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Resistance, Humour and Truth in *The Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*

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Abstract:

Abolitionist discourse cordoned strict boundaries around the creativity of formerly enslaved people in its requirement of truth and corroboration of their accounts. Due to the interference of white editors at the time, some contemporary critical readership has fallen into attempts to unearth the "true" voice of the enslaved person, and in so doing have renewed the abolitionist denial of black creativity. *The Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* is a text acknowledged widely by critics as a clear example of white editor's erasing black subjectivity and displacing the author's voice (Brooks, 73). However, readings such as these perpetuate the denial of black creativity. Instead of reading practices that similarly limit the creativity of these authors, restricting their voices, these accounts can be read as sites of multiplying meaning, where the unbounded creativity of these authors can be seen. I will examine how the demand for truth plays into racializing discourse, and the discourses of slavery. I will then explore an alternative critical approach to such texts, that is exploratory rather than suspicious, using the work of Gilroy and Banner and applying it to Brown's work in reference to Gates' examination of Signifyin(g). This paper will explore how the multiplicity of meaning and the use of humour constitutes resistance against abolitionist, Enlightenment, and racializing discourses.

The consistent demand for the verification of the accounts of formerly enslaved people is a central concern in the genre of the 'slave narrative'. This concern for the "true" accounts, and the suspicion applied to authors resultingly is seen in abolitionist discourse, expressed through the textual framing devices of white editors which 'vouched that the slave's story was a true-to-life, factually accurate portrait of the horrors of slavery' (Banner, 298). Gilroy's important work, *The Black Atlantic*, links the preoccupation with the veracity of these texts to defining aspects of the Enlightenment project, such as 'the coherence of the subject' and 'fixity of meaning' (55). He further argues that 'Each of these issues has an impact on the formation of racial discourse and a relevance in understanding the development of racial politics' (55). Thus, within the genre of the 'slave narrative', resistance is imagined through the destabilisation of 'fixity of meaning' and its associated 'truth', as it resists Enlightenment discourse and the resulting 'racial discourse' that it enforces. Here, the use of humour emerges because the 'loose ends at the limits of serious talk, writing or any form of human interaction […] afford the interpretive ambiguities for the humorous mode to play upon. The existence of humour therefore demonstrates the inadequacy of the serious mode to fulfil its presumption of a single known in common world' (Fox, 433). As such, humour can be positioned as a powerful tool of resistance as it abounds in those ambiguities that contradict Enlightenment fixity of meaning, consequently rejecting the coherence of the subject as the requirement of truth from black authors is refused. Such use of humour as resistance is exhibited in *The Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*. His 'escape artistry' (Brooks, 69) eludes fixity of meaning and its related conception of truth through his covert rhetorical strategy and overt physical (dis)appearances.

Gilroy cites 'the struggle to have blacks perceived as agents, as people with cognitive capacities and even with an intellectual history' (6) as the reason for pursuing his work, *The Black Atlantic*. This 'struggle' is exhibited fundamentally and consistently in the slave

narrative genre through 'the (white) examiner's statement of approval [which] functioned as an authoritative white verification of a black author's intellectual abilities' (Banner, 298). The demand for truth from these authors persists, as the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Banner, 304) is today preserved, with the search to entirely expose the speaker persisting in a different form. Brown's text is one acknowledged widely by critics as a clear example of white editor's erasing black subjectivity and displacing the author's voice (Brooks, 73). However, readings such as these perpetuate the struggle that Gilroy cites, and entrenches ideas of enslaved peoples as voiceless bodies. The critical practice attempting to unearth from beneath the editorial interference the "true voice" of the speaker is linked, Banner argues, to the 'Enlightenment era practice of deploying white, male tribunals to verify the mental capabilities of African authors' (298). As a result, we can see the continued denial of agency of the authors, and this condemns the speaker to be 'an entity "embedded" in the text who can only be archaeologically recovered, but not permitted to shift, stretch' (Banner, 304). This approach separates the author 'from the field of textual play, from the arena of creation and performance of the text' (Banner, 307). Thus, abolitionist discourse from the mid eighteenth century, and its connection to 'the struggle' that Gilroy writes of in 1993, tragically persists as twenty years later, in 2013, Banner is highlighting this critical tendency that continues to deny authorial agency.

The denial of black agency, and the continued search to expose the 'true' speaker relates to the discourses of slavery that assumed unrestricted access to black bodies. As slave narratives emerged, 'People of African descent who were producing work in Anglo-European languages had to be not only seen, but strictly examined' (Banner, 298). Indeed, much abolitionist practice depended on the total exposure of 'former slaves' and on 'tours on abolitionist lecture circuits, […] some were encouraged to turn their naked backs to an audience in order to display the physical scars of slavery' (Banner, 298). Banner argues that

'the white-authored paratextual frames of slave narratives manifested a similar desire to "vividly" show readers a portrait of slavery' (298). As such, the demand of the physical exposure of the subject's body extends itself into textual practice, where the subject must be not only physically 'naked', but also intellectually so, as authors are denied their own artistry, creation and performance.

In his narrative, Brown rejects the examination and exposure that 'slave narrative' authors at the time, and indeed contemporarily, are subjected to. In the Preface he writes 'The tale of my own sufferings is not one of great interest to those who delight to read of hair-breadth adventures, of tragic occurrences, and scenes of blood' (Preface, i). As such,

> The text affirms a representational lack, a thematic absence in the context of the male slave narrative genre which depends on exposure and graphic detail. With its professed resistance to the articulation of violence, Brown's narrative erects a cordon of its own around slavery's explicit abjection, purposefully muting the horrors of captivity in order to reaffirm for readers the ironies of this the more palatable side of the system (Brooks, 71)

Brown's 'resistance' against the 'exposure and graphic detail' that is demanded underlines Banner's suggestion 'that slave narrative can and should be read as a literary thickening or opacity of the known world: a performance without end—a costume whose body/bodies we are finally never permitted to see' (302). Through his refusal to be 'explicit' Brown signals 'that taking instances of black performativity […] at their (ambiguous) word restores complex formal agency to the genre of the slave narrative' (Banner, 301). By refusing explicitness and invoking ambiguity, the withholding of detail becomes a significant act of resistance which consequently refuses the Enlightenment fixity of meaning and coherence of the subject.

The 'representational lack' persists, as the Preface refers to 'tortures' that 'will never be related' because 'language is inadequate to express them' (ii), pointing to the limits surrounding the expression of Brown's experience. However, Brown may be signalling the

inadequacy of one language, while using another to move beyond such limits, constructing his own rhetorical strategy to address his own experience. Here, Gates' exploration of the practice of 'Signifyin(g)' can be applied. This 'black vernacular tradition' supplants received meaning associations and creates profound homonymic puns, thereby separating itself from standard English language speaking (3). Gates explores how this complex language use acts upon the established and customary use of formal language, those language customs set up and secured by middle-class white people (3). Accordingly, this creative use of language emerges as 'guerrilla action' (3) because 'To revise the received sign (quotient) […] is to critique the nature of (white) meaning itself, to challenge through a literal critique of the sign, the meaning of meaning' (4). Such critique of white meaning can be seen in relation to Gilroy's connection between the Enlightenment value of fixity of meaning and racial discourse. Therefore, as Brown highlights the inadequacy of language 'to express' his experience, he exposes the limits of white established language customs. Gates contrasts 'signification', this restricted language and its connection to Enlightenment fixity of meaning, with 'Signifyin(g)', or 'Signification', because 'Whereas signification depends for order and coherence on the exclusion of unconscious associations which any given word yields […], Signification luxuriates in the inclusion of the free play of these associative rhetorical and semantic relations' (6). As Brown abstains from 'exposure and graphic detail' in his acknowledgement of the restriction enacted by 'language' that cannot 'express', he may propose a turn to 'Signifyin(g)'. The layering of meaning that occurs vis Signifyin(g) echoes Brown's refusal to be explicit. In this way, by using such language to multiply meanings, resisting 'order and coherence', Brown ensures the impossibility of the location of the '"real" slave voice and is able to evade the requirement of truth imposed upon him. Therefore, Brown resists the fixity of meaning and the coherence of the subject of the 'Enlightenment project', in their contributions to 'the formation of racial discourse and politics' (Gilroy, 55).

An example of Signifyin(g) may be perceived when Brown describes his expectation of freedom, the disappointment of which is framed around the requirement of truth placed upon him:

> 'we ran with beating hearts and highly elated feelings, not doubting, in the, least, but that he was about to confer upon us the boon of freedom […] --but imagine our deep disappointment when the old man called me to his side and said, Henry yon, will make a good Plough-boy, or a good gardener, now you must be an honest boy and never tell an untruth' (III, 15).

In this statement we can perceive the 'loud-talking' mode of Signifyin(g). Gates explains how 'one successfully loud-talks by speaking to a second person remarks in fact directed to a third person, at a level just audible to the third person' (38). When Brown links the requirement of complete truth with the dashing of the hope of liberation, and further enslavement, it is possible he is loud-talking. While speaking to a second person, 'assuring the reader that I am not joking but stating' (I, 4), Brown can indirectly and ironically address his editor Stearn, and more widely the abolitionist movement's version of 'freedom' that requires and assumes access to the entirely exposed black subject. Through loud-talking, Brown is able to covertly critique abolitionist discourse that restricts black subjects, highlighting abolitionist's paradoxical upholding of Enlightenment and racializing discourse. He exhibits how the requirement of truth limits black autonomy, expression, and creativity, while simultaneously seeming to adhere to such limitations. Furthermore, the covertness of this critique heavily ironizes such absolutist conception of truth that relies on fixity of meaning. It flaunts the destabilisation and multiplicity of meaning to those willing to acknowledge the impossibility of a 'single known in common world'.

Such covert meaning attachment is a crucial element in the conception of Signifyin(g) as resistance 'Since the full effectiveness of Signifyin(g) turns upon all speakers possessing the mastery of reading, […] "intergroup" Signifyin(g) is difficult to effect, if only because the inherent irony of discourse most probably will not be understood' (Gates, 33). Here,

Signifyin(g) constitutes a powerful tool of resistance, as in its covert manipulation of language and meaning, it uses the 'master's' monopoly on controlling narrative and meaning, turning the tables on who possesses 'the mastery of reading'. Fundamentally, it also subverts the established power dynamic of who exposes who, as Brown openly yet covertly brandishes criticism of a conception of freedom that denies autonomy and creativity, a criticism of which the existence of itself illegitimates abolitionist discourse. This crucial resistance is exemplified in Brown's reference to the 'slave-holders version of the creation of the human race' (APPENDIX, i). This story describes how the first people created 'were two whites and two blacks', and one day 'two bags of different sizes drop[ped]' from the clouds,

> 'They then proceeded to untie their bags, when lo! in the large one, there was a shovel and a hoe; and in the small one, a pen, ink, and paper; to write the declaration of the intention of the Almighty; they each proceeded to employ the lnstruments which God had sent them, and ever since the colored race have had to labor with the shovel and the hoe, while the rich man works with the pen and ink!' (APPENDIX, i-ii)

As such, the white men's exclusive control of the 'pen and ink' is clearly subverted via Signifyin(g), where it is the white men who cannot access meaning. A pertinent example of such intergroup Signifyin(g) is found in *Harriet The Moses of Her People*, as Tubman uses songs openly sung in the presence of 'masters' to communicate with other enslaved people, using 'the words of their familiar hymns, telling of the heavenly journey, and the land of Canaan, while they did not attract the attention of the masters, conveyed to their brethren and sisters in bondage something more than met the ear' (27). Therefore, developing covert meaning transfer undermines the white dominion over meaning and these authors place themselves outside of the established epistemological framework. As such, the idea of 'hiding in plain sight' is imagined as a powerful tool of resistance, which both covertly subverts the abolitionist will to expose the author, and reclaims control of meaning. Hiding is plain sight is used to almost pantomime effect, where humour is complexly employed through meaning attachment to ironize and invalidate abolitionist, Enlightenment and racializing discourse.

Hiding in plain sight is exhibited through Brown's box. Through this imaginative escape Brown undoubtedly asserts himself as an 'agent'. He highlights his autonomous actions with 'the idea […] of *shutting myself up* in a box, and *getting myself conveyed* […] to a free state' (51, emphasis mine), as he holds the space of subject as well as object in the statement. Beyond this, 'Brown's crate announces a staged resistance to the gaze and presumed spectatorial authority of his readership' (Brooks, 74). His performative return to the box emphasises how freedom is conceptualised through controlling access and self-exposure. The box resists against 'the juridical surveillance and circumscription of captive bodies (Brooks, 68) and Brown thus reclaims agency over his physical and intellectual uncovering.

Furthermore, Brown's panorama and its travelling element constitutes significant resistance in the use of his physical body to ironize the discourse of slavery, as the migrating body physically exhibits the ironies of U.S. domestic enslavement (Brooks, 67). Brown's ironizing extends to the form he selects. National interest in expansion fuelled the popularity of panoramas in mid-century American culture (Brooks, 80). In this way, Brown paradoxically appropriates the expansionist and imperialist popular panoramic form for the antislavery mission (Brooks, 80). Just as Brown appropriates language to escape the limits of constructed meaning, he also appropriates the physical and visual form of panorama. Thus, the choice to select the panorama is crucial, as a form which twists history to support the expansionist and imperialist agenda and masquerades itself as truth. Brown manipulates the form to construct his own truth that reflects the many layers of slavery's hell (Brooks, 101). Brown's own reclamation and presentation of 'Truth' powerfully resists the national narratives usually promoted by the panorama form, as well as the perceived requirement of white corroboration of the accounts of formerly enslaved people.

Furthermore, after hijacking white means of 'truth' production, Brown again rejects meaning limitation and subverts the white monopoly of meaning through the name of his

panorama. Through its title '*The Mirror of Slavery'* and its exhibition in 'free' U.S. states and in Britain, Brown invokes the 'naming' mode of Signifyin(g), where 'the remark is, on the surface, directed toward no one in particular' (Gates, 38) yet is actually 'invoking an absent meaning ambiguously "present" in a carefully wrought statement' (41). Brown calls audiences in 'free' contexts to behold their own reflection, compelling them to confront their implication in slavery, and ironizing their claim as 'free' from slavery. As such, even within the *Mirror*'s 'Gothic narration' (Brooks, 110) Brown destabilises meaning through the humorous mode. He imitates serious talk through the panorama form that presents white-washed history and nation narratives, creatively constructing his own truth which mocks the restrictions placed upon him by the abolitionist movement.

In conclusion, Brown's resistance is rooted fundamentally in his asserting himself as an agent, who himself decides and controls the access that others have to him. In his language use he resists the abolitionist requirement of his own exposure and manipulates meaning to control who may access it. Brooks highlights the 'fugitive slave narrator['s]' use of 'opacity [to] signify on the limits of what can be retrieved, restored, and re-membered in slavery. The fugitive may know, but may choose not to tell' (110). This choice is the location of resistance and emphasises that slavery is unknowable if not personally experienced. Further, Signifyin(g) 'is a metaphor for textual revision' (Gates, 43), and Brown's use of it constitutes total resistance against fixity of meaning and the coherence of the subject, thereby destabilising racial discourse at its base. Brown also firmly positions himself as a performer, and his renaming of himself his stage name 'Henry Box Brown' testifies how he became a mid-century icon. While exhibiting his hiding in plain sight by subsuming his 'Box' to the interior of his name, 'Henry' 'Brown' remains untraceably and epistemologically outside of the box.

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