July 1843,” in I.M. Walker, *Edgar Allan Poe: The Critical Heritage*, 133-135, 133-34.

reading of the extended multitude.”<sup>18</sup> This comparison seems more intended as an insult to Arthur than a compliment to Poe: the final sentence notes that “for learning, uniqueness, and originality,” Poe “stands entirely alone.” But it nonetheless strangely contrasts with the earlier premise that “all know” of Poe’s originality: while it doesn’t necessarily disprove that claim, it suggests that Poe is known by all, but truly understood by a select few. In praising Poe, the article is both universal and strangely exclusionary. Where before the article invited all of its readers into the fold of Poe’s celebrity by telling them that they’re already part of it, here it suggests that to appreciate Poe, one must be capable of more than just “the very general reading of the extended multitude,” for whom the sentimental novels of Timothy Arthur would be a better fit. To read this article is to share knowledge with “everybody” and, at the same time, be better informed than “the extended multitude.”

In its paradoxical vision of an all-inclusive reading public defined in contrast to those it excludes, this review echoes the very tale it claims to be critiquing—one which appeals to circulating texts as a way to generate interpersonal bonds between characters while simultaneously eliding or obscuring those same texts. The tale starts with Dupin alone, the sole heir to a once-grand family, who in the lapses of fortune had “ceased to bestir himself in the world.” In this fallen state, the narrator declares, “[b]ooks, indeed, were his sole luxuries.” But while Dupin’s love of books initially appears to be a symptom of his isolated lot in life, that same bibliophilia is responsible for reinserting Dupin into society. Dupin and the narrator first come into contact with one another “at an obscure library in the Rue Montmartre, where the accident of our both being in search of

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

the same very rare and very remarkable volume brought us into closer communion.”

Poe’s use of “communion” is no coincidence, as the relationship between the two quickly takes on a spiritual tenor. “I was astonished,” the narrator writes, “at the vast extent of his reading: and, above all, I felt my soul enkindled within me by the wild fervor, and the vivid freshness of his imagination” (400). In this moment, reading is the primary currency with which Dupin can be valued, as well as the medium connecting the detective to his newfound companion. As the narrator’s “soul” takes on a new vibrancy, it becomes an intimate vessel for the force of Dupin’s “imagination.”

This scene literally instantiates what Gillian Silverman labels “communion” among antebellum readers: the idea that circulating books could generate intense affective ties between the individuals who share them.<sup>19</sup> The “very rare and very remarkable volume” invites a kind of affective doubling between its readers—at least on the part of the narrator, who has apparently become a lesser version of Dupin. At the same time that the book generates the affective relationship between Dupin and the narrator, it also suggests the dissolution of the individual: the narrator and Dupin quickly move in together and are never meaningfully separated from one another over the course of the tale. To the extent that the tome’s “very rare and very remarkable” nature attests to the sophistication and intensity of those searching for the text, it is solely responsible for organizing the Dupin-narrator dyad that can productively navigate the newspapers of Paris later in the story.

But that dyad is ultimately constructed around a lacuna: while the scene dramatizes the way that texts can organize individuals into collectives (both of the

---

<sup>19</sup> Gillian Silverman, *Bodies and Books*, 2.



affective and intellectual nature), the text itself remains resolutely unknown. Without any clue as to its title, its author, or even its contents, the “very remarkable” book goes literally unremarked upon. The search ends in similar ambiguity. Did Dupin and the narrator find the text in question, or did they simply find each other?

Those lapses could be read as an instance of simple narrative economy: the details of the text are less important to the relationship between narrator and detective than the simple knowledge that their relationship was catalyzed by reading (or at least the desire to read). But there remains another possibility: what if the “very rare and very remarkable volume,” like the “certain German book” of “The Man of the Crowd,” does not *go* unread, but rather “does not permit itself to be read”?<sup>20</sup> Read as a moment of conscious refusal—a withholding of citation—the scene takes on a new meaning, particularly in the context of Poe’s later protracted transcription of the *Gazette des Tribunaux*. That newspaper’s prominence within the text reflects its status as a circulating volume: Poe makes the newspaper available to his readers precisely because the newspaper form emphasizes mass availability. In contrast, the “very rare and very remarkable volume” operates within a much smaller sphere. Its ‘very rarity’ manifests itself in the concealment of its title or subject, presumably known only to the two figures whom it brings together in “closer communion.” In this instance, Poe uses the distinction between mass print and the individual text to account for the division between the larger public sphere and the close relationship between the narrator and the detective. In turn, when Poe’s reading audience is invited to share readership of the *Gazette* with Dupin and the

---

<sup>20</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, 388.

narrator, that invitation matters precisely because his audience had previously been excluded from the intimacy generated by the “very rare and very remarkable volume.”

The arc from the unnamed volume to the transcribed *Gazette* entails a narrative of progress: the readers of *Graham's Magazine* (or of any of the myriad reprints of Poe's tale that have appeared in the nearly two hundred years since its initial publication) cease to be external to the story's reading public, and instead begin to participate within that reading public, which for its part opens up to allow more participants. Read thus, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” is more than a parable about the possibilities of print circulation to build communities, but is itself a technology to generate communal sentiment. This sequence is completed by the “passage from Cuvier” that appears at the tale's climax, which further asserts the idea that Poe's characters and readers are members of an expansive reading public while simultaneously offering new ways to demarcate the boundaries of that reading public.

Cuvier's text appears in the tale at precisely the moment when empirical observation has failed to generate a solution for the narrator. Having gathered evidence from the newspaper reports and the scene of the crime, Dupin leads his friend through the contradictory nature of that evidence. The killer was not speaking *any* identifiable language, at least according to conflicting witness reports that denied hearing any European tongue. The killer entered and exited the L'Espanaye's apartment without leaving any evidence that any of the doors had been forced. And the physical evidence that attested to the killer's body (the physical force behind its brutality, the bruises on one victim's neck) seems simply inhuman. As Dupin guides the narrator's mind through this thought process—one leading away from Europe, away from outward appearances, and

finally away from the human at all—the narrator finds himself on “the verge of comprehension, without power to comprehend.” Epistemological confusion soon becomes physical discomfort: the narrator experiences a “creeping of the flesh” and becomes “completely unnerved” when Dupin reveals a previously-unseen tuft of inhuman hair. Seeing the traces of the story without the means to draw them together, the narrator is thrust into an existential crisis: he is aware of his own interpretive failure—his failure as a reader—and yet lacks the means to correct it.

But while this cavalcade of conflicting empirical evidence produces ever-increasing anxiety, Dupin’s final piece of evidence regulates that unease by situating empirical knowledge within the realm of text:

“Read now,” replied Dupin, “this passage from Cuvier.”  
It was a minute anatomical and generally descriptive account of the large fulvous Ourang-Outang of the East Indian Islands. The gigantic stature, the prodigious strength and activity, the wild ferocity, and the imitative propensities of these mammalia are sufficiently well known to all. I understood the full horrors of the murder at once. (424)

The citation gives meaning to the previously inexplicable forensic evidence: Cuvier’s text works as “both authoritative back-up and explicatory reference to Dupin’s own observations at the scene of the crime,” validating the detective’s skills by making their implications coherent to his audience.<sup>21</sup> The production of Cuvier sets the stage for all that follows: having affirmed the knowledge of the killer’s identity, the story can begin its arc towards social recuperation. But in this moment, Poe doesn’t emphasize the social stakes of revelation, but instead dramatizes the psychological restitution produced by understanding. Identification and accusation blur together in the narrator’s reaction, the

---

<sup>21</sup> Andrea Goulet, *Optiques: The Science of the Eye and the Birth of Modern French Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 87.

empirical totality of “full horrors” producing a simultaneous climax and catharsis. By granting the narrator the missing term—“Ourang-Outang”—Dupin pushes him over “the verge of comprehension,” allowing for the reconstitution of the readerly identity that is otherwise threatened by illegibility.

The “passage from Cuvier” catalyzes the process through which discrete facts are synthesized into a larger understanding. As if to highlight the power of the text in accomplishing this goal, Dupin falls uncharacteristically silent, ceding his voice to a sort of instantaneous dialogue between text and reader. The “passage” speaks to the narrator directly, while the narrator in his turn verifies the conformity between text and evidence. Cuvier’s description of the Ourang-Outang’s fingers “is in exact accordance” with the prints found on Mlle. L’Espanaye’s neck, such that “no animal but an Ourang-Outang, of the species here mentioned, could have left them behind”; the tuft of hair is similarly “identical in character with that of the beast of Cuvier” (424). The collapse between textual and experiential knowledge seems familiar, as the narrator’s claim of “exact accordance” recalls his earlier claim that he saw “nothing beyond what had been stated in the *‘Gazette des Tribunaux’*” at the scene of the crime. But whereas that earlier moment dramatized a failure of reading—the narrator’s inability to read beyond the book—the “passage from Cuvier” corrects that failure by demonstrating the proper use of textual knowledge: not as the sole source of observations, but rather as a general hermeneutic to guide the reader’s interpretations.

To the extent that this scene valorizes the *idea* of reading, it does so by erasing the *process* of reading. The narrator’s summary of the relevant details and his “underst[anding] of the full horrors of the murder” take place simultaneously, such that

the deictic “now” of “read now” and the “at once” which closes the paragraph seem to refer to a single unit of time: an enclosed bubble in which indication, internalization, and interpretation collapse into a single process. This temporal collapse conveniently obscures Cuvier’s writing *qua* writing from the tale, replacing it with the narrator’s paraphrasing at precisely the moment the text enters the plot. Where Poe’s protracted inclusion of the *Gazette des Tribunaux* invites doubt by allowing readers to see the ambiguities and contradictions immanent within the witness accounts (or, to put it another way, trains readers to see the newspaper article as a source of incomplete knowledge), his refusal to directly incorporate Cuvier’s text into his tale eliminates the possibility of audience interpretation by elevating the natural historian, and the detective who invoked him, to a position of unassailable authority. Even as the knowledge enlightens the narrator and his audience, it marks them as intellectually subordinate to the figures who brought it to their attention.

And yet, a question remains: if Poe wishes to suggest the hierarchy of knowledge, why does he qualify Cuvier by saying that the information it conveys is “sufficiently well known to all”? This question is best answered by considering Poe’s presentation of textual enlightenment through the pedagogical model that Rancière calls “abrutissement.” While often translated as “stultification,” Rancière’s original language draws specifically on the term “*abrutir*,” meaning “to render stupid” or “to treat like a brute.”<sup>22</sup> The term resonates strangely with “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”—after all, Dupin presents Cuvier as a way to *distinguish* brute animality from human criminality—but that

---

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 7.

resonance also reflects the hierarchical relationships between readers that structure Poe's vision of society.

As Rancière describes it, *abrutissement* asserts a master's ability to "transmit" knowledge to an inferior mind. "The superior intelligence," Rancière writes in a sentence that seems tailored to Dupin, "knows things by reason, proceeds by method, from the simple to the complex, from the part to the whole." In turn, "this intelligence... allows the master to transmit his knowledge by adapting it to the intellectual capacities of the student and allows him to verify that the student has satisfactorily understood what he has learned."<sup>23</sup> Rancière's criticism of *abrutissement* is not based in its inability to educate, but rather in its presumption of the 'inferior' intelligence as little more than an imperfect vessel, capable of containing the master's knowledge but unable to produce new knowledge on its own.

In contrast, Rancière's ideal pedagogical relationship is that of "the ignorant schoolmaster and the emancipated novice": the relationship generated by a teacher who cedes interpretive authority as a means of empowering a student.<sup>24</sup> For Rancière, the distinction between emancipation and *abrutissement* can best be understood as a way of relating to text itself. "In the logic of emancipation," he writes, "between the ignorant schoolmaster and the emancipated novice there is always a third thing – a book or some other piece of writing – alien to both and to which they can refer to verify in common what the pupil has seen, what she says and what she thinks of it."<sup>25</sup> Where emancipated pedagogy recognizes the text as an active and "alien" third voice in the conversation, a

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 14-15.

pedagogy of *abrutissement* treats the text as simply the vehicle through which the master can “transmit his knowledge”:

The stultifier is not an aged obtuse master who crams his students’ skulls full of poorly digested knowledge, or a malignant character mouthing half-truths in order to shore up his power and the social power. On the contrary, he is all the more efficacious because he is knowledgeable, enlightened, and of good faith... The more he is enlightened, the more evident he finds the difference between groping blindly and searching methodically, the more he will insist on substituting the spirit for the letter, the clarity of explications for the authority of the book.<sup>26</sup>

*Abrutissement*, then, is not only a form of violence against the student who it treats ‘like a brute,’ but also a way to nullify “the authority of the book.” At the heart of this violence is the idea of what Rancière calls “understanding” (“what the child cannot do without the explanations of a master”): the idea that knowledge production is useful only insofar as it can be made to cohere with what a master already knows.

Poe’s curatorial and citational tactics in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”—proffering or withholding circulating texts as a tool to sustain an interpretive hierarchy—deploy practices of *abrutissement* in order to organize and navigate a world of mass print. In my next section I will explore the ways that those practices reimagine—or rather reinscribe—the logic of species relation in Cuvier’s writing. But for now, I only want to sketch out the way that this logical hierarchy not only structures Poe’s fictional world, but also shapes his relationship to his assumed reading audience. Poe’s use of Cuvier exemplifies Rancière’s warning against “substituting the spirit for the letter”: the text is summarized and elided, precisely in the name of transmitting knowledge directly between characters and readers. The natural history acts less as a text than as a particular idealized vision of what a text could be: an instantaneous transmission of thought with no loss of

---

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 7-8.

meaning, one that links not only Dupin and the narrator but also the narrator and his audience.

That lossless transmission is precisely what Poe's narrator claims when he announces that the Ourang-Outang's characteristics are "sufficiently well known to all." In a strange invocation of mass circulation, Poe suggests that the information stemming from Cuvier was always available to the reader, who simply needed to be reminded of what they already knew. Poe simultaneously incorporates Cuvier into the story and renders his textual contribution utterly inert, mediating his readers' knowledge of the ape by appealing to a shared body of common understanding. At the same time, Poe also implicitly incorporates any reader who may *not* be familiar with Cuvier into that understanding. In a sense, Poe posits "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" as itself another form of print circulation for Cuvier, at least insofar as any reader of the tale is assumed to be (and thus interpolated as) a reader of Cuvier. The "passage from Cuvier" concludes the narrative of exclusion that began with the "very rare and very remarkable volume" at the start of the tale's central friendship: averred to be a shared text, it draws Poe's readers into the circle of "closer communion" shared by Dupin and the narrator.

The result is something of a paradox: the shared text facilitates, and in fact produces, interpersonal 'communion' as a direct result of its not being shared. In the process, it suggests that the story can only be considered complete to the extent that it forecloses alternative possibilities. Peter Thoms describes Poe's detective genre as "stories about the making of stories" in which "the criminal is the antagonist, who in making mystery obstructs the formation of a rounded narrative, and the detective is the hero, who in a skilled act of reading and writing uncovers what happened and devises the



completed narrative of explanation.”<sup>27</sup> In the context of “Rue Morgue,” this “completed narrative of explanation” becomes attainable only through an incomplete explanation.

Between the three diegetic texts that structure “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”—the “very rare and very remarkable volume,” the newspaper transcription of witness reports, and the “passage from Cuvier” that brings the story to its climax—Poe not only constructs a remarkably complete narrative of community formation, but suggests that “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” itself can be the tool that generates that reading community. In the first instance, Dupin and the narrator share knowledge of a volume of which the audience has no knowledge, and as a result their relationship is defined by the exclusion of the reading audience. In the second instance, Poe offers a series of newspaper articles to be read by both audience and characters, which invites both groups to understand themselves as sharing a text. In the final instance, Poe imagines a text that need not be read simply because it is already known to everybody, inviting his readers to recognize that they have become a fixed part of the reading public that began with Dupin and the narrator. The practices of heavily controlled citation and curation that entail Poe’s *abrutissement* ensure that any vision of a reading public generated in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” recognizes Dupin as the pinnacle of interpretive prowess, but they also work to situate individual readers as members of that public—a reading public shaped by common knowledge of Cuvier, and characterized in opposition to the animal that catalyzed the violence in the first place. If Dupin and Poe

---

<sup>27</sup> Peter Thoms, “Poe’s Dupin and the Power of Detection,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Kevin Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 133-147, 135.

treat their readers ‘like a brute,’ they can do so precisely because there is another brute below them.

### **The Beast of Cuvier**

When Poe claims that his audience already knows what Cuvier has to say, he replaces the natural historian’s words with a guided interpretation of what those words represent. Unsurprisingly, there is a massive discrepancy between the creature depicted in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and that described by the Baron Georges Cuvier in his influential taxonomy *Le Règne animal distribué d’après son organization* (1817), translated into English as *The Animal Kingdom Arranged in Conformity with its Organization* (1831). Audiences familiar with that work might well recognize “the wild ferocity” of Poe’s beast and its brutality towards women in Cuvier’s description of the “Chimpanzé,” a relative to the “Ourang-Outang” which “lives in troops, constructs huts of leaves and sticks, arms itself with clubs and stones, and thus repulses men and elephants; pursues and abducts, as is said, negro woman, &c.”<sup>28</sup> Cuvier references a popular and racialized myth of ape abduction, one that dated back to the sixteenth century and was popularly used to “[conjure] up notions of interspecies rape.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the creature’s “imitative propensities” are well documented in Cuvier, who notes that the Ourang-Outang “is enabled by his conformation to imitate many of our actions”; certainly this could account for Poe’s creature, who kills with a razor “in imitation of the motions of a barber” (430). But Cuvier also describes the ape as “a mild and gentle

---

<sup>28</sup> Baron Georges Cuvier, *The Animal Kingdom Arranged in Conformity with its Organization*, trans. Henry McMurtrie (New York: G. & C. & H. Carvill, 1831), 59. All subsequent citations in text.

<sup>29</sup> Elise Lemire, “*Miscegenation*,” 102.

animal, easily rendered tame and affectionate” (57). An earlier article by Cuvier similarly affirmed this benignity, describing a creature that was “[i]n general... gentle and affectionate, and seemed to delight in society.”<sup>30</sup> While Poe’s narrator labels the murderer “the beast of Cuvier,” the process of revision through which a “gentle and affectionate” creature becomes the murderer of the Rue Morgue constitutes a form of *abrutissement* in its own right.

In light of these apparent revisions, scholars have justly asked what Poe gains by citing Cuvier. One school of thought suggests that Poe’s interest was in drawing an analogy between biological and criminal investigation. Cuvier was particularly celebrated for his ability to analyze fossil evidence, and Shawn Rosenheim argues that Poe was more interested in using “the zoologist’s mode of analysis [as] an analogue to his own technique of detection” than he was in reproducing the content of the Baron’s work. If Poe “virtually reverses Cuvier’s actual claims,” Rosenheim writes, it is because his “intellectual allegiance to Cuvier was subservient to his need to magnify the melodramatic and Gothic aspects of the murders.”<sup>31</sup> But while this account treats the distinction between Cuvier’s gentle beast and Poe’s fierce monster as a function of form (Poe cedes his story’s claim to strict accuracy in favor of embellishing its spectacular effect on the reader), others have demonstrated that Poe’s citation of Cuvier served an ideological purpose, allowing Poe to transpose racial categories onto the human-animal divide. John Carlos Rowe argues that “[w]hat appeals to Poe is Baron Cuvier’s pseudo-

---

<sup>30</sup> Georges Cuvier, “Description of an Ourang-Outang, reprinted from *The Monthly Magazine*,” *Select Reviews of Literature and Spirit of Foreign Periodicals* 7 (May 1812): 402.

<sup>31</sup> Shawn Rosenheim, “Detective Fiction and Psychoanalysis,” in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, eds. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 153-178, 160-161.

evolutionary classification of human types in the manner of animal species, as well as the flagrant Eurocentrism of his taxonomies of the human.”<sup>32</sup> And Elise Lemire adds to this, situating Poe’s *Ourang-Outang* in the discourse of antebellum scientific racism by noting how the tale’s emphasis on the creature’s “imitative propensities,” with particular reference to the creature’s attempt to shave itself, puts Cuvier’s zoology in dialogue with popular racist representations of black barbers in Philadelphia, the city of the tale’s publication.<sup>33</sup>

All of these readings make compelling arguments as to why Poe was drawn to Cuvier, but none of them offer particularly satisfying accounts for why Poe’s citation of Cuvier is so carefully curated. In this section, I read Cuvier’s *The Animal Kingdom* alongside other depictions of the ape in natural historical and political writings to show how Poe’s creature, far from a general symbol of animal brutality, draws on popular accounts of the *Ourang-Outang* as a liminal figure that marks two highly racialized boundaries: the boundary between man and animal, and the boundary between civility and savagery. Late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century white writers used the alternating human/nonhuman status of the *Ourang-Outang* as a point of comparison for defining the relative humanity of Africans (and people of African descent) in the context of chattel slavery. In crafting his *Ourang-Outang*, Poe draws on the contradictory discourse of ape humanity. But in the process of guiding his story to a clear and

---

<sup>32</sup> John Carlos Rowe, *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 72.

<sup>33</sup> As Lemire puts it, the figure of “[t]he barbering primate” would have been familiar to visitors of Peale’s Museum in Philadelphia, which “showcased stuffed monkeys dressed in the outfits of various professions and arranged in occupational poses,” including a prominent display of “the monkeys dressed and arranged so as to depict the life of a barber shop.” Elise Lemire, “*Miscegenation*,” 103-105.

resolvable conclusion, Poe also exorcises those contradictions in a conscious effort to teach readers to delineate the boundaries of humanity—boundaries, in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” that are defined by the ability to participate in a homogenous white reading public.

Upon its French publication in 1817, Cuvier’s *The Animal Kingdom* became a popular touchstone for the field of zoology, particularly for its revision of the relationship between humans and other animals. Cuvier sought to revise the dominant taxonomy developed by Carl Linnaeus over the course of 12 editions of *Systema Naturae* (1735-1768). Linnaeus’ earliest editions drew on an Aristotelian tradition in which humans were not only characterized as a form of quadruped, but were identified as part of the same taxonomic category as apes and other types of monkeys.<sup>34</sup> That categorization failed to win over Linnaeus’ contemporaries, who argued that identifying man as “a hairy animal with four feet and four incisors” was at best inaccurate to human anatomy and at worst heretical in its failing to adequately distinguish man from beast.<sup>35</sup> In his 10<sup>th</sup> edition (1758), which classified and provided binomial names to over 4,000 species, Linnaeus responded to his critics by introducing the category of “Mammalia” (emphasizing lactation as the central organizing term) in order to account for the similarities between species. In the process, though, Linnaeus further confused the relationship between man and animal by proposing a distinct species of human, derived from early accounts of the

---

<sup>34</sup> Christina Skott gives a detailed account of Linnaeus’ navigation of the relationship between humans and “Ourang-Outangs” in “Linnaeus and the Troglodyte: European Encounters with the Malay World and the Natural History of Man,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 42, no. 123 (2014): 141-169.

<sup>35</sup> Londa Schiebinger, “Mammals, primatology and sexology,” in *Sexual Knowledge, Sexual Science: The History of Attitudes to Sexuality*, eds. Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 184- 209, 187-88.

“Ourang Outang,” which he dubbed *Homo troglodytes*.<sup>36</sup> In contrast to this expansive view of humanity, Cuvier’s *The Animal Kingdom* continued to use Linnaeus’ category of Mammalia, but divided it between “Quadrumania” and “Bimana”—a division that set Man apart from all other species.

While it’s impossible to say whether the characteristics of “the beast of Cuvier” were “sufficiently well known to all,” as Poe’s narrator puts it, they were undeniably “well known.” In the decades following its publication, *The Animal Kingdom* was translated a number of times, most prominently in America by Henry McMurtrie in 1831. It was certainly McMurtrie’s translation that Poe had in mind when describing the “passage from Cuvier” in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” In 1839, only two years prior to the tale’s publication, Poe had edited Thomas Wyatt’s *A Synopsis of Natural History*, a textbook that directly excerpted several sections from McMurtrie’s translation—most strikingly its entries on “Varieties of the Human Race” and “Simia.”<sup>37</sup> Those two entries are particularly important because, for Cuvier, the primary tool for distinguishing “Bimana” from “Quadrumania” lay in the distinction between “Man” and “Monkey”—the same distinction that also informs Cuvier’s understanding of racial difference.

In his introduction to *The Animal Kingdom*, Cuvier emphasizes that his goal is not to hierarchize species “so as to form a single line, or so as to mark their relative superiority,” but simply to order them: “I regard my divisions and subdivisions as the merely graduated expression of the resemblance of the beings which enter into each of

---

<sup>36</sup> Christina Skott, “Linnaeus and the Troglodyte,” 150.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Wyatt, *A Synopsis of Natural History* (Philadelphia: Thomas Wardle, 1839), 20, 30.

them, and although in some we observe a sort of degradation or passage from one species to the other, which cannot be denied, this disposition is far from being general” (xvii). As a rule, then, Cuvier emphasizes difference as the primary relationship between categories, rather than superiority. Thus Cuvier writes that “[t]he foot of Man is very different from that of the Monkey,” while the thumb is “longer in proportion than those of the Monkey” and human nostrils are “more complicated than those of the Monkey” (45-47). But in his account of “Varieties of the Human Species,” Cuvier makes an exception for defining “The negro race,” which he distinguishes from other categories of humanity (specifically “the *Caucasian* or white” and “the *Mongolian* or yellow”) by situating it closer in relation to apes: “[t]he projection of the lower parts of the face, and the thick lips, evidently approximate it to the monkey tribe: the hordes of which it consists have always remained in the most complete state of utter barbarism” (52). While Cuvier separates mankind from other species by virtue of their differences, he explicitly positions Africans as closer to animal and, thus, further from other humans.

At the same time that *The Animal Kingdom* distinguishes certain humans as being closer to apes, it also distinguishes certain apes by emphasizing their proximity to humans. This is particularly true for the Orang-Outang, the first entry in the category of Monkeys: “Of all animals, this Orang is considered as approaching most nearly to Man in the form of his head, height of forehead, and volume of brain,” although Cuvier notes that this similitude is often exaggerated by popular descriptions (57). While the Orang-Outang is resolutely inhuman, it nevertheless nears the boundary that separates man from animal, a position comparable to Cuvier’s description of “the negro race.” To expand the

spatial metaphor, we might say that the boundary that defines humanity, for Cuvier, lies in the difference between the Ourang-Outang and the African human.

By emphasizing the proximity between apes and humans, and Africans in particular, Cuvier sought to resolve the ambiguity of 18<sup>th</sup> century debates about the ties between intellectual capacity and humanity. The question reflected Enlightenment writers' uncertainty about whether speciation was indicative of purely physical difference, or intellectual difference as well—an uncertainty exemplified by Rousseau's doubt as to whether “*orang-outangs*” and other non-speaking creatures “were not in fact real savage men” who simply remained in a state of nature.<sup>38</sup> In 18<sup>th</sup>- and early 19<sup>th</sup>-century debates, “the orangutan was a difficult cipher posed between man and animal, between *l'homme physique* and *l'homme morale*.”<sup>39</sup> At the heart of this distinction were two questions: could the behavior of sufficiently advanced animals be distinguished from that of humans, and how could that behavior inform the relationships between different kinds of humans?

Those who wished to recognize orangutans as humans generally justified such recognition through comparison with specifically European humans. Such is the case with Scottish linguist Lord Monboddo (James Burnett), whose *Of the Origin and Progress of Language* (1773) describes the “Orang Outangs” of Angola as a “whole nation” that has “been found without the use of speech”:

They are exactly of the human form; walking erect, not upon all-four, like the savages that have been found in Europe; they use sticks for weapons;

---

<sup>38</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin Classics, 1984), 155.

<sup>39</sup> Aaron Garrett, “Human Nature,” in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 160-233, 179.



they live in society; they make huts of branches of trees, and they carry off negroe girls, of whom they make slaves, and use them both for work and pleasure.<sup>40</sup>

Monboddo's account emphasizes the relative humanity of a species that walks on two legs and "live[s] in society." The linguist supports this latter claim by invoking the myth of ape abduction not as a narrative of savagery, but rather as a narrative of slavery, reinterpreting animal lust as an economic desire for "work and pleasure" that echoes the Atlantic slave trade. For Monboddo, apes could be human to the extent that their motives resemble those of Europeans; he implies that the desire to enslave others is an important condition of human identity.

While Monboddo situated the apes in relation to European chattel slavery to demonstrate their humanity, however, that analogy usually worked the other way: philosophers and writers invoked the inhumanity of apes as a way to dehumanize Africans, and thus more easily delimit the category of humanity. The most famous instance of this takes place in Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), in which the myth of ape abduction recurs as evidence of white supremacy (and therefore as evidence of the justness of African slavery). To prove that the colors of European skin are "preferable to that eternal monotony" of black skin, Jefferson asserts that Africans prefer the skin of whites "as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the black women over those of his own species."<sup>41</sup> In this instance, Elise Lemire notes, Jefferson invokes the "Chain of Being," a taxonomy of races and species "organized by kind where blacks and primates are together on the bottom of the hierarchy," while at the same time

---

<sup>40</sup> James Burnett, Lord Monboddo, *Of the Origin and Progress of Language* (Edinburgh: J. Balfour, 1773), 187-188.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (London: John Stockdale, 1787), 230.

revising it to argue that different kinds of being are ordered by lesser and greater beauty.<sup>42</sup> Jefferson's analogy asserts that "blacks" and "whites" are as different from one another as the former is from "the Oranootan," while also validating that assertion by arguing that all three types recognize themselves as being distinct from the other.

Monboddo and Jefferson each situate their arguments within the context of philosophical and scientific debates; in the process, both also show how the figure of the Ourang-Outang could be deployed to naturalize the economic relationship of slavery, a practice that became increasingly politicized with the growth of abolitionist sentiment in the nineteenth century. Anti-abolitionist and pro-slavery writers frequently drew on natural history to justify the peculiar institution.<sup>43</sup> But such comparisons often relied as much on intimation as on assertion. Four years before Poe published "The Murders in the Rue Moruge," J. H. Guenebalt of Charleston released a selected translation of Julien-Joseph Virey's *Histoire naturelle du Genre Human* (1801) as a pro-slavery pamphlet titled *The Natural History of the Negro Race* (1837). Guenebalt introduces his anti-abolitionist credentials by asserting that "[s]ocial equality is but a hollow sound"—a

---

<sup>42</sup> Elise Lemire, "Miscegenation," 28-30.

<sup>43</sup> A description of a recently discovered type of ape in the 1847 *Boston Journal of Natural History* claims that "it cannot be denied, however wide the separation, that the negro and ourang-outang do afford the points where man and the brute—when the totality of their organization is considered—most nearly approach each other." Thomas Savage and Jeffries Wyman, "Notice of the External Characters and Habits of Troglodytes Gorilla," *Boston Journal of Natural History* 4 (December 1847): 417-442, 441. Thomas R. R. Cobb, a pro-slavery writer from Georgia, would later cite that same line as proof of the justness of chattel slavery. Thomas R. R. Cobb, *An Inquiry into the Law of Negro Slavery* (Savannah: W. Thorne Williams, 1858), 25. Similarly, physician Samuel Cartwright draws on Cuvier to argue for physiognomic similarity between "the infant negro and ourang outing" in "Philosophy of the Negro Constitution," an 1852 article for the *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal*; that piece was later transcribed verbatim into the anti-abolitionist anthology *Cotton is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments*, ed. E. N. Elliott (Augusta, GA: Pritchard, Abbot & Loomis, 1860), 690-716, 709-710.

fitting introduction to the translation that follows, which evades the idea of equality between either types of humans or types of species, even as it constantly insinuates the proximity between certain types of men and apes.<sup>44</sup>

The translated material from Virey opens by drawing a line between physiology and psychology, claiming that “the negro has more feelings than thoughts, his intellect is not so extensive as that of the white man; his shape even bears some resemblance to the Orang-Outang.”<sup>45</sup> That turn to physiology informs Virey’s larger argument that physical similitude dictates psychological and social similarity, even as the natural historian stutters in defining that causality:

In fact, when we consider the great analogy between monkeys, Hottentots and Papous, so great that Galen in the anatomy of a Pitheque [orangutan], mistook him for a man; when we remark how intelligent the orang-outang is, how much his bearing, actions and habits are similar to those of negroes, how easily he is instructed, it seems that we must acknowledge the most imperfect negroes, to be next to the most perfect monkeys. We are indeed, far from maintaining that they belong to the same species, although the female orang-outang displays many constitutional peculiarities of the human female, as gestation for nine months, &c., and is as fond of men, as monkeys of women. No doubt there is a chasm between a monkey and a Hottentot; not so great is that which separates the Hottentot from the Caffre, this one from the Malays, the Malays from the European, still the transition is incontestable; it has been acknowledged and admitted by all Naturalists, who have classed them immediately after the human species, Linnaeus himself being the first authority.<sup>46</sup>

While Virey’s writing is suffused with the language of parallelism and proximity between Africans and apes, he adamantly refuses to make any definitive statements about the relationships in question. The “most imperfect negroes” are emphatically “next to the most perfect monkeys”; there is “a great analogy” which he “must acknowledge”; there is

---

<sup>44</sup> Julien-Joseph Virey, *The Natural History of the Negro Race*, Trans. J. H. Guenebalt (Charleston: D. J. Dowling, 1837), vi-vii.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 1-2.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 102.

“no doubt” a significant difference between men and apes, even though all Virey’s claims imply otherwise. Later on, Virey further demonstrates his faith in this “great analogy” by claiming that between different kinds of apes reflect those between different kinds of human, arguing that “as the *human race* is much more distant from the perfect type in Africa... so *the monkeys of Africa are more stupid and ferocious than those of Asia*”—a comparison that implies that “the reddish Orang Outang of Borneo” is as superior to the “Chimpanze” as other types of humans are to Africans. For Virey and Guenebalt, the figure of the orangutan serves a double purpose: its body is a physical analogue to Africans, while its primacy among apes is a social analogue to white Europeans.

Many black and abolitionist writers sought to counteract this account: when orangutans were referenced in the African American newspapers that proliferated later in the antebellum period, it was almost exclusively to argue against the animal/human proximity implied by writers like Cuvier and Virey. In 1828, *Freedom’s Journal* published “The Varieties of the Human Race.” The anonymous author of the piece describes Linnaeus’ effort “to introduce the Ourang Outang into the human family” as proof of the strange phenomenon whereby “men of acknowledged talents and genius should be so fond of placing their names before posterity as supporters and propagators of doctrines alike inconsistent and devoid of sense.” To prove the inconsistency of the claim, the article points to the extreme anatomical variance between man and ape: “[t]he Ourang Outang so highly extolled by Linnaeus, and which approaches nearest to man, has three vertebrae less than the human skeleton. It has no regular feet; it has no great toe, that great organ for walking in man; its larynx or organ of the voice is so formed, as to

render it less capable of even inarticulate sounds than most any other animal.”<sup>47</sup> In order to argue for the physical and intellectual equality of different kinds of human, the author completely excises the Ourang Outang from any possible claim to the title of humanity.

The article undermines the logic of similarity underlying racist thought by mobilizing quantifiable avenues of difference, in the process highlighting both the superficiality of degrees of color or facial distinction and the possibility for biological arguments to oppose the extremities of racist thought. Equally important is what is not said: the emphasis that “the Ourang Outang... approaches nearest to man” consciously elides the racist logic surrounding most such comparisons, which argued that the Ourang Outang was most proximate to *Africans*. By emphasizing only “man” as an encompassing species, “On the Varieties of the Human Race” turns the ape’s ambiguous status against its uses in racist rhetoric: the Ourang-Outang could be claimed in proximity to humans only on the understanding of its similarity to *all* humans.

Read in this context, the revelation that Poe’s killer was in fact an Ourang-Outang seems to resolve one mystery—that of who killed the L’Espanayes—only to replace it with a deeper epistemological crisis: how to make sense of the ongoing debate about the relationship between humanity, society, and the social ape? At first glance, that debate is strikingly absent from the resolution of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Poe’s reference to the creature’s “imitative propensities” is the closest the author gets to directly addressing the idea that Man could be similar to the Ourang-Outang, and in fact the revelation of the ape’s identity is marked by a litany of assertions about the impossibility of such a similarity. Witnesses heard “no sounds resembling words,” and

---

<sup>47</sup> “On the Varieties of the Human Race.” *Freedom’s Journal* (New York), April 18 1828.

Dupin describes the murders as “*excessively outré*—something altogether irreconcilable with our common notions of human action”; the narrator himself proclaims the tuft of hair to be “no *human* hair,” while the wounds around Mlle. L’Espanaye’s throat bear “the mark of no human hand” (416, 422-24). Thangan Ravindranathan describes Poe’s repetition as a “serial path” of negation which situates the Ourang-Outang in “the unnamable, hollowed out *outside* of the human”: it is less than human in some ways (intelligence, sociability), and more than human in other ways (its “superhuman strength”), but it always remains ontologically external from the category of humanity.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, the idea that an Ourang-Outang could be mistaken for a human is the primary conflict of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” The litany of negative assertions (“no *human*” hair, hand, etc.) draws its force precisely from the assumption, implicit throughout the tale, that the killings must have been committed by a human. The name “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” draws attention to criminal intentionality, while a more strictly accurate title like “Maulings in the Rue Morgue” would immediately give away the game. Within the tale, witnesses are preconditioned to listen for human languages and police only think to look for avenues of ingress and egress that would be available to a human intruder. Even the narrator falls victim to this assumption: when confronted with the evidence of inhuman brutality, he first proposes that “A madman... has done this deed—some raving maniac, escaped from a neighboring *Maison de Santé*” (423). When Poe identifies his Ourang-Outang as resolutely nonhuman, it is not only an ideological response to those who would argue otherwise, but also a rebuke to an

---

<sup>48</sup> Thingam Ravindranathan, “Unequal Metrics: Animals Passing in La Fontaine, Poe, and Chevillard,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 24, no. 5 (2014): 1-35, 14.

audience that has been set up to misidentify brutality as criminality—to confuse, in other words, the animal with the human.

That Poe sets his audience up to make this assumption is precisely the point; in fact, John Bryant argues that “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” should be read as one of Poe’s hoaxes, particularly in light of Dupin’s withholding of vital evidence from the reader.<sup>49</sup> But what precisely is the aim of Poe’s hoax? His overarching goal—convincing his reader that they are looking for a human, only to reveal that the evidence has been pointing to an ape the entire time—gently satirizes the idea that the latter could be so easily mistaken for the former. While Cuvier is the only source Poe cites for his Ourang-Outang, Poe guides his narrator and his readers through the multiple possibilities on Ourang-Outang humanity, not by dramatizing the discourse surrounding the conversation, but instead by crafting a narrative in which those readers must recognize their own gullibility in failing to distinguish between ape and man.

When Poe cites the “passage from Cuvier,” he thus performs two critical actions. As I argued in my previous section, he invites his readers to situate themselves within a shared reading public guided by the interpretive authority of Dupin. But Poe makes that invitation contingent on recognizing the limits of humanity—or, more precisely, contingent on actively recognizing the fallacy of assuming that everything that inhabits a human city is in fact human. The crisis that “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” solves, in short, is not simply that there are Ourang-Outangs killing people in the heart of civilized society; rather, it is that there are people in the heart of civilized society who will read about an Ourang-Outang and only see another human.

---

<sup>49</sup> John Bryant, “Poe’s Ape of UnReason: Humor, Ritual, and Culture,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 51, no. 1 (Jun 1996): 16-52, 33.

### Incorporating the Absent Others

Thus far, I have endeavored to show how Poe constructs a binary between his reading public—one centered around the figures of Dupin and the narrator, but capacious enough to incorporate Poe’s own readers—and the Ourang-Outang, a figure commonly associated with questions of human/animal liminality that Poe has in contrast defined as a figure of exceptionality, always outside of the boundaries of humanity. To show how this binary conditions the racial imagination of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” I conclude this chapter by examining how Poe situates two foreign figures into that binary: the “Asiatics” and “Africans” whose existence Dupin explicitly denies, and the foreign sailor responsible for bringing the Ourang-Outang into Paris in the first place.

Poe is very clear about the role that non-white people play—or rather, don’t play—in his story. When Dupin discusses the “peculiarity of the evidence” prior to announcing his solution, he first focuses on language. Dupin is less interested in the fact that witnesses who heard the killer all disagree about the language spoken than he is by the fact that “while an Italian, an Englishman, a Spaniard, a Hollander, and a Frenchman attempted to describe it, each one spoke of it as that *of a foreigner*”:

Now, how strangely unusual must that voice have really been, about which such testimony as this *could* have been elicited! – in whose *tones*, even, denizens of the five great divisions of Europe could recognise nothing familiar! You will say that it might have been the voice of an Asiatic – of an African. Neither Asiatics nor Africans abound in Paris; but, without denying the inference, I will just now merely call your attention to three points which have relation to this topic. (416)

This strange denial has been the subject of significant critical attention, both for its implicit racial politics and the strange irrationality with which it is presented: as Nancy



Harrowitz puts it, the detective “assumes that there has to be some sort of population of the group in question to make their purported presence a logical possibility,” an assumption that “throws into some question Dupin’s own hypothesis about the orangutan as perpetrator since it then suggests that orangutans *do* abound in Paris.”<sup>50</sup> By drawing attention to the possibility of non-white actors, and qualifying it “without denying the inference,” Poe tacitly encourages readers to consider that it is reasonable to suspect “Africans and Asiatics” even as he denies the possibility of their involvement.

In one sense, as Ed White argues, the strange series of negatives surrounding Dupin’s disavowal of “Asiatics” or “Africans” marks the impact of slave revolution on Poe’s text. In White’s reading, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” responds to lingering anxieties about slave uprisings, particularly stemming from Nat Turner’s 1831 rebellion, by invoking the language of slavery: the “fugitive” ape “escaped” from the “dread whip” of its “master.” More than that, White argues, the tale’s underlying logic of discovering secrets actively allegorizes the larger cultural anxieties about slave agency. If we recognize a slave rebellion to include “the feigned ignorance, the defiance, and the planning of slaves, the suspicion, terror, and ignorance of whites, the rumors and secrets in circulation during and after the event, and the struggle to control the aftermath of information,” then “[s]aying that ‘Murders in the Rue Morgue’ is about slave rebellions means that it is about the orangutan’s violence, yes, but also about the secrecy, the racial code, the overall hermeneutics surrounding slave insurrections.”<sup>51</sup> For White, the tale’s violence is secondary to its larger fascination with semiotic uncertainty; in this reading,

---

<sup>50</sup> Nancy A. Harrowitz, “Criminality and Poe’s Orangutan,” 189.

<sup>51</sup> Ed White, “The Ourang-Outang Situation,” 95-97.

Dupin's ability to solve the problem entails a larger belief that white intellects will always exist to counter enslaved conspiracies.

But while "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" gestures towards enslaved uprisings without specifically talking about them, Dupin's denial also erases the possibility of non-white urban dwellers. Throughout the 1820s and 1830s, African American reading communities had begun to proliferate across the urban North, and particularly in Philadelphia, Poe's home since 1838.<sup>52</sup> The same year that Poe published "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," black Philadelphian Joseph Wilson dedicated a substantial amount of his book *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored People in Philadelphia* (1841) to praising the city's black literary societies, writing that "[a]mong no people, in proportion to their means and advantages, is the pursuit of knowledge more honored than among the colored inhabitants of Philadelphia."<sup>53</sup> As if to prove this point, he goes on to describe and cataloging seven of the city's "most prominent" black literary societies, while noting the presence of several others. These societies were public enough to be mocked by white writers like Sarah Josepha Hale, whose 1853 novel *Liberia; or, Mr. Peyton's Experiments* maligns "the Philomathean Society" of Philadelphia as an instance of free blacks "wasting their time and opportunities."<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth McHenry describes the relationships between Philadelphia's literary societies, as well as those in New York and Boston, in the 1820s and 1830s in "Dreaded Eloquence: The Origins and Rise of African American Literary Societies," *Forgotten Readers*, 23-83.

<sup>53</sup> Joseph Wilson ("A Southerner"), *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Thompson, Printers, 1841), 94.

<sup>54</sup> Sarah Josepha Hale. *Liberia; or, Mr. Peyton's Experiments* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853), 83. For more on Hale's representation of black literary societies, particularly as a contrast to life in the Liberia colony, see Chapter 3 of this dissertation, "Black Readers at a Distance: The Abolitionists and the *Liberia Herald*."

It would be speculation to say that Poe either was or wasn't aware of Philadelphia's black readers, although such knowledge would align with his interest in parodying those who aspired to high literary culture in tales such as 1838's "How to Write a Blackwood Article/A Predicament." More to the point, though, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" imagines a world where such speculation would be meaningless. In crafting a world shaped by circulating texts and denying the possibility of non-white people to participate in that world, Poe actively and explicitly claims the field of the written word as the exclusive property of white Europeans.

While Dupin's claim that "neither Asiatics nor Africans abound in Paris" erases the impress of non-white actors from Paris, Poe elsewhere works to erase the stigma of racialization from his white characters, and in particular the figure of the sailor who brought the Ourang-Outang from Borneo in the first place, "a Frenchman" who sails "on a Maltese vessel" (425). Nancy Harrowitz describes the sailor's qualified French-ness as an extension of "[t]he threat of the exotic that the orangutan represents." In her reading, the ape's owner "is both French and emphatically not French, as he comes from a Maltese vessel"; moreover, because Malta successfully resisted colonization by the French, the sailor is "a figure for a kind of reverse colonization," whose presence marks the intrusion of the outside world into Poe's Paris.<sup>55</sup>

Dupin initially perceives the sailor, or at least the idea of the sailor, as a threat: after summoning the owner by publishing a classified ad claiming to have caught the ape, the detective warns the narrator to "[b]e ready... with your pistols." Those preparations seem warranted by the owner's appearance: "a tall, stout, and muscular-looking man," his

---

<sup>55</sup> Nancy Harrowitz, "Criminality and Poe's Orangutan," 190-191.

“greatly sunburnt” face “more than half hidden by a world of whisker and *mustachio*,” and carrying “a huge oaken cudgel” (426). By emphasizing his strength, his color, his hairiness, and even his capacity for violence, Poe establishes the sailor as a human counterpart to the ape, albeit one in whom the markers of foreignness stand in for the markers of animality. But the sailor defuses that apparent similarity with his first actions, “bow[ing] awkwardly” and introducing himself “in French accents, which, although somewhat Neufchatel-ish, were still sufficiently indicative of a Parisian origin” (426-27). Front-loading the “Neufchatelish” qualification prior to the assertion “of a Parisian origin,” Poe contrasts the sailor’s only partial foreignness with the incontrovertible alterity of the ape: where the latter threatens invasion, the former suggests the possibility of a reconsolidated Parisian identity in the face of such invasion.

That reconsolidation is precisely what results. While the sailor’s sunburnt and unshaven body bears the marks of the liminal oceanic spaces that separate the civilized from the savage in Poe’s tale, Dupin’s interactions with the sailor emphasize cultural proximity between the two men. While the narrator alternates between naming the character “the sailor” and “the Frenchman,” Dupin only ever uses the latter nomenclature, privileging the character’s homeland over his career. When Dupin first conceives of the sailor’s reactions, he does so via an imagined first-person narrative within his third-person monologue: “He will reason thus:--‘I am innocent; I am poor; my Ourang-Outang is of great value—to one in my circumstances a fortune of itself—why should I lose it through idle apprehensions of danger?’” (426). And when Dupin finally confronts the man with knowledge of the crime, he does so (“in a kind tone”) by constantly denying the man’s criminality:

We mean you no harm whatever. I pledge you the honor of a gentleman, and of a Frenchman, that we intend you no injury. I perfectly well know that you are innocent of the atrocities in the Rue Morgue. It will not do, however, to deny that you are in some measure implicated in them... Now the thing stands thus. You have done nothing which you could have avoided—nothing, certainly, which renders you culpable. You were not even guilty of robbery, when you might have robbed with impunity. You have nothing to conceal. You have no reason for concealment. (427-428)

In contrast to the earlier scene in which Dupin identified the Ourang-Outang via a series of negations (“no *human* hair,” “no human hand”), the detective now uses the same structure to negate the possibility of criminality, asserting that he has “done nothing,” is “not even guilty,” has “nothing to conceal.” To the extent that the sailor faces any danger, Dupin implies, it lies only the possibility that his agency could be tied to that of the ape. By asserting the distinction between being “implicated in” the crime, and “culpable [for]” the same, Dupin once again promises to rescue humanity from being confused with animality.

Significantly, the process of affirming the Frenchman’s innocence in the matter begins with another circulating text: the classified ad that invites the unlucky sailor to Dupin’s parlor. In many ways, the ad echoes the “passage from Cuvier” that preceded it: produced by Dupin seemingly out of nowhere to reveal the identity of the accused, even the passage’s language (“*a very large tawny Ourang-Outang of the Borneese species*”) echoes the narrator’s summary of Cuvier (“the large fulvous Ourang-Outang of the East Indian Islands”). But by responding to the ad—which is to say, by demonstrating his ability to understand the ad, even if he’s unable to perceive the truth behind it—the sailor implicitly demonstrates his ability to be recuperated into the social landscape of the tale.

My point is not that reading alone is the sole characteristic that sets the sailor apart from the Ourang-Outang, any more than I’m saying that the Ourang-Outang’s

presumed inability to read is the sole thing that makes it a threat to Poe's Parisian society. But I am arguing that reading is the precondition that makes those differences visible, and in turn that the positive characteristics with which Poe imbues the sailor—his sorrow, his “presence of mind,” and his desire to “make a clean breast if I die for it”—appear in the tale as a function of his ability to read. Prior to the sailor's introduction, Poe's tale seeks to generate a hierarchical reading public that bridges fictional and real readers. Dupin's response to the sailor models the possibility for that hierarchy to incorporate variations in class and social status between white readers, even as Dupin's earlier denial that “neither Asiatics nor Africans abound in Paris” suggests the racial divisions between readers that Poe is unable or unwilling to imagine.

Poe's later tales continue to develop the two roles that shape “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” the detective as curator and the Ourang-Outang as the inhuman Other. In Dupin's later adventures, circulating texts are either completely available or completely opaque. In “The Mystery of Marie Roget” (1842), Poe's citational practices reach new extremes, as he transcribes real New York newspaper articles nearly verbatim, changing only the names and locations within in order to reflect Dupin's Paris. In “The Purloined Letter” (1844), in contrast, Poe doubles down on his elision of Cuvier by imagining a text, the titular letter, whose contents are so implicitly obvious to the tale's characters as to render the letter itself virtually unreadable. That combination of symbolic meaning and literal illegibility informs the tale's popularity in psychoanalytic, deconstructionist, and feminist criticism—most notably the famous debate between Jacques Lacan, Jacques

Derrida, and Barbara Johnson about the letter's semiotic significance.<sup>56</sup> In these later stories, Poe further nuances and challenges the ways that circulating texts condition readers to relate to one another within the hierarchy established by "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," the earlier tale having already demarcated the limits of that hierarchy.

Meanwhile, Poe's "Ape Tales" (as John Bryant calls them) delve deeper into the Ourang-Outang as a figure whose alternating human/animal status speaks to a larger confusion about the distinctions between master and captives. In "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether" (1845), a narrator fails to detect that the French asylum he's visiting has been taken over by its inmates; when the keepers who have been tarred and feathered finally escape, Poe's foolish narrator mistakes them for a riot of "Chimpanzees, Ourang-Outangs, or big black baboons of the Cape of Good Hope."<sup>57</sup> And "Hop-Frog" (1849), one of Poe's final works and the closest approximation to an antislavery tale in his oeuvre, recasts the events of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" into a fable about abusive authorities. When a cruel European king strikes Trippetta, an enslaved girl "from some barbarous region," her friend Hop-Frog—a jester from the same country who resembles "a small monkey"—convinces the king and his seven ministers to disguise themselves for a masquerade by dressing up, in tar and flax, as "Eight Chained Ourang-Outangs." At the party, Hop-Frog hooks their chains to a chandelier hook and plays the role of the detective, announcing to the crowd, "I shall soon find out who they are!" As

---

<sup>56</sup> Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on the Purloined Letter," trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, in "French Freud: Structural Studies in Psychoanalysis," *Yale French Studies* 48 (1972): 38-72; Jacques Derrida, "The Purveyor of Truth," trans. Willis Domingo, in "Graphesis: Perspectives in Literature and Philosophy," *Yale French Studies* 52 (1975): 31-113; Barbara Johnson, "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida," in "Literature and Psychoanalysis/The Question of Reading: Otherwise," *Yale French Studies* 55-56 (1977): 457-505.

<sup>57</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, 716.

he reveals their identity (“a king who does not scruple to strike a defenseless girl, and his seven councillors who abet him in the outrage”), Hop-Frog sets the ‘Ourang-Outangs’ on fire; he and Trippetta escape out a skylight in the panic, leaving behind only “a fetid, blackened, hideous, and indistinguishable mass.”<sup>58</sup> In these tales’ visions of enslaved captives rising up against would-be masters, Poe plays on the Ourang-Outang’s status as a figure that blurs the lines between human and animal by presenting the ape as a status that can be imposed—willingly or not—upon other humans.<sup>59</sup>

Each of these story sets follow the trajectory of different figures and concerns that emerge from “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”: the Dupin tales use the detective to continue examining how circulating texts structure social relationships between readers, while the Ape tales use the figure of the Ourang-Outang to continue exploring the relationship between social authorities and social outsiders at moments of intense upheaval. Only in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” though, are those two figures

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 900, 907-8.

<sup>59</sup> A number of authors have called attention to the trajectory of the Ourang-Outang in Poe’s tale, and in particular to the relationship between “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “Hop-Frog.” In particular, John Bryant argues that Poe’s “Ape Tales” present the Ourang-Outang as a comic figure, in which Poe not only “thwart[s] the comic rituals and symbols of his culture,” but moreover “allow[s] the inherent integrative focus of the rituals of humor and the symbolism of the Ape to bend him away from satire toward a self-exposing but self-redeeming sense of humor.” “Poe’s Ape of UnReason,” 20-21. John Carlos Rowe proposes that “[i]n ‘Hop-Frog,’ this overt racism [of ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’] is more subtly shifted to incorporate false authority,” a construction that locates “Hop-Frog” as an expansion of the earlier tale’s authoritarian tendencies to reflect Poe’s growing distrust of cultural authorities. “Poe’s Imperial Fantasy,” in *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*, edited by J. Gerald Kennedy and Liliane Weissberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 75-105, 99. Paul Christian Jones reads “Hop-Frog” as a satire of anti-slavery writing that builds sympathy with the enslaved character in order to “illustrate the dangers of the abolitionist rhetoric about slavery”; in this reading, both tales reflect the generalized “fears of a racial other.” “The Danger of Sympathy: Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘Hop-Frog’ and the Abolitionist Rhetoric of Pathos,” *Journal of American Studies* 35, no. 2 (August 2001): 239-254, 240.



explicitly in dialogue with one another. Throughout the tale, Poe imagines the ways that reading—or at least, properly guided and curated practices of reading—can mediate the threat of violent change, precisely by teaching readers to recognize the difference between internal threats (human criminality) and external threats (animal brutality). But his use of natural history and explicit denial of non-white humans in his story also encourages readers to understand the distinction between human and animal in terms of the relationship between implicitly white readers and explicitly racialized Others. For Poe, I have argued, the rise of mass circulation suggested that shared texts could be a new tool to police the boundaries of white society against the threat of the racial other. But in my next chapter, I read Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee* (1836) alongside the rise of abolitionist printing to show how other writers came to believe that mass circulation could subvert those boundaries precisely by generating new types of readers.

## Chapter 2: “Sendary Papers”: The Anti-Slavery Pamphlet and the Composite Reader in *Sheppard Lee*

The flippancy with which certain writers and speakers of the present day use this term, is indeed laughable. One might suppose, from the manner of their expression, that the pens of the “abolitionists” are surcharged with gunpowder, and the paper on which they write and print is made of loco-foco matches!

**Anon.**

**“Incendiary Publications” (1835)**

“Yes!” cried another, who had but one eye, “I have read all about him: he lives in Boston, keeps a niggur school, and prints sendary papers, a hundred thousand at a time, to set niggurs insurrecting.”

**Robert Montgomery Bird**

***Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself* (1836)**

By the time he wrote and published *Sheppard Lee* in 1836, Robert Montgomery Bird was already well aware of how texts could work beyond their author’s goals. Five years earlier Bird had premiered *The Gladiator*, a dramatization of Spartacus’ famous rebellion, on September 26, 1831; only a month earlier, Nat Turner had led an army of enslaved Africans in search of freedom through Virginia’s Southampton County. This inadvertent confluence—a play about the most famous classical slave rebellion coinciding with the bloodiest uprising in the history of American slavery—did nothing to prevent *The Gladiator* from becoming one of the most celebrated plays of its time. It may have even helped cement the play’s legacy: in a retrospective review from 1846, Walt Whitman made the matter-of-fact statement that “This play is as full of ‘Abolitionism’ as an egg is of meat.”<sup>1</sup> But while Bird had his doubts about slavery, he was no abolitionist,

---

<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman, “December 26, 1846. ‘The Gladiator’—Mr. Forrest—Acting,” in *The Gathering of the Forces*, eds. Cleveland Rodgers and John Black (New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1920), 331.

and his diary entries at the time were concerned less with the righteousness of Turner's rebels than with the inadvertent consequences of this coincidence: "If *The Gladiator* were produced in a slave state, the managers, players, and perhaps myself into the bargain, would be rewarded with the Penitentiary! Happy States!"<sup>2</sup> This history suggests one possible reason why *Sheppard Lee* is so concerned with the difficulty of controlling circulating texts, as well as one possible reason why, despite his rising fame as a dramatist and adventure novelist, Bird declined to attach his name to the provocative social satire. The novel was published anonymously in August 1836, with its full title providing the only notice of authorship: *Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself*.

So when the Boston *Saturday Morning Transcript* ran a short excerpt from the novel under the title "Massacre at Ridgewood Hill by the Negroes" and described it as being "Related by a Slave," that may very well have been the best attribution possible.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Richard Harris. "A Young Dramatist's Diary: *The Secret Records* of R. M. Bird." *Library Chronicle* 25, no. 1. (Winter 1959): 8-24, 16-17. Bird's diary details his mistrust of slavery, which he views as a form of violence, as well as his dislike of black Americans: "At this present moment there are 6 or 800 armed negroes marching through Southampton County, Virginia, murdering, ravishing, and burning those whom the Grace of God has made their owners—70 killed, principally women and children. If they had but a Spartacus among them—to organize the half million of Virginia, the hundreds of thousands of the states, and lead them on in the Crusade of Massacre, what a blessed example might they not give to the world of the excellence of slavery! What a field of interest to the playwrights of posterity! Some day we shall have it, and future generations will perhaps remember the horrors of Haiti as a farce compared with the tragedies of our own happy land! The *vis et amor sceleratus habendi* [*Force, and the base love of gain*"] will be repaid, violence with violence, and avarice with blood. I had sooner live among bedbugs than negroes" (16-17).

<sup>3</sup> The weekly counterpart to the *Daily Evening Transcript*, the *Saturday Morning Transcript* sought to provide news and entertainment to a wider audience—and at a lower price than its more expensive counterparts—and like many cheap papers, the *Transcript* made no secret of relying on reprinted material from other sources. For more on the rise of cheap newspapers, see Susan Thomson, *The Penny Press: The Origins of the Modern News Media, 1833-1861* (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2004); James Croutham, *Bennett's New York Herald and the Rise of the Popular Press* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse

The article acknowledges its source at the end—“[Extract from ‘Sheppard Lee’]”—but further clarification would go beyond the scope of the *Transcript*’s reprinting, which presents the scene as a typical instance of a slave “Massacre.” In the extract, a slave uprising similar to Nat Turner’s erupts at the fictional Ridgewood Hill plantation in Virginia. The revolution begins with fire when the enslaved Governor, the leader of the rebels, transforms into a “devil incarnate”: “he was so bold, cunning, and eager for blood, to fire the pile of timber where it stood near the quarters, or negro huts; the burning of which would serve the double purpose of drawing our intended victims from the house, and giving the signal to the neighboring estates.” Governor’s master is killed in the fray, as are his son-in-law and overseer; his children disappear into the chaos. Meanwhile, the flames confine themselves to the slave quarters—but their light, “equal to that of noon, though red as blood itself,” soon covers the entire melee. Through this hellish light, the narrator can see all the way to the roof of the big house, where Governor has chased his master’s daughters, Isabella and Edith. Before the narrator’s eyes, the sisters leap one after the other from the observatory “to escape by death a fate otherwise inevitable.”<sup>4</sup>

The threat of murder and the unspeakable specter of rape go hand in hand with the description of Governor as “eager for blood”: appetites rule the day. But the inferno, which casts its glow over the entire passage, seems less a force of consumption than a means of illumination. The fire destroys only the slave cabins, symbols that are to be rendered obsolete by the revolution that ensues; but the *firelight*, in contrast, becomes the dominant symbol of the rebellion as a brutal parody of enlightenment. It simultaneously

---

University Press, 1989). For more on the history of reprinting in the popular press, see Meredith McGill, *The Culture of Reprinting* (2003).

<sup>4</sup> “MASSACRE AT RIDGEWOOD HILL BY THE NEGROES [Related by a Slave]” *Saturday Morning Transcript* (Boston), September 10, 1836.

lures white slave owners to their deaths and invites other would-be rebels to the slaughter, becoming a beacon to two very different audiences at the onset of one brutal uprising. Fire in this instance is dangerous not because of what it can destroy, but because of what it can make visible: the ways that the geography of plantation slavery establishes a dangerous proximity between the very black and white subjects it seeks to hierarchize. The flames are both a metonym of revolutionary action *and* a communications technology: a form of address or summoning that seems inseparable from the violence it calls forth. In the face of the inferno, two groups defined in distinction to one another—slaves and slave owners, insurgents and authorities—become readers of the same sign.

In its excerpted form, “Massacre at Ridgewood Hill” makes its point clearly: rebellion, like fire, cannot be seen until it is too late. But as with Dupin’s selective use of Cuvier in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” that clarity is only possible as a result of careful curation. The article begins just prior to the commencement of violence: “The hour [was] drawing nigh at which they had appointed to strike the first blow.” As a result of this framing, the two key conditions of revolution in the novel disappear from the extract’s field of vision. The first is the material origins of discontent on the plantation; the second is the troubling subject position of the “Slave” who relates it.

In “Massacre at Ridgewood Hill by the Negroes,” Governor literally ignites the fire that illuminates the downfall of the plantation. But in the full text of *Sheppard Lee*, the leader of the enslaved is himself little more than kindling for an “incendiary publication.” Prior to the revolution, an anti-slavery pamphlet entitled “An Address to the Owners of Slaves” appears at the margins of the otherwise idyllic Ridgewood Hill plantation. In a comic aside, the narrator claims that the text “was not one of those

incendiary publications of which so much is said, as being designed for the eyes of slaves themselves, to exasperate them to revolt”—but events on the plantation quickly prove him wrong in denying its inflammatory potential.<sup>5</sup>

The pamphlet first appears among the “boards and scantling” of a docked ship, an uncanny prefiguring of the woodpile Governor will later ignite to start the rebellion (352). And like that fire, which casts its light from the slave quarters to the big house, the pamphlet’s influence quickly spreads throughout the plantation:

My companions began to talk of violence and dream of blood. A week before there was not one of them who would not have risked his life to save his master’s; the scene was now changed—my master walked daily, though without knowing it, among volcanoes; all looked upon him askant, and muttered curses as he passed. A kinder-hearted man and easier master never lived; and it may seem incredible that he should be hated without any real cause. Imaginary causes are, however, always the most efficacious in exciting jealousy and hatred. In affairs of the affections, slaves and the members of political factions are equally unreasonable. The only difference in the effect is, that the one cannot, while the other can, and *does* change his masters when his whim changes. (357)

Bird’s analogy of slaves to volcanoes suggests a popular anti-slavery rhetoric that presented rebellion as a natural phenomenon, the inevitable apocalyptic response to the national sin of chattel slavery.<sup>6</sup> But the analogy could also serve a pro-slavery purpose:

---

<sup>5</sup> Robert Montgomery Bird, *Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself* (New York: New York Review Books, 2008), 362, 349. All subsequent citations in text.

<sup>6</sup> Writing in *The Liberator*, for instance, William Lloyd Garrison described the Nat Turner rebellion as “[t]he first step of the earthquake,” “the prelude to a deluge from the gathering clouds,” and “[t]he first flash of the lightning, which is to smite and consume.” “*The Liberator*: September 3, 1831,” in Turner and Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 69. The specific trope of analogizing slave resurrections as volcanoes persisted well beyond Bird. Maggie Montesinos Sale writes about the history of “the slumbering volcano” as a way of categorizing the unease and inevitability of anti-slavery action in both Frederick Douglass’ *The Heroic Slave* (1853) and Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* (1855). For more, see Maggie Montesinos Sale, “*Benito Cereno* (1855) and the Slumbering Volcano,” in *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 146-172.

by suggesting a lack of intelligent agency, it dissociates slave rebellions from historical analogues like the American Revolution. For Bird, the yet-to-erupt volcanoes of discontent are simply an extension of the incendiary pamphlet: a volatile analogy waiting to be made literal. But as the passage continues, the volcanoes transform into “members of political factions.” The incorporation of party politics into the scene of slave rebellion carries with it a different type of equivocation. Far from the naturalized logic of volcanic eruption, Bird now points to insurrection as a type of willful (if unreasoning) political agency—and one that begins to break down the distinctions between enslaved Africans and free white Americans.

That distinction is precisely what is at stake in the scene’s attribution to “a Slave.” In *Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself*, the title character is indeed a slave, but that is only one of many roles he plays. In fact, the title character and “Author” of *Sheppard Lee* begins the novel as a white New Jersey farmer and slaveholder, and remains one until his untimely death at the end of Book I. Far from concluding Sheppard Lee’s adventures, his death multiplies them, as Bird uses metempsychosis—the transmigration of a spirit to a new body at the time of death—to imagine a macabre variation on the picaresque.<sup>7</sup> Each subsequent episode finds Lee’s disembodied spirit possessing a different (recently deceased) body, the original inhabitant of which fits into a neatly established American type. Each transposition inverts the problems of the previous identity. Book II grants Lee

---

<sup>7</sup> Bird’s use of metempsychosis in *Sheppard Lee* suggests a lingering debt to 18<sup>th</sup>-century novels of circulation, or it-narratives. These texts followed objects, or humans who were transformed into “things,” as they circulated between owners. Jonathan Lamb identifies metempsychosis as one form of circulation in it-narratives, as characters become spirits that circulate between different bodies. Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 217-20. This chapter will demonstrate the way that Sheppard Lee’s status as a circulating object reflects a larger anxiety about textual circulation at play in Bird’s novel.

the body of a wealthy man desperate to escape his wife; in Book III, Lee occupies the role (and corpse) of an impoverished dandy in search of bride and dowry; and so on, until Book VI, the source of “Massacre at Ridgewood Hill,” which finds Lee on a Virginia plantation in the body of Tom, an enslaved black man. The “Slave” who ‘relates’ the massacre, in other words, is also a slaveholder, peer to both the perpetrators and victims of the uprising. More than that, he is responsible for reading the pamphlet aloud to Governor and his fellows; he is not only the narrator of the rebellion, but also its cause.

By attributing the scene to “a Slave,” the *Transcript* tries to present Sheppard Lee as a representative black slave. Where this excerpt avoids addressing the complexity of the narrator, however, this collapse of Lee’s voice into Tom’s only expands on the logic of the novel itself. While Bird’s novel suggests that a man can turn into a slave through a protracted and fantastic set of magical circumstances, the *Transcript* suggests that a white narrator can turn into “a Slave” as a result of the formal demands of recirculation and reprinting.

I don’t open on the *Transcript* excerpt in order to ask whether or not Sheppard Lee is a slave, but rather to suggest that the excerpt’s twin attributions (“Related by a Slave” and “Extract from ‘Sheppard Lee’”) embody the ontological uncertainty of racial identity in *Sheppard Lee*—and, more importantly, the extent to which that uncertainty results from the imagined relationship between revolutionary action, narratorial agency, and black literacy. The question of who is speaking and who is acting in this episode ties back to the disruptive and “incendiary” nature of the abolitionist pamphlet. Critics have studied the way that the pamphlet in *Sheppard Lee* responds to a pre-existing discourse of anti-slavery writing, as well as the ways that Lee’s presence in Tom’s body destabilizes



ideas of fixed racial difference in the antebellum period.<sup>8</sup> In this chapter, I show how these two facets of *Sheppard Lee* are intertwined in the novel's narrative of rebellion: the same process of reading catalyzes both the mutation of Ridgewood Hill from a plantation idyll into a scene of bloody revolution and the merging of Lee and Tom into a composite figure. In order to emphasize the odd hybridity of this character, I invoke the recent critical naming convention of "Lee-as-Tom"—a useful construction that simultaneously conjoins and distinguishes the figure's two identities.<sup>9</sup> Seemingly summoned by the abolitionist tract to enact its will, Lee-as-Tom draws on a larger antebellum anxiety about the power of reading and literacy to redraw the boundaries of racial difference in an age of mass print.

This anxiety was particularly centered around the idea that abolitionist publications were incendiary texts—or, as one poor white Southerner describes them in

---

<sup>8</sup> Readings of the role of print media in *Sheppard Lee* can be found in Jordan Alexander Stein, "The Whig Interpretation of Media: *Sheppard Lee* and Jacksonian Paperwork," *History of the Present* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 29-56. For readings of race and racial interiority as they relate to a variety of popular discourses in *Sheppard Lee*, see Christopher Looby's introduction to *Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself* (2008); Samuel Otter's "Philadelphia Metempsychosis in *Sheppard Lee*" from *Philadelphia Stories* (2010); Justine Murison's "A bond-slave to the mind: sympathy and hypochondria in Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee*" in *The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 17-46; D. Berton Emerson's "'This is a strange book': Re-Membering Local Democratic Agency in Bird's *Sheppard Lee*," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 61, no. 2 (2015): 241-261; Lori Leavell, "'Not intended exclusively for the slave states': Antebellum Recirculation of David Walker's *Appeal*," *Callaloo* 3, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 679-695; and Mathew Rebhorn's "Ontological Drift: Medical Discourse and Racial Embodiment in Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee*," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 61, no. 2 (2015): 262-296.

<sup>9</sup> Maurice S. Lee first uses "Lee-as-Tom" in "Absolute Poe" in *Slavery, Philosophy, and American Literature, 1830-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 26. Since then, the name has been used in Samuel Otter's *Philadelphia Stories* (2010), Justine Murison's *Politics of Anxiety* (2011), and D. Berton Emerson's "Re-Membering Local Democratic Agency" (2015).

the novel, “sendary papers.” Bird offers this mispronunciation of “incendiary papers” through dialect to mock the ways that political discourse can be taken up by less educated or less literate members of society. But it also reveals the ways that incendiary publications exist not as a stable genre, but rather as a rhetorical category available to be imposed upon material texts. By changing “incendiary papers” to “sendary papers,” Bird emphasizes the syllable “send” contained within “incendiary”—a pun that locates circulation literally at the core of the threat of violent revolution. The distinction between abolitionist pamphlets and incendiary (or ‘sendary’) papers is that between a material text and its rhetorical figuration: the distinction, in short, between referent and reference. To the extent that the two cannot be easily separated in the 1820s and 1830s, it is not because they signify the same thing, but rather because any abolitionist writing that circulated in the American South was shadowed by the figure of the incendiary publication.

As such, this chapter reads the abolitionist pamphlet and the incendiary publication alike as different ways of thinking about and responding to shared texts. In my previous chapter, I showed how Edgar Allan Poe put forth the idea that certain circulating texts, carefully and selectively shared between readers of varying skills, could be a tool to organize and regulate a white reading public. In this chapter, I examine the other side of that idea: the fear that the wrong kind of texts, distributed freely to the wrong readers, could lead to the downfall of white society. This chapter considers the abolitionist print pamphlet as a shared text not only in its initial circulation and dissemination throughout the South, but also—and perhaps more importantly—in its *figuration* in both political literature and fiction as a shared text, with the contingent dangers to pro-slavery interests and to binary accounts of racial difference.

The rise of abolitionist print circulation in the 1820s and 1830s marked a turning point for representations of black literacy in antebellum culture. Early black readers and writers such as Phillis Wheatley and George Moses Horton attained social prominence as individuals, but as white Americans came to fear the ways that enslaved readers might respond to antislavery texts, they also had to reckon with the implications of an emerging black reading public. Reading *Sheppard Lee* in the context of the larger antebellum discourse surrounding incendiary texts, I argue that Bird's narrator embodies (quite literally) a widespread fear among Americans that the circulation of antislavery printed matter would bring black and white Americans together in new and troubling ways.

Scholarly accounts of abolitionist pamphlets have tended to work in one of two ways: either examining the popular belief that incendiary texts would catalyze slave uprisings or situating antislavery writing within the larger antebellum discourse of sentimentality.<sup>10</sup> Taken as a whole, these approaches suggest two separate narratives: either sentimental appeals nurtured sympathies in white readers *or* incendiary texts stoked insurrection among black slaves. But as I will show, antebellum anxieties over incendiary texts stemmed in large part from the epistemological challenge of situating

---

<sup>10</sup> A few key studies of the reception of abolitionist writing as incendiary include Herbert Aptheker, *"One Continual Cry": David Walker's Appeal* (New York: A.I.M.S. by Humanities Press, 1965); Leonard Richards, *"Gentlemen of Property and Standing": Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Hasan Crockett, "The Incendiary Pamphlet: David Walker's *Appeal* in Georgia," in *The Journal of Negro History* 86, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 305-318; and Lori Leavell, "Antebellum Recirculation" (2015). Two recent essays on sentimentality in antislavery print show how abolitionists deployed familiar visual and literary tropes to engage the sympathies of free white readers: Radclani Clytus, "'Keep It Before the People': The Pictorialization of American Abolitionism," in *Early African American Print Culture*, 290-317; Teresa A. Goddu, "U.S. Antislavery Tracts and the Literary Imagination," in *The Cambridge Companion to Slavery in American Literature*, ed. Ezra Tawil (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 32-54.

enslaved black and free white audiences in relation to each other. Critics of incendiary texts didn't just fear enslaved readers; they feared that free black and enslaved readers were surreptitiously encountering the same texts as white readers. Antislavery pamphlets demonstrated that mass circulation could cut across racial boundaries, compelling writers to reframe the relationships between white and black subjects in terms of shared experiences of reading-in-common.

As a figure, Lee-as-Tom articulates the contradictions underlying the idea of incendiary writing, an idea that raised new questions about how individuals participated simultaneously in national reading publics and collective racial categories. The mass circulation of abolitionist writing challenged Americans' belief that printed texts could have a reliable addressee, and as a result unsettled the idea of a stable reading public. Michael Warner encourages us to see "a public" as "a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself." For Warner, a public "exists *by virtue of being addressed*" by the discourse that organizes it."<sup>11</sup> Taken broadly, early nineteenth-century abolitionist print assembled a public out of the predominantly white reading audience to whom most antislavery texts were addressed. But the debates over incendiary texts indicate that many white Americans had grave doubts about who, if anybody, was in fact the intended addressee of abolitionist writing. White Americans in the 1820s and 1830s negotiated a dynamic and troubling sense of the public sphere as it expanded to include—or rather revealed itself to have already included—an enslaved reading class of unknown proportions. In a world where the circulation of antislavery writing promised to link free white and enslaved black Americans with little regard for the systems of racial hierarchy

---

<sup>11</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 67.

that worked to separate those groups, Lee-as-Tom suggests the distillation of that multivalent public into a single individual: the composite reader who is black and white, slave and master, literate and illiterate at once.

In order to understand what *Sheppard Lee* can tell us about how abolitionist writing functioned as shared texts, we must first understand the emerging rhetoric of incendiary writing throughout the 1820s and 1830s. As proponents of slavery increasingly feared the psychological impact of antislavery print on slaves and slave-owners alike, they also imagined new types of social and cultural proximity between free white and enslaved black readers. Lee-as-Tom gives a literal body to this paradigm, as Bird's efforts to separate Tom's experiences as a black man and Lee's voice as a white narrator fall apart at the moment of reading. *Sheppard Lee* reveals how the transgressive circulation of abolitionist pamphlets forced white writers to redefine their understanding of a text's reading public—and to reimagine the connections between race and reading.

### **“Deranged from apprehension”: Imagining Abolitionist Print**

When Lee-as-Tom first reads the pamphlet's title, he naïvely takes it at its word: “[the pamphlet] was entitled ‘An Address to the Owners of Slaves,’ and could not, therefore, be classed among those ‘incendiary publications’ which certain over-zealous philanthropists are accused of sending among slaves themselves, to inflame them into insurrection and murder” (352). The implicit question of intention is misleading: whatever the author meant to accomplish, the pamphlet still triggers a revolt. But Lee's reference to “those” texts demonstrates that by 1836, American readers understood the term “incendiary publications” to refer to antislavery texts that were intentionally

directed to black slaves. To see the significance of that label, though, we must decouple the incendiary publication—understood as a rhetorical figure—from the material texts to which it referred. Examining several moments when abolitionist writing was either treated as or labeled “incendiary” will show how the idea of the incendiary text encompassed a larger set of anxieties about how mass print circulation could erase individual agency and racial identity.

When critics described antislavery writing as “incendiary,” they invoked a familiar term from earlier political controversies. In *The American Crisis* (1777), for instance, Thomas Paine describes an “incendiary publication” circulated by Quaker loyalists during the American Revolution. Paine was concerned about a pamphlet, signed “John Pemberton,” that encouraged its readers to refuse support to the fledgling revolution—a position Paine believed to be “evidently intended to promote sedition and treason, and encourage the enemy, who were then within a day’s march of this city, to proceed on and possess it.”<sup>12</sup> An incendiary publication, in other words, could not only reach and be read by “the enemy,” but could also transform neutral parties—or even allies—into enemies themselves. Such a text threatens to unsettle those who read it, warping personal politics and undermining individual agency. The idea of incendiary texts attests to the power of reading to transform its readers, and, as a necessary corollary, to the vulnerability of those readers’ wills.

This concept appealed to anti-abolitionist writers in the 1820s and 1830s, a period when the increasing production of antislavery printed material coincided with a rise in high profile slave insurrections—a period beginning in many ways with Denmark

---

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Paine, “*The American Crisis* Number III” (1777), in *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Library of America, 1995), 135.

Vesey's unsuccessful revolution. In 1822, city officials in Charleston, South Carolina, uncovered evidence of an imminent uprising among the city's enslaved population; that evidence ultimately pointed back to freeman Denmark Vesey. In a widely reprinted circular, South Carolina governor Thomas Bennett blamed the plot in part on "the seditious pamphlets brought into this state, by equally culpable incendiaries."<sup>13</sup> In an important distinction, Bennett doesn't label the pamphlets as themselves incendiary, but rather uses the term to compare those who circulate such materials to arsonists. For Bennett, at least, the power of a text lies in the uses others make of it, and is not immanent in the text itself—a distinction that insists on the responsibility of all involved parties.

But the trials following Denmark Vesey's insurrection suggested another possibility: that antislavery texts could actually supplant the agency of their audience. In his testimony, enslaved defendant Jack Purcell describes Vesey's efforts to convert the enslaved to his cause by reading antislavery texts aloud. Purcell blames Vesey for his predicament, but he also encourages his accusers to view his role in the conspiracy as the direct result of simply having been read to:

If it had not been for that old villain Vesey, I should not be in my present situation. He employed every stratagem to induce me to join him. He was in the habit of reading to me all the passages in the newspapers that related to St. Domingo, and apparently every pamphlet he could lay his hands on, that had any connexion with slavery. He one day brought me a speech which he told me had been delivered by a *Mr. King* on the subject of slavery; he told me this Mr. King was the black man's friend, that he, Mr. King, had declared he would continue to speak, write, and publish pamphlets against slavery the longest day he lived, until the Southern

---

<sup>13</sup> Among other papers, Bennet's circular ran in the *Charleston Courier* (Charleston, SC), Aug. 23, 1822; *Niles' Weekly Register* (Baltimore, MD), Sep. 7, 1822; and the *Alexandria Herald* (Alexandria, VA), Aug. 28, 1822.

states consented to emancipate their slaves, for that slavery was a great disgrace to the country.<sup>14</sup>

Purcell places himself at the center of a larger network of print circulation, one in which news from Haiti and abolitionist speeches from Massachusetts senator Rufus King alike are transmitted by free abolitionists like Vesey to vulnerable slaves.<sup>15</sup> In the process, Purcell consciously performs his own innocence by invoking his own illiteracy to offload the crime of insurrection from his own person onto the texts themselves.<sup>16</sup> Printed matter becomes the medium through which Vesey's will supplants Purcell's, even as the defendant insinuates that Vesey himself might be serving the will of distant abolitionists like "Mr. King." Purcell theorizes reading as a form of possession that links minds and bodies across geographic and social boundaries.

This theory failed to save Purcell from the gallows, but it persisted in the writing of one of the men who ultimately sentenced him to death. In 1827, five years after serving as a judge in the Vesey trials, Robert James Turnbull (under the pseudonym "Brutus") published *The Crisis; Or, Essays on the Usurpations of the Federal*

---

<sup>14</sup> James Hamilton, *Negro Plot. An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection Among a Portion of the Blacks of the City of Charleston, South Carolina*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Boston: J. W. Ingraham, 1822), 45-46.

<sup>15</sup> Rufus King was a frequent target of pro-slavery activists, thanks to his opposition to both the Three-Fifths Compromise and the Missouri Compromise. See Robert Ernst, *Rufus King: American Federalist* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968).

<sup>16</sup> Caleb Smith cautions against the temptation "to view popular legal literature as a precious archive, preserving the elusive voices of the excluded and the dispossessed," arguing that such testimony must instead be read as a complex interplay between the criminalized subject and an adjudicating audience eager to find the source of a crime: "Especially in the context of a criminal trial, where the prosecution's task is to demonstrate the defendant's mental and spiritual responsibility for a transgression, the condemned seeks ways out of the bind of subjection." Caleb Smith, *The Oracle and the Curse: A Poetics of Justice from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 21-22.



*Government*, a combination of new writing and material he had written for the *Charleston Mercury* earlier that year. The “Crisis” of the title refers to the infringement of Northern antislavery beliefs on federal governance: “Must [South Carolina’s] Representatives stand by, and see Committees from Abolition and Negro Societies, crowding the lobbies of the House, soliciting and provoking the discussion of subjects, which, to us, in these States, will be productive of evils, which language is inadequate to describe?”<sup>17</sup> Turnbull describes a chaotic ideological geography. Pro-slavery representatives from South Carolina travel North to Congress only to be beset by abolitionists; those abolitionists’ speeches then flow back from “the lobbies of the House” to “these [Southern] States” where they produce nameless “evils.” (Turnbull likely wrote these lines with Senator Rufus King specifically in mind.) The mobility of antislavery language relies on speeches being printed and physically circulated, but *The Crisis* elides that materiality in order to blur the difference between spoken rhetoric and circulating text: a speech before Congress *is* also a speech to the South. In a world where printed orations make spoken language mobile and mass-consumable, Turnbull insinuates that public speech cannot be reliably directed to a single audience.

But Turnbull was not just concerned with the impact of abolitionist writing on enslaved peoples, noting that slave-owners also encountered antislavery print. The American Colonization Society (or ACS), which sought to relocate freed slaves to the Liberia colony, particularly irked Turnbull. The ACS didn’t explicitly seek to end slavery (many of its supporters owned slaves and viewed colonization as an effective way to limit

---

<sup>17</sup> Robert James Turnbull (Brutus), *The Crisis: Or, Essays on the Usurpations of the Federal Government* (Charleston: A. E. Miller, 1827), 23. All subsequent citations in text.

America's free black population), but Turnbull nevertheless saw the ACS as "but another name for an *Abolition Society*" (122).<sup>18</sup> He particularly maligns its monthly publication, the *African Repository*:

It is in this periodical, that are constantly disseminated *the sentiments which are to make the slave dissatisfied with his condition, and the master doubtful, whether we ought to hold in subjection his slave*. It is here that we have essays, in which the system of servitude is pourtrayed [sic] in colors the most frightful and disgusting. It is this journal in which the tales are to be told, and the anecdotes related, of the cruelty of owners to their slaves. And it is here again, that are recorded the examples of those silly mortals who sacrificed their wealth upon the altars of a moral enthusiasm; who think they aggrandize their country by manumitting their slaves, and thus letting loose beings, neither fitted by education or by habit for freedom, and who must be a walking pestilence wherever they go. It is in this journal, that are constantly expressed, those mischievous forebodings, 'that the time must come when the oppressed shall rise against the oppressor with a desolating vengeance.' (125, *emphasis mine*)

Turnbull certainly had Vesey's insurrection in mind when he described "the sentiments which are to make the slave dissatisfied with his condition." But this passage introduces a new wrinkle to this problem by suggesting that slave-owners, along with slaves, can be corrupted or taken over by abolitionist propaganda. While narratives of slave revolution locate the white body as susceptible to physical violence, Turnbull positions white minds as equally vulnerable to the "moral enthusiasm" of abolitionism.

This passage does not stick to one danger or the other—either the corruption of the enslaved or the slaveholder—but instead vacillates between the two. Turnbull begins by describing the danger to the slave (dissatisfaction), then to the master (doubt or guilt), all the while implying that a threat to one group also harms the other. Slave

---

<sup>18</sup> Turnbull's view of the American Colonization Society as an 'Abolition Society' was far from universal; as I will explore in my next chapter, many prominent abolitionists (most notably William Lloyd Garrison and his followers) strongly opposed both the ACS and the colonization project more generally. For more on the ACS's complex ideological position, see Beverly C. Tomek, *Colonization and Its Discontents* (2011).

dissatisfaction leads to violence against the master; the master's guilt leads to freeing the unprepared slave. Turnbull's rhetoric demonstrates a profound inability to separate the dangers to the enslaved from the dangers to the master, both of whom experience an involuntary affective response to the magazine. Their responses lead in different directions, but slave and master alike are transformed into potential emancipationists through the experience of reading the *Repository*. Turnbull expands Purcell's account of the power of abolitionist circulation. Where the latter suggested that he lost himself amidst Vesey's archive of antislavery texts, Turnbull implies that slave-owners were just as vulnerable to the intrusive will of abolitionists who sought to manipulate both black and white readers.

While neither Purcell nor Turnbull make the analogy explicit, a series of specific events in the early 1830s led to a sharp rise in descriptions of antislavery writing as "incendiary." Three specific events catalyzed the transformation of abolitionist writing into incendiary texts: the publication in 1829 and 1830 of David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*; Nat Turner's Southampton rebellion in August 1831; and the American Anti-Slavery Society's postal campaign of 1835. Rather than seeing these as discrete phenomena, proponents of slavery used the rhetoric of incendiary writing to identify these events as components of a sequential narrative of abolitionist interference into an otherwise stable slave economy. Many Southerners denounced the revolutionary possibilities of incendiary texts, and in doing so drew attention to those texts' psychological impact on black and white readers alike.

David Walker's *Appeal* (published in three editions in 1829 and 1830) was the most prominent antislavery pamphlet written by a black man, and it drew white

Americans' attention to the potential existence of otherwise-invisible black readers.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike the newspaper reports and speeches described by Jack Purcell, which would have been implicitly addressed to white audiences, the *Appeal* directly calls for action from black and enslaved readers. Walker encourages his readers to be prepared to “fight under our Lord and Master Jesus Christ... to be delivered from the most wretched, abject, and servile slavery.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the *Appeal* was more likely than most antislavery texts to actually reach those potential enslaved readers: where its content angered white Southerners, its distribution scared them.

As the pamphlet's full title suggests, Walker sought to circulate his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* among black readers, and specifically within religious communities in the slave states where it could be read aloud to illiterate listeners.<sup>21</sup> In order to reach these audiences, Walker needed to find ways of circulation that could avoid censure. Pro-slavery authorities in the South and North alike saw attempted insurrections like Vesey's as evidence that any black community could harbor the seeds of anti-slavery violence. Black mariners and traveling agents could move between communities and comprised an important part of Walker's circulation scheme, but they were also vulnerable to surveillance and suspicion. To avoid this suspicion, Walker frequently employed white sailors—often illiterate themselves—to carry copies of the *Appeal* South to these audiences. Each time white authorities uncovered and seized a shipment of pamphlets, they instituted new restrictions on traveling mariners and local

---

<sup>19</sup> Herbert Aptheker, “*One Continual Cry*,” 54.

<sup>20</sup> David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal*, 14-15.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth McHenry describes the *Appeal*'s reception among free and enslaved black readers in “‘Dreaded Eloquence’: The Origins and Rise of African American Literary Societies,” in *Forgotten Readers*, 23-83.

black communities; these legal constraints were often accompanied by extralegal outbreaks of anti-black vigilante violence.<sup>22</sup> But while white authorities tried to limit the *Appeal*'s distribution through illicit channels, they could not control the anxiety generated by that distribution. For every shipment that was seized, how many more copies had made it to the eyes and ears of enslaved readers?

Walker's pamphlet revealed a shadow system of circulation: an avenue of national distribution that showed white observers the limitations of their own knowledge of the extent of print circulation.<sup>23</sup> One such figure was Harrison Gray Otis, whose position as the mayor of Boston theoretically gave him oversight over the abolitionist writers and publishers, including Walker, who called that city home. In a widely reprinted 1830 letter to Savannah, GA mayor William Thorne William, Otis made the limits of his authority explicit. Otis apologizes to William for not intervening directly in Walker's "attempt to throw fire-brands into your country," but notes that Walker conducted his business with full knowledge of his first amendment rights. Otis ultimately promises "to publish a general notice" about the "consequences of transporting incendiary writings into your and the other Southern States."<sup>24</sup> Otis' fiery language was not strictly metaphorical: Georgia had in fact seen a rash of arsons, believed to be caused by slaves, immediately prior to Walker's publication.<sup>25</sup> But his remedy suggests the difficulty of

---

<sup>22</sup> Peter P. Hinks, "Introduction" to *David Walker's Appeal*, xxxviii.

<sup>23</sup> In "'not intended exclusively for the slave states,'" Lori Leavell traces the *Appeal*'s recirculation and reprinting throughout the Northern as well as Southern states to show how the white response to the *Appeal*'s circulation "reveal[s] an economy for assessing the impact of abolitionist print in which circulation is the metric" (682).

<sup>24</sup> Among other places, the letter ran in the *Richmond Enquirer* (Richmond, VA) Feb. 18, 1830; the *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), Feb 24, 1830; and *Nile's Weekly Register* (Baltimore, MD), Mar. 27, 1830.

<sup>25</sup> Hasan Crockett, "The Incendiary Pamphlet," 308-309.

putting out such a conflagration. Otis could produce “a general notice” threatening those who would circulate Walker’s pamphlet, but he had little material control over the *Appeal*’s distribution network.

The fear of incendiary writings reached its apex following Nat Turner’s 1831 Southampton rebellion, which many proponents of slavery blamed directly on the circulation of abolitionist texts from the North. If Denmark Vesey’s unsuccessful uprising had convinced Southern whites to fear the possibility of slave violence, Turner’s rebellion validated those fears: the Southampton rebellion led to the deaths of at least 50 white Virginians and countless enslaved blacks.<sup>26</sup> With the dangers of slavery to its benefactors suddenly made manifest, pro-slavery Southerners examined Turner’s rebellion to see what they could learn from its example. What actions could be taken to avoid future rebellions? And what types of behavior among the enslaved could offer an early warning sign of possible resistance?

The answer to that last question, many Southerners suggested, was reading. There is little material evidence to suggest that Turner had specifically read Walker’s *Appeal*, but anti-abolitionist writers were nevertheless quick to attribute Turner’s rebellion to the influence of Walker’s pamphlet, as well as to the circulation of other “incendiary”

---

<sup>26</sup> While sources vary, Thomas R. Gray’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831) lists fifty-five white people killed, including slave-owners and their families. Sixteen accused insurgents—including Turner himself—were executed by the state; more were deported from the country, a fate akin to being ‘sold down river’ in its contemporaneous meaning. Historians will never be able to speak with certainty as to how many free and enslaved blacks died as a result of ensuing white vigilante violence, but conservative estimates suggest that over one hundred people were killed following the rebellion. Kenneth S. Greenberg, *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents*, 18-23, 57; Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 301.

material like William Lloyd Garrison's Boston-based newspaper, the *Liberator*.<sup>27</sup> The tendency to blame abolitionist publications stemmed from pro-slavery whites' desperation to find a direct cause for Turner's rebellion, but it also served a more complex ideological and political purpose. If Turner's uprising could be attributed to antislavery pamphlets published by Northern abolitionists, then rebellions could be understood as simply one component of an internecine struggle between free white Americans.

This narrative argued that insurrection was not the inevitable result of the 'peculiar institution,' but was instead a threat to everybody in the South stemming from the agitation of malevolent Northerners. One such argument came from Mrs. Lawrence Lewis of Alexandria, Va., who argued that Northern abolitionists wielded an overwhelming amount of psychological power over enslaved and slave-owning readers alike—a far cry from Thomas Bennett's description of distributors of antislavery texts and enslaved readers as "equally culpable" for affronts to white Southerners. In a private letter to Harrison Gray Otis, Lewis held William Lloyd Garrison, editor of Boston's abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, directly responsible for "the dreadful events of Augst [sic] last." In the process, she diagnoses the effects of such interference on white observers:

I think [Garrison] merits *Death*—you would pronounce sentence of Death, on an Incendiary who would fire your city, throw a match into your powder magazine. Is not the Editor of the *Liberator* an incendiary of the very worst description – He inculcates insurrection, murder, cruelty, & baseness, in every shape. The most *lenient* are as frequently the victims, as the most rigorous, & even *more* frequently; since *nine* times out of *ten*, a negro loves those best who are *least* indulgent – *fear* not *principle* governing the *far far* greater part. Our whites unhappily evince *too much*

---

<sup>27</sup> Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 106-108.

*fear* of these wretches – they can *never* succeed in subjugating the Whites, but our young & lovely females, infant innocence, & helpless age will be their victims – it is like a smothered volcano – we know not when, or where, the flame will burst forth, but we know that death in the most horrid forms threatens us. Some have died, others have become deranged from apprehension, since the South Hampton affair. Can you reflect on the instrument employed for our destruction – that we may trace the *train* as far as *Boston*, & not use your efforts to arrest its course, to make an example of the Author of evil.<sup>28</sup>

In spite of Lewis' emphasis on Garrison as "the Author of evil," she attributes agency in every direction: the slave South is alternately a "powder magazine" and a "smothered volcano," which either could or will go off at any moment. Lewis' letter expresses the paranoia surrounding the circulation of abolitionist print: because an incendiary text is only known through its effects, it is therefore always *potentially* threatening.

This emphasis on potential danger allows Lewis to identify incendiary writing as dangerous even in the absence of slave violence, at least to the extent that it incites traumatic anxiety in the South. When Lewis writes that "Some have died, others have become deranged from apprehension, since the South Hampton affair," she places the affective impact of the incendiary pamphlet on equal footing with its implicit threat of physical violence (and suggests that both warrant capital punishment). Lewis' definition blurs the line between speech and action, and in fact presages modern figurations of hate speech. Using the language of J. L. Austin, Judith Butler describes hate speech as performative speech insofar as legal discourse treats it as either a perlocutionary speech act ("those utterances that initiate a set of consequences") or as an illocutionary speech

---

<sup>28</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Life and Letters of Harrison Gray Otis, Federalist, 1765-1848* Vol. II (Boston: The University Press Cambridge, 1913), 259-261.



act (“one in which in saying something, one is at the same time doing something”).<sup>29</sup> As Butler notes elsewhere, the legal weight of hate speech depends on its being diagnosed as a form of action, with that diagnosis constituting “*a theory of the speech act* that has its own performative power.”<sup>30</sup> By naming Garrison’s writing as an incendiary act, Lewis identifies it as both encouraging further action and as a form of violence in its own right: rebellion and the fear of rebellion become comparable dangers.

For Lewis, this is more than a problem of abstract representation: she identifies fear as a crucial component of racial difference, and so a rise in white paranoia directly threatens to pervert relationships between slaves and slave-owners. Lewis invokes fear as a positive force on the enslaved: “*nine* times out of *ten*, a negro loves those best who are *least* indulgent – *fear* not *principle* governing the *far far* greater part.” In a proper slave-holding society, she suggests, fear is a necessary characteristic of slave psychology. Accordingly, Lewis’ anxiety might be best expressed as a borderline tautology: she fears what it means for white slave-owners to feel fear. The *Liberator* disrupts the affective equilibrium between masters and the enslaved: the more righteous and less fearful the enslaved, the less righteous and more fearful their owners. If fear is the proper mental state for the enslaved, in other words, incendiary papers threaten to relegate the owners of slaves to the same subject position as their property. Like Turnbull’s description of “the sentiments which are to make the slave dissatisfied with his condition, and the master doubtful, whether we ought to hold in subjection his slave,” Lewis suggests that even in

---

<sup>29</sup> Judith Butler, “On Linguistic Vulnerability,” in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1-42, 17.

<sup>30</sup> Judith Butler, “Sovereign Performatives,” in *Excitable Speech*, 71-102, 96

the absence of black readers, incendiary writing threatens to undermine the ideological tenets of chattel slavery.

The following years saw increases both in the number of laws prohibiting slave literacy and in the mass circulation of abolitionist writing. 1835 in particular saw the beginning of the abolitionist postal campaign, in which members of Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society (or AASS) published and distributed over one million pamphlets, periodicals, and other texts throughout the South—numbers made possible by technological developments (cheaper and more accessible printing, a more dependable post office) as well as social change (abolition's slow move from the political fringe towards more mainstream acceptance).<sup>31</sup> Unsurprisingly, this postal campaign was accompanied by a spike in mainstream references to "incendiary publications."<sup>32</sup> But what did it mean to label these abolitionist texts incendiary? In editorials which were often themselves reprinted in the pages of the *Liberator*, antislavery writers pointed out the dangerously unspecified limits of the label "incendiary," while noting that texts that could incite rebellion included the Bible, the Declaration of Independence, or even the slave codes of Southern states.<sup>33</sup> Looking back on this era from 1856, Harriet Beecher

---

<sup>31</sup> Circulation numbers appear in the AASS' *Third Annual Report* (1836), 35. For more on the postal campaign's reception, see W. Sherman Savage, *The Controversy over the Distribution of Abolition Literature 1830-1860* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1938); Henry H. Simms, *Emotion at High Tide: Abolition as a Controversial Factor 1830-1845* (Baltimore: Moore & Company, 1960); and Leonard Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing* (1970).

<sup>32</sup> Searching Proquest's *American Periodicals* database for "incendiary documents" (as well as "pamphlets," "periodicals," "papers," and "writing") brings up over 2000 references between 1830-1839, nearly four times the number from 1820-1829 (and ten times more than 1810-1819). References to incendiary texts peaked in 1835 and 1836—the years of the AASS mail campaign.

<sup>33</sup> "The Bible an Incendiary Book (From the *New-England Christian Advocate*)," *Liberator* (Boston), November 12, 1841; "The Incendiary Publication Bill,"

Stowe claimed that when “grave, thoughtful, energetic men” begin to appear among enslaved people, “it follows that almost every public speech, document, or newspaper, becomes an incendiary publication.”<sup>34</sup> In short, as applied to abolitionist writing primarily by anti-abolitionist writers, the label spoke less to a text’s content than to its circulation. Single-page illustrated tracts, multi-part pamphlets like Walker’s *Appeal*, and periodicals like the *Liberator* or *The African Repository* could all be labeled “incendiary.” At the heart of this categorization lay the question of intention. Was the text in question *meant* to be read by (or to) black slaves? How could that intention be determined?

In the case of the text that catalyzed the fear of incendiary papers, Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, the intended audience was clear from its title and its clandestine distribution networks. But while that text may have been the exemplary “incendiary pamphlet,” it also differed fundamentally from the “incendiary” writing that comprised the AASS postal campaign. Walker’s *Appeal* was written, published, and distributed by a black man, and surreptitiously distributed among black readers and communities. In contrast, the largely white abolitionists behind the postal campaign both formally addressed and literally mailed their writing to white readers in the slave states. The AASS distributed material such as Lydia Maria Child’s *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (originally published in 1833), which called for black participation in American national identity even as its title identified

---

*Philanthropist* (Cincinnati, OH), August 5, 1836; “Incendiary Publications (From the *Massachusetts Journal*),” *Liberator* (Boston), December 3 1831.

<sup>34</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 203.

black Americans as objects of solicitous attention rather than potential readers.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the AASS actively sought to avoid being accused of writing to enslaved readers: unlike the shadow circulation of the *Appeal*, the AASS mailed their material directly to white readers, “a preselected target audience of 20,000 Southerners whose names [had been] cobbled together from city directories, the proceedings of religious bodies, and other compendia of prominent men of affairs.”<sup>36</sup> But by this point, many Southerners had decided that direct address was not to be trusted, and fears and rumors nevertheless persisted that the AASS intended to encourage revolution among slaves.

The sheer quantity of material sent in the AASS campaign reinforced Southern fears that the texts could make their way into the hands of enslaved readers. In his Eighth Annual Message to Congress in 1836, President Andrew Jackson denounced “incendiary material” as “attempts to circulate through the mails inflammatory appeals addressed to the passions of the slaves, in prints and various sorts of publications, calculated to stimulate them to insurrection.”<sup>37</sup> A text both mailed *and* speaking to a white reader could nevertheless, Jackson suggests, be “addressed to the *passions* of the slaves”—and so, far from assuaging concerns, pamphlets’ material and formal address only drew attention to the uncertain boundaries between white and black readers.

The rhetoric surrounding incendiary papers revealed the relative proximity of the master and the slave, and in the process sabotaged those systems (whether of literacy, of political aptitude, or simply of fear) that were imagined to keep those groups separate. At

---

<sup>35</sup> Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (Boston: Allen & Ticknor, 1833).

<sup>36</sup> Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 262.

<sup>37</sup> Andrew Jackson. *Messages of Gen. Andrew Jackson: With a Short Sketch of His Life*. (Concord, N.H: John F. Brown and William White, 1837), 350-51.

the heart of that rhetoric was a persistent fear of shared texts, as white Southerners were uncertain both about a text's intended audience and about how that text might work its author's will on people in different subject positions. Exaggerated representations of abolitionist print not only conjured the threat of black revolution, but also posited a threat to racial hierarchy, one borne from the complex interplay of circulation and address that characterized antislavery pamphlet writing. The rise of mass print in the early nineteenth century threatened to cross seemingly insurmountable boundaries between geographic regions and social strata. The idea of abolitionist or "incendiary" texts suggested that mass print could also cross the divisions between free white and enslaved black readers. In the process, it set the stage for *Sheppard Lee*'s composite reader, who demonstrates the breakdown of the boundaries between slave and master in the body of a single paradoxical individual.

### **Reading, Possession, and Identity in *Sheppard Lee***

When *Sheppard Lee* was first published in 1836, the second year of the AASS postal campaign, critics particularly singled the novel out for its 'originality.' The New York *American Monthly Magazine* praised the novel as "one of the most original and ingenious works of fiction that has been produced in the United States."<sup>38</sup> Edgar Allan Poe himself grudgingly praised the novel as "a very clever, and not altogether unoriginal, *jeu d'esprit*."<sup>39</sup> The originality of *Sheppard Lee*, however, can best be understood in terms of Poe's later definition of the term, from his 1847 analysis of Hawthorne: "the true originality – true in respect of its purposes – is that which, in bringing out the half-

---

<sup>38</sup> *American Monthly Magazine* 8 (October 1836), pp. 411.

<sup>39</sup> *Southern Literary Messenger* 2, no. 10 (September 1836), 662.

formed, the reluctant, or the unexpressed fancies of mankind, or in exciting the more delicate pulses of the heart's passion, or in giving birth to some universal sentiment or instinct in embryo, thus combines with the pleasurable effect of *apparent* novelty, a real egotistic delight."<sup>40</sup> For Poe, a work is not original because it offers something new, but rather because it reveals the embryonic ideas and sensations that lie within the familiar.

Certainly this was the case for *Sheppard Lee*'s account of slave insurrection, which drew on narrative tropes surrounding insurrection that had already become familiar to American readers. A peaceful and too-trusting master allows slaves too much freedom; a few black leaders with strong community ties—generally through religious organizations—emerge as the instigators of the violence; the rebellion is controlled or suppressed in part through the actions of willing informants among the enslaved.<sup>41</sup> As we've seen, the assignation of blame to abolitionist writing was a recurring trope in accounts of rebellion. In the years between 1822 and 1835, slave uprising in the United States had gone from a nebulous possibility to historical fact; Turnbull's "doubt" over the righteousness of slavery had become the 'derange[ment] from apprehension' described

---

<sup>40</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, 580-81.

<sup>41</sup> In *An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection*, Charleston city official James Hamilton claims that Vesey's followers "had no individual hardship to complain of, and were among the most humanely treated negroes in our city": "Many slave owners among us, not satisfied with ministering to the wants of their domestics, by all the comforts of abundant food, and excellent clothing, with a misguided benevolence, have not only permitted their instruction, but lent to such efforts their approbation and applause." As a corollary to this claim, he describes the African Methodist Episcopal Church as the "hot-bed, in which the germ might well be expected to spring into life and vigour." *Negro Plot*, 29-30. In *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Turner is quoted as saying that Joseph Travis "was to me a kind master, and placed the greatest confidence in me; in fact, I had no cause to complain of his treatment to me." Turner and Gray, 48. A studied and highly literate leader, Turner's role as an insurgent could not be separated from his status as a spiritual leader to his enslaved peers. Both the discovery of Vesey's plot and the ultimate capture of Nat Turner, however, are attributed in part to certain slaves' loyalty to white authority.

by Mrs. Lawrence Lewis; and at the heart of it all, the figure of the incendiary publication had gone from one link in a complex chain to the primary incendiary in any instance of slave activism.

The rhetoric of incendiary writing did more than reveal the uncomfortable permeability of the boundaries between Northern activism and Southern institutions; as my previous section has shown, it also encompassed a series of anxieties about the intersections between ideas of race and new modes of circulation and literacy—that is to say, anxieties about who could access printed matter and how they came to have that access. If the circulation of so-called incendiary texts threatened to invert the hierarchical relationships between slave-owners and slaves, Bird’s novel literalizes that threat through the racially-unsettled figure of Lee-as-Tom. The fantastic presence of antislavery writing disrupts Bird’s efforts to map different subjectivities onto black and white racial identity. Bird simultaneously implicates abolitionist writing in slave revolution while denying the possibility of black literacy, a paradox that raises the troubling question of how—and by whom—antislavery texts could actually be read.

The dangers ascribed to the abolitionist pamphlet in popular representation were directly tied to its perceived ability to speak to multiple audiences: like Governor’s fire, writing is dangerous precisely because of its abilities to expand its influence across seemingly stable boundaries. But what does this look like on a formal level? *Sheppard Lee* gives us one example when Lee-as-Tom first encounters the pamphlet that causes so much violence:

It was entitled “An Address to the Owners of Slaves,” and could not, therefore, be classed among those “incendiary publications” which certain over-zealous philanthropists are accused of sending among slaves themselves, to inflame them into insurrection and murder. No such

imputation could be cast upon the writer. His object was of a more humane and Christian character; it was to convince the master he was a robber and villain, and, by this pleasing mode of argument, induce him to liberate his bondmen. The only ill consequence that might be produced was, that the book might, provided it fell into their hands, convince the bondsmen of the same thing; but that was a result for which the writer was not responsible—he addressed himself only to the master. (352)

Through the naïve narration of his comic narrator, Bird reflects two key arguments about shared texts in an era of mass circulation. The first is that a text's address may not reflect its ultimate recipient; the second and more insidious claim is that an author can take advantage of that failure of address—to speak to the bondsman while claiming to speak to the master.

Ironically, *Sheppard Lee* itself hinges on a similar divide between form and purpose, as Bird makes his political claim by dissociating his authority as the novel's writer from Lee's voice as narrator. From Lee's perspective, the revolution is an accidental side effect of the pamphlet; as Lee-as-Tom reads through the pamphlet, the narration declares that "Unluckily, the very next paragraph was opened by the quotation from the Declaration of Independence, that 'all men were born free and equal'" (353). An exemplary instance of Bird's sense of irony, Lee's "[u]nluckily" presents writing as an accidental process dissociated from human will, demonstrating the extent to which the narrator simply cannot believe a white man would actually *wish* to incite such violence. But Bird knows better, using Lee's voice instead to perform the difficulties of ascribing agency to the pamphlet and its unknown author.

Lee-as-Tom describes the pamphlet one final time before the attack, as his soon-to-be brothers-in-arms plan out "the first step in a career of conquest and triumph—in other words, of murder and rapine." The narration doubles back on itself to overlay



“conquest and triumph” with “murder and rapine,” a moment in which Bird’s and Lee’s politics seem once more to overlap. But Lee’s retrospective voice soon takes authority once more, as he muses one last time on the ironies of the pamphlet to ask how a text “framed...for the human purpose of turning his neighbour from the error of his way, should have lighted a torch in his dwelling only to be quenched by blood?” (362). Lee returns to the analogy of the “incendiary” pamphlet, but as he moves between analogies of framing and torch-lighting, he presents the same problem of visibility that will appear with Governor’s fire: while Lee imagines the text must have been directed towards a potentially sympathetic white audience, it can just as easily serve as a beacon for other potentially interested parties. The torch that lights the way can quickly become the destructive inferno.

Bird’s anxiety is once more based on questions of address and direction: was the pamphlet meant for slaveholder or slave? Bird resolves this question not by coming down on one side or the other, but by collapsing both figures into a single body. At the same time, it’s important to qualify that the two statuses—white slaveholder and black slave—remain somewhat distinct from one another, at least insofar as Bird’s use of the familiar plot of slave insurrection requires him to present Tom as a typical representative of a black slave.

At a glance, the relation between Lee and Tom suggests another contemporaneous form of mass media: blackface minstrelsy. Both models not only hinge on the idea of blackness as a role that can be inhabited by white actors, but also do so through practices of embodiment. Identifying blackface performance as “the first formal public acknowledgement by whites of black culture,” Eric Lott describes the typical minstrel

production at the height of its popularity as “jumb[ing] together a dramatic spectacle based on an overriding investment in the body, a figural content preoccupied with racial marking and racial transmutation, and a social context of white working-class proximity to blacks.”<sup>42</sup> Where Lott’s model applies specifically to blackface’s manifestation among a predominantly urban white working class milieu, Bird’s novel suggests a similar form of spectacle applied to the Southern plantation: instead of the social context of white working-class proximity to blacks, Bird’s novel draws on the proximity of white slave-owners to enslaved Africans.

But Sheppard Lee rarely inhabits a stable enough subject possession to enable this reading. To read spiritual possession as a type of performance, we would need to be able to clearly identify either body or spirit as an actor, but the nature of metempsychosis in *Sheppard Lee* renders such an analogy impossible. Each time Lee dies and possesses another corpse, he takes on the psychology of its previous owner while his original personality recedes further into the background. In the body of a rich miser, for instance, Lee behaves miserly himself even against his own inclinations. As Lee describes it, an impression of the body’s original spirit lingers even after that spirit has departed: “a man’s body is like a barrel, which, if you salt fish in it once, will make fish of every thing you put into it afterward” (209).<sup>43</sup> Lee possesses bodies primarily in the sense that he

---

<sup>42</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4-6. For more on the role of blackface in Philadelphia during Bird’s lifetime, see Susan G. Davis, “‘Making Night Hideous’: Christmas Revelry and Public Order in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia,” *American Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (1982): 185–99.

<sup>43</sup> In his introduction to *Sheppard Lee*, Christopher Looby reads this as evidence of Bird’s rather materialist conviction that identity is largely determined by embodiment.” For Looby, *Sheppard Lee* is in dialogue with David Hume’s assertion in *A Treatise of Human* that “selfhood is ‘nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed one another with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and

physically animates them: he does not so much take over identities as he is taken over by them, his own spirit remolded to varying degrees to suit the role each character played before their death. At any given moment in *Sheppard Lee*, in other words, either a character's spirit or their body can be the vehicle for the other's will. In some cases Lee presents himself as acting through his hosts; in others, his spirit appears to be little more than a battery powering a preprogrammed body.

This strange relationship between spirit and body—or more precisely, between spirit, body, and memory—has understandably interested historical and contemporary critics alike. In the same review where he acknowledged the novel's originality, Poe also complained about the then-anonymous author's use of metempsychosis—the transmigration of a spirit after its death—as the basis for his story. As Poe presents it, such a narrative ought to introduce “a character unchanging” whose experience of possession “introduces him to a series of adventure which, under ordinary circumstances, could occur only to a plurality of persons.” Sheppard Lee, on the other hand, “very awkwardly, partially loses, and partially does not lose, his identity at each transmigration.” Assuming that the novel intended simply to depict “seven different conditions of existence, and the enforcement of the very doubtful moral that every person

---

movement.”” In response to this, Looby reads Bird's novel as “an account of how one fiction of identity disassembles or decomposes and a new set of habits, propensities, sensations, and so forth is reassembled, by virtue of a new ‘fiction or imaginary principle of union’ into a person.” “Introduction” to Robert Montgomery Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, xv-xxii. In the process, Looby's reading of “embodiment” in *Sheppard Lee* does, however, suggest a new resonance to the claim that *Sheppard Lee* is “Written by Himself.” While the protagonist cannot be reliably contained within either the body *or* the identity of “Sheppard Lee,” the attribution of authorship suggests a form of surrogate embodiment within the material text of the book. Where “Sheppard Lee” ceases to function as a consistent identity, “The Author” (as he is identified in most chapter headings) remains stable.

should remain contented with his own,” Poe argues that *Sheppard Lee* could have accomplished its goals more directly and forcibly “by the mere narrations of seven different individuals.”<sup>44</sup> For Poe, *Sheppard Lee* embodies a formal tension between the narrator’s persistent “identity” and the individualistic nature of the episodes he experiences.

Contemporary critics have looked more generously upon this tension, reading *Sheppard Lee* as a comic study of identity and embodiment. Christopher Looby writes that Poe “failed to recognize” that “Bird absolutely did *not* want a stable consciousness at the center of his tale.”<sup>45</sup> D. Berton Emerson reads Lee’s migrating sense of identity as a parody of democratic unity, one which reveals the impossibility of organizing a coherent identity out of competing individual types.<sup>46</sup> Matthew Rebhorn more clearly labels this instability as a form of “ontological drift”: “an aesthetic shuffling between ontological positions” opened up by the novel’s ambiguously present narrator.<sup>47</sup> This model of ontological drift helpfully clarifies the contingency of identity in *Sheppard Lee*, a novel Rebhorn reads as theorizing “a new relationship between the mind and the body, one that

---

<sup>44</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, 401-402.

<sup>45</sup> Christopher Looby, “Introduction” to Robert Montgomery Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, pp. xvii.

<sup>46</sup> D. Berton Emerson reads *Sheppard Lee*’s metempsychotic adventure as a sort of anti-novel. In contrast to more traditional novels, which “often performed a type of totalizing, homogenizing work resembling the performance of the nation-at-large,” taking “seemingly disparate parts and, much like virtual, representative government, mold those parts together into a singular whole,” Bird’s novel “work[s] against the homogenization of a national body politic through its picaresque plot” as well as through its use of “an unassimilable, localized, vernacularized aesthetic that formally resists collapse into national narratives of incorporation.” D. Berton Emerson, “Re-Membering Local Democratic Agency,” 229-230.

<sup>47</sup> Mathew Rebhorn, “Ontological Drift,” 264.

draws on the chemical understanding of material ‘conditions’ to mark out a contingent, rather than essentialized understanding of consciousness.”<sup>48</sup>

But if “material ‘conditions’” threaten to render consciousness obsolete,” what happens when a ‘condition’ is driven by a consciousness of its own? Jordan Alexander Stein reads *Sheppard Lee* as a narrative about the collapse of individual agency in the face of impersonal institutions, and most prominently the institution of print circulation, which “provides impersonal texts with the opportunity to become personal—to be read or misread, appropriated and repurposed.” As Stein notes, the particular danger of the abolitionist pamphlet in Bird’s novel lies in its ability to impose its own agency in place of that of its readers.<sup>49</sup>

As Bird presents it, antislavery rhetoric is not entirely external to its audience, but functions instead as a form of spiritual possession in its own right. Lee is under the influence of abolitionism even before encountering any specific texts. When Lee first finds himself in a black body, he uncritically adopts the tenor of antislavery sentimentality: “I had forgotten the state of the bondman, the condition of the expatriated African. *Now* I was at last to learn in reality what it was to be the victim of fortune, what to be the exemplar of wretchedness, the true repository of all the griefs that can afflict a human being” (332). While the scene suggests the emotional power of abolitionist rhetoric, though, it also undermines its claim to represent slavery accurately. Much to Lee’s surprise, his own experiences as a slave fail to support this vision of torment; as Tom, Lee in fact feels “for the first time in my life, content, or very nearly so, with my

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Jordan Alexander Stein, “*Sheppard Lee* and Jacksonian Paperwork,” 39-40.

condition” (341). Ironically, Bird imagines Lee’s entry into slavery as a kind of freedom from white fantasies about the experiences of slavery.<sup>50</sup>

When “An Address to the Owners of Slaves” interrupts this fantasy, it does so as a form of demonic possession: “That little scrap of paper, thrown among us perhaps by accident, or, as I have sometimes thought, dropped by the fiend of darkness, had conjured up a thousand of his imps, who, one after another, took up their dwelling in our breasts, and their name was Legion” (354-55). As the pamphlet takes its place within its subjects as surely as does Sheppard Lee himself, Bird suggests a fractal vision of possession. Lee—the spirit of a slaveholder in possession of Tom’s body—finds himself possessed by another spirit: that of the abolitionist pamphlet. In the process, the abolitionist pamphlet reveals itself as the missing third term from critical frameworks that understand *Sheppard Lee* as concerned exclusively with a binary relationship between body and spirit.

---

<sup>50</sup> Mathew Rebirthorn reads Tom’s happiness as a possible resolution to the novel’s divide between spirit and body. In a text predicated on the idea that the discrepancy between mind and body (in such forms as gluttony, philandering, stinginess) ultimately precipitates an individual’s downfall, Rebirthorn suggests that Bird concludes that slavery, by removing the agency of a subject’s mind over their own body, offers “a kind of a paradoxical freedom from the debilitating effects of the market.” “Ontological Drift, 283. In the process, Bird aligns his representation of Tom’s interiority with the popular pro-slavery rhetoric of slave contentment: as Saidiya Hartman describes it, “the fixation on the slave’s ‘good times’ conceals the affiliations of white enjoyment and black subjection and the affective dimensions of mastery and servitude.” *Scenes of Subjection*, 25. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century wore on, these narratives of happiness among the enslaved would increasingly be used not only to defend the slave South, but also—as Bird prefigures in this scene—form the basis for a critique of the cruelty of the Northern states by contrasting the perceived happiness of Southern blacks with an appeal to the suffering of free white laborers. See for instance George Fitzhugh’s critique of “wage-slavery” in *Cannibals All! Or, Slaves Without Masters* (Richmond: A. Morris, 1857) and William J. Grayson’s poem *The Hireling and the Slave* (Charleston, S. C.: McCarter & Co., 1856).

At once material artifact and a form of spiritual transmission in its own right, the pamphlet blurs the distinction between the individual subjectivity of the reader and the larger range of geographies, audiences, and discourses that the incendiary paper makes available to that reader. This blurring is characteristic of what Michael Warner has identified as the “impersonal” mode of reading that emerged in early America to mediate the individual’s engagement with a larger national body.<sup>51</sup> But as Gillian Silverman has pointed out, the experience of sharing a common text could also create a heightened affective connection between individuals.<sup>52</sup> As a discursive object shared between free and enslaved people, and at the same time a material object physically held and read, the pamphlet mediates the relationship between the multiple identities of Lee-as-Tom. In my next section, I will examine the way that this mediation plays out at the moment of reading to show how antislavery writing forges out of Lee and Tom the singular identity that the *Transcript* excerpt can identify as “a Slave,” and that I refer to as the composite reader.

### **Bird’s Composite Reader**

Prior to encountering an incendiary text, Lee’s newfound contentedness in the body of Tom has a curious side effect: it drives him not only to abandon his faith in abolitionist representations of slavery, but also to disavow whiteness. In Bird’s most

---

<sup>51</sup> Michael Warner describes print culture after the late seventeenth century as “normally impersonal,” meaning that “the reader does not simply imagine him- or herself receiving a direct communication or hearing the voice of the author. He or she now also incorporates *into the meaning of the printed object* an awareness of the potentially limitless others who may also be reading. For that reason, it becomes possible to imagine oneself, in the act of reading, becoming part of an arena of the national people that cannot be realized except through such mediating imaginings.” *Letters of the Republic*, xiii.

<sup>52</sup> Gillian D. Silverman, *Bodies and Books*, 15.

explicit display of racism, Lee describes the experience of becoming black as an ontological paring-down of experience:

I was no longer Sheppard Lee, Zachariah Longstraw, nor anybody else, except simply Tom, Thomas, or Tommy, the slave. I forgot that I once had been a freeman, or, to speak more strictly, I did not remember it, the act of remembering involving an effort of mind which it did not comport with my new habits of laziness and indifference to make, though perhaps I *might* have done so, had I chosen. I had ceased to remember all my previous states of existence. I could not have been an African had I troubled myself with thoughts of any thing but the present. (341)

Lee emphatically denies his previous identities, although Bird carefully avoids mentioning whiteness at all. (Lee's reference to his past as a "freeman" seems particularly inapt, given that he had previously been kidnapped and imprisoned as Longstraw.) He also hesitates to claim blackness: in fact, rather than claiming any explicit identity, his narration hinges on a comically drawn out series of disavowals and conditional statements ("no longer," "forgot," "did not remember," "*might* have," "had ceased to remember," etc.). But the narration in this scene undermines its own claim to have experienced a complete racial transformation: Lee narrates his own absence, but in the very act of mandating the ontological separation between "Tom, Thomas, or Tommy, the slave" and the white subjects that preceded him, this passage also suggests the fragility of that separation. If our narrator is no longer "Sheppard Lee, Zachariah Longstraw, nor anybody else," why is that not apparent from the narration itself?

To some extent, this dilemma offers its own resolution: Bird maps African-ness onto an experience of time that, seemingly by definition, cannot be narrated. Lee narrates his experiences in the past tense, suggesting that the events of the novel are memories.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> D. Berton Emerson notes that the narration of Book VI shifts from a "retrospective, sarcastic-laden [sic] commentary... interspersed with a few dialect-laden quotations from



By separating the implied present of Lee's narration from the past tense of the novel's events, Bird allows Lee to retain a continuous presence as narrator. But Lee's account of becoming Tom ruptures that narrative continuity: as defined here, Tom cannot occupy the same imagined temporal position as Sheppard Lee. From a retrospective position that Bird makes available exclusively to a white narrator, Lee narrates "his" own blackness. At the same time, though, this sentence expresses itself as conditional—"I could not have been an African"—rather than indicative: Lee does not claim African-ness so much as he demarcates the *boundaries* of being African.

It's no coincidence that when Bird collapses a black character and a white character into a single body—precisely the moment where race ceases to denote a relationship between character's bodies—he suddenly recasts racial difference as more than a division between racialized bodies, but also as a division between ways of experiencing time itself. As Justine Murison demonstrates, this description builds on the same "American school" of ethnology that informs "The Murders in the Rue Morgue": a pseudoscientific melding of racial physiognomy and psychological theory that writers used to imagine an ontological distinction between people of different races.<sup>54</sup> At this stage of the novel, race is a formal characteristic, one that separates the retrospective white voice of its narrator from the atemporal interiority ascribed to his African host. Tom is the terminus of both narrative and narration: he can neither envision forward motion nor revisit events of the past.

---

other slaves" to a more straightforward account of the rebellion as "an irreducible concrete event" that resists abstraction. "Re-Membering Local Democratic Agency," 233.

<sup>54</sup> Justine S. Murison, "Hypochondria and Racial Interiority," *Arizona Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 1-25, 13-14.

This changes in Chapter 8, subtitled “*The Author descends among the slaves, and suddenly becomes a man of figure, and an interpreter of new doctrines.*” The path to this seeming paradox—a simultaneous descent “among the slaves” and a rise to interpretive authority—begins when one of those slaves, Governor, discovers the abolitionist tract hidden among the “boards and scantling” of a docked ship (349). Unable to read, Governor disregards the pamphlet’s text in favor of mocking the woodcut illustrations of abused bondsmen. Another man, Parson Jim, attempts to decipher the text, but only gets so far as “*de fat ob de slave.*” Far from evoking sympathy or revolutionary anger among their audience, these images and misreadings “afforded the delighted Governor so much matter for mimicry and merriment” (350). Bird suggests here a fundamental failing of both black literacy and antislavery visual culture.<sup>55</sup> Even these characters’ names evoke two types associated with historical slave revolutions—the politically-canny revolutionary (Toussaint L’Ouverture, Denmark Vesey) and the enslaved preacher (Nat Turner)—only to inoculate them, by virtue of illiteracy, from abolitionist ideology. The very traits Bird ascribes to blackness, in other words, render black revolution impossible.

But then the narrator intervenes: Tom, or rather Lee-as-Tom, is able to successfully read the pamphlet aloud, and is thus able to provoke the revolution that

---

<sup>55</sup> Radiclan Clytus argues that abolitionists deployed illustration as a direct appeal to distant white audiences: AASS activists thought that “seeing graphic images of slavery [was] not only tantamount to bearing witness to the ‘injuries of the oppressed’ but it also provide[d] the most effective means to enable spectatorial sympathy among those who were physically barred from investigating the peculiar institution and thus unable to grasp ‘the suffering caused by every act of selfish will.’” “Keep It Before the People,” 296. In *Sheppard Lee*, in contrast, Lee’s narration implies that illustrations were in fact aimed at slaves: “Why the pictures were put in it, I cannot imagine, since it may be supposed the master could understand the argument and exhortation of the writer well enough without them. Perhaps they were intended to divert his children” (362). If these illustrations were meant to foster black revolution, however, Bird’s narrative suggests that they were incapable of having the implied effect.

destroys Ridgewood Hill Plantation. As Jordan Alexander Stein notes, Bird grants the text an “agency” that “cancels any assessment the slaves have of their own experience of slavery.”<sup>56</sup> But both the pamphlet’s agency, as well as Lee-as-Tom’s ability to be “an interpreter of new doctrines,” hinge on a sudden redefinition of the narrator’s bifurcated and biracial identity:

“Let me read it,” said I.  
 “*You* read, you nigga! whar you learn to read?” cried my friends. It was a question I could not well answer; for, as I said before, the memory of my past existence had quite faded from my mind: nevertheless, I had a feeling in me as if I *could* read; and taking the book from the parson, I succeeded in deciphering the legend—“THE FATE OF THE SLAVE.” (350)

In its orientation towards a specified future, the very conceit of “THE FATE OF THE SLAVE” is at odds with Bird’s vision of being African as being without time. As if to highlight this distinction, Bird refuses to immerse his narrator in the experience of enslavement in this moment of reading: Lee-as-Tom’s unmodified speech clearly stands apart from the dialect of his would-be peers. But in depicting the transformative impacts of reading on his narrator, Bird also forces himself to recalculate that narrator’s convoluted interiority. Bird’s first-person narration is never more loaded than in this moment, where “I” simultaneously stands for the retrospective narrator (“as I said before”), the enslaved man struggling to remember (“I had a feeling in me”), and the “past existence” that enables such literacy.

In *Sheppard Lee*, Bird implicitly maps literacy onto a racial binary. As a free white man, Lee can read; as an enslaved black man, Tom cannot. This binary recalls Lee’s earlier distinction between the memory of white subjects and the eternal presentism of “African” subjectivity. But upon encountering “An Address to the Owners of Slaves,”

---

<sup>56</sup> Jordan Alexander Stein, “Sheppard Lee and Jacksonian Paperwork,” 42.

two temporalities—Lee’s previous life as an educated white farmer and Tom’s history as an illiterate slave—merge together to produce a sort of immanent literacy. The narrator invokes a surrogate “feeling” or self-knowledge that exposes his literacy, even as he denies any “memory of my past existence.”

Bird takes care not to contradict himself: where Lee earlier specified that he didn’t so much “forgot” his previous life as he failed to “remember it,” Tom seems not to remember how to read so much as to not-forget it. But these contortions only highlight the impossibility for Bird of imagining black literacy while maintaining an ontological division between black and white subjects. Bird’s earlier proposition that the African slave has no “thoughts of any thing but the present” relies on three categorical assertions: first, that “African” can be a stable identity category; second, that although every individual necessarily exists beyond the present, not every individual is capable of engaging with his or her history; and finally, that the primary mode of engagement with that history is thought. Yet this account of reading leads to a question which Bird is unprepared to answer: is Tom drawing on Lee’s memories? Is Lee thinking through Tom? Or, as seems to be the case, are both of these processes happening simultaneously?

This narratorial uncertainty undermines the very specific logic of racial hierarchy at play in Bird’s distinction between black and white subjects. On the one hand, Tom exists as an embodiment of accreted racial stereotypes, to the extent that Bird can only recognize Tom as having any sort of interiority once that interiority can be inhabited—and thus narrated—by Sheppard Lee. But that same narration disavows its own existence, and in the process refuses the possibility of Lee’s agency as an actor. Then again, to take Lee at his word would be to ignore the ways that his narration operates in ever-returning

loops of denial and disavowal—and in this moment of recursive confusion, the critical nomenclature of “Lee-as-Tom” takes on a new meaning to suggest not only the instability of identity in this episode, but also the instability of race more generally within Bird’s fictional America. In earlier episodes, Lee’s transmigrations between identities highlight the stability of American types, as circumstances and associations work to both create identity categories (the dandy, the philanthropist, the miser) and to sustain those categories once they’ve been established. But Book VI interrupts this trend: the episode that most vehemently denies the persistence of Lee’s identity nevertheless hinges on the simultaneous repression and resurgence of Lee’s past experiences as a white reader.

In this moment, Bird introduces a new figure to his otherwise-archetypal account of slave rebellion: Lee-as-Tom, a composite reader. The two characters act as racially stable reference points (“Lee” and “Tom” are distinct, even if the individuals they refer to bleed together), and Bird suspends one alongside the other in a way that ruptures the possibility of understanding race as the sole determinant for an individual’s character. Lee-as-Tom subverts the familiar populist narrative that had been crafted in opposition to the circulation of abolitionist writing. In that story, the happy slave and the ethical slave owner work together in a state of Edenic innocence that is disrupted by the outside force of the incendiary publication; the publication’s discovery fosters discontent and violence that destroys both slave and master; and, ultimately, other slave owners grow to fear their own enslaved workers, in turn destroying the utopian possibilities initially attributed to the plantation model. That narrative relies on a clear hierarchical distinction between the enslaved black workers and the white slave-owners, but the presence of Lee-as-Tom suggests that that binary fails to reflect the complexity of the agents of slave rebellion.

In one sense, this figure of the composite reader evokes the liminal figures who enabled the distribution of incendiary writing. Tom reads the pamphlet aloud in the manner of Denmark Vesey, a free carpenter who read aloud to enslaved people, while Lee's role in enabling Tom's reading recalls the white sailors who helped carry Walker's *Appeal* to black communities across the nation. By collapsing these disparate subject positions into a single figure, Bird implies that understanding the circulation of antislavery writing requires paying attention not simply to the primary actors of slave revolution—enslaved people, slave-owning whites, and abolitionist writers—but also to precisely those individuals who cannot be contained within those categories, even as they circulate texts and ideas between them.

But the figure of the composite reader does more than reference the people who enable the circulation of antislavery writing: it imagines a new kind of subject, both constituted within and disruptive of the ideology of racial difference, that emerges in response to incendiary texts. In a chapter subtitled "*The effect of the pamphlet on its readers and hearers*," Lee describes the discontent of the slaves as a kind of inauguration into politics, saying that "that fatal book infected my own spirit as deeply as it did those of the others" and led him "to have sentimental notions about liberty and equality, the dignity of man, the nobleness of freedom, and so forth; and a stupid ambition, a vague notion that I was born to be a king or president, or some such great personage, filled my imagination." Lee's narration blames these changes from Tom's "original condition" on the idea that "the past was dead with me; I lived only for the present" (357). But the very story he's telling, one filled with violent ambition and aspiration, undermines that claim.

Lee-as-Tom and his peers have transformed into a new kind of audience, capable of perceiving their lives through the narrative lenses of both politics and sentimentality.

This new audience reflects a larger discourse of address and affect centering on the question of who had access to antislavery writing. To this end, Bird offers a patchwork narration, one that claims to represent blackness and grounding its presence in an ongoing white subjectivity. When Lee-as-Tom describes his reactions to “An Address to the Owners of Slaves,” he simultaneously performs the roles of both a sentimental slave-owner and a revolutionary slave. As Lee-as-Tom presents it, the pamphlet’s anonymous writer wishes “to convince the master he was a robber and villain, and, by this pleasing mode of argument, induce him to liberate his bondmen,” although Lee qualifies this by noting that “the book might, provided it fell into their hands, convince the bondsmen of the same thing; but that was a result for which the writer was not responsible—he addressed himself only to the master” (352). Even as Bird suggests that the pamphlet’s title hides its true intentions, however, the first person to read it is as much a master as he is a bondsman. Through “Lee-as-Tom” Bird’s visions of blackness and whiteness are not blended together but suspended alongside one another, the sum of two constituent and indivisible black and white parts. We see, in short, the impossible condensation of the multiple reading audiences of antislavery writing—slave-holding whites and enslaved blacks—in the figure of a single reader.

This confusion shows us the extent to which antebellum discourses of race synchronized with discourses of reading and literacy. The racial confusion that produces the composite reader Lee-as-Tom emerges from the intersections of voice (Lee’s narration), narrative (the novel’s ever-pressing need to move beyond the eternal present it

imposes upon Tom), and ideology (Bird's adherence to a static racial hierarchy). If these problems seem innate to the task of narrativizing a white spirit possessing a black body in antebellum America, however, they become urgent in the wake of the abolitionist pamphlet. Far from a coincidence, *Sheppard Lee* posits a causal narrative link between the encounter with printed text and the explosion of racial identity—for both its multiply-raced narrator and for the other black slaves that surround him. But as I shall argue in my final section, if the circulation of abolitionist texts suggested new identities for the black people who were imagined to read them, the act of labeling those texts “incendiary” also called into question the racial identity of those who wrote them.

### “Sendary Papers” and Mass Reception

The idea that abolitionist writing could be incendiary implied that it would start fires, but the metaphor also suggested the ultimate fate of much of that writing. On July 29<sup>th</sup>, 1835—a little more than a year prior to the publication of *Sheppard Lee*—the steamboat *Columbia* arrived at the port of Charleston, South Carolina, as part of its ordinary shipping run from New York City. Included in its cargo were several thousand anti-slavery periodicals and magazines from the American Anti-Slavery Society, likely including copies of the *Emancipator*, *The Anti-Slavery Record*, and *The Slave's Friend*—an illustrated monthly advising white children of their moral obligation to fight slavery.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> For more on the *Slave's Friend*, and its attitude towards Southern slavery, see Christopher D. Geist, “The *Slave's Friend*: An Abolitionist Magazine for Children,” *American Periodicals* 9 (Jan 1 1999): 27-35. Sources, including Geist, provide conflicting information on when *Slave's Friend* was first published. While the first issue was apparently dated 1836, initial reports of the *Columbia's* cargo directly identify the *Slave's Friend* among its contents. “Incendiary Tracts and Papers,” *Southern Patriot* (Charleston), July 29, 1835.



Upon arriving at the post office, the first batch of letters was sent out to a group of 20,000 white Southerners, compiled from “city directories, the proceedings of religious bodies, and other compendia of prominent men of affairs.” These texts proved to be quite literally incendiary: that evening, a group of vigilantes calling themselves the “Lynch Men” broke into the post office, stole the remainder of the periodicals, and incinerated them the following night at a public bonfire.<sup>58</sup>

The distribution of abolitionist pamphlets theoretically allowed white abolitionists to address both enslaved blacks and pro-slavery whites simultaneously. But in practice, it also generated an emergent discourse of incendiary writing in which those very pro-slavery whites, like Turnbull, posited themselves as the last defenders of both themselves and their enslaved charges against the threat of white abolitionists. As such, it created a feedback loop, as both abolitionist writing *and* writing about abolitionist writing threatened to incite violence.

That feedback loop suggested a new dimension to the idea that incendiary writing could redefine the idea of racial difference. We’ve seen the ways that Bird struggled to articulate a binary racial divide in the contexts of literacy, and the ways that the various reading publics of anti-slavery literature produced a new model for thinking about a racially composite reader. To conclude this chapter, I’m going to revisit an earlier scene in *Sheppard Lee*, depicting the kidnapping of an accused “abolitionist,” to consider the ways that “sendary papers” could destabilize the idea of a white racial identity even in the absence of material texts—and in the absence of enslaved readers.

---

<sup>58</sup> Richard R. John, *Spreading the News*, 257-280.

Many of the same critics who praised Bird's originality also praised his authenticity. Poe described "some very excellent chapters upon abolition and the exciting effects of incendiary pamphlets and pictures, among our slaves in the South."<sup>59</sup> A review in the Charleston *Southern Rose* was still more effusive, claiming "The author [of *Sheppard Lee*] has a right to Southern patronage, from his hostility to abolitionist doctrines, the evils of which he forcibly illustrates."<sup>60</sup> Perhaps the most striking appeal to *Sheppard Lee* as an authority on such matters appeared in the *Boston Pearl*, which excerpted the discovery of the pamphlet and subsequent violence under the title, "ABOLITION TRACTS – HOW THEY WORK."<sup>61</sup> While the excerpt itself borrows Bird's satirical voice in its description "of scourging, and all that sort of thing, with which the pencils of those who never exaggerate have colored their pictures of the condition of slaves," its title strips the scene of its fantastic origins, transforming Bird's fictional narrative into a factual account.

The irony of that transformation is that, while Bird's novel was very concerned about the ways that abolitionist fictions could be read as fact, it was just as concerned with the way that fictions *about* abolitionists could take on the veneer of truth. At the same time that Bird's novel dramatizes the dangers of abolitionist writing to the institution of slavery, it remains wary of the polemical representations of abolitionist publishing in pro-slavery periodicals. In fact, Bird positions Lee's journey to the South as a direct result of anti-abolitionist fanaticism. In Book V ("*Containing the Adventures of a*

---

<sup>59</sup> Poe's praise should be qualified, however: while describing the preceding episodes in substantial detail, he only offers two sentences on the events of Book VI. As such, Poe's praise comes off more as political acknowledgement than an actual investment in the novel's depiction of race. Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, 399.

<sup>60</sup> *Southern Rose* (Charleston, SC), October 1, 1836.

<sup>61</sup> *The Boston Pearl, a Gazette of Polite Literature* 6, no. 16 (September 14, 1836): 2.

*Good Samaritan*”), Lee inhabits the body of Quaker philanthropist Zachariah Longstraw. The bulk of the episode criticizes Longstraw’s charity as directed towards those who don’t deserve it. Before being possessed by Lee, the Quaker gives “a sinner and a foolish man” a silver dollar and promises to find him future employment; dissatisfied with the coin, the convict turns upon his benefactor “with a violence that would have felled an ox,” killing Longstraw and stealing his pocket watch (245). When Lee possesses the corpse, he continues this misguided philanthropy: Longstraw’s efforts to help others see him belittled, abused, and slowly bilked out of his own estate by his trusted steward, Abel Snipe.

Uncharacteristically for the novel, these failings have very little to do with the conclusion of Longstraw’s story. In earlier sections, the behavioral tendencies of Lee’s previous hosts facilitate their ultimate demise—“ultimate” in this context referring to their second encounter with death when Lee’s spirit ultimately abandons their corpse. But Longstraw’s path back to the grave is curiously abstruse. In a tortuous turn of events, Longstraw finally runs out of money and goes into debt, only to learn that his beloved nephew had intentionally drained the Quaker’s bank accounts to protect them from being embezzled by Snipe. At this point, it seems, Bird’s convoluted morality tale has concluded. Longstraw has been chided for his too-trusting nature, but—perhaps due to Bird’s hesitance to punish Longstraw too completely for the sin of naïve compassion—the Quaker is far from ruined.

While Longstraw wanders the town trying to comprehend the nature of this restitution, however, he is picked up by two Southern kidnappers *en route* to Louisiana, where they plan to sell him as an abolitionist. When it turns out that Longstraw was no

such thing, his kidnappers simply “[tell] everybody they met that they had kidnapped Zachariah Longstraw, the famous abolitionist, the very life and soul of northern incendiarism, whom they were carrying to Louisiana, to be Lynched according to law; and as the circumstance would, of course, get into every patriotic newspaper along the way, it was certain that I should be made famous enough before I got there, and they thus enjoy the advantage of advertising their commodity without paying a cent to the printer” (318-19). Newspaper rewards for captured abolitionists were not unheard of in the 1830s, with some prominent activists commanding bounties as much as \$100,000 in 1835.<sup>62</sup> But just as incendiary texts can generate revolutionaries out of slaves, Bird suggests that newspaper can conjure abolitionists out of thin air.

While the threat of kidnapping was largely abstract even for white abolitionists, it was a very real threat for black Americans in the North. Samuel Otter points out that Bird’s depiction of Longstraw’s ordeal mirrors the abduction of free blacks from the North to be sold in the South.<sup>63</sup> Bird makes this parallel explicit when the philanthropist asks his captors, “will you sell my life for money?” to which they respond, “No... it’s a mere trade in flesh and blood—wouldn’t take a man’s life on no consideration.” While the most famous account of abduction by slave-traders, Solomon Northup’s *12 Years a Slave* (1853), wouldn’t be published for another seventeen years, kidnapping had been a concern for decades. In border states such as Pennsylvania, where Bird attended university and pursued most of his career as a writer, kidnappings in the name of slavery

---

<sup>62</sup> Leonard Richards, “*Gentlemen of Property and Standing*,” 16-17.

<sup>63</sup> Samuel Otter, *Philadelphia Stories*, 102.

were a common occurrence, and abolitionists like John Parrish and Thomas P. Cope had condemned their frequency since the turn of the century.<sup>64</sup>

In this context, Longstraw's experience strangely prefigures the events of Book VI: while the next episode sees Lee directly inhabit the body of a black man, Bird first troubles the racial coding of Sheppard Lee through the scene of kidnapping. Bird offers the body of the abolitionist as a surrogate for the body of the enslaved, a transposition accomplished by subjecting the abolitionist to the same forced journey to the south as that of abducted black Americans. If whiteness in the antebellum period marked certain individuals as invulnerable to the types of fungibility imposed on black African bodies, Bird undermines that invulnerability by having his white, wealthy protagonist literally 'sold down river.'

The racially homogenous figure of a white man possessed by the spirit of another white man, Lee's tenure as Longstraw doesn't exhibit the same existential crisis of racial identity as we see later on in Book VI. While their ideological positions may vary, Bird doesn't qualitatively distinguish Lee's intellectual capacity from Longstraw in the ways that problematize his account of being Tom—and in fact, the character might more productively be framed as Lee/Longstraw, as the two sides of the character in this scene function more or less interchangeably, in contrast to the more troubled ideological performance of Lee-as-Tom. While this episode lacks the contradictory force of Book VI's account of a composite racial identity, it expresses the ways that the relationship between slavery and literacy could impact the idea of whiteness, even in the absence of a

---

<sup>64</sup> For more on kidnapping in the name of chattel slavery, see Carol Wilson, *Freedom At Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America, 1780-1865* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), 9-39.

direct encounter with the peculiar institution. Lee/Longstraw experiences a process of “amalgamation,” to borrow from Leland Person’s reading of Poe’s tales, as “an encroaching color change” which destabilizes racial difference by rendering a white man susceptible to conditions normally ascribed to black subjects.<sup>65</sup>

As with Book VI, this confusion of race as a signifying category emerges in direct response to abolitionism as a print phenomenon. The idea of selling abolitionists can only make sense in an economy informed by anti-abolitionist sentiment. It is in this context that Bird draws the distinction between “sendary” and ‘incendiary’ papers, as one white Southerner falsely accuses Longstraw of “liv[ing] in New-York,” where he “sells sendary pictures, packed up between the soles of niggur shoes”; another declares that he “lives in Boston, keeps a niggur school, and prints sendary papers, a hundred thousand at a time, to set niggurs insurrecting” (319). That their stories contradict one another, and Longstraw’s own history as a Philadelphian, only demonstrates the persistence of the abolitionist as a type that can circulate apart from any individual person, just as “sendary papers” as a figure can circulate in the absence of any actual abolitionist writing. Instead, newspapers take on the role of surrogates for other forms of print: while there can be no examples of the “sendary papers” which Longstraw is accused of publishing, the periodical accounts of their existence stand in for the pamphlets themselves as material evidence of his guilt.

In this context, the idea that texts could be incendiary invokes another historical analogue: the burning of mailbags, acts of arson, and “torchlight parades” that

---

<sup>65</sup> Leland S. Person, “Poe’s Philosophy of Amalgamation,” in Kennedy and Weissberg, eds., *Romancing the Shadow*, 210.

characterized anti-abolitionist mob responses to the postal campaign.<sup>66</sup> While Lee/Longstraw avoids such a fiery fate, he is nevertheless a victim of mob violence. At the end of his journey, Lee/Longstraw faces lynching by a crowd of both white and black Southerners—including the enslaved Tom, the very character who will be at the epicenter of Book VI’s anxious musings on the epistemological limits of racial difference. While securing the rope that will carry Longstraw to the afterlife, Tom falls from a tree and breaks his neck. Lee, sensing an opportunity to escape death once more, rushes to fill the vacancy, and thus sets in motion the events that will ultimately lead to the rebellion and massacre at Ridgewood Hill that started this very chapter.<sup>67</sup>

Yet having seen the ways that shared texts could facilitate the mutation of black slaves into composite readers, or Philadelphia philanthropists into kidnapped fugitives, it should come as no surprise that the very process of possession should be part of a narrative that begins with the specter of the anti-slavery pamphlet. Longstraw’s “sendary papers” are no more material than the phantom author of “An Address to the Owners of Slaves,” and yet the nature of mass circulation produces meaning from their negative presence. Just as Longstraw’s apprehension as an “abolitionist” suggests the signifying power of anti-slavery rhetoric even in the absence of slaves, so does Tom’s presence at Longstraw’s lynching suggest the ways people can understand and share texts even in the absence of literacy. Already drawn into the field of action produced by the circulating reports of Longstraw’s “abolitionist,” Tom embraces the “exciting” effects of newspapers well before his later encounter with literacy.

---

<sup>66</sup> Leonard Richards, “*Gentlemen of Property and Standing*,” 16-17.

<sup>67</sup> This scene itself suggests an uncanny doubling of Longstraw and Tom. As the lynching of a white abolitionist results in a black man falling from a tree and breaking his neck, Bird seems to once again conflate the fate of the abolitionist with that of the enslaved.

Longstraw's accuser describes anti-slavery writing as "sendary papers," but Bird's own narrative suggests that the title could just as easily apply to the newspapers that describe those pamphlets. The circulation of anti-slavery writing, and the difficulties pro-slavery activists had in attempting to contain their dissemination, exposed the porous boundaries between Northern and Southern geographies—and in the process exposed the permeability of antebellum racial identity. In Longstraw's lynching, however, Bird asks his audience to consider the ways that the potentially illicit genre of tract writing existed in a feedback loop with the mainstream demagoguery of newspapers. The one threatens to incite violence from enslaved readers; the other threatens to invite the same behavior from free whites. Both types of texts generate a kind of dangerous equity between the races, even as they also divorce the bodies of writers from the texts that supposedly articulate their will.

This distinction between authors and texts, like the division of bodies and spirits in *Sheppard Lee*, contributes to the causal uncertainty that underlies not only the circulation of anti-slavery writing, but also a larger discourse about black agency in slave revolution. For Bird, what begins as a linear narrative—"incendiary pamphlets" lead to discontent, discontent leads to revolution, revolution leads to death—quickly expands beyond his control. The pamphlets become the site for an intricate transaction of wills, one which sees alternately Lee, Tom, the composite Lee-as-Tom, the revolutionary spirit of the pamphlet, and the displaced but not absent voice of the pamphlet's author all roiling beneath the surface of a single figure of enslavement. Through practices of metempsychosis and reading alike, *Sheppard Lee* embodies the fantastic possibilities of representations of slave violence that sought to undermine black revolutionary agency by



attributing black action to white wills. As Robert Montgomery Bird moves through the story, the origins of incendiary action and incendiary literature become harder and harder to disentangle, and texts and readers alike are summoned seemingly from thin air. And as they become dissociated from their author and imbricated in Bird's account of Lee-as-Tom's interiority, the "sendary papers" articulate a vision in which the feedback loop between mass print and new readers comes to blur the lines between action and reaction, individuality and collectivity, and even black and white, just as much as the spirit of Sheppard Lee himself.

### **Chapter 3: “As sable now as when we left the United States”: The *Liberia Herald* and Black Readers at a Distance**

“Is this written by colored men?” asked Ben.

“Yes, po’try and all.”

**Sarah Josepha Hale**

***Liberia; or, Mr. Peyton’s Experiments* (1854)**

Yet, these men wish to denominate themselves friends to the colored man. They go strangely to work, to obtain the appellation, unless they suspect we have turned “white,” since we came to Africa. Indeed, we have not. We do assure them; we are as sable now as when we left the United States.

**Anon.**

**Letter to the Editor of the *Liberia Herald* (1835)**

My previous two chapters have told the story of antebellum black readers as a narrative of emergence, focusing on how white writers imagined—or consciously refused to imagine—the relationship between black readers and a larger reading public; my final two chapters will focus on the dialogues between black and white authors as they sought to define that relationship in the context of black self-determination. In “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” the idea that black readers could co-exist with a white reading public appeared to be an epistemological impossibility. At the same time, the rhetoric of incendiary papers dramatized in *Sheppard Lee* marked white Americans’ growing anxiety that enslaved readers might be thriving at the invisible margins of that white reading public. In each of these instances, white Americans assumed that the difference between white literacy and black illiteracy could counteract the geographic proximity between black and white populations: the physically closer the two groups, the more pressing it became to establish and fortify the social distance between them.

But what happened when black and white readers were an ocean apart? In 1822, the American Colonization Society (or ACS), a group organized by wealthy white philanthropists, established a colony on the west coast of Africa in order to house free and formerly-enslaved black Americans. The Liberia colony (and particularly its capital, Monrovia) quickly became a space of exception in the antebellum imagination, a site where mainland American readers and writers could imagine blackness at a distance. In this chapter, I argue that the *Liberia Herald* (the colony's official newspaper from the 1830s onwards) shows how colonization's attempts to geographically segregate black and white readers generated new types of social proximity between them.

The most straightforward account of the *Liberia Herald*'s role in the public imagination is that offered by Sarah Josepha Hale in her 1854 pro-colonization novel, *Liberia; or, Mr. Peyton's Experiments*, which looked back to the origins of the Liberia colony in the 1820s and 1830s. By the 1850s, Hale was already the most prominent historical revisionist in America, thanks to her tireless public efforts to have Thanksgiving enshrined as a national holiday.<sup>1</sup> That holiday promised a tempting ethical shortcut, a way to condense centuries of European/Native American politics—a history of bloodshed and ethnic cleansing as well as political idealism and spirituality—into a single

---

<sup>1</sup> Hale began her activism as early as her 1827 novel *Northwood*, which portrays a lavish Thanksgiving feast as a site for family unity. (Hale's narrative work here prefigures what Dickens would do for Christmas in 1840s England.) Her official campaign to have Thanksgiving recognized as a national holiday wouldn't begin until 1846, but it lasted until the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant (a distant relative of Hale's) finally saw the custom enshrined as an American tradition. Nor was this Hale's only revisionist project: in the 1850s, she joined forces with the movement to purchase and restore Mount Vernon. (That America's heroic origins should be celebrated in a plantation seems particularly appropriate, given her politics.) For more on Hale's historical projects, see Sherbrooke Rogers' *Sarah Josepha Hale: A New England Pioneer, 1788-1879* (Grantham, NH: Thompson & Rutter, 1985).

sentimental evening of cross-cultural cooperation and domestic promise. The Thanksgiving campaign embodied Hale's overarching belief that history could be recuperated with the right narrative. As Hale presented them, both the Liberia colony and its official newspaper were very much part of the same revisionist project.<sup>2</sup>

In *Liberia*, Virginia slaveholder Richard Peyton frees his most loyal slaves after they side with him in the midst of a county-wide slave uprising—a twist that effectively recasts Nat Turner's 1831 Southampton rebellion, the event with arguably the single most destabilizing impact on American slavery as an institution, into a proving ground for slave loyalty. Where Peyton's 'experiments' with manumission in America fail, the Liberia colony offers a new form of emancipation; the novel ends with its formerly-enslaved characters happily establishing new lives on the African coast. The promise of colonization is most directly embodied in the diptych that opens her novel: "In 1620 the first African slaves were brought to Virginia. In 1820 the first emancipated Africans were sent from the United States to Liberia."<sup>3</sup> As two hundred years pass in two sentences, Hale's parallel structure invites readers to recognize "the first African slaves" in "the first emancipated Africans," and thus to see the act of 'sending' the latter to Africa as the logical culmination of the originary act of 'bringing' the former to America. Like many

---

<sup>2</sup> Amy Kaplan reads Hale's interest in American colonization as serving the same ideological ends as "the domestic ritual of Thanksgiving," which for Hale "polices the domestic sphere by making black people, both free and enslaved, foreign to the domestic nation and denying them a home within America's expanding borders." If the goal of Thanksgiving as a holiday was to establish the national, ideological, and racial limits of an American identity, then *Liberia; or, Mr. Peyton's Experiments* imagined the Liberia colony as a way to fortify a particular African identity—one defined as much by its cultural subordination to the United States as by its social proximity. Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (September 1998): 581-06, 593.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Josepha Hale, *Liberia; or, Mr. Peyton's Experiments* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853), iii. All subsequent citations in text.

supporters of colonization, Hale was at best a gradual abolitionist, and she frequently argued that slavery had positive as well as negative effects on its victims: the novel's preface also describes the "emigrants returning, civilized and Christianized, to the land which, two centuries previous, their fathers had left degraded and idolatrous savages" (iii). But the colonization project enables Hale to imagine slavery itself as a self-resolving system. The parallel structure of those opening lines becomes the organizing praxis for her entire novel. In the first half, freedom generates new problems in America; in the second half, those problems are corrected in Liberia.

One such problem, as Hale sees it, is the incompatibility of black readers and white writing. Early in the novel, Peyton frees a family—married couple Ben and Clara, and their cousin Americus—and sends them to live among Philadelphia's free black community. When the Peytons next travel north, they find that Americus has joined "the Philomathean Society," a black reading group which debates such lofty topics as "Which is the finest poet of Human Nature, Byron or Shelley?" For the Peytons, and for Hale herself, this reading group embodies the worst excesses of free black society. Mrs. Peyton struggles to see "those to whom so much had been given—such careful, early training, so much religious instruction, and at last liberty—thus wasting their time and opportunities" (83). Mr. Peyton is slightly more generous: while he notes that "Byron and Shelley are not, to be sure, likely to be of any great use to them, nor will their studies of poetry bring about any practical result," he acknowledges that the debate "shows some desire for intellectual improvement, and some power of application, for they must read and study to be able to make any speech at all" (84). The scene's conclusion disproves even that condescending hypothesis: Americus backs Byron because "Miss Mary, Mr. Patterson's

daughter, told me that Shelley was an atheist, so, of course, I would not uphold him” (85). Far from having to “read and study,” Americus is only invested in Byron and Shelley for their social capital. For Hale, reading white European poets is not only unlikely to “bring about any practical result” for black readers, but is intrinsically beyond their grasp.

But if Romantic poetry marks the dangers of impractical literature in America, the *Liberia Herald* offers a beneficial alternative. After Ben and Clara succumb to poverty and disease in Philadelphia, the Peytons send the family to Monrovia. Eager to learn about their new life, Clara asks their host (another former slave from the Peyton plantation) if the houses are well furnished:

“I reckon they are,” replied Polydore; “some of them are most equal to ol’ mast’r’s house at home. Here’s one of our newspapers,” continued he, handing “The Liberia Herald” to Ben; “we’ve got another one besides that.”

“Is this written by colored men?” asked Ben.

“Yes, po’try and all. Don’t you ‘member Colin Teage, that came over here the same time Keziah and I came? His son, the Reverend Hilary Teage, is the editor.” (203)

While Hale spends five pages on Amanda and Americus’ Philomathean Society, this dialogue comprises Hale’s only reference to the *Herald*—a strange but unsurprising contrast that suggests she was more interested in policing black Americans than imagining new possibilities for Liberians. But in spite of its brevity, this conversation proposes the *Herald* as a desirable alternative to Byron and Shelley. Hale segregates Liberian writing from white writing most prominently through dialect: poetry is dangerous for black readers, but “po’try and all” is perfectly practical.

The distinction between poetry and “po’try” speaks to Hale’s belief that black readers should stick to black writers. But the *Herald* doesn’t quite fit this model. It goes

strangely unread in the novel: Hale introduces the *Herald* as an accessory to a properly furnished home, a use that strangely echoes Americus' non-reading of Byron and Shelley. Polydore's emphasis on Liberian homes being "most equal to ol' mast'r's house at home" poses a similar problem, implying that the *Herald* is valuable more for its mimetic qualities (it resembles American newspapers) than for its content. Most troublingly, while the *Herald* was indeed edited by black men, it largely comprised reprinted material from English and American papers, much of which was written by white writers. Saying the *Herald* was "written by colored men" suggests a literary one-drop rule: whatever a piece's provenance, if it appears in the *Liberia Herald*, it becomes black writing. For Hale, the *Herald* is less important as a text than as a clear boundary between black and white reading publics—a boundary that racializes everything that crosses it.

But for readers and writers of the *Herald* in the 1830s, the lines between audiences were much messier. One reason for this messiness was discursive, as the debate over American colonization undermined any easy distinctions between pro- and anti-slavery ideologies. Members of the American Colonization Society covered a wide range of political and subject positions: many black and white anti-slavery advocates believed that people of African descent could only achieve self-determination away from the pervasive dangers of American society, but the colony also appealed to supporters of slavery who wanted to regulate and diminish the influence of America's free black population on enslaved peoples.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, colonization drew enmity from an equally diverse body of critics. Most African American leaders in America had little love

---

<sup>4</sup> In 1830, for instance, one member of the Tennessee Colonization Society praised "the causes of colonization as peculiarly a Southern cause," proclaiming "colonization societies as hand-maids of the slave-holder, not as opposed to his interests." Letter from Tennessee Colonization Society to ACS, January 9 1830.

for a largely-white organization that actively sought to drive black Americans away from their country of birth. Anti-colonization activism emerged across the ideological spectrum: die-hard emancipationists like William Lloyd Garrison and unapologetic slaveholders like Robert James Turnbull each accused the ACS of supporting the other's side.<sup>5</sup>

This *mélange* of allegiances and oppositions had existential stakes for black colonists living in Liberia, who found themselves at odds not only with the most passionate abolitionists, but also with the most politically active black Americans. Some colonists had emigrated under coercion, having been manumitted by slave-owners only on the condition that they relocate to Liberia, but many more chose to pursue a new life in Africa of their own accord. For that latter group, their status as colonists raised new and troubling questions about how they related to American politics. In the July 1835 edition of the *Liberia Herald*, an anonymous writer (likely editor John Brown Russwurm, an American expatriate) describes his frustration with “the persevering labours of our friends, the abolitionist[s], in their opposition to the colony”:

---

<sup>5</sup> Ousmane K. Power Greene analyzes black organization against colonization (and in favor of Haitian emigration) in *Against Wind and Tide: The African American Struggle Against the Colonization Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), xvii. Beverly C. Tomek offers an intricate study on the relationships between different pro- and anti-colonization factions in Philadelphia in *Colonization and Its Discontents* (2011). In particular, she argues that abolitionists generally mapped onto the division between gradualists, who believed that abolition should proceed cautiously and tended to support colonization as a way to regulate social change, and immediatists like Garrison, who viewed slavery as an evil to be ended without hesitation, and who saw colonization as a tool to prolong slavery while depriving black Americans of their rights. For a broader view on the reception of colonization across the country, see also Beverly Tomek's introduction to her edited volume on *New Directions in the Study of African American Recolonization* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017), 1-30. For more on Turnbull in particular, see Ch. 2 of this dissertation, “‘Sendary Papers’: Anti-Slavery Pamphlets and the Composite Reader in *Sheppard Lee*.”



They continue to apply to the inhabitants of this colony, in all the meekness of christian charity, the loving epithets of villains, rascals rogues, vagabonds and a thousand other names, that their superior education gives them command of [sic]. (...) Yet, these men wish to denominate themselves friends to the colored man. They go strangely to work, to obtain the appellation, unless they suspect we have turned “white,” since we came to Africa. Indeed, we have not. We do assure them; we are as sable now as when we left the United States.<sup>6</sup>

This letter wryly reflects familiar tensions surrounding colonization, including the antagonism between colonizationists and Garrisonian abolitionists; the lingering suggestion that Liberian colonists have abandoned their fellow black Americans; and the limitations that abolitionist rhetoric imposed on black political agency. But the writer reads new meaning into those tensions, connecting the political turmoil of American colonization to race itself. In an era where most black American writers strove to be treated similarly to the white Americans and Europeans that surrounded them, this letter suggests a striking inverse: at a great enough distance, Liberian colonists must struggle to be seen as truly black.

What would it mean for abolitionists to suspect that colonists “have turned ‘white,’ since [they] came to Africa”? The accusation exposes the inconsistent logic of abolitionists who simultaneously defend the rights of enslaved blacks in America and oppose the political agency of free blacks in Africa. In the process, the letter writer reminds his audience that blackness cannot be mapped onto a single political position: there is no monolithic “colored man.” But while the writer doesn’t literally believe abolitionists have come to see him and his fellow colonists as “white,” he sincerely questions what blackness has come to mean in a milieu of black political dissent. His final ironic claim that “we are as sable now as when we left the United States” suggests

---

<sup>6</sup> *Liberia Herald* (Monrovia), July 10, 1835.

that the writer's racial identity depends on his having been in America, and as a result is now contingent on the distance from which he writes back to American readers. In this context, being seen as black depends on two conditions: a subject's proximity to Euro-American whiteness and their placement within a limited spectrum of political positions. The sardonic reminder of the colonists' race thus encourages its readers, hostile and otherwise, to learn to recognize blackness in the absence of a sharp white background.

Such an editorial could only have been published in Liberia, a colony that began in many ways as an experiment in making American populations coherent—and thus controllable. As David Kazanjian argues, the ideology of colonization was above all an exercise in categorizing groups of people: “By making freedom dependent upon territorially discrete racial populations organized into distinct nations, colonization sought to teach American subjects to understand themselves as such populations.” Accordingly, colonizationists “represented blacks and whites as racially and nationally codifiable members of distinct, calculable populations,” and colonization itself mandated “a systematic reformation of citizenship that demanded the participation of the populations it addressed.”<sup>7</sup> A host of questions and concerns informed this attempt to reimagine the ties of race and history. Could the complicated knots of interdependency and obligation that characterized chattel slavery be undone by turning to Africa? Could generations of interrelations and abuses be wished away? Could the Triangle Trade be squared off? Could a diaspora become a closed loop? And finally, the question underlying all of the others: could there be, at the dawn of the nineteenth century, an exclusively white American national identity?

---

<sup>7</sup> David Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick: National Culture and Imperial Citizenship in Early America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 92.

As with all such crises, the effort to answer those questions is more interesting and informative than the answers themselves—in each case, a resounding “No.” The ideological turmoil of colonization has long been of interest to historians and scholars of antebellum racial thought. But scholarship on the Liberia colony tends to draw from one of two primary archives. One branch of study focuses on the institutional and ideological history of colonization, drawing its sources primarily from mainland American writing and writers.<sup>8</sup> The other branch focuses on the impact of Liberia on black cultural identity and self-fashioning, which frequently looks to letters and correspondence between Liberian colonists and their friends and family in America.<sup>9</sup> In order to see one side of the project, though, the other often gets minimized. Scholars are left to choose between either an institutional approach that studies Liberia (and a broader imaginary of ‘Africa’ writ large) as the site of a discursive battle between American nationals, or an epistolary approach that uses the circum- and transatlantic practices of writing-to and writing-back to present Liberia as a space where black colonists reimagined their social and domestic relationships.

---

<sup>8</sup> The most prominent sources for this methodology are the ACS’ magazine publication, the *African Repository*, as well as abolitionist and anti-slavery critiques of the ACS from writers like David Walker and William Lloyd Garrison.

<sup>9</sup> Most prominently, David Kazanjian has written in both of these modes. His Foucauldian account of the colonization movement in *The Colonizing Trick* (2003) focuses on the debates about colonial—and thus black—autonomy that characterized the early years of the ACS. His later study, *The Brink of Freedom: Improvising Life in the Nineteenth Century Atlantic World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), focuses instead on “the quotidian texture” of Liberian (as well as Yucatanian) epistolary archives in order to “rethink what we mean by, and how we judge or measure, the successes and failures of social movements” (15). For other texts on the institutional history of the ACS, see Eric Burin’s *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005) and Beverly Tomek’s *Colonization and its Discontents* (2011). For more colonist perspectives on Liberia and the surrounding debates, see Bell I. Wiley’s *Slaves No More: Letters from Liberia 1833-1869* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1980).

The *Liberia Herald* both validates and complicates this institutional-domestic binary. If the story of the colony is split between two registers—between the intercontinental abstraction of American colonization as a response to slavery and the lived experiences of men and women seeking ways to escape the snare of American racism—no text traversed that gap with greater frequency or urgency than the colony’s first periodical newspaper. From its inception in 1826, the *Herald* was edited and printed by black colonists and carried articles, both original and reprinted from other newspapers, that its editors felt would speak to Liberian colonists. But it also gave mainland Americans readers a direct source of news from the colony. The ACS would often reprint positive stories from the *Herald* in its own monthly magazine, the *African Repository*; meanwhile, bad news from Liberia could easily make its way to the pages of anti-colonization papers like William Lloyd Garrison’s *Liberator*.<sup>10</sup> The *Herald*, in other words, could be a black newspaper for a black Liberian audiences only so long as it could balance the colony’s needs alongside the paper’s inevitable uses as propaganda. We might best understand this balancing act as an ever-shifting economy of audiences, in which the *Herald* and its editors struggled to regulate how their material would be read by mainland American interests and colonial readers alike—a system of valuation which tended to favor the international audience over the local, even as it ultimately exposed the interconnectedness between the two.

---

<sup>10</sup> An 1832 article in the *Liberator*, for instance, cites the *Herald*’s account of military strife between colonial agents and local Africans under the title “Progress of Christianity in Liberia.” *Liberator* (Boston, MA), September 8, 1832. In another example, the *Liberator* quoted the *Herald* on an increase in the local slave trade to disprove the ACS’ claim that colonization would help suppress slavery in Africa. “Mr. Gurley in Boston,” *Liberator* (Boston, MA), November 30, 1833.

While the *Liberia Herald* occupied a central role in both the discourse of colonization and the emerging culture of African American periodical writing, scholars have historically paid relatively little attention to the paper. As a colonial periodical, it inhabits an awkward liminal space between the discursive histories of American colonization and the social histories of Black Atlantic mobility that have characterized most studies of the early years of the Liberia colony. As a monthly paper consisting largely of reprinted material, it hardly stands out as a formally exciting textual archive, and a small but significant amount of its original material is available elsewhere, having been reprinted in contemporaneous periodicals and magazines. Finally, archives of the *Liberia Herald* are rare and often incomplete, and the paper itself was prone to errors in printing and publication, particularly during the early years studied in this chapter. With few exceptions, scholars generally treat the *Herald* as little more than a footnote to other historical narratives, a trend that segregates the *Herald* from the broader field of nineteenth-century American periodical culture.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> The most substantial analysis of the *Herald*, found in Carl Patrick Burrowes' *Power & Press Freedom in Liberia, 1830-1970* (Trenton: Africa World Press Inc., 2004), focuses on the paper largely as a precursor to a more substantial narrative of Liberian media history. Those who study the American Colonization Society as an institution tend to present the *Herald* as a significant but largely self-explanatory milestone in the colony's development. A few such readings can be found in Vol. 1 of Charles Henry Huberich's *The Political and Legislative History of Liberia* (New York: Central Book Company, 1947); P. J. Stadenraus' *The African Colonization Movement 1816-1865* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961); and Beverly Tomek's *Colonization and Its Discontents* (2011). In the chapter "Subtle Barbarians" from *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses* (1999), Terrence Whalen reads Lucian Minor's review of the *Herald* in the *Southern Literary Messenger* as a way to contextualize Poe's politics as editor of that magazine. More focused studies of the *Herald* have generally been composed with a biographical focus on one of the paper's two early editors, John Brown Russwurm or Hilary Teage. For studies of Russwurm and the *Herald*, see Winston James, *The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm* (2010) and Adam Lewis, "'A Traitor to His Brethren?'" (2015). For more on Hilary Teage, see Carl Patrick Burrowes, "'In Common

This chapter challenges this trend by showing that the *Liberia Herald* played a significant role in the development of the black periodical tradition, both as a direct ideological successor to *Freedom's Journal* and as a newspaper that inspired radically divergent readings from black and white Americans alike. In his reading of black newspapers following the Civil War, Christopher Hager argues that one of the effects of emancipation was that freed people sought “participation in a realm from which they had always been marginalized, in which written words were the currency.”<sup>12</sup> This chapter argues that the *Liberia Herald* performed a similar function three decades prior, marking the entry point into American periodical culture for a colonial black community that was trebly marginalized: isolated by political circumstance and geographic distance as well as race. But I also seek to show how the *Herald's* participation in a larger periodical culture made it vulnerable not only to its political enemies, but also to erstwhile allies who ensured that the paper continued to be marginalized.

Above all, this chapter seeks to take seriously the question implied by my opening epigraphs: how did the *Liberia Herald's* complex relationships with local and American readers influence antebellum conceptions of black writing and reading? This chapter will explore this question in three dimensions. First, I look at early prospectuses from the paper's first two editors, Charles Force and John Brown Russwurm, to show how both men presented the *Herald* as navigating two fundamentally distinct reading audiences in Liberia and the US. I then study the paper's publication and reception history from 1830-1836 to show how the paper participated in an antebellum culture of reprinting, as well as

---

with Colored Men, I Have Certain Sentiments': Black Nationalism and Hilary Teage of the 'Liberia Herald,'" *The Journal of Negro History* 86, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 30-44.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Hager, *Word by Word*, 182.

how the *Herald's* audiences fractured around the question of how, and by whom, black Liberian life could be represented. Finally, I turn to one of the most well-known responses to the *Herald*, Lucian Minor's notice of "Liberian Literature" from the *Southern Literary Messenger*, to show how the *Herald* encouraged mainland Americans to imagine new and expansive reading publics.

This chapter requires two key qualifications. First, this chapter reads the *Liberia Herald* as an outgrowth of the antebellum literary tradition from which it emerged, and so draws on the work of hemispheric American studies to expand the boundaries of American literature as a category.<sup>13</sup> As such, this chapter only focuses on the early years of the paper through the 1830s and 1840s. But the *Herald* continued to be published into the mid-twentieth century, long after the span covered in this chapter. Indeed, as Carl Patrick Burrowes demonstrates, part of the *Herald's* significance is that it bridges the legacy of American and African newspapers.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, this chapter focuses primarily on the relationship between colonists and the mainland—a relationship, in short, between expatriates and Americans. These groups comprise the primary actors in this chapter, but they were far from the only people involved in the colony's history. The Liberia colony was inspired by the British effort to rehouse displaced Africans in nearby Sierra Leone, and Liberia itself had a significant

---

<sup>13</sup> Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine define the project of hemispheric American Studies as a move "to chart new literary and cultural geographies by decentering the U.S. nation and excavating the intricate and complex politics, histories, and discourses of spatial encounter that occur throughout the hemisphere but tend to be obscured in U.S. nation-based inquiries." "Introduction: Essays Beyond the Nation," in *Hemispheric American Studies*, eds. Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 1-17, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Carl Patrick Burrowes offers a comprehensive reading of Liberian journalism, and the *Herald's* originary role in that tradition, in *Power and Press Freedom in Liberia, 1830-1970*.

population of what the *Herald* referred to as “Recaptured Africans”: Africans who had been sold into slavery, but were seized by British vessels before being transported to new shores.<sup>15</sup> The relationship between colonists, recaptured Africans, and native Africans from surrounding lands continues to shape Liberian history to this day; the domination of Liberian politics by Americo-Liberians was a major factor in the country’s first civil war in 1989. By limiting my focus to the relationship between colonists and American readers in the early decades of the colony, my goal is not to mythologize or celebrate the colonization of Liberia, but rather to examine how the ideas generated by colonization reshaped ideas of race and reading in American discourse.

#### **“To the Colony Also”: Forecasting the *Herald***

The colonization movement in America was by definition a forward-looking project, although its different constituents looked to very different prospective futures. Its abolitionist backers hoped it would point the way to total emancipation, and its black supporters more specifically hoped it would offer a chance to create a new and less constrained life than was possible in the America; at the same time, its constituency of slaveholders hoped it would lead to a more sustainable equilibrium between free and enslaved blacks in the United States. As its name suggests, the *Liberia Herald* was part of this speculative tradition, defined as much by the future it represented as by the present it inhabited. In that spirit, this section looks at prospectuses from two key points in the paper’s history: the *Herald*’s failed first establishment by Charles Force in February

---

<sup>15</sup> “To Our Readers,” *Liberia Herald* (Monrovia), February 22, 1832. The *Herald* frequently ran stories about the needs of their recaptured population, including “Schools for Native Children” (May 7, 1832) and “For the Liberia Herald” (March 31, 1835).



1826, and its successful revival in 1830 at the hands of John Brown Russwurm. With Russwurm's prospectus in particular, the *Liberia Herald* can be situated within the larger development of black newspapers in the United States. In these moments when black men envisioned the future of the *Liberia Herald* as a shared text, they showed the conflicting promises of print circulation for marginalized African Americans: a black newspaper could at once be a symbol of active black incorporation into a larger global politics, and a tool for black self-actualization away from the control of white authorities.

In the early days of January 1826, nearly four years to the day since the Liberia colony was first settled, black printer Charles Force left Boston Harbor for Monrovia. He traveled on the same ship as the Reverends Horace Sessions and Calvin Holton; ten hogsheads of "first rate Kentuckey leaf tobacco"; "a thousand volumes of useful, and many of them most valuable books"; and a printing press, furnished by friends of the ACS in Boston.<sup>16</sup> It was appropriate company: the first Liberian press and the first publisher of the *Liberia Herald* arrived amongst harbingers of spiritual fulfillment, of commercial success, and of widespread—and unmistakably pragmatic—literacy.

While the ACS marketed Liberia to black Americans as the site to build a better and more socially upward future, life in the colony often told a much bleaker story. Colonists frequently fell sick upon arriving, and those who recovered were implored to take up agricultural careers for the good of the community, rather than pursue individual wealth through risky mercantile ventures.<sup>17</sup> (If Sarah Josepha Hale's 1854 reading of the

---

<sup>16</sup> *Liberia Herald* (Monrovia), February 16, 1826. For more information on the provenance of the printing press, see Charles Henry Huberich, *The Political and Legislative History of Liberia*, 342-344.

<sup>17</sup> In particular, colonists who traded with natives risked being depicted as neglecting the needs of the colony. "Examination of Thomas C. Brown: Trading with the Natives,"

*Herald* obscured the newspaper's complexity, it accurately captured colonizationists' obsession with distinguishing between practical and impractical activities.) Free and newly-emancipated people alike were encouraged to bring their dreams to the colony, but those dreams were often cut short by the material conditions of colonial life.

Force's brief career as editor exemplifies this spirit of dashed hopes. He only published one prospective issue of the *Herald* before he took ill and died—a fairly common state of affairs in the early years of the colony, whose high mortality rates provided ample fodder for critics of colonization.<sup>18</sup> It's unclear how many copies Force printed of his sole issue, or whether he intended it to be the first issue of the paper or simply a sample of what it could be.<sup>19</sup> The issue contained simply a short prospectus for the *Herald*, along with two articles, a few sample advertisements, and a marriage announcement.

Force's prospectus was an optimistic venture that laid out a future he wouldn't live to see: one in which Liberia played a key role in an intercontinental information

---

*Liberia Herald* (Monrovia), August 13, 1834. The distinction between literary reading and practical reading also shaped popular responses to the *Herald*, as will be shown in the final section of this chapter.

<sup>18</sup> "Mortality at Liberia," *Liberator* (Boston, MA), October 29, 1831.

<sup>19</sup> Sources disagree on the status of Force's publication. H. B. Cole claimed in 1971 that "only a few issues of the *Liberia Herald* appeared under [Force's] editorship, and such issues are now difficult to find," "The Press in Liberia," *Liberian Studies Journal* 4, no. 2 (1971-1972): 147-155, 147. It's unclear whether he means that Force published multiple copies of this issue, or that Force's print run continued beyond this prospectus. Carl Patrick Burrowes notes that the latter is particularly unlikely, "considering the penchant of the ACS for preservation of its records and celebration of its every advance." *Power & Press Freedom*, 49-50. That being said, neither of the two extant copies of Force's prospectus are actually contained in the ACS archive, and documentation beyond that point is difficult; it remains possible, although extremely improbable, that further issues were published before Force's death.

network. Force accordingly marks a clear distinction between the paper's global ambitions and its less-auspicious local value:

Various are the purposes which [the press] will subserve, but none appear more interesting than the regular issue of a periodical journal. A great variety of interesting intelligence is collected here from time to time, and the columns of a newspaper furnish the best medium for the diffusion of this intelligence to all parts of the world.

*To the Colony also it will be of essential service.* The circulation of religious intelligence among us, the promulgation of all public notices and new laws, the decisions of courts, the arrival and departure of vessels, the notice of marriages and deaths, both in this country and America, together with a variety of political and religious essays, which may occupy its columns will furnish the means of instruction and improvement to every family and school on many important branches of knowledge.<sup>20</sup> (*Emphasis mine*)

Force emphasizes two distinct purposes for the *Liberia Herald*. First, it will collect information from Africa and distribute it across the world—a function that would not only appeal to global curiosity about the continent and its peoples, but that would also facilitate American colonization by identifying and tracing the relationships between different African political powers. (This function is already at work in Force's lone issue, as one of its articles details the relationship between the colonial agent and local kings.) The second purpose speaks to the needs of colonists: as the emphasis on "circulation," "promulgation," and "instruction and improvement" suggests, the paper will mobilize information within the Liberian community for the benefit of those who live there. Force imagines the *Herald* as the linking mechanism between the African expansion of a global economy and the social uplift of black colonists.

But those two purposes hardly carry equal weight in Force's prophecy. His paragraphs arc from the "interesting" to the "essential": an African newspaper could be a

---

<sup>20</sup> *Liberia Herald* (February 16, 1826).

curiosity to the world at large, but could play a much more pivotal role within the colony itself. But Force, a new arrival himself, was acutely aware of the need to maintain outside interest and support for Liberia, whose future depended in part on convincing other black Americans to leave the US. When Force refers to his prospective Liberian audience with the qualifier that “To the Colony also it will be of essential service,” he highlights that readership as a secondary function of the paper. Even as Force specifically delineates the various purposes the newspaper could serve within Liberia, he subordinates those benefits to the paper’s primary goal: to ‘diffuse intelligence to all parts of the world.’ As Force saw it, the *Herald* would need to prioritize international “interest” over local readers.

Force’s implied balancing act between readers at home and those abroad remained an ongoing concern when the *Herald* was revived four years later under the pen of John Brown Russwurm. In 1830, Russwurm was likely the most experienced black journalist in the United States. He was certainly the most infamous. At the age of 27, Russwurm, along with Samuel Cornish, had helped to found and edit *Freedom’s Journal* (1827-1829), the first black newspaper in America. (Although as a historical aside, *Freedom’s Journal* was preceded by the *Liberia Herald*, which would have been the first paper run by an African American editor were it not for Force’s untimely death.) Russwurm became the paper’s sole editor soon after, a position which meant carefully navigating the difference between speaking to and speaking on behalf of black readers. In their first issue, Russwurm and Cornish declared “that a paper devoted to the dissemination of useful knowledge among our brethren, and to their moral and religious improvement, must meet with the cordial approbation of every friend to humanity.”

While the editors knew their paper would draw the attention of interested white readers, for good or ill, it was far from their greatest concern:

It is our earnest wish to make our Journal a medium of intercourse between our brethren in the different states of this great confederacy; that through its columns an expression of our sentiments, on many interesting subjects which concern us, may be offered to the publick: that plans which apparently are beneficial may be candidly discussed and properly weighed; if worthy, receive our cordial approbation; if not, our marked disapprobation.<sup>21</sup>

The editors of *Freedom's Journal*, like Charles Force, presented themselves as bridging two publics divided by race. But while the offer of “interesting subjects” to “the publick” may have a familiar ring, Russwurm and Cornish don’t actively pursue a white audience so much as they saw it as a logical result of their primary goal: bringing black readers into dialogue with one another.

But those black readers could not be taken for granted—a fact that would prove to be the end of both *Freedom's Journal* and Russwurm’s entire stateside career. The paper was of course vehemently opposed to slavery, but otherwise maintained a thin veneer of political neutrality whenever possible. Nevertheless, its self-proclaimed status as a “medium of intercourse” encouraged black contributors to take clear political positions. *Freedom's Journal* became the central stage for black writers and readers to debate African emigration and colonization. Russwurm not only published articles by prominent anti-colonization writers like David Walker, but adopted a fierce stance against the ACS himself; after the paper’s demise, one black minister praised the paper as the first and primary avenue through which black Americans could make their own anti-colonization

---

<sup>21</sup> “To Our Patrons,” *Freedom's Journal* (New York City), March 16, 1827.

feelings visible to the “public mind.”<sup>22</sup> But Russwurm was nonetheless uncertain about the prospects for justice in America, and after a year of increasing contact with ACS members (particularly ACS secretary Ralph Randolph Gurley), Russwurm declared in 1829 that “our views are materially altered”:

We have carefully examined the different plans now in operation for our benefit, and none we believe, can reach half so efficiently the mass, as the plan of colonization on the coast of Africa: for if we take a second look into any or all of them, we find them limited to a single city or state. We consider it mere waste of words to talk of every enjoying citizenship in this country: it is utterly impossible in the nature of things: all therefore who pant for these, must cast their eyes elsewhere.<sup>23</sup>

Russwurm was far from the only black American to support colonization; had he been, the project itself would have been virtually unrealizable, as plans for the Liberia colony depended as much on free emigrants as it did on the manumission of enslaved peoples. But to the audiences of *Freedom's Journal*, Russwurm's pro-colonization turn felt like a harsh betrayal, one made all the worse by the paper's claim to speak for all black Americans.<sup>24</sup> In response to the negative backlash and dwindling subscriptions, Russwurm shuttered *Freedom's Journal* in March 1829. That September, Russwurm set sail for Liberia to serve as superintendent of schools, colonial secretary, and new editor of the *Liberia Herald*. Like Charles Force, Russwurm's plans were scuttled when he contracted a severe fever shortly after arriving; unlike his unlucky predecessor, Russwurm got better.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Jacqueline Bacon, *Freedom's Journal*, 177-179. For a detailed account of Russwurm's early anti-colonization politics, see “*Freedom's Journal*: Pleading Our Own Cause” in Winston James, *The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm*, 26-43.

<sup>23</sup> *Freedom's Journal* (New York City), February 14, 1829.

<sup>24</sup> Jacqueline Bacon, *Freedom's Journal*, 63-64.

<sup>25</sup> Carl Patrick Burrowes, *Power and Press Freedom in Liberia, 1830-1970*, 19.

A number of historians have looked at the *Liberia Herald* as part of the longer narrative of Russwurm's life, but have generally downplayed its connections to the development of the African American periodical tradition.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the colonial paper developed in many ways out of the ashes of *Freedom's Journal*. Materially, the *Herald* looked nearly identical to the American paper: four folio pages of four columns each, with poetry and advertisements largely relegated to the back pages. The paper's ideological lineage, while more fraught, still carried traces of Russwurm's previous position. Under Russwurm and his successor, his rival Hilary Teage, the *Herald* worked to speak both to and for black Liberians. Like African American newspapers in the United States following *Freedom's Journal*, the *Herald* wanted to promote black uplift and the recognition of black accomplishments, but the paper's social position complicated those goals. The very existence of the *Liberia Herald* endorsed colonization, a project that Russwurm himself understood to mean leaving America behind. By the most generous reading, the *Herald* had ceded the fight for black rights within the United States; few were inclined to be generous. Samuel Cornish proclaimed that "Any coloured man of common intelligence" who supports colonization "should be considered a traitor to his brethren, and discarded by every respectable man of colour," a thinly-veiled allusion to Russwurm that David Walker went on to quote verbatim in his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829-1830).<sup>27</sup> The *Liberia Herald* thus occupied the

---

<sup>26</sup> Both Winston James and Adam Lewis discuss the links between *Freedom's Journal* and the *Liberia Herald* through the framework of Russwurm's biography. Jacqueline Bacon's book-length study of *Freedom's Journal* is a more typical example, notably relegating the *Liberia Herald* to three pages about Russwurm's later life.

<sup>27</sup> David Walker quotes and endorses Cornish's criticism in his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, 70. For more on the backlash against Russwurm's pro-colonization turn, see Adam Lewis' "'A Traitor to His Brethren'?" (2015)

paradoxical position of being one of the most visible black newspapers precisely because of its support of what we might today call an anti-African American political stance. In this sense, the *Herald* both extended and rejected the ideological work of black American papers.

While Russwurm was aware of his paper's impact across the Atlantic, it wasn't his primary concern. His first editorial from Liberia situates the *Herald* in between Force's initial proposal and *Freedom's Journal*, echoing Force's focus on spreading knowledge while switching priorities to focus on Liberia's underserved black community. The piece opens by noting that "A more general dissemination of knowledge, is certainly a subject deserving the serious consideration of every man of reflection," but for Russwurm, the *Herald's* greatest potential is more specifically to facilitate "the subject of education; as from it flows every comfort & blessing which society enjoys." Where Force looked to the white world, Russwurm situates his *Herald* in a larger black tradition: "As low as Africa has descended in the scale of nations," he writes, "she can with propriety claim the invention of letters, as the honor rests between the Egyptians and the Ethiopians." The paper may have been made possible by supporters of the ACS, but Russwurm sees it as the end result of a long lineage of African writing—not simply a product of repentant white benevolence.

While Russwurm denies that America is the basis for black achievement, he acknowledges its value as a model for realizing that achievement:

We are pilgrims in search of Liberty, and it is our duty to profit by the wisdom of those who have gone before us. I refer particularly to the pilgrim fathers of New England. Education was ever in their thoughts. No sooner had they erected their lowly dwellings than the school-house was the next object of consideration: and their thoughts were united with action. From the first settlement of the Colony, schools were put into



operation, and every encouragement was held out to literary men, to emigrate from the mother country. The schools which they established have been continued to the present day, and their descendants are now distinguished for their intelligence and learning. It follows then, if we wish for like results: if we wish for the blessing of posterity: if we wish for our names in after ages to be pronounced with reverence: *we must take like step: we must make like exertions.*<sup>28</sup>

By citing the United States—and specifically its origins in European expatriates—as a model to be emulated, Russwurm consciously undermines the idea that Liberian achievement should identify the US as its primary benefactor. Where Force foresaw the *Herald* as one component of a global intelligence-gathering machine, Russwurm imagines the world itself as a source of information for Liberia.

But Russwurm's time at *Freedom's Journal* had also made him wary about the dangers of hostile readers. His prospectus promised that the *Herald* would remain a civil space: "Our columns will ever be open to enlightened and liberal views on political subjects; but they shall never be made the channel of party prejudices, or personal abuse."<sup>29</sup> While Russwurm's call for civility within the *Herald* accurately predicted that the paper would be a vehicle for political sentiments within the colony, it also foresaw the dangers awaiting the paper outside of the colony.

As I shall demonstrate in the next two sections, he was right to worry. The early editors of the *Herald* both understood that the paper would be a shared text, one that would relate differently to very different internal and external reading audiences. For Russwurm, that status as a shared text could be its greatest boon, allowing the *Herald* to mobilize outside knowledge for the benefit of the colony. But that shared status also

---

<sup>28</sup> "To Our Readers," *Liberia Herald* (Monrovia), March 6, 1830. Qtd. in Winston James, *The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm*, 218-222.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

made the *Herald* uniquely vulnerable to political interference from outside the colony as well as within—interference that troubled the notion that those two audiences could ever be treated as wholly distinct.

**“Which Africk scans”: Reprinting the *Liberia Herald***

Russwurm was not alone in seeing the *Liberia Herald* as a beacon marking the return of letters to an Africa too long deprived of the written word. In the first stanza of her 1831 poem, “On the Publication of the Liberia Herald,” white American abolitionist and ACS supporter Lydia Huntley Sigourney apostrophizes the “Spirit of Science!—who so long / Expatriate from thy native sphere, / Has traced no line, and breath’d no song, / That dark, neglected land to cheer.” Her second and third stanzas follow suit, addressing the spirits of “Power” and “Piety” that have similarly abandoned their land of origin. But the forces that once enlivened Africa have not yet been completely lost, and they triumphantly return in the poem’s final stanzas:

Again ye wake!—ye thrill the soul!—  
Your resurrection morn appears,  
Ye pour your language o’er a scroll  
Which Africk scans through raptur’d tears;--

Bid your blest “*Herald’s*” wing expand  
From shore to shore, from wave to wave,--  
Till distant realms shall stretch the hand  
To strike the fetter from the slave.<sup>30</sup>

In her fourth stanza, Sigourney carefully delineates the impact of the *Herald*. The paper need not produce “Science,” “Power,” or “Piety”; those spirits are already immanent within Africa. But it can make those forces legible once more, in the form of “a scroll /

---

<sup>30</sup> “On the Publication of the Liberia Herald,” *African Repository* 6, no. 11 (January 1831): 350-351.

Which Africk scans through raptur'd tears;--." The *Herald* (and the process of writing, editing, and publishing the paper) is significant not because it generates information, but because it generates readers. The initial triumph of Sigourney's poem lies in her vision of "Africk" as an enlightened reading public.

But the poem undercuts the triumph of those lines (Africa reads once more) with the dash that promises more to come. In her fifth stanza, as the paper's "wing expand[s] / From shore to shore, from wave to wave," Sigourney suggests that Africa is only the first step in a larger progression, shifting in the process from the figure of the scroll being read to the figure of a bird crossing the ocean. Her imagery prefigures one of the colony's most important emblems: when Liberia announced its independence from the United States in 1847, its official seal included the image of "A dove on the wing with an open scroll in its claws," soaring above "a view of the ocean with a ship under sail."<sup>31</sup> The image is rich in significance, and different readings suggest that the bird could be carrying the promise of emancipation or Liberia's declaration of independence. David Kazanjian makes the compelling argument that the scroll, at times represented as a letter, evokes the epistolary archive which put black Liberians in dialogue with mainland Americans.<sup>32</sup> Through all of these readings, the image suggests the significance of print circulation to the emerging Liberian state.

Sigourney twists that imagery into a new form, though. Her *Herald* is not carried, but spreads its own wings; her scroll and her bird are one and the same. In this conflation of figures, the separate processes of writing, reading, and circulating a text coalesce into a single action. This conflation has its analog in the transition from "Africk" tearfully

---

<sup>31</sup> Charles Henry Huberich, *The Political and Legislative History of Liberia*, 836.

<sup>32</sup> David Kazanjian, *The Brink of Freedom*, 38-41.

reading to “distant realms” taking forceful action against slavery: once one action begins, Sigourney suggests, the other must follow.<sup>33</sup> Sigourney’s poem expresses the paradox of a journal that is meant to simultaneously speak directly to Africa while valuing Africa only as one segment of a larger mission. That paradox resonates throughout her medium of communication: produced by a white reader of the *Herald* and published in the *African Repository*, the poem addresses itself to Africa’s dormant Spirits in a magazine published and circulated primarily within the United States. Russwurm began editing the *Herald* intending to speak to a primarily Liberian audience, but Sigourney’s poem evokes the cycles of circum-Atlantic circulation that make it difficult to know to whom, and to what ends, the *Liberia Herald* is speaking at any one time. When does it write to a Liberian audience, and when to an American audience? More importantly, when does that distinction, like that between scroll and bird, begin to fade away?

We can begin answering these questions by considering the relative scales of these audiences. Reliable numbers are unattainable, but the *Herald* certainly had far more readers in America than in Liberia. When Liberia formally declared independence from the United States in 1847, the population of the colony was around 2,390; at that time, the *Herald* maintained an estimated circulation of around 500 copies per issue.<sup>34</sup> Information on readers from earlier years is harder to track down and requires some conjecture. In 1830, colonial agent Joseph Mechlin sent “300 copies of the first number of the *Liberia Herald*” to ACS secretary Ralph Randolph Gurley, hoping that they would “show to the

---

<sup>33</sup> Adam Lewis describes this process as one of simultaneity, in which “The publication of the newspaper in Africa and its global circulation simultaneously proclaims (‘herald’) and enacts (‘strike’) and end to slavery.” “‘A Traitor to His Brethren’?: John Brown Russwurm and the *Liberia Herald*,” 119.

<sup>34</sup> Carl Patrick Burrowes, *Power and Press Freedom*, 54

people at home that we are making greater progress than they are willing to give us credit for.”<sup>35</sup> The few available numbers for Liberian readers, in contrast, suggest a much smaller audience. In 1839, then-editor Hilary Teage wrote about increases in subscriptions, noting that “[today] we find we have in Liberia seventy-four subscribers; whereas, four months ago, we had only ten.”<sup>36</sup> If “Africk” was indeed tearfully scanning the *Herald*, as Sigourney’s poem suggests, she certainly wasn’t subscribing to it.

Then again, Teage also knew that a paper’s circulation was by no means confined to paid subscribers. In 1838 he published a “Dialogue; Between an Editor and His Neighbour,” in which a reader attempts to dictate an editor’s behavior before admitting not to subscribe to his paper: “Lord, I never took a paper in my life. The times don’t allow my taking papers-I borrow it every day of the barber who has took it these seven years.”<sup>37</sup> The piece mocks readers who believe that a paper they don’t pay for should nevertheless represent their point of view. (Given that the *Herald*’s publications costs were largely paid for by mainland American donors, we might justly ask what this tells us about Teage’s perspective on the paper’s intended audience.) The dialogue lacks attribution and may well be Teage’s own writing, but even if it is a reprint it suggests that the *Herald*’s Liberian readership was certainly larger than any subscription list could confirm.

But the same avenues of recirculation that likely boosted the *Herald*’s Liberian readership applied trebly for its American audiences. The most dedicated members of the ACS could directly subscribe to the *Herald*, and eagerly awaited its arrival every month.

---

<sup>35</sup> “Latest from Liberia,” *African Repository* 6, no. 2 (April 1830): 56.

<sup>36</sup> *Liberia Herald* (Monrovia), October 1839.

<sup>37</sup> “DIALOGUE,” *Liberia Herald* (Monrovia), June 1838.

Other members who lacked direct access to the paper could still read articles from the *Herald* on “African Customs” or new developments in Monrovia when they were reprinted in the pages of the *African Repository*.<sup>38</sup> And those articles, and others, were in turn reprinted in periodicals and magazines across the country; in 1833 alone, regional news from the *Herald* was excerpted in papers ranging from Portland, Maine to Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>39</sup>

Such second- and third-hand circulation was characteristic of what Meredith McGill has called the periodical “culture of reprinting” in the nineteenth-century, and the *Herald* was very much a product of that culture.<sup>40</sup> John Brown Russwurm was a prolific scavenger as well as a prolific writer, a fact that has challenged scholarly efforts to distinguish his writings from those he borrowed from others.<sup>41</sup> In a particularly extreme example, one early issue of the *Herald* featured no fewer than eleven pieces drawn from a single source: George Byrom Whittaker’s *Anecdote Library*.<sup>42</sup> But the *Herald* drew most

---

<sup>38</sup> These articles were reprinted in the June 1834 and July 1834 issues of the *African Repository*.

<sup>39</sup> “From Africa,” *Portland Advertiser* (Portland, ME), May 6, 1833; “From the Liberia Herald : The Quarra Expedition,” *The Southern Patriot* (Charleston, SC), March 13, 1833.

<sup>40</sup> In *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting* (2003), Meredith McGill traces the relationship between mass media, American and British literary identities, and the practices of frequent reprinting that enabled both to thrive.

<sup>41</sup> In *The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm*, Winston James erroneously attributes “Every Man the Architect of his Own Fortune” to Russwurm, describing it as “the most revealing indication of the creed by which Russwurm himself conducted his life” (225). While the piece appeared in both *Freedom’s Journal* (1828) and the *Liberia Herald* (1831), however, it circulated in the same form at least six years prior in John McDiarmid’s *The Scrap Book: A Collection of Amusing and Striking Pieces in Prose and Verse: 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, High-Street, 1822), 258-262.

<sup>42</sup> *Liberia Herald* (Monrovia), June 6, 1830. The excerpts in question comprise six stories on the first two pages (“Arthur Onslow,” “Dr. Dodd,” “Short Charity Sermon,” “Governor Wall,” “Cromwell’s Infancy,” and “Unprincipled Jury”) as well as five pieces of miscellany on the back page (“Origin of the Slave Trade,” “The Mariner’s Compass,”

of its material from foreign periodicals and magazines. Any given issue might reprint news about slavery abroad, general items of historical interest, and literary material. For instance, the February 22, 1834 *Herald* featured a report from England about a speech honoring the late abolitionist William Wilberforce; a story on an “Expedition from the Cape of Good Hope to the Interior of Africa”; an anthropological study of Sepoys in India from the *New York Standard*; and two poems by Lydia Huntley Sigourney herself, “Marriage Hymn” and “Hymn for a Sunday-School Scholar, at entering school.” (While Russwurm labels both of those poems as “For the Liberia Herald,” they originally circulated in the United States.<sup>43</sup>)

By reprinting texts from English and American periodicals, the *Herald* bridged its mainland and colonial audiences. But reprinting also brought with it new political challenges, particularly for supporters of colonization. *Freedom’s Journal* had brought together a new market of African American newspaper readers, and after that paper folded, a new wave of periodical and magazines arose to fill the gap left by its absence. None drew more attention than the *Liberator*, edited by Boston abolitionist William

---

“Teachicals” [sic], “Garrick,” and “Logan the Indian Chief”). George Byrom Whittaker was a London bookseller, renowned among other things for publishing a sixteen-volume translation of the Baron Georges Cuvier’s *Animal Kingdom*. (For more on *Animal Kingdom* and its recirculation, see Ch. 1 of this dissertation.) Whittaker’s *Anecdote Library* was published in multiple editions throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. The preface to his 1822 edition classified the anecdote as a universally accessible and beneficial form, describing the collection as “a garden, such as nature would produce, containing an inexhaustible variety of flowers, adapted to every taste.” It should be noted, however, that this appeal to “every taste” didn’t prevent Whittaker from incorporating explicitly anti-slavery stories in his “garden.” *Anecdote Library: Being the Largest Collection of Anecdotes Ever Assembled in a Single Volume* (London: George B. Whittaker, Ave-Maria Lane, 1822).

<sup>43</sup> “Marriage Hymn” appears in no less than the January 1834 edition of *Graham’s Magazine*, where it is attributed to the Hartford *Pearl*. “Hymn for a Scholar” originates from *Original Hymns for Sabbath Schools* (Boston: Lilly, Wait, Colman, & Holden, 1833), a small volume of hymns for children.

Lloyd Garrison.<sup>44</sup> In sharp contrast to the *Liberia Herald*, the *Liberator* was edited by a white man but was predominantly supported by black readers, who comprised most of Garrison's audience and provided most of the paper's financial support.<sup>45</sup> And when it came to colonization, Garrison's politics followed the inverse trajectory of Russwurm's. While Garrison was initially open to colonization as a possible solution to the evils of slavery, he quickly became its fiercest critic.

In 1832, Garrison published *Thoughts on African Colonization*, a pamphlet designed to catalog and broadcast the ACS' sins against black Americans. Garrison cites Job 15:6 prominently among its epigraphs: "Out of thine own mouth will I condemn thee."<sup>46</sup> True to that promise, he drew his evidence for each accusation from the *African Repository* (along with other material from the ACS' public records). Some sections feature dozens of such citations, all carefully curated for maximum impact. In Section III, entitled "Recognises Slaves as Property," Garrison only briefly introduces his accusation before unleashing his "proof": sixteen quotes and excerpts, ranging from the *African Repository*'s fourth volume ("The rights of masters are to remain sacred in the eyes of the Society"); a report on a speech by Henry Clay, first president of the ACS ("He was himself a slaveholder; and he considered that kind of property as inviolable as any other in the country"); and a pro-colonization pamphlet printed in Boston entitled "A new and interesting View of Slavery" ("I repeat, that though not a slaveholder, yet I think that

---

<sup>44</sup> Some of the more dramatic responses to the *Liberator* can be seen in Ch. 2 of this dissertation.

<sup>45</sup> Ousmane K. Power-Greene, *Against Wind and Tide*, 52. Power-Greene describes the *Liberator* as "the most important newspaper for the cause of freedom in the North" in the wake of *Freedom's Journal*.

<sup>46</sup> William Lloyd Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization* (Boston: Garrison and Knapp, 1832. Reprinted in New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968), Title page.



every man ought to be protected in his property, and as the laws of our country have decreed that negroes are property, every person that holds a slave, according to these laws, ought to be protected”).<sup>47</sup> In drawing his material from his enemies, Garrison’s work prefigures later anti-slavery works such as Theodore Dwight Weld’s *American Slavery As It Is* (1839), which bolstered its anti-slavery position by citing pro-slavery texts along with examples of advertisements and reports from pro-slavery newspapers.<sup>48</sup>

Garrison’s critique of the ACS relies on positioning himself not as an innate opponent to colonization, but rather as a careful reader. As Garrison narrates, he first had “an array of motives before me to bias my judgment” in favor of colonization until he “resolved to make a close and candid examination of the subject”:

I went, first of all, to the fountain head—to the African Repository and the Reports of the Society. I was not long in discovering sentiments which seemed to me as abhorrent to humanity as contrary to reason. I perused page after page, first with perplexity, then with astonishment, and finally with indignation. I found little else than sinful palliations, fatal concessions, vain expectations, exaggerated statements, unfriendly representations, glaring contractions, naked terrors, deceptive assurances, unrelenting prejudices, and unchristian denunciations. I collected together the publications of auxiliary societies, in order to discern some redeeming traits ; but I found them marred and disfigured with the same disgusting details. I courted the acquaintance of eminent colonizationists, that I might learn how far their private sentiments agreed with those which were so offensive in print; and I found no dissimilarity between them. I listened to discourses from the pulpit in favor of the Society; and the same moral obliquities were seen in minister and people.<sup>49</sup>

Garrison’s enemies may have been the people who supported and proselytized colonization across the country, but his identification of *The African Repository* and the

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 69-70.

<sup>48</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery As It Is* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839).

<sup>49</sup> William Lloyd Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization*, 5.

Annual Reports as “the fountain head” suggests the inextricability of the ideological movement from the texts it puts forth. By Garrison’s metric, circulating texts and periodicals provide the kind of reliable evidence of intention that could otherwise be obscured in individual interactions.

By citing ACS publications, Garrison posed a sobering rejoinder to the idea that the Society could control the spread of its message. As much a curated anthology as it is a condemnation, *Thoughts on African Colonization* effectively pits the ACS against its own substantial media presence. The colonization movement was particularly well-situated to take advantage of antebellum mass media, with supporters from a wide range of ideological positions prepared to circulate their ideas in magazines and newspapers, pamphlets, and public speeches. The possibilities of mass distribution allowed the ACS to target otherwise vastly disparate audiences, and different individuals and texts could tailor their message to different agendas. Garrison was not wrong in identifying the Society as a friend to the slaveholder—his archival evidence remains as fundamentally valid now as it was two centuries ago—but it’s equally true that many supporters of colonization identified themselves as strict opponents to America’s ‘peculiar institution.’<sup>50</sup> But by collecting and redeploying the Society’s own printed material against it, Garrison makes the case that no individual’s stated goals, however ethical they may appear, can withstand the underlying abuses of the colonization movement. A more generous reader than Garrison might have argued that the nature of mass circulation simply rendered the Society unable to police its members’ speech acts to ensure that they matched the Society’s larger ethical goals of relieving beleaguered African Americans; as

---

<sup>50</sup> Beverly C. Tomek describes the overlaps between immediatists, gradualists, and colonizationists in Philadelphia in *Colonization and Its Discontents* (2011).

Garrison presents it, printed texts prove colonizationists' intentions more truthfully than they themselves might realize.

The *Liberia Herald* was particularly vulnerable to Garrison's policy of oppositional reprinting. The *Liberator*'s audience comprised for the most part immediate abolitionists and free black Americans, many of whom had supported *Freedom's Journal* in its heyday. For those readers, the *Herald* was inexorably tainted by its association with Russwurm: "After [Russwurm] subverted the pledge he made to his colored brethren," wrote one black reader, "he left, to our satisfaction, his country—suffused with shame—and branded with the stigma of disgrace—to dwell in that land for which the tempter MONEY caused him to avow his preferment."<sup>51</sup> For his part, Garrison himself labeled Russwurm as "a traitor and a hireling."<sup>52</sup> But the *Herald* nonetheless provided useful material to undermine lofty claims about the merits of colonization. When the *Herald* published news about recent deaths in the colony, Garrison and his readers compared the article to letters from the colony in search of inconsistencies.<sup>53</sup> And when ACS Secretary R. R. Gurley claimed in 1833 that the colony had suppressed the slave trade, Garrison cited a *Herald* article saying that, "*This trade has been gradually acquiring strength for the last four years.*"<sup>54</sup> The *Herald* responded as best it could, both by publishing original material responding directly to Garrison's accusations and by reprinting articles mocking Garrison (and other anti-colonization activists) from other sources.<sup>55</sup> But the nature of

---

<sup>51</sup> "Liberia Herald," *Liberator* (Boston), April 16, 1831.

<sup>52</sup> "Liberia Herald—John B. Russwurm," *Liberator* (Boston), February 25, 1832. See also Adam Lewis' "'A Traitor to His Brethren?'"

<sup>53</sup> "Liberia," *Liberator* (Boston), November 12, 1831.

<sup>54</sup> "Mr. Gurley in Boston," *Liberator* (Boston), November 30, 1838.

<sup>55</sup> In 1831, Russwurm published a brief response to Garrison's writing on mortality in the colony. "Mortality at Liberia Among the emigrants, per Volador of Baltimore," *Liberia*

oppositional reprinting meant that even seemingly-apolitical components of the *Herald* could be mobilized against it.

Such reprinting meant that the *Herald* had to carefully balance its function as a symbol in America against its utilitarian values for Liberian readers. That division came to a head in 1833, when Garrison's friend Charles Denison (editor of the New York *Emancipator*) excerpted several advertisements and current price listings for "Ardent Spirits" from the *Liberia Herald* under the title of "More 'Missionary Intelligence' from Liberia." Denison followed this up by citing a letter ("written, we presume, by J. B. Russwurm") that refers to buying land with rum, directing his readers to "Mark... [that] the above is omitted from the religious and colonization papers!":

Here, then, we have it from the colonists themselves—these *devoted* missionaries—that they resort to 'palaver,' and the traffic in RUM, to obtain from the poor, blind, perishing heathen their property, that they may give them in exchange—not the word of life—but pollution, disease, and death! O, wondrous wisdom! that seeks to enlighten Afric by such means! O, strange philanthropy! that seeks to cast intelligent colored men among such a horde of traffickers as these!<sup>56</sup>

Denison juxtaposes the lofty rhetoric of colonial missionary labor against the material reality of rum trading in order to reveal that they are one and the same. But he also performs a similar action at the formal level, juxtaposing the textual content of Russwurm's letter against the seemingly paratextual matter of the *Herald*'s advertising. Denison dismantles the idea that the *Herald*'s ideological mission and its daily practices

---

*Herald* (Monrovia), December 22, 1831. The June 7, 1834 issue reprints a satire from the *U.S. Gazette* mocking Garrison as being "so continually occupied (we mean his time) with the cause of the colored people, that he never has, too our knowledge, taken to himself a wife, though we see no reason why he should not "lead about a wife or a sister," as well as any other; and of course, we have felt afraid that his good *name* would perish with him."

<sup>56</sup> "More Missionary Intelligence From Liberia [From the *Emancipator*]," *Liberator* (Boston), October 5, 1833.

could be discrete components, even as his aside—“Mark, reader, the above is omitted from the religious and colonization papers!”—invites readers to see the implicit division between text and paratext as a tool to obscure the sinful nature of colonization.

Russwurm responded in the *Herald* to point out that alcohol was never produced in Liberia, and only advertised: “instead of carping at us, for doing the latter, it would equally as well become the editor of the Emancipator to begin his labor of love on his side of the water and keep the poison from being sent here to gull our poor natives, who are such sots, that, with a bottle of rum in one hand, and a few beads in the other, you can effect any bargain you please with them.” As Russwurm presents it, listing alcohol prices—while undesirable—is an inevitable side effect of Liberia’s larger participation in a circum-Atlantic economy. Nor, Russwurm suggests, can the *Liberia Herald* be shamed out of its economic function: “our course has been untrammelled, and we are not to be driven from the even tenor of our way by angry denunciations. Ardent spirits, we have advertised for sale: and if proper we will do the same again, without holding ourselves amenable to his rebuff.”<sup>57</sup> Russwurm’s primary goal, in other words, was to declare that the *Herald* would not have the terms of its publication dictated to it by political enemies across the sea.

As if to hammer home the idea that the *Herald* could advertise “ardent spirits” without endorsing their use, the last page of that issue featured an advertisement for brandy, gin, wine (“in Cases and Casks”), and rum, as well as the pithy thought that “The sight of a man intoxicated, is the best lesson of sobriety.”<sup>58</sup> Russwurm ends the issue on a note of defiance. But in future issues, the “Wholesale Prices Current” section ceased

---

<sup>57</sup> “Ardent Spirits,” *Liberia Herald* (Monrovia), December 1833.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

listing alcohol prices entirely, while ads for alcohol became rarer and were frequently accompanied by articles on temperance, either home or abroad. That might simply reflect a larger turn toward temperance in general, but it also suggests that Russwurm had ceded the cause to the Garrisonians.

The loss of liquor prices from the *Herald* likely didn't make a huge material dent on local trading, but it suggested the impact that the *Herald's* status as a shared text had on Russwurm's priorities. In making the paper less useful to traders in the colony in order to deflect criticism from Denison and other abolitionists, Russwurm prioritizes the reactions of hostile white readers over the paper's local utility. To recognize this, however, invites a new question: if curated reprinting from white abolitionists across the wide Atlantic could shape the *Herald's* publishing practices, to what extent could the paper truly be controlled by black Africans? My next section will explore this question in more detail by examining the end of Russwurm's tenure as editor. Over the course of what I call the Temple arguments, white ACS officials and black Liberian colonists enacted political pressure over the *Herald* in ways that further blurred the lines between the paper's international and Liberian identity.

### **Colonial Authority and the Temple Arguments**

Thus far, I have endeavored to show how the *Herald's* participation in a global network of readers was envisioned at a local as well as an international scale. In 1834, a series of events I call "The Temple Arguments" placed those two ideas of what Liberian letters could—and should—be in stark contrast to one another. That May, a series of letters written by James Temple, a black Presbyterian Reverend who had served as a

missionary in Liberia, appeared in Baltimore's *Genius of Universal Emancipation*.

Temple had initially been eager to move to Africa, but his experiences in the colony quickly changed his mind: "It is a good place for the natives themselves," he writes, "but it does not suit any other living animal on earth that is born any where else... It is but few that escape the fever and man die with it, and they who escape death only live to drag out a miserable, unhappy life." One letter posits that the ACS "pretend[s] to send [black Americans] to be free, but they are slaves to the Colonization Society, and that society have murdered more unhappy slaves than the slave holders have done for twenty years in all the slave islands"; another catalogs the varied things in Liberia that can kill people, including "Drivers, bugabugs, claw scorpions, spiders, ants of a hundred kinds, lizards thousands, snakes thousands, tigers many, leopards, monkeys, wild cats of many kinds, antelopes, a thing like a spider, it has three mouths, it comes in the house in the night and crawls on the wall."<sup>59</sup> As described by Temple, the dream of colonization resolved itself into a quite literal nightmare.

Temple's comments were in many ways unremarkable, offering only further documentary proof of what anti-colonization supporters like Garrison and Denison had already proclaimed—although that didn't stop either of them from gleefully reprinting the letters in the *Liberator* and the *Emancipator*, respectively.<sup>60</sup> But Temple's letters did more than simply testify against conditions in the Liberia colony. Arriving at a time of political crisis in the colony, these letters catalyzed the replacement of John Brown

---

<sup>59</sup> Untitled Letter from Joshua Coffin, *Genius of Universal Emancipation* 1, no. 5 (May 1834): 74-75.

<sup>60</sup> "Important From Liberia," *Emancipator* (New York City), May 6, 1834; "Picture of Liberia! [From the Genius of Universal Emancipation]," *Liberator* (Boston), May 31, 1834.

Russwurm as editor of the *Herald* and his replacement by Hilary Teage. But more importantly, public responses to these letters show how the *Liberia Herald* was most vulnerable to interference by white authorities at precisely the moments that it prioritized local over international speech.

Temple's letters inspired a fierce conflict in the pages of the *Liberia Herald* between two colonists, Baptist minister Hilary Teage (writing as "T.") and local merchant Joseph Dailey—an argument that quickly blurred the lines between public and private discourse. In his initial response, Hilary Teage sought to defend Liberia from the "thick-head" and "selfish" Temple, whom he describes as "a hanger on of the Presbyterian Mission." In particular, Teage eviscerates the "great discrepance, between [Temple's] professions and declarations to us here, and the sentiments expressed in his letters," musing "whether he is to be more pitied as an igonoramus [sic], or detested as a liar." Teage's most revealing accusation arrives at the end of his letter, when he advises Temple "to publish a history of his adventures":

His fertile genius can furnish circumstances, and incidences sufficient, for a large volume, and as they would be certain of extensive circulations among a certain class of people in America, the process would enable him to cross his legs, and sing "*begone dull care*;" while less felicitous brethren would have to continue to beat the laborious and monotonous round of missionary labor in their respective fields of labor.<sup>61</sup>

As Teage puts it, Temple has colluded with the abolitionist press and betrayed his "less felicitous brethren" in Liberia. Teage frames that treachery through the distinction between "his professions and declarations to us here" and the "extensive circulations" he could receive in America": Temple has not simply abandoned Liberia, Teage suggests, but has done so as a calculated choice to participate in a wider American public sphere.

---

<sup>61</sup> "TEMPLE'S LETTERS," *Liberia Herald* (Monrovia), August 13, 1834.



While Teage positioned himself as the colony's defender, Joseph Dailey had come to despise life in Liberia: as such, he praises Temple's "unquestionable piety" and maligns "the phrenzied and incoherent allegations of T." After pointing out that Teage has passed judgement on Temple while demonstrating "nothing but poverty of thought—sterility of ideas—bold assertions, and vulgar epithets," Dailey proceeds to assault his rival's writing:

We next, proceed to arraign our erudite aspirant, for the commission of a *most egregious tautology*. Viz: "*Missionary labor in their respective fields of labor*." Syntax bleeds at this perversion of rule and smiling school-boys feel amused at their juvenile superiority, to mature ignorance. Esculapius frowns upon such aspirations to his parentage, and stamps his bastardy with the seal of contempt. We should be cautious how we cast stones, when our tenements are composed of as brittle substances as those of our neighbors.<sup>62</sup>

Dailey spends as much time drawing attention to his own breadth of knowledge as he does belittling Teage. This excerpt neatly characterizes Dailey's elevated language ("our erudite aspirant") and his use of classical alongside colloquial references ("Esculapius frowns," "we should be careful how we cast stones"). In the process, Dailey shifts the argument: rather than opposing Teage's narrative, he turns to focus on his rival's writing skills. His main criticism against Teage centers on his lack of cultural sophistication. Where Teage complained about Temple's choice to participate in a larger public, Dailey insults Teage by suggesting that he is unable to do so. Teage presents himself with the wounded air of a loyal colonist; Dailey takes up the role of the cosmopolitan wit.

Teage identified Dailey as such in his one published response, accusing him of "wish[ing] to astonish 'dull Liberians,' with an over powering blaze of your literary abilities, and charm them into extacy with one your of [sic] syren songs" and labeling his

---

<sup>62</sup> *Liberia Herald* (Monrovia), September 26, 1834.

rival a “‘Jack o’ lantern’... calculated to scintillate only in the peatiferous marshes of vanity, scurility [sic] and contemptible wit.”<sup>63</sup> Teage’s invocation of “dull Liberians” hits hardest, both implying that Dailey views himself as above other colonists and charging him with literary pretensions. In spite of this charge, though, Teage’s response still spends most of its time cataloging Dailey’s referential and spelling errors. In short, a battle over claims to truth in representation—and specifically about the public perception of colonization and Liberia—morphs into a fight over grammar, and over the literary appropriateness of each side’s writing.

Both Teage and Dailey embodied opposing models of Liberian identity. Teage martyrs himself as a loyal Liberian beset by outsiders like Temple (an agent of “the abolitionists, alias enemies, of Liberia”) and Dailey (who seeks “to astonish ‘dull Liberians,’ with an over powering blaze of [his] literary abilities”). Dailey, in contrast, embraces a cosmopolitan identity befitting a traveling merchant: his writing alternates between literary references (citing Asclepius, Pope, and Shakespeare) and florid attacks on Teage’s “poverty of thought—sterility of ideas—bold assertions, and vulgar epithets.” Teage imagines Liberia as a sanctuary from the cruelties of the world, while Dailey suggests the colony is simply one more participant in a vibrant circum-Atlantic culture. It’s unclear exactly why *Russwurm* published these letters, but in doing so he enabled a vibrant debate about Liberian identity that would have been inconceivable in any other periodical, one that drew on personal and political enmity to inform a larger debate about what black civil society could—or should—look like to the rest of the world.

---

<sup>63</sup> *Liberia Herald* (Monrovia), October 29, 1835.

This argument would have major ramifications for the *Herald*. By January, 1835, white colonial agent John B. Pinney removed Russwurm as editor of the *Liberia Herald*, and replaced him with none other than Teage. Pinney accounted for this decision by blaming “the highly offensive character of several pieces lately admitted into its columns & especially an article by Mr Daily in the December No.”—an issue that had been recalled after only twelve copies had been printed.<sup>64</sup> Pinney had some reason to connect Dailey’s words to Russwurm: the two were business partners, and advertisements for “Dailey & Russwurm” appeared frequently in the back pages of the *Herald*. Russwurm, for his part, saw it as a conspiracy between Pinney, who had attempted to exercise control of the press previously, and “my enemies the Teages.”<sup>65</sup> And to make matters even more complicated, Pinney was also enemies with Temple. The two had traveled to Liberia on the same boat when Pinney remarked “that his Education had induced him to be prejudiced against the people of colour,” a comment that soon spread throughout the colony.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Pinney to Gurley, January 7, 1835. While the Temple debates catalyzed Pinney’s actions, however, he admits that they were not the only problem with the *Herald*: while praising Teage, Pinney notes that “in [his] hands we may expect the *Liberia Herald* to improve,” and he also complains about the printer, James Minor, as “both lazy and insolent,” suggesting material problems with the paper.

<sup>65</sup> Pinney and Russwurm had a host of other problems; the agent blamed Russwurm (who also served as Colonial Secretary) for poor negotiations during the Society’s attempt to buy land at Bassa Cove, and had accused him of fraudulently extorting over \$1700 through duplicate receipts. Pinney to Gurley, May 1834 (Exact Date Illegible). When justifying his decision to fire Russwurm from the *Herald*, though, Pinney explicitly blames the Temple argument—a decision that indicates either that Pinney thought it was a greater offense, or that he felt it would appeal more to the ACS’ expectations for colonial behavior. For his part, Russwurm saw the Teages as working to actively undermine (or in the case of the *Herald* usurp) Russwurm’s authority within the colony. Russwurm to Gurley, October 5, 1835.

<sup>66</sup> In a letter to the ACS Board of Managers, Agent James Brown writes:

I list these relationships not to trace a complex historical narrative of accusations, but rather to show how, under Russwurm's tenure, the *Liberia Herald's* status as a shared text could change the way the argument played out for the paper's varied audiences. Mainland readers would have seen a debate delineated by three key figures: Dailey, "T.," and Temple himself. This perspective emphasized the international antagonism between the AASS and Liberian colonists. Colonial readers, in contrast, saw a much more complicated social struggle between four key individuals—Russwurm and Pinney in addition to Teage and Dailey—in which Temple himself served as little more than a catalyst. Readers in Liberia, in short, were primed to see the Temple debate less as an argument about American perceptions of Liberia than as a struggle for power between a white Colonial Agent and a black publisher.

Most strikingly, neither of these concerns about representation can be separated from the formal criticisms that comprise the majority of Teage's and Dailey's responses to one another. The two writers snidely point out one another's grammatical errors, misspellings, or inappropriate citations, an emphasis on literary form that calls attention to the formal structures of propriety in public discourse. In the midst of an ongoing argument about who has the right to represent Liberia, and how Liberia should be

---

In your selection of Agent since I left the United States have been most unfortunate. I know Gentlemen you thought as I did that Mr Pinney was a most excellent choice – but we both have been mistaken. He has rendered himself very unpopular from this circumstances... When Mr P was on his passage here he mentioned in the hearing of some of the Coloured passengers that his Education had induced him to be prejudiced against the people of colour. Mr. [James] Temple observed to him he thought he was a very unfit person to govern a coloured community this saying of Mr. P.'s, of course was soon spread in the colony and was calculated to do a great deal of harm in such a community as ours although there was many as well as myself who would put the most charitable constructions upon such observations yet they were very improper. James Brown to "Gentlemen of the Board of Managers AC Society," May 15, 1835.

described, Teage and Dailey dictate the appropriate forms of writing in general while taunting one another about the way their language is seen by others.

At every level—the political, the ideological, the social, and even the formal—the Temple arguments reveal a bitter ongoing debate about the appropriate means for the *Liberia Herald* to move between colonial and mainland reading publics. Teage emerged as victor, claiming the position of editor after Russwurm's removal. Russwurm's career in African colonization was far from over—in 1836 he became governor of Maryland in Africa, a nearby colony that would in fact become part of Liberia after Russwurm's death—but he never again wrote for the *Liberia Herald*. But Pinney's role in Teage's appointment raised tangible doubts about the distribution of power in the colony, as well as about the identity of the *Herald* as an African newspaper.

Russwurm himself raised these questions in a letter mailed out to foreign newspapers in March 1835 (and reprinted, ironically enough, in Garrison's *Liberator*). Signing the letter as "Late Editor of the Liberia Herald, &c.," Russwurm lays out the case against him:

By virtue of his sovereign authority, without assigning any cause, or bringing any charge, Mr. Pinney has removed me from office, for the mere insertion of a controversial piece, with the author's name affixed, in which there were a few innuendoes, perhaps referring to him, he has given the Colonial press to another... I cannot offer an explanation through the columns of the Liberia Herald, as the right of control lately assumed by the Agent would prevent its appearance. With reluctance therefore, I am compelled to appear in foreign columns, and appeal to a candid public for that justice, which the sovereign sway of the Colonial Agent of our free and happy country, denies me in the land of my adoption.<sup>67</sup>

Throughout the letter, Russwurm avoids referring to Teage by name, even when he later directly calls for others to testify to his successor's character. Rather, Russwurm

---

<sup>67</sup> "Trouble in Liberia: To the Public," *Liberator* (Monrovia), May 9, 1835.

emphasizes Pinney's role in the proceedings, even identifying Pinney—rather than Teage—as the figure who prevents his writing from appearing in the *Herald*. On the one hand, this surely reflects Russwurm's animus towards his political rival; on the other hand, it also formally performs the erasure of black labor from the *Liberia Herald*. As Russwurm presents it, the *Herald* can no longer elevate Africans, or Africa itself, once the white Colonial Agent has become its editor in all but name.

Russwurm constructs a familiar narrative of white American tyranny over black colonial labor—in a sense, a narrative of re-colonization. But that story of external interference is confused by Russwurm's own means of communication. Writing to “foreign columns” and “appeal[ing] to a candid public,” Russwurm suggests that his career could be saved with external influence. But, strikingly, he also uses this letter to call for support from within the colony: “Speak, fellow-citizens of Liberia for I appeal to you.” Did Russwurm expect this letter to reach the ears of his fellow colonists? Or did he simply summon their voices to express the larger indignity of Pinney's tyranny over a community of purportedly free men? Either way, it was unsuccessful—but in the very difficulty of drawing that distinction between rhetorical apostrophe and direct address, Russwurm's final letter as the “Late Editor of the Liberia Herald” shows how much the paper had become inextricable from a larger circumatlantic sphere of periodical publishing. As “fellow-citizens of Liberia” and “foreign columns” seem to collapse into one another, Russwurm suggests that from his perspective, the lines between local and international readers had at last collapsed. What, then, did it mean to identify the *Herald* as an African newspaper? To conclude this chapter, I turn to Lucian Minor's article on

“Liberian Literature” to show how white American authors incorporated the idea of black African literacy—and literature—into the schema of American racial politics.

### **The African Newspaper and the Literary Marketplace**

In the same 1833 *Emancipator* article in which he critiques the *Herald*’s intemperate advertising, Charles Denison describes “THE APPEARANCE OF THE PAPERS THEMSELVES”: “They are so stained with the dampness of the climate as to be scarcely legible, and they emit a smell like grass which has been for months soaking in water.” He goes on to quote the same issue’s account of the colony’s recent rain, opining “What a delightful and salubrious climate it must be where the ‘rainy season’ is thirty consecutive days in setting in!”<sup>68</sup> As Denison presents it, the paper’s waterlogged condition was testimony to the condition of life in Liberia.<sup>69</sup> But the abolitionist’s childlike pleasure in the grotesqueries of the paper belies a deeper distaste for the paper’s African-ness: no matter how far the *Herald* travels, Denison suggests, it must be irrevocably marked as inferior to other papers by its material origins.

The *Herald*’s production was often fraught, as Russwurm himself acknowledged in his response to Denison. But rather than defy Denison’s implied opposition between the *Herald* and American papers, Russwurm embraced that difference:

Respecting the Herald, we know that our Nrs. have not that finished appearance which newspapers have, issuing from the presses at home, under the hands of regular journeymen. What little knowledge we have acquired of printing, has been self taught, and we believe such is the case

---

<sup>68</sup> “More Missionary Intelligence from Liberia [From the *Emancipator*.],” *Liberator* (Boston), October 5, 1833.

<sup>69</sup> Adam Lewis describes this as a process of “attach[ing] both aesthetic and political meaning to the paper’s material aspects in addition to the content of Russwurm’s editorials.” Adam Lewis, “‘A Traitor to His Brethren’?,” 120.

with our printer, and it is our candid opinion, that we deserve more credit than otherwise, for our perseverance amidst the many discouragements which we have had to encounter in putting the press into operation. Little does a white editor, in New-York, surrounded by numerous friends & correspondents, a complete printing office, and regular workmen, think of the difference of his situation, with that of another of the same vocation in Africa when he begins to criticize on the appearance even of the number of an African Journal.<sup>70</sup>

As Russwurm puts it, the *Herald*'s lack of "that finished appearance which newspapers have" testifies to the endurance and will of its creators. In contrast to these "self-taught" Africans, Russwurm describes the material luxuries available to a wealthy white American. This tactic initially risks validating Denison's implicit claim of Liberian inferiority: the best resources available within the Liberia colony could scarcely compare to the most modest resources available to an American editor. But Russwurm also accuses Denison of forgetting their different positions, precisely at the moment that Denison most emphasizes material difference. Russwurm's comment anticipates the anonymous letter, cited in the epigraph, reminding abolitionists that black supporters of colonization are still black.

But if the *Herald* galvanized abolitionists such as Denison and Garrison to look down on the newspaper, it went on to draw praise from equally strange sources. In this section, I will examine Lucian Minor's 1836 review of "Liberian Literature" from the *Southern Literary Messenger*. By opening this chapter on Hale's retrospective account of the paper and closing on Minor's contemporary review, I hope to demonstrate the tangible impacts of the *Herald* on America's literary market. Both Minor and Hale wrote about the *Herald* after Russwurm had been replaced as editor by his rival, Hilary Teage. But these texts refer less to any specific editor than to the broad stakes of Liberian

---

<sup>70</sup> "The Emancipator." *Liberia Herald* (Monrovia), December 1833.



writing. These texts are particularly striking in that they each embody different aspects of pro-slavery ideology and white supremacy: where Hale proclaimed her black characters to be culturally inferior to her white heroes, Minor grounds his laudatory account of the paper in biological racism. As I will demonstrate, though, Minor's review shows how the geographic and cultural distance implied by the *Liberia Herald* created new avenues to imagine black participation in American literary life.

The *Southern Literary Messenger* was the last place anybody would have expected to see a positive review of the *Liberia Herald*. Published in Virginia since 1834 and edited at the time by a young Edgar Allan Poe, the *Messenger* built its reputation on two premises: first, that American literary production was dominated by self-promoting Northern authors (particularly in Boston); and second, that Southern literature could not thrive without institutional support from literary magazines. In the magazine's first issue, James Ewell Heath describes the marginalization of Southern writers:

Are we to be doomed forever to a kind of vassalage to our northern neighbors—a dependence for our literary food upon our brethren, whose superiority in all the great points of character,—in valor—eloquence and patriotism, we are no wise disposed to admit? Is it not altogether extraordinary that in this extensive commonwealth, containing a white population of upwards of six hundred thousand souls—a vast deal of agricultural wealth, and innumerable persons of both sexes, who enjoy both leisure and affluence—there is not one solitary periodical exclusively literary?<sup>71</sup>

The *Messenger* resented the literary “vassalage” and “dependence” imposed on Southern writers by the gatekeepers of American literature. As such, no magazine was more keenly aware of the cultural capital of “literature” as a category, and the *Messenger* frequently reviewed other literary periodicals from America and England. But as Heath's emphasis

---

<sup>71</sup> Untitled, *Southern Literary Messenger* 1, no. 1 (August 1834): 1-2.

on the “white population” of the South makes clear, the *Messenger* was also an ideological product of chattel slavery. While the *Messenger* often avoided taking direct stances on racism—a position Terence Whalen describes as a cultivated “average racism” that appealed to white readers on all sides of slavery—its position was generally in favor of slavery and against any form of abolitionism.<sup>72</sup>

Readers were therefore likely surprised to encounter an article called “Liberian Literature” in the *Messenger*. As Minor presents it, he was surprised to write it:

We are perfectly serious in speaking of *Liberian Literature*. Yes—in Liberia, a province on the coast of Africa, where, thirteen years and a half ago, the tangled and pathless forest frowned in a silence unbroken save by the roar of wild beasts, the fury of the tornado, the whoop of the man-stealer, or the agonizing shrieks of his victims on being torn from their homes to brave the horrors of the Middle Passage and of the West Indies—in Liberia, the English language is now spoken ; the English spirit is breathed ; English Literature exists ; and with it, exist those comforts, virtues, and pleasures, which the existence of Literature necessarily implies.<sup>73</sup>

Minor presupposes that Liberian literature should be a contradiction in terms, offering a sonic catalog of ‘silence,’ roars, furies, whoops, and shrieks as the expected forms of African self-representation. But unlike Denison’s earlier review, which evoked Africa only to belittle the *Herald*, Minor quickly undermines the idea that geography determines literary merit. His initial subject of “*Liberian Literature*”—and that literature’s geographic context in familiar representations of Africa—quickly transforms into “English Literature [that] exists” in Liberia. And even the emphasis on “English Literature” falls away by the sentence’s end, with Minor now taking as his subject “the existence of Literature” without qualification. This formal distillation entails a

---

<sup>72</sup> Terence Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses*, 111-112.

<sup>73</sup> Lucian Minor, “Liberian Literature,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 2, no. 3 (February 1836): 158.

compelling argument, and one that resonates with the *Messenger*'s larger goals: like "Southern" literature, Minor suggests "Liberian" literature is just another subcategory of the larger field of meaningful literary production. As Minor moves from "Liberian Literature" to a category we might call 'literature in Liberia,' he suggests a global literature very much in line with Charles Force's initial vision of a newspaper's purpose. Or to put it more bluntly, Minor praises the *Liberia Herald* precisely to the extent that it exceeds its point of origin.

Minor doesn't deny the paper's African-ness, but he vacillates between situating the *Herald* in a circum-Atlantic literary marketplace on the one hand, and dramatically racializing the paper on the other. As Minor puts it, to circulate within literary circles is to be literary: "What we especially had in view, however, was neither rhapsody nor dissertation upon the march of Liberia to prosperity and civilization—unparalleled as that march is, in the annals of colonization—but a notice (a *critical notice*, if the reader please) of the aforesaid newspaper; by way of *instancing* the literary condition of the settlement." Minor's argument becomes a self-validating tautology in which Minor needn't argue *for* the literary merit of the paper, since he couldn't write a "*critical notice*" if it didn't already have such merit.

The *Herald*'s function within a larger literary marketplace is evident, to Minor, by the fact that it is not only a shared text itself, but is also capable of receiving and responding to other prominent shared texts. Minor's review draws particular attention to the paper's "greatest curiosity": "a *critique* upon Miss Fanny Kemble's Journal," written by Hilary Teage. Frances Anne Butler (*nee* Fanny Kemble's) *Journal*, recounting the celebrated British actress' marriage to American plantation-owner Pierce Butler and their

subsequent travels in the Americas, drew attention from publishers and readers eager to know what the foreign celebrity would say about the United States. But many Americans also saw Kemble as inappropriately outspoken for a woman, and the reception of Kemble's *Journal* was characterized by three concerns: her status as a British celebrity; her flippancy towards American culture; and her failure to adhere to a properly feminine ideal. An earlier review in the *Messenger* critiqued Kemble's "innumerable faults of language, her sturdy prejudices, her hasty opinions, and her ungenerous sarcasms"—flaws that were "often characterized by a vehemence which is very like *profanity*, an offence that would not be tolerated in a writer of the other sex."<sup>74</sup> For male writers concerned with establishing an American high culture, Kemble embodied the epitome of the judgmental outsider. Public but too public, in proximity to America but distinctly not American; Kemble's liminal social status made her uniquely susceptible to criticism, even from such a source as the *Liberia Herald*.

Fully excerpted in Minor's article, the *Herald's* review aligns neatly with that of the *Messenger*. The review opens with a series of self-deprecating remarks on the *Herald's* own qualifications—as Teage puts it, "On the literary merits of work, we do not feel ourselves competent to decide." But the review continues to note that, while the book is indeed beautiful, Kemble's writing was "not exactly in unison with that soft and tender delicacy, of which our imagination had composed the fair sex, of the higher order." More precisely, the *Herald's* review complained that the *Journal* needed "a Lexicon... as doubtless the excellence of the work is locked up in such words as 'daudle,' 'twaddle,'

---

<sup>74</sup> "Journal—by Frances Anne Butler," *Southern Literary Messenger* 1, no. 9 (May 1835): 524-531.

&c., which are to us ‘daudles’ indeed, or in plain English, unexplorable regions.”<sup>75</sup> As Kemble’s writing marks her as outside the *Southern Literary Messenger*’s purview for proper literature, it also enables Minor to read the *Liberia Herald*’s critique of her *Journal* as a moment of cultural accord between white American and black Liberian critics.

But Minor qualifies that accord, reminding his audience of the *Herald*’s author in overtly racist language:

Yes, reader—think of Mrs. Butler, and all the ‘terrifying exactions’ of her redoubtable book, subjected, on the very margin of Guinea, to the criticism of an African Editor, who treats her as uncereemoniously, if not as justly, as any critics on this side of the Atlantic, or on the north side of the Mediterranean. Imagine him in his elbow chair at Monrovia, his broad nose dilating and his thick lips swelling with conscious dignity, while he thus passes judgment upon one who perhaps would hardly suffer him to clean her shoes. (158)

In spite of a clear citation at the masthead of each issue of the *Liberia Herald*, Minor never mentions Hilary Teage by name, but instead imagines the “African Editor” as a figure of grotesque bodily stereotype. Minor’s emphasis on physiognomic racism aligns strangely with his earlier catalog of African sounds. As in that earlier instance, he invokes one form of stereotype only to juxtapose it against a more important form of similarity, as he describes the “African Editor” as otherwise comparable to his American and European counterparts. In this context, the Editor’s “broad nose” and “thick lips” take on the air of blackface performance, as Minor seems to imagine an otherwise-stereotypical white editor obscured behind the racial markers of stereotypical Africanness. Just as “Liberian

---

<sup>75</sup> “*Francis Ann Butler*,” qtd. in “Liberian Literature.”

Literature” is, to Minor, simply a subsection of “Literature,” so the “African Editor” emerges as a variation of the fundamental type of the Editor.<sup>76</sup>

In contrast to the anonymous editorial cited in this chapter’s epigraph, Minor emphatically does *not* “suspect” that Liberian colonists “have turned white” since coming to Africa, but he nevertheless describes the production of Liberian literature as a sort of literary deracination. Minor’s initial shifts from “Liberian” to “African,” “African” to “English,” destabilize the idea that literature belongs inherently to any one race. In this context, the reiteration of the physical features of the imagined “African Editor” suggests that, like the earlier anonymous letter writer, Minor finds himself forced to remind his presumably white audience that they are reading the work of black men. In the process, Minor suggests that literature as a category is informed by race, but not dependent on it. Where Sarah Josepha Hale would later look to the *Liberia Herald* as proof that writing “by colored men” occupies a different social stratum from the work of white poets, Minor envisions racial difference as being fixed within the bodies of writers, and not within the texts they produce.

We might say that Minor affirms a type of biological racism (a belief in ontological differences between black and white bodies) in order to challenge cultural racism (a belief in ontological differences between black and white cultural production). Unsurprisingly, that position provoked some backlash. Poe described the article’s “fate” in a letter to Minor: “Lauded by all men of sense, it has excited animadversion from the

---

<sup>76</sup> This is all the stranger when we consider that the immediate model of an “Editor” for readers of the *Southern Literary Messenger* would be none other than Edgar Allan Poe—and so, when Minor asks his audience to extrapolate the type of the Editor to “the very margin of Guinea,” he implicitly calls upon them to imagine the *Herald* under the pen of an African Poe.

*Augusta Chronicle*. The scoundrel says it is sheer abolitionism.”<sup>77</sup> Poe’s phrasing suggests that neither he nor Minor believe the piece to be abolitionist in nature—and as we’ve seen, supporting colonization in no way implied an anti-slavery stance. But it does suggest that reviewing the *Liberia Herald* changed the way the *Messenger*, a periodical that was existentially concerned with the ways that “Literature” was defined and categorized, situated itself in relation to black writers. To illustrate this point, we might simply look at the catalog of readers implied by this letter. Edgar Allan Poe is reading the *Augusta Chronicle*, which is reading Lucian Minor, who is reading the *Liberia Herald*, who is reading Fanny Kemble’s *Journal*—a recursive rabbit hole in which the *Liberia Herald* does not stand out as particularly exceptional. Nor did this network extend, unidirectionally, outward from Africa. A few years later, the *Liberia Herald* reprinted an article from the same volume of the *Messenger* as Minor’s review, suggesting that the *Southern Literary Messenger*—and possibly even “Liberian Literature”—was read in Liberia.<sup>78</sup> If we accept Minor’s implied tautology—that for something to be classified as literature, it must participate in a literary market—then the *Liberia Herald* amply qualifies.

Minor’s position that “Liberian Literature” can and should be treated as simply a subcategory of Literature reflects the way that the *Liberia Herald* in the 1830s embodied a larger series of questions and experiments about black participation in US civil culture. Where Hale imagined the *Herald* as a separate (and far-from-equal) alternative to white writing, Minor saw the *Herald* as proof that literature as a category could expand beyond the world of white writers and readers. But in troubling ways, both writers perceived the

---

<sup>77</sup> Letter to Lucian Minor, March 10, 1836.

<sup>78</sup> “Odds and Ends,” *Liberia Herald* (Monrovia), October 1839.

*Herald* as a turning point in representing black literature, placing the newspaper at the center of new schema for understanding the relationships between black and white readers. The paper's Liberian and American readers may have been situated over 4,000 miles apart, but it was nevertheless a central player in an ongoing debate about the possibilities of black participation in white literary culture. The *Liberia Herald* encouraged black Liberians and mainland white audiences to understand one another as both geographically distant and socially proximate—even as it raised new questions on both sides of the Atlantic about what it meant to perceive blackness at a distance.



## Chapter 4: Uncle Tom's "literary cabinet": The Bible, Ownership and the Changing Stories of Black Readership

Tom read, in his only literary cabinet, of one who had "learned in whatsoever state he was, therewith to be content." It seemed to him good and reasonable doctrine, and accorded well with the settled and thoughtful habit which he had acquired from the reading of that same book.

**Harriet Beecher Stowe**

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)

Do they believe that on giving the Bible, the unlettered Slave will all at once—by some miraculous transformation—become a man of letters and be able to read the sacred Scriptures?

**Frederick Douglass**

"Bibles for the Slaves" (1848)

Chapter 22 of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* finds its hero in a state of ambivalence in New Orleans. Having been purchased by the sarcastic but benevolent Augustine St. Clare, Tom is safe from the worst dangers of plantation slavery. Moreover, he's found a new spiritual companion in the form of Eva, St. Clare's inquisitive young daughter. But Tom is also hundreds of miles away from the Shelby plantation in Kentucky, where he'd spent his entire life prior to being sold to pay off Master Shelby's debt, and where his friends and family still live. Not quite "positively and consciously miserable" but nonetheless "parted from all his soul held dear," Tom turns to the one comfort that has followed him South: his Bible, or as Stowe puts it, "his only literary cabinet."<sup>1</sup>

What seems at first like a simple pun on the Bible's composition (a book full of books) or an instance of Stowe's characteristic irony (to an enslaved man, the Bible is the equivalent of the middle-class bookshelf) speaks to a series of larger questions about the

---

<sup>1</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 235. All subsequent citations in text.

relationship between the Bible and the enslaved person in antebellum America, and the impact of mass circulation on both. As a synonym for book case, Tom's "literary cabinet" is part of a larger trend whereby the novel uses a character's books—or, to be more precise, the spaces they set aside for books—as a trace of their previous lives. As Eliza Harris prepares to run away from the Shelby plantation, she looks nostalgically over "the little case of books" she'll be leaving behind (32); Miss Ophelia is introduced with a description of the "staid respectable old book-case" she left in New England (142); and when Eva and Augustine St. Clare die, they leave behind them tables or entire rooms of books. In each case, the space for books becomes an anchor, fixing their owners to a specific time and place even when that owner has vanished. Home, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is where the books are.

This reading of Tom's literary cabinet aligns neatly with Stowe's spiritual project: as a gift from God, and a promise of the afterlife to come, the Bible offers a stable fixture in the otherwise unstable life of the enslaved. But Stowe's reference to Tom's Bible also evokes a less stable referent: the teeming marketplace of literary magazines, where the "Literary Cabinet" was a recurring name for new magazines. Those included the Yale *Literary Cabinet* (1806-1807), the first college magazine; Samuel Woodworth's New York *Ladies' Literary Cabinet* (1809-1822); and Thomas Gregg's *Literary Cabinet and Western Olive Branch*, published in St. Clairsville, Ohio in 1833, the year after Stowe moved to Cincinnati at the age of 21.<sup>2</sup> None of these magazines lasted long, and none of them managed to attain significant success in the crowded field of American magazines;

---

<sup>2</sup> Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, 172, 139. The *Literary Cabinet and Western Olive Branch* was renamed the *Western Gem and Cabinet of Literature, Science, and News* for its second and final volume. David C. Mott, "Thomas Gregg, Local Historian and Author," *The Annals of Iowa* 14 (1924): 263-270.

there's no reason to think that Stowe had these magazines (or any other similarly-named magazine from America or Britain) in mind when she described Tom's Bible. But their very ephemerality shows the importance behind the naming convention. The title "Literary Cabinet" implies that, while the magazine form may seem ephemeral and unfixed, its contents are on par with those of any great bookshelf. And in more practical terms, the name gently urges readers to store the magazine on their bookshelf when they're done with it (as opposed, say, to the dustbin or hearth). If the idea of the literary cabinet promises something safe and sturdy, the act of naming something a "literary cabinet" suggests that it might otherwise be overlooked or lost amid the noise. By describing Tom's Bible as his literary cabinet, Stowe simultaneously identifies it as a stabilizing presence and situates the book and its owner on shaky ground.

In this chapter, I explore the ways that Stowe's vision of the Bible in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* draws on ongoing abolitionist debates about the relationship between reading and ownership in the context of chattel's slavery. Where my previous chapters explored the varying degrees to which a black reading public could be visible to white authors, this chapter examines the way that the idea of enslaved participation in a reading public reflected the varying ideas as to whether or not enslaved people could own property. As such, this chapter's title, "Uncle Tom's 'literary cabinet,'" puns on the paradox of ownership implied by the novel's title. While the name *Uncle Tom's Cabin* claims ownership rights on its hero's behalf, within the economic structure of American chattel slavery, the cabin is Uncle Tom's only to the extent that property can own property. Both man and cabin alike are property of Master Shelby, whose claim to ownership has privilege over any others, and virtually all of the drama of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* derives

from the exercise of this privilege. Shelby sells Tom under financial duress and so permanently divests Tom from ‘his’ cabin; as such, Stowe’s title doesn’t describe a factual relationship, but instead draws attention to the kind of domestic stability that the novel cannot imagine for its enslaved characters. But while Tom’s cabin is his only in theory, his literary cabinet is a different sort of property. Tom carries it with him from Kentucky to New Orleans, and finally to the Louisiana swamp. The book journeys with him, from the warm home of the title to the “rude shanties” of Legree’s plantation, “destitute of furniture” without even “a shelf for his Bible” to reside upon (316). Wherever Tom goes, so goes the Bible, a circulating text that signifies his ability to read as well as his ability to own property.

By identifying the Bible as Tom’s property, Stowe reflects on the ways the Bible both did and didn’t operate as a shared text in the slave South. On the one hand, Stowe was worried about what it meant to share the Bible with pro-slavery Christians, whose noxious influence she worried could diminish (if it hadn’t already diminished) the Bible’s status as Americans’ moral compass. She frequently draws bitter humor from the disparity between the Bible’s cachet as a cultural reference point on the one hand, and what she sees as white Americans’ failure to adhere to its ethical code on the other, as when she cites the Letter to the Hebrews as “some words of an unfashionable old book” (106). In one of the novel’s most famous scenes, Mrs. Bird accosts her husband for his support of a fugitive slave law, claiming, “I don’t know anything about politics, but I can read my Bible; and there I see that I must feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the desolate; and that Bible I must follow”; his response (“But in cases where your doing so would involve a great public evil—”) equivocates about the Bible’s place in a society

where economics have replaced ethics as the foundation of legal authority (72-73). Even when Senator Bird ultimately elects to help the runaway Eliza escape further South, his choice to privilege Christian charity over legal obligation suggests the incompatibility between Biblical law and chattel slavery.

On the other hand, while Stowe worried about what it meant to have the Bible taken up by people of radically different political interests, she also feared that the Bible wasn't reaching enough people. While free white readers in Stowe's novel risk taking the Bible for granted, enslaved people don't even have that option. On her deathbed, Eva comes up short when she advises her enslaved mourners to turn to the Bible, advising them that "you must read—" before bursting into tears when she remembers their lot in life; after despairing—"O, dear! you *can't* read,—poor souls!"—Eva settles for telling them to "ask Him to help you, and get the Bible read to you whenever you can; and I think I shall see you all in Heaven" (264). If the Bible is a source of stability in Stowe's America, it is remarkably ephemeral, closed off to those who cannot read it and discarded by those who value economy or the law above its message. At the same time, even if it is ephemera, it is also remarkably persistent: for characters such as Mrs. Bird, Eva, and Tom himself, the Bible fixes their orientation in a world of moral uncertainty. Whether associated with abolitionists or proponents of slavery, free whites or enslaved blacks, the Bible becomes a key reference for Stowe's thinking about how black and white readers are categorized and set apart from one another; in this context, to label the Bible a "literary cabinet" is to draw attention to the multiple versions of the Bible that circulate.

Stowe's description of the Bible as a "literary cabinet" thus brings with it a range of possible meanings. Tom's Bible is one book, but it is also many books. It is as sturdy

and stable as a piece of furniture, but it is also as portable and transient as a literary magazine. It is the guiding force of the moral universe that Tom inhabits, but it is also willfully ignored by most of the people with power to dictate his life. But that uncertain range is all grounded and contained by one irrefutable fact: whatever else it may be, Tom's "literary cabinet" *belongs* to Uncle Tom.

At the time Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, debates had been raging about the means and ethics of distributing Bibles to enslaved people for decades, with input in all directions from religious societies, spiritual leaders, and formerly-enslaved people like Frederick Douglass and Henry Bibb, whose slave narratives had reshaped Northerners' conceptions of slavery. Those slaves who did learn to read were often taught the Bible, either by benevolent societies or interested slaveholders who believed that Christian virtue could be deployed to encourage enslaved people to be more docile.<sup>3</sup> As I shall discuss in my next section, though, those social institutions that devoted themselves to distributing the Bible tended to disregard enslaved readers, particularly after the rise of anti-literacy laws following the Vesey and Turner rebellions; as such, the Bible became an important tool to calcify the social difference between black and white readers in the slave South. At the same time, the Bible's status as a circulating text created the conditions not only to envision an American reading public, but also to imagine the paths through which enslaved people could be situated within that reading public.

---

<sup>3</sup> Janet Duitsman Cornelius describes some of the processes through which interested white educators taught enslaved people the Bible in "'Bible Slavery': The White Role in Slave Literacy," in *"When I Can Read My Title Clear?,"* 105-124.

By concluding my dissertation on the Bible's status as a shared text—albeit one that affixes itself to certain kinds of enslaved readers in the abolitionist imagination—I hope to thread together a number of strands that have informed my larger project. Over the course of the previous three chapters, I've sought to explore how the circulation of texts between black and white readers offered new ways to imagine the proximity as well as the distance between those groups. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Poe uses the highly regulated circulation of natural history to affix reading to white society while offloading the idea of racial difference onto an animal other. The composite reader of *Sheppard Lee* embodies the paradoxes of recognizing black readers in the midst of a discourse that conflated reading with whiteness, even as growing anxieties about slave rebellions led to increased paranoia about those black readers. And where that composite reader suggested the difficulty of imagining a black reader apart from the influence of a white interlocutor, the *Liberia Herald's* circulation projected the idea that black Americans could belong to an international reading public on the condition that they no longer be recognized as American. In this chapter, I examine the way that the idea of a reading public organized around Bible circulation became a new way for abolitionists to define the possibilities of emancipation.

In this chapter, I argue that the mobility of enslaved Americans came to be figured in terms similar to the mobility of the Bible, precisely because of the way that both were thought of as forms of property. Anti-slavery activists conflated ideas of reading and owning books and people alike in order to make the figure of the black reader a focal point for the sympathetic project of abolitionism. I read Stowe's celebration of enslaved Bible readers in dialogue with Frederick Douglass' skepticism

toward Bible distribution to show how abolitionists used the idea of Biblical ownership as a tool to theorize African American freedom as a function of black Americans' ability to participate in a wider national culture, one shaped not only by the ability to read books, but also by the ability to claim ownership over books and thus claim ownership over themselves.

It's important to qualify this chapter's focus in several key regards. This is not an exegetical reading of the Bible, but rather an exploration of how the Bible came to be imagined as the intersection between ideas of literacy, liberation, and ownership; this is not a chapter about how the Bible was read but how it was circulated. Similarly, this is not a study of the Bible's divergent uses to either support slavery or oppose it, both of which have been the subject of exhaustive and ongoing study since the antebellum period itself.<sup>4</sup> Rather than explore how proponents of either abolishing or maintaining slavery

---

<sup>4</sup> While *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was itself likely the most prominent theological call for abolition in the years leading up to the Civil War, it was part of a long tradition of Christian antislavery labor. For a few studies of the ties between antislavery reform and Christianity, see E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), specifically "Theology and Protest" (313-318) and "The Dilemma of Slavery" (494-504); Rita Roberts, *Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reform in Northern Black Thought, 1776-1863* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010); and Shira Wolosky, "Claiming the Bible: Slave Spirituals and African-American Typology," in *Poetry and Public Discourse in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). As abolitionists drew on the Bible, they were countered by texts like Josiah Priest's *Bible Defence of Slavery* (1851), which paired Biblical narratives with polygenetic proclamations about the inferiority of blacks to prove the general point that "[s]lavery is tolerated in the Bible," and that American slavery is particularly resonant with Christianity. Further, Priest argues, the slaveholder "in whose hands Divine Providence has thrown any of his fellow men in this form, is bound by ever tie that can bind the soul of man, not to set them free, until he can do it to their advantage." Josiah Priest, *Bible Defence of Slavery*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition (Glasgow, KY: Rev. W. S. Brown, M. D., 1852), 567-568. Frances Harper responded in 1854 with a poem, also called "Bible Defence of Slavery," accusing Priest of putting slavery above God, and so of becoming heathen himself: "Oh! when we pray for the heathen lands,/ And plead for their dark



sought to justify their politics with reference to the Bible's contents, this chapter examines the ways that the book's physical mobility—its status as a circulating object—shaped abolitionists' sense of the power of property in American slavery.

The difficulty with making that claim, of course, is that slavery as a practice had many faces. Is slavery the system of laws defining the bounds of the peculiar institution? In that case, there were as many types of slavery as were defined within each state. But the cultural phenomenon of slavery also encompassed a wide variety of ideological perspectives and positions, all of which maintained different property relations. Did slavery claim that people were property, for instance, or simply their labor? Why can slaves be tried for murder if their actions are property of another? Is the right to obedience another form of labor, or a separate legal obligation of the slave to the master?

As Stephen Best demonstrates in his comprehensive study, *The Fugitive's Properties* (2004), these questions not only had a wide range of answers in the antebellum period, but also speak to lingering contradictions in our definitions of personhood and property through the present. When nineteenth-century abolitionists “decried the institution [of slavery] for confusing the boundaries between property and persons,” they implicitly lodged their reasoning in Lockean theories of liberalism.<sup>5</sup> In

---

shores, / Remember Slavery's cruel hands / Make heathens at your doors!” *Complete Poems of Frances E. W. Harper*, editor Maryemma Graham (New York: Oxford University Press 1988), 5-6. For studies of pro-slavery uses of the Bible, see Eugene Genovese, *A Consuming Fire: The Fall of the Confederacy in the Mind of the Christian South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999); John Patrick Daly, *When Slavery was Called Freedom: Evangelicalism, Proslavery, and the Causes of the Civil War* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2002); and Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Best, *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 8.

arguing for the divine origins of property rights, Locke held that “every man has a *property* in his own *person*,” such that “[t]he *labour* of his body, and the *work* of his hands... are properly his.” To justify the denial of such rights to slaves, Locke interprets slavery as a deferral of death: while “a man, not having the power of his own life, *cannot... enslave himself* to any one,” he may “[forfeit] his life, by some act that deserves death,” in which case “he, to whom he has forfeited it... may delay to take it, and make use of him to his own service.”<sup>6</sup> As Best argues, however, antebellum legal discourse devised its own account for slavery: as long as the Lockean idea of labour as property held up, the slaveholder didn’t need to own the enslaved person as such, but only needed to own their labour, itself a form of property. This rationalization resulted in the legal figuration of the fugitive as “two persons in one,” at once “pilfered property and indebted person, object of property and subject of contract”—a phenomenon that Best describes as “the slave’s two bodies.”<sup>7</sup>

Best’s argument offers an important account for the kind of contradictions that the idea of property takes on in a slave economy. But property is not just a legal discourse, but also what Orlando Patterson calls “an idiom of power.” Patterson identifies property as “[t]he conceptual aspect of the idea of power,” a concept based primarily in ideas of

---

<sup>6</sup> John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 19, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Best, *The Fugitive’s Properties*, 8-9. Best describes this a derivation of the English philosophy of the king’s “body natural” and “body politic,” as well as a counterpart to the contemporaneous logic of corporate personhood. In the case of the slave, one ‘body’ is mortal and subject to the same legal and affective arrangements as other mortals: it can both be held responsible for criminal actions and be recognized as a subject of sentiment on the other. The other ‘body’ is “implicitly immortal,” a form of property and object of ‘estate’ that can be claimed in perpetuity by an owner. Best elaborates on this model in “The Slaves Two Bodies,” in *Fugitive Properties*, 1-25.

ownership.<sup>8</sup> The defining trait of a slave economy lies in the idea that, while all humans may be subject to certain ownership claims (through institutions ranging from feudalism and sovereignty to citizenship and marriage), a certain category of human beings can be recognized as property. As Patterson presents it, our modern conceptions of slavery emerged in the classical period through the Roman legal apparatus of “dominium or absolute ownership.”<sup>9</sup> Under dominium, Roman law sharply distinguished between owners (or *personae*) and things (*res*); to be a slave in this system, and the Western systems of slavery that followed, was to be a thing. But Patterson identifies “dominium” as a legal fiction imposed upon a prior, more diffuse, “personalistic idiom of power,” in which all humans were potentially subject to being owned by another. Under these societies, property claims marked the clearest distinction between slave and master. “The slave could not claim or exercise direct powers of property,” and instead “all such claims had to be made through the master”; as such, “the slave was a slave not because he was the *object* of property, but because he could not be the *subject* of property.”<sup>10</sup> While antebellum slavery cannot be reduced to such abstract accounts of slavery, first and foremost because of its discursive emphasis on racial difference as the categorical grounds for enslavement, these models are useful for understanding both Douglass and Stowe’s view of slavery in the American South. To be a slave was to be property; to be property was to lack the ability to hold property.

These ideas of property inform this chapter, which explores the way that the circulation of texts to black readers—and those readers’ ability to claim ownership over

---

<sup>8</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 20.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 31.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 28.

texts, implicitly or otherwise—changed Americans’ sense of what it meant to be part of a reading public. Throughout my dissertation I’ve argued that the circulation of texts between different racialized audiences could change those audiences’ sense of themselves and their society. For my final chapter, I show how that culture of racialized circulation also opened up new questions about how ideas of textual ownership generated new ways to conceive of black social participation.

### The Bible Question

Contemporary scholars and readers alike gravitate towards one phrase to describe the historical impact of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: ‘except the Bible.’ The Library of America edition (1982), Norton Critical Edition (2010), and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *Annotated Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (2007) all emphasize that Stowe’s novel outsold every book in nineteenth-century America bar one.<sup>11</sup> The comparison itself has been canonized in Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* (1936), which describes Yankee women’s tendency to “[accept] *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as revelation second only to the Bible.”<sup>12</sup> As a refrain, the phrase invites readers to understand successful circulation as a sign of both social impact and spiritual importance: even if Stowe couldn’t equal the Bible on any of those fronts, she still came closer than any other author. But the familiar phrasing has the strange side effect of making *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* success seem exceptional while making the Bible’s far greater circulation seem like a matter of course. To understand the world

---

<sup>11</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Three Novels*, ed. Kathryn Sklar (New York: Library of America, 1982), 1471; Elizabeth Ammons, “Introduction” to Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (2010), ix; Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Hollis Robbins, *The Annotated Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), xliii.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 670.

of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the phrase suggests, is to understand a world where Biblical circulation must be taken for granted.

While the Bible was certainly the most familiar text in antebellum America, its wide circulation was not by chance, but was rather the result of dedicated institutional publishing initiatives that shaped the nature of print in America; if the Bible could be taken for granted in American print culture, it was because in many ways the Bible was the exemplar of that print culture. Scholarship on the Bible and mass print—particularly the work of David Paul Nord and Paul C. Gutjahr—has demonstrated that American Bible and Tract Societies in the early nineteenth century developed the technological and infrastructural tools to enable American mass culture more broadly.<sup>13</sup> But in focusing on the efforts to generate a mass audience, these accounts often treat black, and particularly enslaved, readers as a footnote in the development of this mass culture. At the same time, there is no shortage of literary and historical scholarship about the ways that enslaved people sought to access and make use of Scripture, generally as part of larger genealogies of black American Christianity.<sup>14</sup> This division means that our historical understanding of access to Scripture often vacillates between a broad focus on the ties between Bible circulation and the rise of mass culture, or a narrow focus on black American literacy as a means to generate spiritual communities.

---

<sup>13</sup> I refer specifically to David Paul Nord, “The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815-1835,” *Journalism Monographs* 88 (May 1984); David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible* (1999).

<sup>14</sup> A few recent examples include Vincent L. Wimbush, editor, *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (New York: Continuum, 2000); Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Katherine Clay Bassard, *Transforming Scriptures: African American Women Writers and the Bible* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

In this section, I draw on both of these paradigms in order to situate questions of enslaved access to the Bible within the context of American mass culture. As abolitionist sentiment grew increasingly mainstream throughout the 1830s and 1840s, so too did debates about whether Northerners should dedicate money and resources to distributing Bibles to Southern slaves. As participants in these conversations drew pointed attention to the Bible's status as a global circulating text, the debates themselves focused on the possibilities of incorporating black readers into American mass culture. In the process, however, these conversations tended to abstract enslaved readers into a uniform group. Insofar as the circulation of the Bible was integral to the development of American mass culture, debates about whether or not enslaved people should have access to the Bible were also necessarily exercises in imagining—and delimiting—the possibilities of an American reading public.

The early years of the nineteenth century saw Bible Societies flourish throughout the United States, leading to the formation of the nation-wide American Bible Society (or ABS) in 1816. As an evangelical institution, the ABS was concerned that the Bible might be eclipsed, in the eyes of American readers, by widely available texts promoting irreligious or Enlightenment values. In a revealing anecdote, one founding member, Elias Boudinot was particularly concerned that copies of Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* were being widely and cheaply distributed in Philadelphia, and so resolved to fund the circulation of spiritual texts.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> David Paul Nord writes that “[w]hile Americans could read a greater quantity and greater diversity of printed material as the century progressed, such extensive reading threatened the intensive reading of certain privileged texts, most importantly the Bible.” “The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media,” 3.

To the ABS, these ideological threats were a logical result of mass textual production, which encouraged “extensive” rather than “intensive” reading. While the Bible was one of the most widely available and widely read texts in the smaller print economy of the early eighteenth century, the rise of mass print challenged (or at least threatened to challenge) its preeminence.<sup>16</sup> The ABS sought to counter this trend by making the Bible readily (and plentifully) available to as many Americans as possible. To accomplish this goal, the Society imported and funded technological improvements in printing, particularly advances in stereotyping, paper manufacturing, and steam-powered presses. They also established circulation networks that allowed their colporteurs, or agents, to distribute books across the country. These and other developments, David Paul Nord argues, were not only responsible for wider distribution of religious texts, but ironically also created the precedent and infrastructure for more ostensibly secular forms of mass media in America.<sup>17</sup> The Bible’s importance in antebellum America was thus part of a feedback loop with mass print: the more that mass print appeared to threaten the primacy of religious reading, the more funds that Bible and Tract Societies put towards strengthening their own publishing networks.

The increased production and distribution of Bibles didn’t just change the shape of American mass culture; it also changed the significance of the Bible itself. The ABS hoped to cultivate Christianity throughout the country, believing that “Mak[ing] the Bible the most accessible written text in the United States” would also “make it the most important.”<sup>18</sup> But as Gutjahr argues, this logic didn’t challenge the rise of extensive

---

<sup>16</sup> Paul Gutjahr, *An American Bible*, 18-19.

<sup>17</sup> Nord, “The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media,” 23.

<sup>18</sup> Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible*, 19.

reading, but rather enabled it. While the ABS successfully maintained the Bible's cultural centrality in American life, it also created an entire generic category of Bibles. A marketplace of Bibles sprung up, offering different translations, different bindings and font choices, and the inclusion of extras like detailed maps or elaborate glosses; to borrow a term from Walter Benjamin, the increased reproducibility of the Bible made the text more widely available at the cost of its singular, sacral aura. While Benjamin's critique of reproducibility mainly focuses on plastic arts' ability to be cloned and reproduced, his reading of film as both "*the artwork most capable of improvement*" and, at the same time, a "*renunciation of eternal value*" neatly describes the paradox of Biblical reproduction for Gutjahr.<sup>19</sup> As the wide availability of Bibles of differing qualities pressured readers to choose between different sacred texts, the idea that there was a stable, singular "The Bible" didn't disappear altogether, but it did diminish.<sup>20</sup>

As more and more texts became available in America's growing print marketplace, and as Biblical production increased to try to keep pace, Americans started to care more about *owning* the Bible than *reading* the Bible. But one demographic, of course, didn't have access to a wide range of texts: enslaved people. By 1829, the American Bible Society had the resources to meet their most expansive goal: providing a

---

<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty & Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 19-55, 28.

<sup>20</sup> This dialectic between mass production and sacred singularity famously plays out in Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850). When Mrs. Montgomery takes Ellen to pick out her own Bible, the bookshop becomes a kaleidoscope of Biblical possibilities: "large, small, and middle-sized; black, blue, purple, and red; gilt and not gilt; clasp and no clasp." In this scenario, the Bible's singular importance is not an intrinsic aspect of its circulation, but is rather produced through the act of selection. Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1987), 30.



Bible for every family in America.<sup>21</sup> But while the ABS focused its efforts on poor and struggling families, it soon came under fire by activists for its failure to account for enslaved African Americans in its official policies.

The ABS' failure to imagine enslaved readers was a point of contention from the 1830s through the Civil War. In the 1820s and early 1830s, most abolitionists saw the American Bible Society as a relatively apolitical charitable society: the pages of the *Liberator*, for instance, often featured brief notes on the organization's recent collection efforts.<sup>22</sup> But cracks in that relationship were forming as early as 1831, when the newspaper excerpted a series of questions from the *Southern Religious Telegraph* under the title "Shall the Bible be Read?" Taking the name "Berea," the author lays out seven "Queries for Evangelical Christians" that deftly tie black Biblical literacy to the ongoing project of crafting an American identity:

- 1st. Is it right for every human being to have a Bible and be taught to read it?
- 2d. If not, what exceptions are to be made to the general rule, and what is the ground of those exceptions?
- 3d. Do those exceptions arise from color or from circumstances?
- 4th. If from color, ought the Bible to be distributed in Africa?
- 5th. If from circumstances, are not the Roman Catholics right in withholding it from those whom they hold in subjection?
- 6th. If there is any limitation in the Bible to the command '*Search the Scriptures*,' where is it to be found?
- 7th. Is there any rule by which this limitation is to be applied, or is every one at liberty to apply it as his interest or his feelings may dictate?<sup>23</sup>

Berea is less concerned with how black readers would benefit from possessing the Bible than with pointing out hypocrisy. There are those, the article suggests, who would eagerly

---

<sup>21</sup> David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 83; John Fea, *The Bible Cause: A History of the American Bible Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 40-50.

<sup>22</sup> Representative examples can be found in the June 4, 1831, September 15, 1832, and the January 12, 1833 editions of the *Liberator*.

<sup>23</sup> "Shall the Bible Be Read?," *Liberator* (April 9, 1831).

distribute Bibles to unconverted Africans and bemoan the Catholic Church's restrictions on Biblical access, even as they would deny that same text to suffering humans within their own country.

By placing those contrasting impulses in tension with one another, and framing them under the overarching first question of whether “every human being” should have a Bible, the list pressures readers to come to one of two conclusions. A reader who maintains that black slaves should not read the Bible must conclude that enslaved black people did not qualify as ‘human beings’—a reading that supplants a Christian faith in Adamic descent with biological racism. (This incompatibility is part of the reason Katherine Bassard argues that biblical defenses of slavery “helped to undermine the appeal to biblical authority” and necessitated “the turn to scientific racism in the 1850s.”<sup>24</sup>) Alternatively, a reader who believes that slaves deserve access to the Bible must also conclude that practices which deny that are not simply uncharitable but against the spirit of American Protestantism.

This argument depends on the Bible's unique ability to circulate in a global marketplace of ideas. As Berea sees it, denying the Bible to American slaves is not simply similar to Catholicism, but is part of the same global trend, to the extent that endorsing one means endorsing the other. Berea's letter exemplifies a developing trend in the abolitionist Bible campaign of emphasizing the text's global readership as a way to censure opponents.

A few years later, members of the American Anti-Slavery Society followed similar reasoning when proposing that the American Bible Society to distribute Bibles

---

<sup>24</sup> Katherine Bassard, *Transforming Scriptures*, 31.

directly to enslaved Americans. An unsigned editorial in the *American Anti-Slavery Reporter* muses “why in distributing the scriptures we should treat with any more delicacy the wicked prejudices and anti-Christian laws which stand in our way in our own country, than those in Spanish America or in China,” before proceeding to ask whether missionaries in India or Syria would respect “those laws which forbid the people to receive the sacred volume, or hold any intercourse with its teachers?”<sup>25</sup> By this metric, efforts to limit the circulation of the Bible threatened to erase the distinctions between American Christians and the rest of the non-Protestant world.

Perhaps the most striking thing about this model is that it places enslaved readers at the heart of America’s relationship with the world at large. But who, exactly, were those enslaved readers? As that unnamed writer presents it, those readers are largely hypothetical:

This measure will bring to the test those who say that the slaves are generally held not as property—not in the spirit of the original kidnappers—but in trust, till they can be *prepared for freedom*. Let the philanthropists of the north say to the people of the south through the American Bible Society, “If as you pretend, you really desire to fit the slave for liberty, here are the means. We do not say, teach them to read and *then* we will give Bibles; but here are Bibles which they may have to read.” If the slaves need “*a preparation for freedom*,” what can be a better and safer one than instruction in the word of God?<sup>26</sup>

This transformation hinges on the idea that slaves are held either as property in perpetuity or in trust (although it’s important to note that the phrasing “in trust,” as opposed to “as wards,” still identifies slaves as property—this is a distinction between two classes of property, rather than between property and people). This anonymous writer evokes a

---

<sup>25</sup> “Anniversary of the American Anti-Slavery Society,” *American Anti-Slavery Reporter* 1, no. 6 (June 1834): 81-83.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

belief common to evangelical abolitionists that reading is a foundational step in a teleological journey to freedom. This belief drew as much from faith in the Bible as it did from reading slave narratives, which frequently presented learning to read and write as transformative moments in the lives of enslaved narrators.<sup>27</sup>

While this teleology conflates enslaved reading with eventual freedom, it also suggests that reading is the necessary end result of textual circulation. Read generously, the writer argues that no amount of effort or knowledge can enable somebody to read an absent text, while somebody who possesses a text at least has the means, if not the skills, to learn how to read. But as written, the phrase “Bibles which they may have to read” leaps directly from the physical presence of the Bible to the action of reading, eliding the idea that reading requires anything more than a text. By collapsing distribution, possession, and comprehension into one process, the writer reveals a faith in distribution itself as the sole requirement to produce a reading public: only send the Bible to the plantation, and readers will necessarily emerge to greet it.

In responding to this call for action, the American Bible Society focused less on the impact of the Bible on enslaved readers than it did on the bureaucratic difficulties of reaching them, arguing that the very infrastructure that enabled wider circulation of the Bible also limited the types of people who could read it. Many members of the American Bible Society supported anti-slavery efforts, particularly in the North, where its early leaders included noted abolitionists like John Jay and New Jersey Senator Theodore Frelinghuysen; many non-abolitionist members still believed that exposing enslaved people to scripture could lead to a more benevolent form of slavery. But as an institution,

---

<sup>27</sup> Janet Duitsman Cornelius, “*When I Can Read My Title Clear?*,” 61.

the ABS drew funding and resources from smaller regional Bible Societies, upon whom it relied to physically distribute texts throughout their respective states. And many Bible Societies in the South were organized and led by slaveholders, who were of two minds on the issue. Those who believed that slavery could be a beneficial institution were more likely to allow—and even encourage—colporteurs to give Bibles to their slaves.<sup>28</sup> But there were many others who resisted slave literacy, either out of a general belief that literate slaves were less likely to work, or out of more specific fears of uprising in the aftermath of prominent rebellions led by figures such as Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner, both of whom were prominent religious leaders.

As a rule, the American Bible Society didn't so much refuse to distribute Bibles to slaves as they declined to take a position. The ABS might encourage auxiliaries "to get the Bible in the hands of slaves," but were unwilling or unable to impose stricter guidelines on their sub-organizations.<sup>29</sup> In order to create an institution that spanned the

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 113.

<sup>29</sup> John Fea, *The Bible Cause*, 72-75. Archibald Maclay, an agent of the American & Foreign Bible Society (an off-shoot that disagreed with the translations used by the ABS) demonstrates this position in an 1839 letter. Maclay cites a report, "without any real foundation in truth," that "it was [the AFBS'] intention to withhold the word of God from the slave population." Maclay denies the accusation first by claiming to "have never met with a Christian, whether Baptist or Pedobaptist, or even a man of the world, who expressed a wish to withhold the sacred scriptures from the slaves," noting that he has "witnessed the slave reading the Bible in the presence of the master, and with his decided approbation"; he goes on to deny that the AFBS had ever asked him to pledge any such thing, and ultimately declares that the Society wished that "the perishing nations of the earth... may be delivered from the slavery of sin and Satan, and become Christ's freemen, persuaded that whom the Son of God makes free, they are free indeed." In an era when anti-literacy laws were becoming more common in the South, Maclay both denies that any forces might be organized to discourage distributing literature to slaves and argues that the Bible provides a better and more lasting form of freedom than physical emancipation; in the process, he deftly distracts from any acknowledgement of the AFBS' policies on enslaved readers one way or the other. "American & Foreign Bible

nation, in other words, the American Bible Society had to cede their stated goals to those of regional authorities. Paradoxically, the very systems that enabled the Bible to cross state and regional boundaries impeded its ability to cross the social boundaries of chattel slavery.

These early debates showed the conditions under which activists imagined enslaved readers to exist. Those who supported distribution saw slaves as a sleeping giant, waiting for the Bible to awaken them to a life of reading and enlightenment—and, as many abolitionists among that group hoped, putting them on the road towards inevitable freedom. That same sentiment informed those who opposed distributing Bibles, fearing that reading would undermine the peculiar institution. In the process, they reveal a kind of raw faith in, or fear of, mass circulation. Both of these accounts take for granted the presence of enslaved readers, or at least that the circulation of Bibles would generate new readers among enslaved people—a fantasy that would generate controversy in years to come.

### **Frederick Douglass and the Fantasy of the Reading Slave**

For the next decade and a half, the conversation about distributing Bibles to enslaved people followed roughly the same pattern. Abolitionists called upon the ABS to initiate distribution efforts and called them out for failing to do so; meanwhile, the ABS vocalized general support but refused to move forward on any specific action. By the tail-end of the 1840s, though, the American Bible Society became more amenable to its critics, in large part thanks to the rise of abolitionist sentiments in its sister organizations,

---

Society (From the *New-York Baptist Register*),” *The Vermont Telegraph* (September 1839): 197.

the American Tract Society and American Missionary Association.<sup>30</sup>

As the campaign to distribute Bibles to slaves moved closer to reality, however, it drew new criticism for failing to respond to the tangible needs of enslaved readers, and no critic was more vocal than rising abolitionist star Frederick Douglass. Douglass put forth his critique in the 1848 edition of *The Liberty Bell*, a yearly gift-book put out by the American Anti-Slavery Society that featured essays, stories and poems; that same edition, for instance, included Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim Point." In an essay called "Bibles for the Slaves," Douglass makes three main points against the "recent but quite numerous class of persons" that want the American Bible Society to distribute Bibles to enslaved people. First, he notes that the scheme relies on patently unreliable participants, asking whether its proponents truly believe that "the American Slave can receive the Bible," that "the American Bible Society cares one straw about giving Bibles to the Slave," or "that Slaveholders in open violation of their wicked laws, will allow their Slaves to have the Bible?"<sup>31</sup> Second, he notes that the project takes for granted that enslaved Africans could read the Bible. Finally, he critiques the idea as a distraction from meaningful abolitionist work.

Of these positions, Douglass' description of Bible distribution as a distraction is perhaps the most politically forceful, but it builds upon the idea that abolitionists have tricked themselves into seeing all enslaved people as potential readers:

Then again, of what value is the Bible to one who may not read its contents? Do [friends of the movement] intend to send teachers into the Slave States, with the Bibles, to teach the slaves to read them? Do they believe that on giving the Bible, the unlettered Slave, will all at once—by

---

<sup>30</sup> Katherine Bassard, *Transforming Scriptures*, 38.

<sup>31</sup> "Bibles for the Slaves," *The Liberty Bell, By Friends of Freedom*, ed. Maria Chapman (Boston: Andrews and Prentiss, 1848), 121

some miraculous transformation—become a man of letters and be able to read the sacred Scriptures? Will they first obtain the Slaveholder’s consent, or will they proceed without it? And if the former, by what means will they seek it? And if the latter, what success do they expect?<sup>32</sup>

Douglass undermines the teleological narrative of literacy surrounding the Bible campaign: not only can slaves not be assumed to be literate, he suggests, but it is also sheer arrogance to believe that a Bible alone is enough to produce literacy. His sardonic description of the “miraculous transformation” evokes the moment in Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Sheppard Lee* when Lee-as-Tom, confronted with an “incendiary” pamphlet, describes the “feeling in me as if I *could* read.”<sup>33</sup> Where that scene relies on the fantastic contrivances of spiritual possession, walking corpses, and metempsychosis, Douglass suggests that it is no less fantastic to assume that one can spread literacy simply by circulating books to the illiterate. As Douglass presents it, a naïve faith in circulation has led activists to lose sight of the deprived conditions of real slaves. By focusing on the shift from “the unlettered Slave” to “a man of letters,” Douglass suggests that activists have been imagining a fantastic subject: an immanent “man of letters” who will emerge, fully formed, from the “unlettered slave” upon exposure to Biblical truth.

Perhaps the most striking thing about this critique is its tacit suggestion that activists have come to this conclusion through a misreading of Douglass’ own life story. Douglass had been a free man for nearly a decade by the time he weighed in on the Bibles for slaves debate, but the relatively recent publication of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) positioned him among a limited group of writers able to speak authoritatively to the conditions of enslaved life. Moreover, the *Narrative*’s explicit

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Montgomery Bird, *Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself*, ed. Christopher Looby (New York: New York Review Books, 2008), 350.



focus on literacy meant that Douglass was perhaps the most celebrated enslaved reader in the nation, at least to the extent that his was the most high-profile story of learning to read.

That fame may have been part of the problem. As Charles Heglar notes, the self-authored slave narrative formally and narratively draws attention to the ties between acquiring freedom and literacy: the form frequently relies on “the tacit contrast of the narrator’s current literacy in freedom with his or her past illiteracy in slavery,” such that literacy appears to be a facet of freedom more generally.<sup>34</sup> In “Bibles for the Slaves,” Douglass suggests a downside to this generic characteristic: because those self-authored slave narratives were among the most common accounts of enslaved experiences, free white readers could fail to distinguish the narratorial presentation of the free author from the narrative representation of the author’s experiences of illiteracy. Where the *Narrative* promises readers that, having “seen how a man was made a slave,” they “shall see how a slave was made a man,” “Bibles for the Slaves” echoes that same language—an “unlettered slave” becomes “a man of letters”—to suggest that Bible activists have utterly failed to see the conditions of slave literacy.

Douglass presents his experiences of learning to read in the *Narrative* as a reflection of social possibility more than textual availability; the autobiography counteracts the idea that a text itself could be the guarantor of literacy. His first lessons in reading came from Mrs. Auld, who “very kindly commenced to teach [Douglass] the A, B, C” before being instructed by her husband that, “if you teach that nigger... how to

---

<sup>34</sup> Charles J. Heglar, *Rethinking the Slave Narrative: Slave Marriage and the Narratives of Henry Bibb and William and Ellen Craft* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 24.

read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave.”<sup>35</sup>

Douglass continued his lessons illicitly with the help of poor white children in the streets. He describes himself as eternally grateful to those “hungry little urchins,” who in exchange for pieces of bread would share “that more valuable bread of knowledge”—although he also refuses to name them, “for it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country.”<sup>36</sup> Only after these two accounts does Douglass name any specific texts, indicating *The Columbian Orator*, a popular teaching text since 1797. As presented in the *Narrative*, texts are useful only in conjunction with pedagogy—and pedagogical practices in slave society must carefully navigate the systems in place to limit slave education. Or, to put it another way, a text’s use value is contingent on the systems in place to support it.

Read in this light, Douglass’ concern in “Bibles for the Slaves” that Northern readers may have constructed a fantasy out of his own life speaks to his ongoing self-fashioning project. By inviting readers to see the distinction between the hypothetical reading slave (the target of the Bible campaign) and the literal enslaved reader (Douglass himself), Douglass reasserts his own status in readers’ consciousness. But he also sees that fantasy as symptomatic of the more dangerous possibility that activists might advocate for Bible circulation to slaves as a distraction from, or in place of, calls for abolition.

For Douglass, slavery is a zero-sum game: anything short of directly working to free enslaved African Americans contributes to the strength of slaveholders. While the call to distribute Bibles “looks well,” and “wears a religious aspect,” Douglass argues

---

<sup>35</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 37.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 41.

that “the immediate and only effect of [Bible activists] efforts must be to turn off attention from the main and only momentous question connected with the Slave, and absorb energies and money in giving to him the Bible that ought to be used in giving him to *himself*”:

The Slave is property. He cannot hold property. He cannot own a Bible. To give him a Bible is but to give his master a Bible. The Slave is a thing,—and it is the all commanding duty of the American people to make him a man. To demand this in the name of humanity, and of God, is the solemn duty of every living soul. To demand less than this, or anything else than this, is to deceive the fettered bondman, and to soothe the conscience of the Slaveholder on the very point where he should be most stung with remorse and shame.<sup>37</sup>

Douglass can only reach this devastating conclusion—the accusation that many who think themselves to be supporting enslaved readers are only assuaging the guilt of their masters—by pointing out a seemingly obvious axiom: property cannot own property. But this statement requires two components. First, he makes the rhetorical separation between the “humanity” of “the fettered bondman” and “The Slave,” who must be recognized as “a thing”—a move that reminds Northern evangelical readers that sentimental ideals may not be the best way to combat a discourse of slavery based in the discourse of capitalism. But he also reminds his readers that the Bible is still a book—which is to say, a piece of property subject to the same transactional logic as all other property.

That idea of property is at the heart of Douglass’ critique, which theorizes a latent similarity in American culture between the Bible (as a mass-produced text) and the figure of the slave. At the heart of Douglass’ critique of the Bible campaign is what we might identify as the transitive nature of property in slavery: anything owned by the slave is in fact owned by the master, and so the campaign to “give” the Bible to slaves is by

---

<sup>37</sup> Frederick Douglass, “Bibles for the Slaves.”

definition impossible. In the process, Douglass suggests that the American market has reduced the human and the Bible alike to the status of “property,” to the extent that both are subject to the same transactional logic and authoritarian controls as any other material. This reading anticipates Gutjahr’s argument that antebellum mass circulation tended to desacralize the Bible: for all the high rhetoric of liberation theology, Douglass points out, the Bible scheme is ultimately little more than an exercise in moving products. In fact, Douglass suggests, many activists have mobilized to grant the Bible a freedom of mobility that they would never support for the slave.

But the shared status of the Bible and the slave—book and body alike rendered into property—serves a more complex rhetorical purpose, allowing Douglass to suggest that the harm done to the slave is also harm done to the Bible. He concludes his essay with the provocative claim that readers should “Give a hungry man a stone, and tell what beautiful houses are made of it,—give ice to a freezing man, and tell him of its good properties in hot weather,—throw a drowning man a dollar, as a mark of your good will,—but do not mock the bondman in his misery, by giving him a Bible when he cannot read it.”<sup>38</sup> Douglass’ speech hardly demeans the Bible: as Katherine Bassard notes, his very rhetoric acknowledges its importance, referencing Jesus’ question in Luke 11:11, “if a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone?”<sup>39</sup> But he confronts readers with an ultimatum: to give the Bible to the slave not only fails to help the slave—and does help the slaveholder—but also does violence against the good book by turning its presence into an insult.

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Katherine Bassard, *Transforming Scriptures*, 39.

Douglass introduced a new dimension to the struggle: while the debate began as an argument between a coalition of activists and the predominantly white American Bible Society, Douglass' opposition revealed the Bible as a point of dissent among black abolitionists. Other black abolitionists prominently defended the project, and at a meeting at Zion Church in May of 1849, Douglass confronted three of them: Henry Bibb, Henry Highland Garnet, and Samuel Ringgold Ward. While relations between the two factions were generally amiable, Douglass had already had several disagreements with Garnet in particular. Garnet supported violence as an effective (if undesirable) tool to end slavery, while Douglass thought it would only make things worse. Garnet tended to favor African colonization, while Douglass didn't. The nearest counterpart to their disagreement on the Bible centered on constitutional interpretation: Garnet thought that slavery violated the United States Constitution, while in 1849, Douglass believed that any functional abolitionist action had to acknowledge the Constitution as a pro-slavery document.<sup>40</sup>

But the Bible meeting in 1849 created a new animus between the two sides, one lodged in personal insults and accusations of inappropriate behavior. Ward, Garnet, and Bibb were scheduled to speak on behalf of the Bible question, with Charles Lenox Remond taking the opposing view. But Douglass was in attendance, and Garnet took the opportunity to ask whether Douglass had, on a previous conclusion, said "that the Bible

---

<sup>40</sup> William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 205. This belief was a shared tenet among Garrisonian abolitionists, and Douglass would ultimately switch positions after breaking with Garrison; Douglass' 1860 pamphlet *The Constitution of the United States: Is it Pro-Slavery or Anti-Slavery?* makes a passionate defense of the Constitution's potential to defend slaves' rights. For a more specific breakdown of Garnet and Douglass' animosity, see Joel Schor, "The Rivalry Between Frederick Douglass and Henry Highland Garnet," *The Journal of Negro History* 64, no. 1 (Winter 1979): 30-38.

made slaves unhappy.”<sup>41</sup> Douglass confirmed and, wishing to clarify his remarks, held the floor. Accounts split on the propriety of Douglass and Garnet’s behavior. On the one hand, one New York report described how Douglass “insist[ed] upon it that he should be permitted to answer, as he had been called up for that purpose, but Mr. Garnet and his friends refused permission.”<sup>42</sup> In the Syracuse *Impartial Citizen*, on the other hand, Ward reported the meeting as an opportunity to respond to Douglass’ earlier oppositions, one which Douglass took over “irrespective of the right and wishes of the callers and holders of the meeting,” while Garnet published an open letter to Douglass describing “the shame and disgrace with which you covered yourself at the late meeting in New York.”<sup>43</sup>

In the fallout, further discussion of the Bible question became inseparable from attacks on one another’s true investment in abolitionism. At a meeting of the New York Vigilance Committee, Douglass doubled down on his belief that “the Bible and Slave cannot go together – give the Slave to himself, then he shall have the Bible,” while also insinuating that the Bible distribution plan “may be good bait for catching some of the community, but I go in for enacting a law against Slavery – I cannot agree with the right of property in man.”<sup>44</sup> Samuel Ringgold Ward countered the insinuation by suggesting that Douglass simply wanted to wield a slaveholder’s powers for himself:

Mr. Douglass talks as if it were his right to speak of and to a man in terms suited to his own taste, and to cast ‘sneers,’ ‘charges,’ and ‘insinuations,’ as he pleases. But his lordship is not to be approached with freedom. We hope hereafter that when Henry [Highland Garnet] receives a lecture from

---

<sup>41</sup> *New York Ram’s Horn*, n.d., in *The Liberator*, June 1, 1849. Quoted in Herbert Aptheker, editor, *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States: Volume 1* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1951), 288-290.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> “From the *Impartial Citizen*,” *North Star* (June 15, 1849); “Douglass & Garnet,” *The Impartial Citizen* (June 27, 1849).

<sup>44</sup> “New York Vigilance Committee,” *North Star* (June 22, 1849).

a gentleman, who “is no obscure man in the anti-slavery cause, but is known in this country and in England,” he will receive it on his knees, rise not till he is bidden, and then say, thanks marse.<sup>45</sup>

For Ward, Douglass’ disinterest in Biblical mobility speaks to a larger disinterest in freedom for those who disagree with him, while Douglass suggests that Ward and Garnet care more about the Bible’s freedom than that of slaves. These contrasting accusations of supporting slavery reflect the gravity of the insult, but more significantly, they support the implicit connection between enslaved people and Bibles as mobile property, showing how easily questions about Bible distribution could slip into large-scale arguments about slavery.

The personal nature and intensity of the 1849 debate is worth noting less for its sense of scandal than for its argument over who was entitled to imagine the needs of enslaved readers, and how those needs might be addressed. Ward and Garnet’s literacy education differed substantially from Douglass’: both had been quite young when their families escaped slavery in Maryland, and began their formal education in the North.<sup>46</sup> But as described in his *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* (1849), Bibb’s education was remarkably similar to Douglass’, relying on a similar combination of well-intentioned teachers and social outcasts. As a youth, Bibb attended “a Sabbath School for

---

<sup>45</sup> “Douglass & Garnet.”

<sup>46</sup> After escaping to Greenwich, New Jersey (with the help of “the parents of the Rev. H. H. Garnett”), Ward’s father taught him “some valuable lessons—the use of the hoe, to spell in three syllables, and to read the first chapter of John’s Gospel, and my figures.” Samuel Ringgold Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro* (London: John Snow, 1855), 27. Garnet, for his part, gained most of his formal education in the New York, where he attended the African Free School. Both the African Free School and the American Bible Society counted John Jay among their founders; it’s likely no coincidence that a graduate of one should have been so invested in the transformative possibilities of the other. Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 167.

the slaves” run by one Miss Davis, “a poor white girl,” before it was labeled “an incendiary Movement” by the slaves’ owners and shut down.<sup>47</sup> Later, after being arrested for an escape attempt, Bibb continued his education with the help of his fellow inmates in prison (or as he calls it, “robber college”).<sup>48</sup>

If Bibbs’ and Douglass’ educational experiences seemed to mirror one another, though, they diverged when it came to the importance of the Bible. Douglass’ *Narrative* discusses the Bible only in the Appendix, and there as a rebuke to white Christian slaveholders: “He who proclaims it a religious duty to read the Bible denies me the right of learning to read the name of the God who made me.”<sup>49</sup> While later autobiographies would differ substantially, as I shall discuss in my final section, Douglass’ initial act of self-fashioning presented Christianity as a supplement to his lived experiences. Bibb’s narrative, in contrast, prominently focuses on the Bible as a missing component of his life as a slave. Charles Heglar places Bibb’s *Narrative* within a subcategory of slave narratives defined by “literacy as an absence,” which “draw attention to the problems caused by [narrators’] illiteracy in slavery.”<sup>50</sup> Miss Davis’ Sabbath School owed its existence to the presence of “quite a number of slaves in that neighborhood, who felt very

---

<sup>47</sup> Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (New York: Published by the Author, 1849), 21.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 65.

<sup>49</sup> Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 97.

<sup>50</sup> Charles J. Heglar, *Rethinking the Slave Narrative*, 23-25. Heglar argues that critics tend to read slave narratives as telling the “generic story of an essential metamorphosis from one state, slave, to another, freeman.” The familiar argument holds that, in narratives such as Douglass and Jacobs, the acquisition of literacy “all but guarantees that this transformation cannot be reversed,” as “Literacy and, at least, spiritual freedom cannot revert to illiteracy and spiritual bondage” (19). In contrast, Bibb’s and the Crafts’ narratives focus on “literacy as an absence,” a model that Heglar argues is overshadowed by a vision of the slave narrative that prioritizes Douglass and Jacobs as the archetypes of the genre.



desirous to be taught to read the Bible.”<sup>51</sup> As Bibb phrases it, the enslaved African has “no Bible” to guide his moral or spiritual life.<sup>52</sup> And in a particularly revealing moment, Bibb is set upon by a mob comprising “members of the [Methodist Episcopal] church,” who “robbed” Bibb of his church ticket, his money, and his possessions, including “a Bible for which I had paid sixty-two and one half cents.”<sup>53</sup> That episode speaks to the Bible as the material marker of Bibb’s desire for a better life, albeit one that is stolen by hypocritical white Christians. If the Bible is frequently absent in his life, Bibb desired it all the more because of that absence. For Douglass, possessing the Bible was secondary to the pursuit of possessing himself; for Bibb, the Bible signified all that was denied to the slave.

On either side of the issue, Bibb and Douglass presented a way for abolitionists to ground their position in the claims of recently-enslaved readers. (Douglass’ position in particular galvanized Garrisonian abolitionists such as Loring Moody, who echoed Douglass’ sentiments in letters to the *Liberator*.<sup>54</sup>) At the same time, the public disagreement between the two factions made it difficult for free activists to treat “enslaved readers” as the kind of monolithic category put forth in the earlier years of the Bible campaign. The early years of the Bible question took for granted the transformative possibilities of the Bible and the readiness of American slaves to receive that text. The debate at that time focused primarily on circulation itself, and whether the new developments generated by the American Bible Society could be made to serve

---

<sup>51</sup> Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (New York: Published by the Author, 1849), 21.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 118, 119.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 87.

<sup>54</sup> “The Church Awaking!” [sic], *Liberator* (Boston, MA), Nov. 9, 1849.

America's enslaved population. But that debate gave way in the late 1840s to a more complex concern about the value of circulation—and the value of the Bible itself.

Between them, Bibb and Douglass construct a useful theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between text, mass circulation, and slavery. Both men agreed on certain key tenets, the foremost of which being the idea that an enslaved person's desire to read both indexed their desire to be free and enabled a better understanding of what freedom meant. Bibb's and Douglass's own experiences demonstrated that enslaved people could learn to read, and that such learning frequently required external intervention (from a teacher or peer group). Moreover, by 1849, both men agreed that Bibles could conceivably be distributed to potential enslaved readers, a possibility that required both the infrastructural developments of the American Bible and Tract Societies *and* the growing discourse of slaves' rights before it could be imagined. The disagreement between them, then, came down to classifying the Bible. Was it, as Douglass argued, a form of material property subject to the same idioms of power as slaves themselves? Or was it instead a symbol of the various forces—the enslaved person's will to freedom, abolitionists' will to end slavery, and God's will to save His subjects—aligned against slavery? In my next two sections, I will examine how Harriet Beecher Stowe sought to synthesize both of these possibilities—the material and the symbolic—in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

### **Reception Studies and the Enslaved Reader in *Uncle Tom's Cabin***

No text better illustrates the stakes or impact of the Bible debate better than *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Published nationally in 1852, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* debuted in the aftermath

of the arguments about the efficacy of Bible distribution, and Harriet Beecher Stowe was almost certainly familiar with the debate. Her novel was initially serialized in the *National Era* from 1851-1852, the same periodical that had published “Shall We Give Bibles to Two Million and a Half of American Slaves?” in 1847. She had read Henry Bibb’s *Narrative*, and in fact based large portions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* on that text.<sup>55</sup> In her later *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1854), she directly cites Douglass’ *Narrative*—and particularly his story of learning to read—as an ideal model to understand “the intelligence of George [Harris],” the novel’s heroic runaway.<sup>56</sup> Most revealingly, Stowe wrote to Douglass in 1851 (as the novel was being serialized) with two goals. First, she asks if anybody “in the circle of your acquaintance” could give her information on cotton plantations from a slave’s perspective (she specifically suggests “Such a person as Henry Bibb”); second, she challenges Douglass’ cynicism about religion, attempting to prove to him that despite organized Christianity’s failures to end slavery, “the strength & hope of your oppressed race does lie in the *church*.”<sup>57</sup> For Stowe, the success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* depended on its ability to craft true stories of slave suffering into a vision of a better future. That vision depended on the imagined interplay between two figures: the enslaved reader and the circulating Bible.

---

<sup>55</sup> Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 211.

<sup>56</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Co, 1853; reprint Mineola, NY: Dover, 2015), 16-17. Robert Stepto traces the epistolary and literary relationships between Stowe, Bibb, and Douglass in “Sharing the Thunder: The Literary Exchanges of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Bibb, and Frederick Douglass,” in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin: A Casebook*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons, 113-129.

<sup>57</sup> “To Frederick Douglass, July 9, 1851,” in *The Oxford Harriet Beecher Stowe Reader*, ed. Joan Hedrick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 58-61.

For a novel concerned with slavery's failures to address the social and spiritual needs of its victims, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* features a surprisingly prominent cast of enslaved readers. Among the novel's most significant black characters (Tom, Topsy, George, Eliza, and Cassy), all but one are literate at the start of the novel; Topsy, the one exception, quickly learns.<sup>58</sup> This cast of readers is due in part to Stowe's efforts to depict different types of slavery according to region. Tom, George, and Eliza all start the novel in Kentucky; Cassy, the daughter of a white master and an enslaved mother, received her education while being "brought up in luxury" (331). But this cast also reflects Stowe's prioritization of the enslaved reader as the site of sympathy: while her novel frequently features illiterate (or presumed illiterate) enslaved characters, they generally only appear in single episodes. (As I will discuss in my concluding section, there is one important exception to this rule: Tom's wife, Aunt Chloe, whose ability to read is left strangely nebulous.)

Stowe's emphasis on literate characters within *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was an important part of her political project. Barbara Hochman argues that Stowe's association of black literacy with "piety, domesticity, and passive resistance" was a conscious effort to "unma[k]e the association... between literacy and civil disobedience, unbridled

---

<sup>58</sup> The education of Topsy is at the core of the novel's vision of slave uplift. Topsy is introduced as an illiterate slave, "heathenish," and as having "something odd and goblin-like about her appearance" (217-18). By the novel's end she knows how to read, has been granted her freedom and become a Christian missionary, and has attained "grace" at "the age of womanhood" (396). These myriad transformations are, of course, one and the same: as Molly Farrell puts it, learning to read is an integral part of the Puritan pedagogy through which Topsy is "humanized" and given "feminine rather than animalistic features." Molly Farrell, "Dying Instruction: Puritan Pedagogy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *American Literature* 82, no. 2 (June 2010): 243-269, 262.

sexuality, secular individualism, and violence.”<sup>59</sup> These heroic representations of enslaved literacy, coupled with the novel’s massive success at reaching and speaking to readers (‘second to the Bible,’ as they say), have made *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* a centerpiece of antebellum reception studies. In general, these studies speak to three of the novel’s key goals: her appeal to readerly sentiments (teaching readers how to feel), her efforts to represent truth through fiction (teaching readers how to see), and her efforts to situate *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* within America’s overwhelming literary marketplace (teaching readers how to read).

Both because of its appeal to a wide range of readers and its explicit political goals, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is generally treated as the archetypal sentimental American novel. As such, it is a defining component of the larger literary project in which, as Elizabeth Barnes puts it, “early American novels employ sympathetic identification to reinforce a familial model of politics that subordinates difference to sameness and that teaches readers to care for others as if they were reflections of themselves.”<sup>60</sup> As a genre, sentimental novels—particularly religious sentimental novels—work to construct sympathetic ties between reader and character in two ways that are particularly relevant to thinking about enslaved readers. On the one hand, sentimental novels emphasize individual characters’ suffering in order to construct what Lauren Berlant calls “pain alliances,” the collective sympathies between the reader and the suffering character that “generate surplus pleasure and surplus pain at the spectacle of the sublime objects of

---

<sup>59</sup> Barbara Hochman, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Reading Revolution*, 68. Hochman’s second chapter, “Imagining Black Literacy,” offers a particularly rich study of the visions of black literacy undergirding Stowe’s novel.

<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 17.

sentimentality.”<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, these texts also tend to soothe these scenes of suffering through contrasting moments of shared sentiment within the text. Tellingly, these scenes often play up the ties between communal reading, sympathetic identification, and bodily recuperation—the phenomenon that Gillian Silverman identifies as “the fantasy of communion.”<sup>62</sup> Thus we see Ellen Montgomery alternating between mourning her lot in life and reading voraciously with John and Alice in *The Wide, Wide World* (1849), while Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* interjects to guide Alcott’s *Little Women* (1866-68) through the struggles of life and loss.

To the extent that reading mediates the dialectic in the sentimental novel between pain and pleasure, Stowe’s enslaved readers are uniquely poised to participate in those experiences. As Barbara Hochman describes it, “Stowe assert[s] the subjectivity of her black characters by representing them in terms that the white antebellum (especially Northern) reading public could understand.”<sup>63</sup> As slaves, Tom, Eliza, and company are perfectly positioned to enter pain alliances with white readers; as fellow readers, they are simultaneously open to the fantasy of communion in a way that other enslaved characters are not. Literacy thus shapes the social world of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: for an enslaved character to warrant narrative importance, they must be able to read.

In addition to being a function of the sentimental novel, this conditional quality speaks to the transformative power of literacy in the autobiographical slave narratives that inspired Stowe. As Gillian Silverman argues, Douglass’ *Narrative* presents the act of leaving slavery (or “exiting ‘the circle’”) as a transaction of sorts, in which the “loss of

---

<sup>61</sup> Lauren Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” *American Literature* 70 no.3 (Sep. 1998): 635-668, 65.

<sup>62</sup> Gillian Silverman, *Bodies and Books*, 1.

<sup>63</sup> Barbara Hochman, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Reading Revolution*, 75.

authentic black community” enables “a gain of fellowship with his Northern white readers”—a fellowship organized around Douglass’ emergent status as an author and a reader.<sup>64</sup> This is a formal problem for slave autobiography: necessarily written in the retroactive voice of a literate former slave, such texts draw a formal distinction—however unintentional or undesired that distinction might be—between those enslaved people who can tell stories and those enslaved people about whom stories can be told. (To borrow the language of Gayatri Spivak, even the slave narrative produces subalterns who cannot speak.<sup>65</sup>) In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, there is no strictly formal need for characters to be literate, but the narrative importance implied by that formal need persists, as Stowe’s literate characters tap into preexisting avenues of sympathy constructed by autobiographical slave narratives. Stowe’s efforts to map her novel onto the real experiences of enslaved people leads her to transform truth into trope: while illiterate slaves come and go over the course of the novel, narrative agency only lies in the hands of those who read.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Stowe’s emphasis on literate characters speaks to her efforts to model new forms of Christian reading for Americans. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was very much a product of the revolution in mass print following the American Bible Society, and shared that institution’s concerns that Americans might sacrifice ‘intensive reading’ in favor of ‘extended reading.’<sup>66</sup> But *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* also

---

<sup>64</sup> Gillian D. Silverman, *Bodies and Books: Reading and the Fantasy of Communion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 105.

<sup>65</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Colonial Discourse/Post-Colonial Theory*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 66-111, 104.

<sup>66</sup> Two recent studies of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a model for reading practices are Barbara Hochman’s comprehensive *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Reading Revolution* (2011) and

entered a literary marketplace where fiction readers were generally assumed to be inferior readers, and where novels were generally expected to offer didactic lessons.<sup>67</sup> On the one hand, novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had the potential to educate those readers who were least likely to critically examine the Bible of their own accord; on the other hand, they could prove another distraction keeping readers from turning back to the Bible.

Different evangelical authors took different approaches to this problem—perhaps none more extreme than Susan Warner, who ended *The Wide, Wide World* with Ellen Montgomery admonished by her teacher/'brother'/husband to "Read no novels."<sup>68</sup> But Stowe had a more nuanced sense of the value of fiction, having grown up in a family that simultaneously barred most novels as "trash" and adored the fiction of Sir Walter Scott.<sup>69</sup> Stowe's novel uses her characters as models in a "moral literacy project": as Faye Halpern argues, different characters model different modes of conventional literacy (practices of "reading quickly and reading alone," most directly associated with characters like George Harris or Senator Bird, that to Stowe's dismay "were increasingly registering as constituting adult literacy" in mid-century America) and "anti-literacy" (practices that centered reading "as intensive, as oral, as immediate," most associated with Tom himself).<sup>70</sup>

Stowe's enslaved characters do more than just model different reading practices, though; they do so as part of the same constellation of readers as Stowe's white

---

Faye Halpern, "Word Become Flesh: Literacy, Anti-literacy, and Illiteracy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *Legacy* 34, no. 2 (2017): 253-277.

<sup>67</sup> James L. Machor, *Reading Fiction in Antebellum America: Informed Response and Reception Histories, 1820-1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 40-41

<sup>68</sup> Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World*, 564.

<sup>69</sup> Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*, 20.

<sup>70</sup> Faye Halpern, "Word Become Flesh," 263-64.



characters. Jane Tompkins notes that while Stowe's characters frequently cross paths in her novel's narrative, Stowe imbues their relationships with meaning by constructing a "network of allusion in which every character and event has a place," and in which characters are linked to one another "with reference to a third term that is the source of their identity." Tompkins argues that "the figure of Christ is the common term that unites all of the novel's good characters, who are good precisely in proportion as they are imitations of him"; in addition to spiritual links, though, those characters are also linked by their ability to read thoughtfully.<sup>71</sup> Stowe's black readers provide her audience with models for their own reading, encouraging readers to identify their own practices with those of Stowe's enslaved characters, while within this network of allusion they invite readers of the novel to recognize the parity between such disparate groupings as George Harris and Augustine St. Clare (skilled 'extensive' readers who are atheists because of slavery), or Mrs. Bird and Tom (whose sense of Biblical imperative trumps all worldly concerns).

In the literary communities of Stowe's characters, no text is more important—or more subject to abuse—than the Bible, which lies at the center of Stowe's distinctions between types of enslaved readers. This is most apparent in the character of George Harris—in Stowe's words, "the man [who] could not be a thing" (12). George is both brilliant and widely read: prior to the events of the novel, he invented a machine for cleaning hemp "which... displayed quite as much mechanical genius as Whitney's cotton-gin," and he angrily declares of his master that "I can read better than he can" (13-

---

<sup>71</sup> Jane Tompkins, "Sentimental Power: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History," in *Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin: A Casebook*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 63-88, 77.

14). But George's technical and political knowledge come at the expense of spiritual reading. When Eliza encourages him to "trust in God, and try to do right, George declares that "I ain't a Christian like you, Eliza; my heart's full of bitterness; I can't trust in God. Why does he let things be so?" (15). After making his escape, George meets up with Wilson, an old employer who attempts to convince George that running away is "unscriptural." George shuts down this 'Bible defense':

"Don't quote Bible at me that way, Mr. Wilson," said George, with a flashing eye, "don't! for my wife is a Christian, and I mean to be, if ever I get to where I can; but to quote Bible to a fellow in my circumstances, is enough to make him give it up altogether. I appeal to God Almighty;--I'm willing to go with the case to Him, and ask Him if I do wrong to seek my freedom." (99)

George reorders the teleology of Biblical literacy seen in the Bibles for slaves campaign: not only does the Bible not free the slave, George argues, but the slave can only truly engage with the Bible once he has become a free man. While George "mean[s] to be" a Christian, he believes such a conversion can only take place after slavery; at the same time, while he's directly responding to a Biblical defense of slavery, his language—"to quote Bible to a fellow in my circumstances"—echoes Douglass' argument that, in a society organized around chattel slavery, celebrating the Bible as a tool for salvation can actively diminish the book's power for enslaved readers.

If we read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a study in readers and textual reception, George embodies the raw potential of the extensive enslaved reader—a potential that is tainted for Stowe by its distance from the Bible. (While Frederick Douglass never articulated opposition to the Bible to the same degree as George Harris, it's hard not to read the latter's conditional Christianity as a mild censure of the former.) In contrast, Tom

represents Stowe's ideal intensive reader. He only reads two books, his Bible and his hymn-book, and his reading process emphasizes tactility over analysis:

Is it strange, then, that some tears fall on the pages of his Bible, as he lays it on the cotton-bale, and, with patient finger, threading his slow way from word to word, traces out its promises? Having learned late in life, Tom was but a slow reader, and passed on laboriously from verse to verse. Fortunate for him was it that the book he was intent on was one which slow reading cannot injure,--nay, one whose words, like ingots of gold, seem often to need to be weighed separately. (131)

Throughout this account, Stowe repeatedly draws attention to both the physicality of the Bible and to the moments of contact between it and Tom. His eyes don't just scan "the pages," but drop tears upon them. Meanwhile, "reading" becomes "threading," the words only coming together through the tactile presence of Tom's finger. In the process, she resists attributing any agency to the Bible: no "talking book," it is instead alternately a line to thread, a path to trace, a source of gold to measure.

This physicality allows Stowe to valorize Tom's reading as a kind of direct transmission from book to body. As Tom reads aloud to himself from the gospel of John, Stowe transcribes his voice as an unbroken chain: "In—my—father's—house—are—many—mansions. I—go—to—prepare—a—place—for—you." She emphasizes the need to "weigh [each word] separately," but her mode of transcription leaves no empty space between the words: there is no room for introspection, analysis, or ideology to come between text and reader. In her next paragraph, she clarifies this distinction by imagining how the orator Cicero would react to these same lines "when he buried his darling and only daughter." While denying that the orator would feel either more or less grief than Tom ("for both were only men"), Stowe notes that "Cicero could pause over no such sublime words of hope," or believe their promise of "future reunion." In the process,

Stowe suggests that Tom's Biblical reading allows him to collapse two temporalities: it is simultaneously more immediate and more future-oriented than the extensive reading embodied by Cicero.

But Tom's reading orients him towards a future in the afterlife, not one on Earth. No character is more closely tied to the Bible than Tom, and yet the Bible doesn't prepare Tom for emancipation so much as it motivates him to move deeper and deeper into slavery—and closer and closer to death. Throughout the novel, Tom turns down opportunities to leave slavery that go against his sense of Christian imperative; he refuses to lie, to run away, or to kill his master. As Hochman reads it, Stowe describes “literacy as a ‘civilizing practice’ that would serve the cause of faith and domesticity” in contrast to lingering fears that enslaved readers could be a disruptive presence.<sup>72</sup> These anti-revolutionary tendencies are largely responsible for the twentieth century backlash against the novel and character; James Baldwin famously described *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1949 as “Everybody's Protest Novel,” a “report from the pit [that] reassures us of its reality and its darkness and of our own salvation,” while Henry Louis Gates, Jr., describes the status of Uncle Tom in “the *black* public imagination” as “the embodiment of ‘race betrayal’ and an object of scorn, a scapegoat for all of our political self-doubts.”<sup>73</sup>

As a story about reception, then, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* aligns perfectly with Douglass' qualified critique of the Bible as a tool for change. While reading in general orients enslaved characters like George and Eliza towards freedom, reading the Bible

---

<sup>72</sup> Barbara Hochman, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution*, 51-52.

<sup>73</sup> James Baldwin, “Everybody's Protest Novel,” in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 13-24, 19; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Introduction,” *The Annotated Uncle Tom's Cabin*, xi.

does the opposite for Tom—or rather, it orients him towards spiritual freedom and away from earthly freedom. (That this is treated as a heroic martyrdom in the novel hardly discounts Douglass’s basic point that the Bible, whatever its benefits may be, will not end slavery.) But as a story about the mobility of texts, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* challenges Douglass’ sense of the Bible as mere property by positing an alternate meaning to circulation: one in which Tom’s status as an *owner* of texts allows his body and his Bible to mutually reinforce, and even stand in for, one another.

### **Improper Property**

When Stowe describes Tom’s tactile Bible reading “with patient finger, threading his slow way from word to word,” she emphasizes the physical connection between body and book: Tom’s hands and skin, not just his eyes or ears, are the medium through which he can react to the text. That physical connection places his relation to the Bible within the counter-discourse to sentimentality that Kyla Schuller identifies as “impressibility,” a proto-affect discourse that she describes as “the capacity of a substance to receive impressions from external objects that thereby change its characteristics.”<sup>74</sup> Schuller argues that impressibility, which indexes a living being’s ability to develop, informed the hierarchization of nineteenth-century American society according to the capacity to feel and be affected by their experiences: in popular writing, certain categories of people were treated as more impressible (specifically white people and women) and so more capable of feeling, while others (primarily black people and men) were generally treated as less

---

<sup>74</sup> Kyla Schuller, “Introduction: Sentimental Biopower,” *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 1-34, 7.

susceptible to impressibility, and so less capable of feeling. Stowe sought to counter that narrative; as one negative review wrote, “Mrs. Stowe wishes to raise the negroes in our estimation by saying they have a warmth of impulse---a credulous impressibility.”<sup>75</sup> By positioning Tom as an emotional subject, Stowe resists the idea of the unfeeling slave while positing the Bible as the medium through which she makes the enslaved man’s feelings visible.

That impressibility has a strange afterlife in that same chapter when, in the process of purchasing Tom, Augustine St. Clare describes the man to be “All the moral and Christian virtues bound in black morocco, complete!” St. Clare is mocking Haley, the slave trader who has reduced Tom’s Christianity to a selling point; later in the exchange, when Haley describes Tom as “a preacher in them parts he came from,” St. Clare inquires whether the enslaved man has been “examined by any synod or council?” (135-36). As Samuel Otter notes, St. Clare’s joke is not just on Haley, but on slavery itself: he puns on ideas of being “bound in various senses: legally, by slavery; racially, by his skin; theologically, by his Christian destiny; and ideologically, by Stowe.”<sup>76</sup> But St. Clare’s joke has a kernel of truth to it, playing as it does off of Tom’s earlier absorption of Biblical knowledge and the emphasis on the tactility of that absorption.<sup>77</sup> Whatever spiritual knowledge Tom has in this scene is directly tied to the skin that absorbs and

---

<sup>75</sup> “Black Letters; or Uncle Tom-Foolery in Literature,” *Graham’s Magazine* 42, no. 2 (February 1853): 209-215, 211.

<sup>76</sup> Samuel Otter, “Stowe and Race,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe*, ed. Cindy Weinstein (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 15-38, 19.

<sup>77</sup> St. Clare’s joke is more frequently read as a comment on the relationship between characters than on the textuality of those characters. Jane Tompkins reads Tom’s transformation into a religious text as an part of the “network of allusion” that associates him with Eva, who is later described as “the direct and living embodiment of the New Testament.” “Sentimental Power,” 77.

‘binds’ that knowledge; the Bible has impressed itself not just upon his soul, but his body. At the heart of St. Clair’s joke is the idea that the salable slave and the circulating spiritual text have become, if not one and the same, close enough as to be exchangeable for one another.

Both Tom’s Bible reading and his subsequent label as being “bound in black morocco” are part of the process wherein, as Tom become more Christic throughout the novel, his body becomes increasingly Bible-like during his descent into slavery. While the connection between Tom’s body and his Bible first becomes visible in the moment of reading, that connection is galvanized in the moments when Tom is actually sold—the moments, that is, when his status as property is most foregrounded in the novel’s plot. But where St. Clare’s joke plays on the idea that body and book can be conflated, another scene in the novel suggests a stranger and more literal process of assimilation between the two, one that both builds upon and challenges the ideas of property undergirding chattel slavery.

Following the death of her husband, ownership of Tom passes to his wife. Marie St. Clare is Stowe’s quintessential bad reader: in an earlier scene, she holds “an elegantly bound prayer-book” and “imagine[s] she ha[s] been reading it,” though she has in fact been “taking a succession of short naps”—a scene that suggests the primacy of property to Marie, whose investment in the people and objects around her begins and ends with their ability to be ‘held’ (255). Unable to perceive spiritual or moral value, she promptly sells the population of the St. Clare plantation. Marie’s lone concession to the humanity of her enslaved people only confirms the importance of property rights to her sense of

ethics: Tom is sold, swiftly and surely, but he is allowed to take with him “quite a sizable trunk full of clothing” (298).

Far from a mercy, those articles of clothing ultimately index Tom’s inability to hold property. Stowe understood the denial of property to be a constitutive characteristic of American slavery. In the *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, she cites an 1839 estate case in which William Sharkey, Chief Justice of Mississippi’s High Court, ruled that “our statute-law prohibits slaves from owning certain kinds of property,” and further noting that the laws could go “as far as it could be necessary to exclude them from owning *any* property”; this is not “in consequence of [such property] being of a dangerous or offensive character, but because *it was deemed impolitic for them to hold property of any description.*”<sup>78</sup> Sure enough, when Simon Legree purchases Tom, he quite literally strips his new purchase of his material possessions. While Tom “had been attired for sale in his best broadcloth suit, with well-starched linen and shining boots,” Legree orders him to “Take off that stock!” Having established his psychosexual power over Tom, Legree immediately “turn[s] to Tom’s trunk, which, previous to this, he had been ransacking,” and gives Tom “a pair of old pantaloons and a dilapidated coat” (307). Tom’s clothes signify his ability to assert agency over his own body, and are the first things taken away to assert Legree’s dominance over it. The rest of Tom’s property fares no better: Legree discards some of it, including Tom’s Methodist Hymn-Book, and sells the rest off. By the end of the episode, Tom is left without even the trunk itself.

But Tom’s Bible is the sole exception to this process of divestment. “In Tom’s hurried exchange,” Stowe writes, “he had not forgotten to transfer his cherished Bible to

---

<sup>78</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 112-13.



his pocket.” In this moment, the logic that affixed the Bible to Tom in earlier scenes becomes a significant plot point. With Tom seemingly stripped naked, able to hide and keep nothing, the Bible nonetheless remains; more than that, it seems to temporarily merge with his body, its physical presence subordinated to its spiritual persistence. It is the one possession that Legree cannot claim, and the one possession that empowers Tom to rise above the torments to come.

The persistence of Tom’s Bible implicitly challenges Legree’s dominance, suggesting that he will never be able to own Tom completely. While Legree’s “ransacking” of Tom’s trunk appears to validate Douglass’s logic that “[t]he Slave is property” and so “cannot hold property,” the “cherished Bible” inverts that logic. Because Tom manages to keep hold of one piece of property, he cannot be fully rendered into property—cannot, therefore, be reduced to simply a slave.

Tom’s simple transfer of the Bible from pocket to pocket is perhaps the most important action he takes in the novel’s climax. Tom will go on to endure sacrifice after sacrifice, but this surreptitious concealment of the Bible is his originary act of resistance against the injustices of slavery. For the first time in the novel, Tom understands that his master would not tolerate an action—and does it anyway.

So why does the actual action seem like an afterthought? Concealing the Bible is crucial for the novel’s plot, but Stowe describes it as a double negative in the past perfect tense. Tom doesn’t conceal the Bible; Stowe reveals that he has already concealed it. To be more accurate still, he hasn’t even concealed it, but has rather “not forgotten” to conceal it, a construction that renders the action strangely implicit. Of course, every reader of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* understands that Tom is unlikely to have *remembered* to

transfer his Bible but failed to actually *transfer* it; that would be an affront not only to our sense of Tom's priorities, but to the very conventions of narrative. But Stowe nevertheless hesitates to make the moment concrete, leaving the means of Tom's concealment to her readers' imaginations. Meanwhile, the subordinate clause—"[i]n Tom's hurried exchange"—itself implies that something *should* have been forgotten in the rush, acknowledging the improbability of concealing even a pocket-Bible in the midst of such an invasive search and seizure.

There are ways of resolving this improbability. Perhaps Legree is distracted by the trunk, his lust for property ironically blinding him to the most valuable object in the lot. Or perhaps a life as chattel has finally forced Tom, that "good, steady, sensible, pious fellow," to learn the value of subterfuge (2). (One senses that this is the closest to Stowe's intent, but also a claim she can't quite state directly for fear of upsetting Tom's allegorical status.) Then again, there's always the third option: perhaps Tom simply concealed his Bible in the same kind of pocket as Robinson Crusoe, who claimed to have "pull'd off [his] clothes" to swim to a sinking ship where he then "fill'd [his] Pockets with Bisket."<sup>79</sup> Like that infamous episode, this certainly seems like a scene borne out of plot necessity: Tom cannot lose his Bible at this juncture, and so for that reason alone he does not.

But this improbability is precisely Stowe's point. Tom's retroactive subterfuge is not some absent-minded plot hole or authorial error, but rather an instance where Stowe consciously and intentionally warps the world of her novel to accommodate the Bible. Stowe dramatizes the oppression of slavery as a form of tyranny over Tom's ability to

---

<sup>79</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Michael Shinagel (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 37.

hold property, only to mark out the Bible as a conscious exception to those rules. Legree *could* take away the Bible—he certainly has the legal right to do so—but plot and language alike bend to prevent that from taking place. Stowe’s formal abstractions (her use of the past perfect tense and the double negative that makes Tom’s act of concealment invisible) join with her depiction of Legree’s imperiousness to demonstrate the impossibility of recognizing enslaved agency in a system designed to curtail that very agency: Tom can act only as long as he isn’t seen to act, either by Legree or the reader, and only to keep hold of the one piece of property that seems already poised to resist the tug of capitalism.

In a world where slaves cannot own property, Tom’s Bible embodies a paradox. It is unquestionably Tom’s property, and yet it stands apart from the transactional logic of all other property; the logic, that is, that would make it property of Simon Legree. Stowe appears to have taken to heart Douglass’ caution that giving something to a slave is simply giving it to a slaveholder, but she presents the Bible as an exception to this rule. But how can we define this exception? On the one hand, Stowe invites readers to see the Bible as a form of inalienable property—but it’s inalienable property belonging to somebody who not only lacks property rights but is himself alienable. On the other hand, its persistence speaks to its nature as a symbol of Tom’s right to Christianity (and thus to a better ‘life’ to come in Heaven)—but its symbolic qualities are, in this scene and others, resolutely tied to its material presence. As a way of bridging these states, though, we can consider the Bible through the lens of one of Stowe’s chapter titles: “In Which Property Gets into an Improper State of Mind.”

Throughout the novel, Stowe refers to enslaved characters as “Property” or “Living Property” at moments of elevated sentiment, a rhetorical tool that emphasizes the incompatibility of chattel slavery and human emotion. For instance, the chapter in which Eliza learns of the plan to sell her son and Uncle Tom is titled “Showing the Feelings of Living Property on Changing Owners” (28). But Stowe’s label for Chapter XI, “In Which Property Gets into an Improper State of Mind,” is less sentimental appeal than ironic joke (93). The “Property” in question is now the eloquent and well-read fugitive George Harris; the “Improper State of Mind” refers to his disguise as “Henry Butler,” a propertied white man complete with his own slave, Jim, another camouflaged runaway.

Stowe puns on two meanings of “proper.” In the sense of “proper” meaning “conforming to recognized social standards or etiquette,” George has clearly upended the social standards of the slave South.<sup>80</sup> But “proper” also denotes possession, as in the case of proper names or proper nouns.<sup>81</sup> In this context, George’s “Improper State of Mind” directly opposes his categorical label as “Property.” At the most basic level, George’s escape indicates a refusal to submit to his master’s ownership claim. But more importantly, his choice of disguise pits the ideological assumptions of slavery against the institution itself: George is unrecognizable as living property precisely because he has disguised himself as the owner of living property. To follow the logic of the chapter’s title, George *is* property, but he also doesn’t *behave* in the manner accorded to property, and so he ruptures the idiom of power that identifies him as property in the first place. If

---

<sup>80</sup> “Proper, A.I.2.a.,” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed January 29, 2018, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/152660>.

<sup>81</sup> The *OED* phrases this as “Belonging or relating to a specified person or thing distinctively or exclusively; characteristic; particular (*to*).” “Proper, A.II.3.b.,” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed January 29, 2018, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/152660>.

this seems like a nonsensical amount of effort to work through Stowe's graceful irony, it is because Stowe posits that slavery makes the very idea of property nonsensical. Stowe labels Eliza, Harry, and Tom as "Property" in order to reveal the impropriety underwriting the term; she labels George as "Property" in order to reveal its incoherence.

For Stowe, both George Harris and Tom's Bible mark the epistemological boundaries of what I call "improper property": that is to say, the field of figures upon whom ownership claims can be lodged (in each case, specifically by interested white slaveholders), but whose circulation within the narrative consistently undermines those ownership claims.<sup>82</sup> By circulation, I refer to the confluence of two related phenomena: these figures' ability to traverse geographic space and their concurrent ability to control how they are (or are not) perceived. George, who Stowe introduced as "the man [who] could not become a thing," escapes by both running away and making himself appear to be a propertied white man rather than a fugitive (12). Tom's Bible not only follows him from plantation to plantation, but also conceals itself (or rather 'is not forgotten to be concealed') from its ostensible owner, Simon Legree, under his very nose. In each case,

---

<sup>82</sup> This use of "improper property" sharply differs from its application in political philosophy. Rancière uses "improper property" to refer to the contentions generated by notions of political equality: if freedom operated in the classical era as "an empty property" that prevented the oligarchy "from governing through the simple arithmetical play of profits and debts," Rancière argues, then the claim of any single party to represent the whole of a community constitutes a form of "improper property." While both Rancière's and my use of the concept speak to the series of abstractions through which ownership claims become abstracted for political power, Rancière maps it onto property in purely abstract terms (i.e. the ideas of property such as land, slaves, and resources that grant political power). In contrast, and in reference to Stowe's idea of "Property [that] Gets into an Improper State of Mind," I consider the term most useful as a way of considering the way that "Property" as a term can contain its own disjunctions—and how those people and objects labeled "Property" can nevertheless be recognized as having narrative agency. Jacques Rancière, *Agreement and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 8.

the circulation of ‘improper property’ within the text not only deprives slaveholders of their legal property, but more importantly positions enslaved people as property-holders in defiance of their would-be masters.

Stowe’s two figures of ‘improper property’ aren’t meant to equate spiritual freedom with material emancipation: despite the better life waiting him on the other side, Tom’s death is the novel’s defining tragedy, while Stowe treats George’s successful escape and eventual migration to Liberia as a hopeful sign of a better world to come on this plane. Nor should they be read as a simple conflation on Stowe’s part of enslaved bodies and circulating Bibles. Rather, Stowe—like Douglass before her—situates the idea of the slave and the figure of the circulating Bible within a field of association, in which the movements of each one offers a model for understanding the movements of the other. When George Harris finally takes up the Bible after making good his escape, Stowe asks readers to understand both to have been liberated from the constraints of the slave South; when Tom’s Bible refuses to submit to Legree’s ownership, Stowe asks readers to associate the Bible’s resilience as a parallel to that which Tom will display leading up to the novel’s climax.

These figures are part of Stowe’s larger reading project: at the same time that she teaches her audience to identify with the enslaved readers that populate her novel, she also teaches them to associate those feelings with the affective responses generated by shared texts—including the copy of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* they presumably held in their hands. After all, as Stowe notes in her *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the novel “had a purpose entirely transcending the artistic one,” and as a result “is *treated* as a reality,--

sifted, tried and tested, as a reality.”<sup>83</sup> For Stowe, teaching readers to associate books with the enslaved people who read them is also a way to teach them to recognize the degree to which representations can align with reality, at least when it comes to depicting the evils of chattel slavery.

### **Black Letters / A Place to Call My Own**

My goal in this chapter has not been to echo the historical heroic narrative of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a novel that transformed everything that came before it, nor to position Stowe's novel as the telos of a narrative of black readers—a reading that would ignore the way that anxieties and fears about the relationships between black and white readers have consistently recurred throughout American history.<sup>84</sup> Rather, I have sought to demonstrate how the affective and ideological work of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* both was made possible by, and continued to feed into, the conversations and anxieties that emerged throughout the early antebellum period in order to imagine the possibilities of black and enslaved readers in myriad ways. As such, this section will briefly examine some of the ways that hopes and fears about the possibilities of black readers developed in response to Stowe's novel.

---

<sup>83</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 5.

<sup>84</sup> The ideas of white cultural order and animalized chaos that undergird “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” remain powerful icons for white supremacist and white nationalist groups, while the cultural legacy of the *Liberia Herald* has its echoes in the complicated push and pull of respectability politics. In a particularly strange development, the composite reader of *Sheppard Lee* has taken on digital life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as narratives of Russian interference in “Black Lives Matter” organizations work to delegitimize local black political agency by attributing it to the influence of hostile white outsiders. For examples of this interference, see Dan Keating, Kevin Schaul, & Leslie Shapiro, “The Facebook ads Russians targeted at different groups,” *Washington Post* (Washington, DC), Nov. 1, 2017.

For Douglass, the dangers of the Bible circulation debates of the 1840s stemmed directly from a naïve abolitionist imaginary of enslaved literacy: an imaginary that understood reading to lead directly to freedom, and so believed that distributing books was a meaningful abolitionist action. Most Northerners only encountered direct testimony about the peculiar institution from people who had both learned to read and escaped from slavery, and Douglass feared that activists had latched on to the circulating images of enslaved readers popularized by slave narratives and disregarded the actual conditions of those who remained enslaved. But where Douglass saw the Bible debates as the point where the abolitionist fantasy of the black reader needed to be firmly corrected, Stowe used the debates as fodder for expanding that imaginary. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* features no one 'type' of the black reader, but instead generates a host of enslaved readers whose roles in the novel's narrative and society are conditioned by the texts they read and the ways in which they read them. Stowe hoped that those fictional readers would encourage white Americans to see black reading not simply as a surrogate for freedom (as it appeared to be in some slave narratives) or as the medium for sympathetic affection (as in tracts like "The Happy Negro"), but rather as the playing field upon which black and white cultural similarity could be defined.

That similarity ultimately could not be sustained—at least not within the diegesis of Stowe's novel. Stowe's decision to exile all of her surviving literate characters, first to France and ultimately to Liberia, has been the subject of criticism since the novel's publication, when anti-colonizationists such as C. C. Foote accused the novel of accelerating "*the ultimate removal of the colored people from the northern states to the*



*shores of Africa.*”<sup>85</sup> For more recent critics, the episode is generally seen, in Karen Sánchez-Eppler’s words, as Stowe’s ultimate “failure to imagine an America in which blacks could be recognized as persons.”<sup>86</sup> Stephen Best offers a slightly more sympathetic reading, arguing that Stowe recognized the extent to which slavery as an institution and the idea of “living property” mutually reinforced one another, such that “abolition requires annulment of them both”: “not only the form of slavery but the slaves themselves.”<sup>87</sup> Whether motivated by an optimistic belief in a better world, as she claimed, or by a cynical acknowledgement of the impossibility of equality in America, as Best implies, Stowe ultimately found it easier to imagine black participants in a heterogeneous reading public than to imagine them in a heterogeneous nation.

But just as the *Liberia Herald* suggested that it could be easier to conceive of black literary accomplishment at a distance, so did Stowe’s novel show that fictional enslaved readers could bridge America’s reading publics with an alacrity that would be impossible for even the most famous real enslaved people. To some, like George R. Graham of *Graham’s Magazine*, that was a cause for no small amount of concern. In an 1854 article called “Black Letters; Or Uncle Tom-Foolery in Literature,” Graham bemoaned that Uncle Tom was threatening to supplant his own literary cabinet, as “sanctified dissertations upon negro carousals” were being published “almost to the

---

<sup>85</sup> “The Refugees’ Home Society,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* (Rochester, NY), April 22, 1853. Marva Banks explores the anti-colonizationist response to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in depth in “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Antebellum Black Response,” in *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response*, ed. James L. Machor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 209-227.

<sup>86</sup> Karen Sánchez-Eppler, “Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition,” in *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 92-114, 113.

<sup>87</sup> Stephen Best, *The Fugitive’s Properties*, 2.

exclusion of the Bible and healthy and robust works.” Twelve years earlier in the pages of that very magazine, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” had sought to organize a white reading public in which neither “Asiatics nor Aricans” could interfere. Now, that reading public had undergone “a regular incursion of the blacks,” while “[t]he shelves of booksellers groan under the weight of Sambo’s woes, done up in covers!”<sup>88</sup> Graham was particularly concerned that these “Black Letters” would overwhelm “the lazy and feeble, who find its grotesque peculiarities” and “its animal vivacities” more tempting than “the feelings and modes of actions of our own class.” In short, for Graham, the fear that motivated “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”—the concern that without proper guidance, overly-sympathetic readers would forget their position in the social order—had finally been realized by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

At the same time that Stowe’s sympathetic project threatened to redefine the way that Northern white readers imagined black readers, it also energized real black reading publics across the country. While Stowe constructed her novel to speak to the white readers who comprised the vast majority of its audience, the novel was taken up widely by African Americans across the country, many of whom saw the text as both a powerful tool for abolition despite its potentially troublingly representation of black subservience.<sup>89</sup> In May, 1854, black Philadelphia abolitionist and underground railroad conductor William Still attributed a rise in fugitives during the previous year to “that mischievous book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*”:

---

<sup>88</sup> “Black Letters; or Uncle Tom-Foolery in Literature,” *Graham’s Magazine*, 209. The review was published anonymously, but Frederick Douglass attributed it to Graham himself, an attribution which Robert S. Levine maintains in his analysis of Douglass’ response to Stowe’s novel. “Uncle Tom’s Cabin in Frederick Douglass’ Paper: An Analysis of Reception,” *American Literature* 64, no. 1 (March 1992): 71-93, 77.

<sup>89</sup> Marva Banks, “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Antebellum Black Response,” 223-225.

...for but few of the intelligent “articles” there are in the south, who have not read, or heard it read, and consequently have at once “fired up” to strike for Canada. By the way, quite recently I had the pleasure of an interview with a very intelligent “piece” of property from far South, who had *Uncle Tom* with him, thinking as much of the old fellow probably as any other friend living.<sup>90</sup>

While Still’s account echoes the rhetoric of incendiary texts in his description of enslaved people “fired up” by a Northern text, his ironic descriptions of “intelligent ‘articles’” and “a very intelligent ‘piece’ of property” parody the idea that black readers are simply objects to work the will of either Southern slaveholders *or* Northern abolitionists, drawing attention instead to the thoughtfulness and agency of fugitives.

For Still, the power of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is directly tied to its capacity to blur the lines between person and (textual) property. After general praise for the novel, he draws implicit attention to its various confluences of text and reader. Still’s description of “*Uncle Tom*” traveling North with an escaped slave echoes the two depictions of ‘improper property’ in Stowe’s novel, George’s escape from bondage and the Bible’s adherence to Uncle Tom. But it also shows how the figures within those episodes flow into and out of one another to the mind of an interested reader. “*Uncle Tom*” is at once a “mischievous book” and “the old fellow” described within. Moreover, Still implies, it is precisely because of this semiotic uncertainty that “the old fellow” can stick with the “‘piece’ of property” that carries him/his book, in much the same way as the Bible sticks with Uncle Tom.

There is a further measure of irony to Still’s description: while Stowe was deeply troubled by the idea of anyone claiming to own the runaway “‘piece’ of property,” she herself had laid claim to “the old fellow.” A year earlier, Stowe had filed an copyright

---

<sup>90</sup> “For the Provincial Freeman,” *Provincial Freeman* 1, no. 7 (May 6, 1854): 2

suit against a German translation of the novel; the court ruled that while Stowe held the right to “that particular combination of characters that exhibits to the eyes of another the ideas intended to be conveyed,” she did not hold the rights to the ideas themselves.<sup>91</sup>

Justice Robert Grier emphasizes Stowe’s surrender of her “absolute dominion and property” by way of analogy, writing that “Uncle Tom and Topsy are as much *publici juris* as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.”<sup>92</sup> A supporter of the Fugitive Slave Law, Justice Grier constructs what Meredith McGill describes as an “asymmetrical analogy between property in slaves and property in books,” one that “evokes the threat to the union and to theories of ‘absolute dominion and property’ posed by the contested legal status of fugitive slaves.”<sup>93</sup> That analogy draws on the same comparison between enslaved people and books as property that motivates Stowe’s text. On the one hand, for Grier, the comparison between enslaved people and texts puns on the implicit inconsistency between Stowe’s political and literary projects: in trying to free Tom only to claim his *Cabin*, the judge suggests, the author is trying to own her own slaves. On the other hand, it’s important to note that the ruling does not suggest that Stowe’s characters are free, but rather labels them as “public property,” available to be “used and abused by

---

<sup>91</sup> *Stowe v. Thomas*, 23 Fed. Cas. (2 Am. Law Reg. 210): 208.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* 208.

<sup>93</sup> Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting*, 273. Best reads *Stowe v. Thomas* as a pivotal moment when the idea of slave ownership becomes metonymic for the more abstract set of conflicting ownership claims that inform the idea of intellectual property. As Best puts it, “the court’s representation of the public domain (of the public’s property in Stowe’s text) as wayward slaves’ bodies ‘[to] be used and abused’ by the nearest entrepreneur calls to mind the coevalness of the fugitive slave—as contractual person and pilfered property, a subject capable of sentiment and an article of property... The specter of bodies naked, freely circulating, and vulnerable to the interests of the nearest free marketer figures the fungibility of the literary as commodity, embodies the limitless profitability of the book both as private object of appropriation and public capital asset—that redundant and public ‘ownership’ necessary to the production of literary property as market commodity.” *The Fugitive’s Properties*, 122-123.

imitators, play-rights and poetasters.”<sup>94</sup> If Uncle Tom and Topsy cannot be owned by one master, it is not because they are free, but rather because they have become subject to limitless property claims. *Stowe v. Thomas* suggests a counterpoint to Stowe’s liberatory visions of improper property: if Stowe imagined that conflicting ownership claims have the possibility to dispel one another, Justice Grier’s ruling suggests that in the emerging literary marketplace surrounding *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, those ownership claims can just as easily multiply.

In the years following the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, both Douglass and Stowe reevaluated their depictions of black Bible literacy as a way to envision an antislavery reading public. In *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), published three years after Douglass had broken away from Garrison to define his own abolitionist stance, Douglass reinserts the Bible into his narrative of learning to read. He revises his account of living with the Aulds, for instance, to note that “[t]he frequent hearing of my mistress reading the bible... awakened my curiosity in respect to this *mystery* of reading”; he also clarifies Mrs. Auld’s reasons for teaching him to read in the first place, describing “the duty which she felt it to teach me, at least to read *the bible*.”<sup>95</sup> Later, in a chapter titled “Religious Feelings Awakened,” Douglass lists his efforts to learn about abolition, consulting the dictionary (which afforded “very little help”) and the *Baltimore American* (which gave Douglass “the incendiary information denied [him] by the dictionary” (230). His knowledge in the anti-slavery movement, as he puts it, translated into an increased “desire for knowledge,” and especially “a thorough acquaintance with

---

<sup>94</sup> *Stowe v. Thomas*, 208.

<sup>95</sup> *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 1994), 103-452, 216-17. All subsequent citations in text.

the contents of the bible” (231). Later in the chapter, when he describes his furtive efforts to learn to write, Douglass draws attention to the time spent “copying from the bible and the Methodist hymn book, and other books which had accumulated on my hands” (235). Douglass presents the Bible as a critical component of the constellation of texts that impel him to literacy, and he always takes care to situate it in relation to a host of other texts and teachers. Where Douglass’ earlier *Narrative* only cited the Bible to criticize those who used it to justify slavery, the revisions in *My Bondage and My Freedom* suggests that Douglass had begun to see the Bible as a tool worth claiming for his own history, albeit on the condition that it be recognized as part of a larger print sphere.

Meanwhile, Stowe found herself questioning the Bible’s status as a shared text in *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, her follow-up to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. While most of the novel’s plot centers on the efforts of Nina Gordon, a white plantation heiress, to navigate her own family’s imbrication in slavery, the title character is a formerly-enslaved maroon living in Virginia’s Dismal Swamp. Dred is a fictional descendant of none other than Denmark Vesey himself, and he carries with him “an old, much-worn, much-thumbed copy of the Bible” that once belonged to Vesey himself.<sup>96</sup> In *Dred*, Stowe celebrates the book’s capacity to transmit history: it is a physical artifact of a black revolutionary past. But acknowledging that past, for Stowe, also renders the Bible’s power alien and unsettling.

Unlike Douglass, Stowe reasserts the Bible’s singular importance in the life of her enslaved hero: “the book,” she writes, “had been the nurse and forming power of his soul.” But unlike Tom, Dred doesn’t make the Bible legible to others, but rather becomes

---

<sup>96</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 446.

a figure for illegibility. Writing that “[t]hey are much mistaken who say that nothing is efficient as a motive that is not definitely understood,” Stowe compares “the indefinite stimulating power” of Dred’s Bible to “the mingled wail and roar of the Marseillaise.”<sup>97</sup> To recognize the revolutionary Bible of *Dred*, a heroic but dangerous symbol of the power of black anger, requires that Stowe ultimately cede her own ability to transcribe, or even interpret, the book’s power. Dred’s Bible is emphatically a shared text, one that spans three decades of revolutionary history to keep Vesey’s spirit alive in his descendant, but it’s also a text that Stowe refuses—or is unable—to make “definitely understood.”

At the same time that Douglass uses *My Bondage and My Freedom* to re-situate the Bible within the catalog of texts that could be taken up by enslaved readers, Stowe describes the book’s further fragmentation as a result of that same proliferation. Douglass and Stowe’s vacillating perspectives on the Bible as an antislavery tool reflect the larger cultural uncertainty surrounding the Bible’s circulation within America’s mass culture. On the one hand, it is a text with singular power. On the other hand, that singular power is contingent upon its ability to be produced and distributed in mass—processes that suggested that African Americans could participate in an American reading public only if that public could be understood as itself the result of fragmented and often oppositional interests represented by the figure of the shared text.

As a way to close this chapter and dissertation, I would like to examine one alternative perspective on the need to reconcile the individual black reader with the larger

---

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

American reading public: Frances Harper's post-Civil War poem "Learning to Read." Published in 1872's *Sketches of Southern Life*, the poem arrives right in the middle of her Aunt Chloe sequence. The series begin with Aunt Chloe's children being sold by her white mistress, and ends with "The Reunion," in which Aunt Chloe, now emancipated, is reunited with her children and "richer now than Mistus," whose only son died defending his right to own slaves.<sup>98</sup> The name "Aunt Chloe" implicitly refers back to and revises *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In Stowe's novel, Aunt Chloe is Tom's wife, the survivor of a tragic story of family dissolution in which her husband is sold off and killed; in Harper's poem, Aunt Chloe is the persistent spirit who lives long enough to see a family shattered by slavery reconstituted in Reconstruction. But by recasting Aunt Chloe as the subject of the post-war "Learning to Read," Harper draws attention to the limits of pre-war visions of black literacy.

"Learning to Read" depicts the promises and pitfalls of valuing African American reading solely as a way of relating to a larger public sphere. Written in the voice of Chloe, the poem looks back at the antebellum period as a period when all reading was secret, describing how enslaved people "would try to steal / A little from the book": Uncle Caldwell "greased the pages of his book / And hid it in his hat," while "Mr. Turner's Ben" listened to the children's spelling lesson "and picked the words right up by heart." Following the Civil War and emancipation, "Yankee teachers" arrive to teach formerly-enslaved people to read: the same people who fought for freedom are now fighting for literacy, suggesting that the two must go hand in hand: the poem envisions

---

<sup>98</sup> Frances Harper, *Complete Poems of Frances E. W. Harper*, ed. Maryemma Graham (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 131.



progress towards the future as progress away from secretive reading towards a new and expansive reading public.

But Chloe, nearly sixty years old, is barred from that future public. Though she “longed” to read her Bible, “when [she] begun to learn it, / Folks just shook their heads, / And said there is no use trying, / Oh! Chloe, you’re too late.” In this vision of Chloe as the exception to the new rule of literacy, Harper again evokes her character’s namesake from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In the case of Stowe’s Chloe, her ability to read and write is ambiguous. Tom sends letters to Chloe, but Stowe leaves open the possibility that George or somebody else reads them aloud to her; similarly, Chloe comments at one point that she “don’t see... how white people gen’lly can bar to hev to write things much as they do, writin’ ‘s such slow, oneasy kind o’ work” (397). Stowe’s refusal to mark Chloe as a reader sets her apart from Stowe’s other black heroes, while the author frequently emphasizes Chloe’s dialectical confusion such as her “particular fancy for calling poultry poetry”—a line prefiguring Sarah Hale’s vision of “po’try and all” in the *Liberia Herald*. While Aunt Chloe’s status as a sentimental figure is based in part on her ability to participate in an economy of letters, the limits imposed on her literacy suggest Stowe’s greater uncertainty as to how to fit Chloe into her various heroic narratives. Aunt Chloe, for Stowe, exists at the terminus of literacy.

The poem nevertheless ends optimistically. Desperate to read her Bible (“For precious words it said”), Chloe gets “a pair of glasses / And straight to work I went, / And never stopped till I could read / The hymns and Testament.” In the final verse of the poem, Chloe announces her changed circumstances: “Then I got a little cabin / A place to call my own— / And I felt as independent / As the queen upon her throne.” Harper

identifies Chloe's personal independence as both a type of regal authority *and* a result of having "a place to call [her] own."<sup>99</sup> But she emphasizes both phenomena as part of a sequence—"Then I got..."—that requires that she first learn to read the Bible. Harper draws on the concerns of Douglass and Stowe, suggesting that to envision a successful Reconstruction required that her readers understand freedom, at least in part, as the synchronicity of black property ownership with black spiritual literacy.

But in Harper's poem, Chloe's ability to read is heroic precisely *because* it's outside the ambit of the abolitionist imagination. Just as Chloe's reading is set apart from that of a reading public, her Bible is not a shared text: it doesn't index or generate a relationship between her and a larger external world, but is instead the manifestation of her ability to thrive outside of the public sphere. While "Learning to Read" strings freedom, literacy, and ownership together in a sequence, it ultimately concludes with Chloe "as independent / As the queen upon her throne." In the image of Aunt Chloe teaching herself to read, ignored and unseen by the "Yankee teachers" and her formerly-enslaved peers alike, Harper suggests that African American literacy can exist beyond the antebellum debates and anxieties that imagined the black reader as a figure for public consumption. In the process, she posits black reading at the end of slavery as a kind of hopeful paradox: an imagined literacy that no longer needs to be imagined.

---

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 127-128.

## Bibliography

### Collections

*American Colonization Society records, 1792-1964* (Library of Congress: Washington, DC)

### Web Databases

*African American Newspapers* (Accessible Archives)

*America's Historical Newspapers: Early American Newspapers, Series 2-7, 1741-1922* (Readex)

*American Periodical Series Online* (Proquest)

*Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers* (Library of Congress)

### Nineteenth-Century Periodicals/Magazines

*The African Repository*, Washington, DC.

*The Emancipator*, New York City.

*Freedom's Journal*, New York City.

*The Liberator*, Boston.

*The Liberia Herald*, Monrovia, Liberia.

*The North Star*, Rochester, NY.

*The Saturday Morning Transcript*, Boston.

*Southern Literary Messenger*, Richmond, VA.

### Books and Articles

Ammons, Elizabeth, Ed. *Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin: A Casebook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism: Revised Edition*. New York: Verso, 2006.

Aptheker, Herbert. *American Negro Slave Revolts: 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. New York: International Publishers, 1993.

---, Ed. *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States: Volume 1*. New York: The Citadel Press, 1951.

---. "One Continual Cry": *David Walker's Appeal*. New York: A.I.M.S. by Humanities Press, 1965.

Bacon, Jacqueline. *Freedom's Journal: The First African-American Newspaper*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007.

Baldwin, James. "Everybody's Protest Novel." In *Notes of a Native Son*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2012. 13-24.

Ball, Erica L. *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012.

Banks, Marva. "Uncle Tom's Cabin and Antebellum Black Response." In *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response*.

- Edited by James L. Machor. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. 209-227.
- Barnes, Elizabeth. *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Translated by Richard Miller. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1990.
- Bassard, Katherine Clay. *Transforming Scriptures: African American Women Writers and the Bible*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010.
- Baucom, Ian. *Specters of the Atlantic*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Belt-Beyan, Phyllis M. *The Emergence of African American Literacy Traditions: Family and Community Efforts in the Nineteenth Century*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version." Translated by Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty & Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008. 19-55.
- Berlant, Lauren. "Poor Eliza," *American Literature* 70, no.3 (Sep. 1998): 635-668.
- Best, Stephen. *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Bibb, Henry. *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave*. New York: Published by the Author, 1849.
- Bird, Robert Montgomery. *Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself*. Edited by Christopher Looby. New York: New York Review Books, 2008.
- "Black Letters; or Uncle Tom-Foolery in Literature," *Graham's Magazine* 42, no. 2 (February 1853): 209-215.
- Brooks, Daphne. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Bryant, John. "Poe's Ape of UnReason: Humor, Ritual, and Culture." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 51, no. 1 (Jun 1996): 16-52.
- Burin, Eric. *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005.
- Burnett, James, Lord Monboddoo. *Of the Origin and Progress of Language*. Edinburgh: J. Balfour, 1773. 187-188.
- Burrowes, Carl Patrick. "'In Common with Colored Men, I Have Certain Sentiments': Black Nationalism and Hilary Teage of the 'Liberia Herald,'" *The Journal of Negro History* 86, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 30-44
- . *Power & Press Freedom in Liberia, 1830-1970*. Trenton: Africa World Press Inc., 2004.
- Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Callahan, Allen Dwight. *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.
- Cartwright, Samuel. "Philosophy of the Negro Constitution." In *Cotton is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments*. Edited by E. N. Elliott. Augusta, GA: Pritchard, Abbot & Loomis, 1860. 690-716.
- Child, Lydia Maria. *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*. Boston: Allen & Ticknor, 1833.

- Cobb, Thomas R. R. *An Inquiry into the Law of Negro Slavery*. Savannah: W. Thorne Williams, 1858.
- Cohen, Lara Langer and Jordan Alexander Stein, eds. *Early African American Print Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Cole, H. B. "The Press in Liberia." *Liberian Studies Journal* 4, no. 2 (1971-1972): 147-155.
- Cornelius, Duitsman. "*When I Can Read My Title Clear*": *Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991.
- Crain, Patricia. "New Histories of Literacy." In *A Companion to the History of the Book*. Edited by Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. 467-479.
- Crockett, Hasan. "The Incendiary Pamphlet: David Walker's *Appeal* in Georgia," in *The Journal of Negro History* 86, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 305-318.
- Croutham, James. *Bennett's New York Herald and the Rise of the Popular Press*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1989.
- Curry, Leonard. *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850: The Shadow of the Dream*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- Cuvier, Georges, Baron. *The Animal Kingdom Arranged in Conformity with its Organization*. Translated by Henry McMurtrie. New York: G. & C. & H. Carvill, 1831.
- . "Description of an Ourang-Outang, reprinted from *The Monthly Magazine*." *Select Reviews of Literature and Spirit of Foreign Periodicals* 7 (May 1812): 402.
- Daly, John Patrick. *When Slavery was Called Freedom: Evangelicalism, Proslavery, and the Causes of the Civil War*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2002.
- Dann, Martin E., Ed. *The Black Press: 1827-1890*. New York: Capricorn Books, 1970. 11-32.
- Davis, Susan G. "'Making Night Hideous': Christmas Revelry and Public Order in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia." *American Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (1982): 185-99.
- Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe: A Norton Critical Edition*. Edited by Michael Shinagel. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994.
- Derrida, Jacques. "The Purveyor of Truth." Translated by Willis Domingo, et al. In "Graphesis: Perspectives in Literature and Philosophy." *Yale French Studies* 52 (1975): 31-113.
- Dinius, Marcy J. "'Look!! Look!!! at This!!!!': The Radical Typography of David Walker's *Appeal*." *PMLA* 126, no. 1 (Jan 2011): 55-72.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Autobiographies*. Edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Library of America, 1994.
- . "Bibles for the Slaves." In *The Liberty Bell, By Friends of Freedom*. Edited by Maria Chapman. Boston: Andrews and Prentiss, 1848.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *Writings*. Edited by Nathan Huggins. New York: Library of America, 1986.
- Elmer, Jonathan. *Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture, and Edgar Allan Poe*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.
- Emerson, D. Berton. "'This is a strange book': Re-Membering Local Democratic Agency in Bird's *Sheppard Lee*." *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 61, no. 2 (2015): 241-261.

- Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.
- Ernst, Robert. *Rufus King: American Federalist*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968.
- Fanuzzi, Robert. *Abolition's Public Sphere*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Farrell, Molly. "Dying Instruction: Puritan Pedagogy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*." *American Literature* 82, no. 2 (June 2010): 243-269.
- Fea, John. *The Bible Cause: A History of the American Bible Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Fichtelberg, Joseph. *Critical Fictions: Sentiment and the American Market, 1780-1870*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003.
- Fitzhugh, George. *Cannibals All! Or, Slaves Without Masters*. Richmond: A. Morris, 1857.
- Gardner, Eric. *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth-Century African-American Literature*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009.
- Garrett, Aaron. "Human Nature." In *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*. Edited by Knud Haakonssen. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 160-233.
- Garrison, William Lloyd. *Thoughts on African Colonization*. Boston: Garrison and Knapp, 1832. Reprinted in New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism: 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Gaustad, Edwin S., ed. *The American Tract Society Documents: 1824-1925*. New York: Arno Press, 1972.
- Geggus, David Patrick. *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001.
- Geist, Christopher D. "The Slave's Friend: An Abolitionist Magazine for Children." *American Periodicals* 9 (Jan 1 1999): 27-35.
- Genovese, Eugene. *A Consuming Fire: The Fall of the Confederacy in the Mind of the Christian South*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Goddu, Teresa A. "U.S. Antislavery Tracts and the Literary Imagination." In *The Cambridge Companion to Slavery in American Literature*. Edited by Ezra Tawil. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 32-54.
- Goulet, Andrea. *Optiques: The Science of the Eye and the Birth of Modern French Fiction*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.
- Grayson, William J. *The Hireling and the Slave, Chicora, and Other Poems*. Charleston, S. C.: McCarter & Co., 1856.
- Gundaker, Grey. "Give Me a Sign: African Americans, Print, and Practice." In *An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840*. Edited by Robert A. Gross & Mary Kelley. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 483-494.

- Gutjahr, Paul C. *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- Hager, Christopher. *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Hale, Sarah Josepha. *Liberia; or, Mr. Peyton's Experiments*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853.
- Hall, David D. *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996.
- Halpern, Faye. *Sentimental Readers: The Rise and Fall of a Disparaged Rhetoric*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013.
- . "Word Become Flesh: Literacy, Anti-literacy, and Illiteracy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *Legacy* 34, no. 2 (2017): 253-277.
- Hamilton, James. *Negro Plot. An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection Among a Portion of the Blacks of the City of Charleston, South Carolina*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Boston: J. W. Ingraham, 1822.
- Harper, Frances. *Complete Poems of Frances E. W. Harper*. Edited by Maryemma Graham. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Harris, Leslie M. *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Harris, Richard. "A Young Dramatist's Diary: *The Secret Records* of R. M. Bird." *Library Chronicle* 25, no. 1 (Winter 1959): 8-24.
- Harrowitz, Nancy A. "Criminality and Poe's Orangutan: The Question of Race in Detection." In *Agonistics: Arenas of Creative Contest*. Edited by Janet Lungstrum and Elizabeth Sauer. Albany: SUNY Press, 1997. 177-195.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Hayes, Kevin, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Hedrick, Joan D. *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- , Ed. *The Oxford Harriet Beecher Stowe Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Heglar, Charles J. *Rethinking the Slave Narrative: Slave Marriage and the Narratives of Henry Bibb and William and Ellen Craft*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001.
- Hochman, Barbara. *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution: Race, Literacy, Childhood, and Fiction, 1851-1911*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011.
- Holifield, E. Brooks. *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.
- Huberich, Charles Henry. *The Political and Legislative History of Liberia*. New York: Central Book Company, 1947.
- Irons, Charles F. *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.
- Jackson, Andrew. *Messages of Gen. Andrew Jackson: With a Short Sketch of His Life*. Concord, N.H.: John F. Brown and William White, 1837.

- James, C. L. R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution: Second Edition Revised*. New York: Vintage Press, 1989.
- James, Winston. *The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm: The Life and Writings of a Pan-Africanist Pioneer, 1799-1851*. New York: New York University Press, 2010.
- Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.
- Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. London: John Stockdale, 1787.
- John, Richard R. *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Johnson, Barbara. "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida." In "Literature and Psychoanalysis/The Question of Reading: Otherwise." *Yale French Studies* 55-56 (1977): 457-505.
- Jones, Douglas A. *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014.
- Jones, Paul Christian. "The Danger of Sympathy: Edgar Allan Poe's 'Hop-Frog' and the Abolitionist Rhetoric of Pathos." *Journal of American Studies* 35, no. 2 (August 2001): 239-254.
- Kaisary, Phillip. *The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination: Radical Horizons, Conservative Constraints*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014.
- Kaplan, Amy. "Manifest Domesticity." *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (September 1998): 581-606.
- Kazanjian, David. *The Brink of Freedom: Improvising Life in the Nineteenth Century Atlantic World*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.
- . *The Colonizing Trick: National Culture and Imperial Citizenship in Early America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Kennedy, J. Gerald and Liliane Weissberg, eds. *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Kopley, Richard. *Edgar Allan Poe and the Dupin Mysteries*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Lacan, Jacques. "Seminar on the Purloined Letter." Translated by Jeffrey Mehlman. In "French Freud: Structural Studies in Psychoanalysis." *Yale French Studies* 48 (1972): 38-72.
- Lamb, Jonathan. *The Things Things Say*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Leavell, Lori. "'Not intended exclusively for the slave states': Antebellum Recirculation of David Walker's *Appeal*." *Callaloo* 3, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 679-695.
- Lee, Maurice S. *Slavery, Philosophy, and American Literature, 1830-1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Lemire, Elise. "Miscegenation": *Making Race in America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002. 87-114.
- Levander, Caroline F. and Robert S. Levine, eds. *Hemispheric American Studies*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008.
- Levine, Robert S. "Uncle Tom's Cabin in Frederick Douglass' Paper: An Analysis of Reception." *American Literature* 64, no. 1 (March 1992): 71-93.
- Lewis, Adam. "'A Traitor to His Brethren'? John Brown Russwurm and the *Liberia Herald*." *American Periodicals* 25, no. 2 (2015): 112-123.



- Locke, John. *Second Treatise of Government*, Edited by C. B. Macpherson. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980.
- Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Loughran, Trish. *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Machor, James L. *Reading Fiction in Antebellum America: Informed Response and Reception Histories, 1820-1865*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.
- McDiarmid, John. *The Scrap Book: A Collection of Amusing and Striking Pieces in Prose and Verse: 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, High-Street, 1822.
- McFeely, William S. *Frederick Douglass*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991.
- McGill, Meredith. *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.
- McHenry, Elizabeth. *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Mills, Charles W. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone With the Wind*. New York: Macmillan, 1936.
- Monaghan, E. Jennifer. *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005.
- Morison, Samuel Eliot. *The Life and Letters of Harrison Gray Otis, Federalist, 1765-1848* Vol. II. Boston: The University Press Cambridge, 1913.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- Mott, David C. "Thomas Gregg, Local Historian and Author." *The Annals of Iowa* 14 (1924): 263-270.
- Mott, Frank Luther. *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1930: Volume 1 (1741-1850)*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958.
- Murison, Justine. "Hypochondria and Racial Interiority," *Arizona Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 1-25.
- . *The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Nord, David Paul. "The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815-1835." *Journalism Monographs* 88 (May 1984).
- . *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. and Alison L. LaCroix, eds. *Subversion and Sympathy: Gender, Law, and the British Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Original Hymns for Sabbath Schools*. Boston: Lilly, Wait, Colman, & Holden, 1833.
- Ostrom, John Ward. "Poe's Literary Labors and Rewards." In *Myths and Reality*. Edited by Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV. Baltimore: The Edgar Allan Poe Society, 1987. 37-47.
- Otter, Samuel. *Philadelphia Stories: America's Literature of Race and Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- . "Stowe and Race." In *The Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe*. Edited by Cindy Weinstein. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 15-38.

- Paine, Thomas. *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings*. Edited by Eric Foner. New York: Library of America, 1995.
- Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *Essays and Reviews*. Edited by G. R. Thompson. New York: Library of America, 1984.
- . "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." *Graham's Magazine* 18, no. 4 (April 1841): 166-179.
- . *Poetry and Tales*. Edited by Patrick F. Quinn. New York: Library of America, 1984.
- Power Greene, Ousmane K. *Against Wind and Tide: The African American Struggle Against the Colonization Movement*. New York: New York University Press, 2014.
- Priest, Josiah. *Bible Defence of Slavery: 5<sup>th</sup> edition*. Glasgow, KY: Rev. W. S. Brown, M. D., 1852.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Agreement and Philosophy*. Translated by Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- . *The Emancipated Spectator*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. Verso: New York, 2009.
- . *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Translated by Kristin Ross. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.
- Ravindranathan, Thingam. "Unequal Metrics: Animals Passing in La Fontaine, Poe, and Chevillard." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 24, no. 5 (2014): 1-35.
- Rebhorn, Mathew. "Ontological Drift: Medical Discourse and Racial Embodiment in Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee*." *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 61, no. 2 (2015): 262-296.
- Richards, Leonard. "*Gentlemen of Property and Standing*": *Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- Roach, Joseph. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.
- Roberts, Rita. *Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reform in Northern Black Thought, 1776-1863*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010.
- Rogers, Sherbrooke. *Sarah Josepha Hale: A New England Pioneer, 1788-1879*. Grantham, NH: Tompson & Rutter, 1985.
- Rosenheim, Shawn and Stephen Rachman, eds. *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *A Discourse on Inequality*. Translated by Maurice Cranston. London: Penguin Classics, 1984.
- Rowe, John Carlos. *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Ryan, Susan M. *The Moral Economies of American Authorship: Reputation, Scandal, and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Marketplace*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Sale, Maggie Montesinos. *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.
- Sánchez-Epppler, Karen. "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition." In *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in*

- Nineteenth-Century America*. Edited by Shirley Samuels. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 92-114.
- Savage, Thomas and Jeffries Wyman. "Notice of the External Characters and Habits of Troglodytes Gorilla." *Boston Journal of Natural History* 4 (December, 1847): 417-442.
- Savage, W. Sherman. *The Controversy over the Distribution of Abolition Literature 1830-1860*. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1938.
- Savino, Dana Nelson. "The Word in Black and White: Ideologies of Race and Literacy in Antebellum America." In *Reading in America*. Edited by Cathy N. Davidson. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989. 140-156.
- Schiebinger, Londa. "Mammals, primatology and sexology." In *Sexual Knowledge, Sexual Science: The History of Attitudes to Sexuality*. Edited by Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 184- 209.
- Schor, Joel "The Rivalry Between Frederick Douglass and Henry Highland Garnet." *The Journal of Negro History* 64, no. 1 (Winter 1979): 30-38.
- Schuller, Kyla. *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.
- Serle, Ambrose, Esq. *The Happy Negro*. The American Tract Society, 1814.
- Silverman, Gillian D. *Bodies and Books: Reading and the Fantasy of Communion in Nineteenth-Century America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Simms, Henry H. *Emotion at High Tide: Abolition as a Controversial Factor 1830-1845*. Baltimore: Moore & Company, 1960.
- Skott, Christina. "Linnaeus and the Troglodyte: European Encounters with the Malay World and the Natural History of Man." *Indonesia and the Malay World* 42, no. 123 (2014): 141-169.
- Smith, Caleb. *The Oracle and the Curse: A Poetics of Justice from the Revolution to the Civil War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse/Post-Colonial Theory*. Edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. 66-111.
- Stadenraus, P. J. *The African Colonization Movement 1816-1865*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961.
- Stein, Jordan Alexander. "The Whig Interpretation of Media: Sheppard Lee and Jacksonian Paperwork." *History of the Present* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 29-56.
- Stepto, Robert. "I Rose and Found My Voice: Narration, Authentication, and Authorial Control in Four Slave Narratives." In *The Slave's Narrative*. Edited by Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. 225-241.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *The Annotated Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Hollis Robbins. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007.
- . *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.
- . *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Boston: John P. Jewett & Co, 1853. Reprinted Mineola, NY: Dover, 2015.
- . *Three Novels*. Edited by Kathryn Sklar. New York: Library of America, 1982.

- . *Uncle Tom's Cabin: A Norton Critical Edition*. Edited by Elizabeth Ammons. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010.
- Stuckey, Sterling. *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Sundquist, Eric J. *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Third Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society*. New York: William S. Dorr, 1836.
- Thompson, Susan. *The Penny Press: The Origins of the Modern News Media, 1833-1861*. Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2004.
- Thoms, Peter. *Detection and Its Designs: Narrative & Power in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Detective Fiction*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America and Two Essays on America*. Translated by Gerald E. Bevan. London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- Tomek, Beverly C. *Colonization and Its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery in Antebellum Pennsylvania*. New York: New York University Press, 2011.
- , ed. *New Directions in the Study of African American Recolonization* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017).
- Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Turnbull, Robert James (Brutus). *The Crisis: Or, Essays on the Usurpations of the Federal Government*. Charleston: A. E. Miller, 1827.
- Turner, Nat and Thomas R. Gray. *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents*. Edited by Kenneth S. Greenberg. New York: Bedford Books, 1996.
- Virey, Julien-Joseph. *The Natural History of the Negro Race*. Translated by J. H. Guenebalt. Charleston: D. J. Dowling, 1837.
- Walker, David. *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. Edited by Peter P. Hinks. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000.
- Walker, I.M., ed. *Edgar Allan Poe: The Critical Tradition*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986.
- Ward, Samuel Ringgold. *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro*. London: John Snow, 1855.
- Warner, Michael. *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- . *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, 2002.
- Warner, Susan. *The Wide, Wide World*. New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1987.
- Weld, Theodore Dwight. *American Slavery As It Is*. New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839.
- Whalen, Terence. *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Wheatley, Phillis. *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. London: A. Bell, Bookseller, 1778.
- White, Ed. "The Ourang-Outang Situation." *College Literature* 30, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 88-108.

- Whitman, Walt. "December 26, 1846. 'The Gladiator'—Mr. Forrest—Acting." In *The Gathering of the Forces*, edited by Cleveland Rodgers and John Black. New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1920. 331.
- Whittaker, George Byrom, ed. *Anecdote Library: Being the Largest Collection of Anecdotes Ever Assembled in a Single Volume*. London: George B. Whittaker, Ave-Maria Lane, 1822.
- Wiley, Bell I. *Slaves No More: Letters from Liberia 1833-1869*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1980.
- Williams, Heather Andrea. *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.
- Wilson, Carol. *Freedom At Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America, 1780-1865*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994.
- Wilson, Ivy G. *Specters of Democracy: Blackness and the Aesthetics of Politics in the Antebellum U.S.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Wilson, Joseph ("A Southerner"). *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: Merrihew and Thompson, Printers, 1841.
- Wimbush, Vincent L., ed. *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*. New York: Continuum, 2000.
- Wittmann, Reinhard. "Was there a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?." In *A History of Reading in the West*. Edited by Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999. 284-312.
- Wolosky, Shira. *Poetry and Public Discourse in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Wyatt, Thomas. *A Synopsis of Natural History*. Philadelphia: Thomas Wardle, 1839.