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**Contesting Slavery in the Global Market: John Brown's *Slave Life in Georgia*
Michael J Drexler¹ and Stephanie Scherer**

Abstract

John Brown, author of *Slave Life in Georgia*, published in London in 1854, proffered a radical approach to ending slavery in the United States in step with, if not premised upon, Marx. In this paper, we will draw attention to Brown's nearly forgotten narrative, explaining how its model of subjectivity may in part explain its neglect. Brown treats freedom as something foreign and external. He has to learn what freedom means, first through exposure to a model of liberal citizenship – this offered by a free Afro-Briton abandoned to slave sellers in Charleston, SC – and then through the experience of several modulations of fugitive liberty.

Enslaved or free, Brown's social world is wholly determined by external forces and material conditions. Whether slave or freeman, he faces ambiguous situations. Is one master better than another? Will he join a community of fugitive slaves in Indiana? Will he seek refuge from slavery as a laborer in a copper mine? Will he accompany a patron to England? Brown's hesitancy at each of these modalities of freedom takes him also further north, where he serves as a carpenter among fugitives in Canada West. These model communities, designed under the purview of white benefactors to showcase how freed slaves could overcome degradation, also ultimately displease Brown. His postponed travel to England is at last resumed, where he takes up a new charge: Brown proposes a systematic attack on the economic conditions that support the slaveocracy. His goal will be to undersell southern cotton and dismantle southern

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economy through competition. Despite his failure to execute his design, Brown remains an important voice, one committed to systemic change through interventional labor practices, rather than moral suasion through sentimental identification.

Keywords: Slavery; Abolition; Fugitive Slave Narratives; American South; Harriet Beecher Stowe; Frederick Douglass

TEXT

By the middle of the 19th Century, white abolitionists had fully embraced fugitive slave narratives as powerful devices of moral suasion. The narratives' vivid accounts of cruelty, including the separation of families and methods of torture, would, they believed, evoke sympathy and generate support from recalcitrant white northerners. However, the genre had also been, since its inception, a broad canvas for demonstrating black agency, recording cultural practices, describing farming techniques, and showcasing intellectual as well as physical accomplishments. These fugitive slave authors did not abandon such motivations, even after the unprecedented success of Harriet Beecher Stowe's sentimentalized anti-slavery fiction led writers to revise their literary strategies. Nor did fugitive slave narrators universally embrace any one approach to combatting slavery as an institution. In this paper, we will draw attention to one narrator's materialist critique of cotton production that leads him to advocate for dismantling slavery by rendering the southern economy profitless; but before turning to John Brown and his book *Slave Life in Georgia*, we offer an astonishing coincidence where Brown's story intersects with the more famous and celebrated writer who was at the very center of the sentimental turn, the Reverend Josiah Henson.

In the twenty-first chapter of Henson's second autobiographical narrative, entitled *Truth Stranger than Fiction: Father Henson's Story of His Own Life (1858)*, the author describes his encounter with the Queen of England at the Crystal Palace in 1851. Henson was the only black exhibitor at the Great Exhibition of London of that year. Inside the Crystal Palace, both seen and seen through, an empire celebrated itself for becoming the world's cultural center, its industrial center, and, perhaps most importantly, its moral center. By 1851, England had not only abolished the slave trade, but had begun modernization programs in India and emancipated slaves in its Caribbean colonies.¹ It was a signal moment for the self-professed benevolent Empire.² Though Henson concedes that his "complexion" may have attracted attention to his "humble contribution," his polished lumber had a powerful impact as well. Passersby inevitably "paused to look at me, and at themselves, as reflected in my large black walnut mirrors."³ What then did these gazers see? A showcase to elicit sympathy for a fugitive slave? Yes. A stage for moral self-aggrandizing? Yes. A product of free labor? Yes, too. The black walnut, both mirror and representative for the exoticized, black body, is a wonderfully resonant sign for white consumers' gaze and the stereo-optic demand for evidence of good works and exhibits of world-wide exotica. The Queen herself stopped by and exchanged pleasantries.

A cultural studies approach to Henson's anecdote would have us dwell on the local, epitomized in the mirror-like finish of the boards. We would identify this reflective surface as the virtual space that juxtaposes subjects from wildly different backgrounds. In this fantastic space where a fugitive slave nods his cap to a queen, we would point to the carnivalesque exhibition space that enables a moment hardly imaginable elsewhere.⁴ What animates this study, however, cannot be so readily seen. Its coordinates lie not on the surface, a shiny and foreign

veneer, but in another scene where a sawmill sits in a Canadian landscape and black hands, formerly enslaved, rip tree trunks into stock lumber. Some of this wood will be used to build houses, churches, and schools at this settlement, Dawn Institute, a community set up as a model for free black civic life and labor. Other boards will be shipped to Boston and London to show off the fruits of the communal experiment. The settlements of Elgin, Chatham, and Dawn, however, do not stand in isolation on the Canadian plain.⁵ They stand, rather, in relation to other dreams and ideological agendas. Abolitionists, both black and white, had proposed various and sometimes incompatible plans: emigration to Haiti or to Africa, armed rebellion, and organizing for political solutions. So, too, stands John Brown's personal narrative, *Slave Life in Georgia*, for John Brown was also at Dawn, working as one of the laborers who ripped the very boards that Henson would display overseas. Can we reveal the laborer who disappears once his boards become objects of consumer desire? Brown's narrative contains an alternative abolitionist project that rebuts the efficacy of moral suasion to lead to emancipation. Instead, Brown envisions a more direct attack on the slave system – to attack the bottom line, to make slave-produced cotton unprofitable. What we propose, then, is a double act of recovery: to reveal the laborer who is displaced when his boards are appropriated as commodities, and to free his story from the stock exempla of abolitionist literature – the fugitive slave narrative, which could not accommodate Brown's story into its global marketing efforts.⁶

As abolitionist propaganda had adapted to consumer taste by mid-century, Brown's proposed solutions in *Slave Life in Georgia* became virtually illegible. Josiah Henson, by contrast, leveraged his newfound celebrity in the wake of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life among the Lowly* (1852). In *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published just a year after the novel, Stowe had identified Henson as a source for her sentimental hero, Uncle Tom.

We may say that by 1858, Henson was responding to a brand-new world. He was no longer marketing a few pieces of fugitive lumber to commoners and queens, but also marketing *himself* as original to Stowe's bestseller, the quintessential masterpiece of moral suasion.⁷ One can see this clearly in the titles Henson chose for post-Stowe editions of his *Life*. In its raw form, Henson had christened his narrative, straightforwardly, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave Now an Inhabitant of Canada* (1849). After *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he baked the title to suit readers' tastes with the more dramatic *Truth Stranger than Fiction* (1858). The narrative appeared after the Civil War, fully boiled to the commodity-form, as *Uncle Tom's Story of his Life* (1876). The anecdotes about the exhibition of the walnut boards at the Crystal palace first appeared in *Truth Stranger than Fiction*, so it is to that edition we can trace the elision of John Brown.

In his 1858 narrative, Henson presents the mirror-like lumber as a product of his own labor even though his actual work was limited to hiring someone to plane and polish them "in the French style."⁸ He thus replaces Stowe as the one to distill, or edit, the work of a community of black fugitives for the white gaze. The anecdote that follows further secures Henson's legitimate claims to the work. When an official representing the American exhibition threatens to commandeer the boards as products of the United States, Henson resists by marring the shiny surface with white painted letters proclaiming them "THE PRODUCT OF THE INDUSTRY OF A FUGITIVE SLAVE FROM THE UNITED STATES, WHOSE RESIDENCE IS DAWN, CANADA."⁹ To underscore for whom this story is told, an audience is at the ready. A group of English gentlemen, "chuckling with half-suppressed delight," bear witness to the scuffle. The British audience allows Henson's resistance to become visible, for the indelible white letters assert both Henson's blackness and his Canadian identity in opposition to

white supremacy and slaveholding America, who are the butts of the joke. In *Truth Stranger than Fiction*, Henson narrates his transformation from raw slave, whose physical body has been treated as property, into a producer *alongside* what he has produced. An aide to the Queen amplifies this when he assures her that “Indeed he is [a fugitive] and that is his work” (191).

But of course, even the rough boards were not actually a product of Henson’s labor! The credit is due to the black laborers at the Dawn Institute, such as John Brown, a fugitive who had gone by the names Fed and Benford while a slave. Brown’s own narrative, *Slave Life in Georgia*, reclaims those boards and eschews the romantic mode of self-actualization found in fugitive narratives, perhaps most recognizably in Frederick Douglass’ 1845 version of his life story. In *Slave Life in Georgia*, Brown retells his desperate and comic attempts to reach England after escaping his bonds.¹⁰ This story of hapless travel finally rewarded leads Brown to offer a solution to the problem of American slavery. His bid to raise cotton in Liberia and undersell the American South’s market is, moreover, no mere “colonizing trick.”¹¹ Instead of emigration and resettlement, a proposition first conceived by the white leadership of the American Colonization Society, Brown’s plan does not depend on relocation, but capitalizes on the structural inefficiencies in the slave economy to destroy it through economic competition.¹²

Brown’s proposal is neither ameliorative or compensatory, but formal and aggressive. His narrative exposes the multiple layers of deception that both make slavery corruptly profitable, but wasteful as well. His plan is a stunning, Marxist analysis of slavery that puts him in opposition to mainstream abolitionists or those advocating emigration to Canada.¹³

Virtually forgotten except for being mined for its anecdotal support of historicist claims, John Brown's *Slave Life in Georgia, A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Now in England* is a complex and unfortunately obscure literary work. For one, it is among the few narratives to recount life in the Deep South. If this has not been enough to gain Brown readers, we point as well to Brown's self-conscious intervention in the burgeoning genre of slave narratives. His title emphasizes evidentiary realism. It bears some likeness to *The Life or Narrative of Frederick Douglass* (1845), also adopted previously by Charles Ball (1837) and Henson (1849). But it also engages the impact of the novel-form on the genre. He addresses this directly when he writes, "Mrs. Stowe has told something about Slavery. I think she must know a great deal more than she has told. I know more than I dare to tell" (60). We take this to mean that the novel-form pretends to reveal a picture of the whole, but a personal narrative *chooses* what to reveal and withhold and thus remains explicitly and purposefully partial. As we have shown with Henson, after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, several fugitive slave authors changed their titles to reflect shifting literary marketing strategies. Consider the titles of the following second editions: Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage, My Freedom* (1855), Josiah Henson's *Truth Stranger than Fiction* (1858), and Charles Ball's *Fifty Years in Chains* (1859). Brown's *Slave Life in Georgia*, by comparison, softens the personal, memoirist's style, but also strikes a more documentary or quotidian pose. The title points to collective experience, not an individual trajectory, whether heroic or sacrificial. This quality of diminishing the primacy of the authorial subject carries over into the narrative content, where Brown self-deprecates, aiming less at celebrity than typicality. For Brown, slavery is a totalizing condition of being. Unlike Douglass, who is "free" until he learns what it means

to be a slave, or Northup, who knows freedom and loses it, Brown denies any space within which the slave could imagine an autonomous subjectivity, or, as in a novel, a space from which an author could claim omniscience. Freedom for him is neither natural nor inherent. For Douglass, nature is a reservoir of freedom, an antithetical system to slavery, while for Brown the natural world is part of, not apart from, the closed loop of social existence under slavery. “When in Slavery, I was called Fed,” he explains, telling us he has no idea how he got the name and that it was “common for slaves to answer to any name, as it may suit the humour of the master” (5).¹⁴ Servitude is a precondition in Brown’s lifeworld and nature is within it. This is made clear when he tells of children subject to the assaults of the natural world. Ants and mosquitoes plague his infant brother who had to be in the fields with his mother as she worked. Scenes of torture are metonymically linked to a nature contained within the slave system. Fed’s mistress whips slaves with a cow-hide that the slaves call the “blue lizard” and a bull-whip is described as “limber and lithesome as a snake” (7, 110).

In the beginning chapters of the narrative, Fed is punished whenever he tries to insert a gap between himself and the tools for manipulating the natural world. When the milldam overflows or a plough digs too deep, or a mare dies from overheating, Fed is beaten. If he offers an excuse for why he did not run as fast as he could, or could not plough efficiently, or lost time because of a broken knife, his master, Thomas Stevens, reduces him from flesh to body, a brutal reminder that the enslaved black body is just another machine of the trade.¹⁵ When Fed tries to explain why a “buzzard plough” ran foul, Stevens kicks him “right between the eyes,” breaking his nose, “and cutting the leaders of the right eye, so that it turned quite round in its socket” (28).¹⁶ The use of “leaders,” or reins, emphasizes that the eye is either completely useless or, paradoxically, that it can no longer be governed, that it looks backward to

interrogate the master. From the master's perspective, however, the injury suits the crime. Broken plough, broken eye: a perverse refactoring of the biblical prescription of an eye for an eye. The biblical doctrine is based on the justice of equation. That is, in the bible, two human beings can retain equality before the law when the suffering of the victim is imposed *ex post facto* on the aggressor. The logic of equation, however, does not hold under chattel slavery. Slave Codes dating back at least to the Barbados Code of 1661 most clearly distinguished chattel from human beings in sections detailing punishment for a master who killed or injured his own or another's slave. While a slave would suffer execution for any physical aggression toward a master, whites who maimed or killed slaves were subject to fines levied to recuperate the monetary value of the lost labor. Black bodies, like any commodity, could be exchanged for coin, the universal equivalent for a certain quantity of property. The economic logic of capital underwrote the relations between master and slave. Slave Codes were an early form of cynical market regulation, obscuring quotidian violence by giving the appearance of outlawing the worst excesses of individual slave masters.

Where a morally driven abolitionist might react with horror at the devaluation of an individual slave's humanity in summary punishments like the one Brown describes, Brown chooses instead to highlight how commonplace were violations against slave bodies at the whim of the master class. In Brown's recollection, when he attempted to rationalize or explain the inefficient functioning of a tool, his defense was met with a violence that effectively rejected the separation of slave and implement.¹⁷ The slave was not a subject who could comment on structurally independent inefficiencies, but an extension of the tool. If the tool is broken, then the slave body must be as well. In place of equation, the slave body was

disciplined as a part of a whole. In literary terms, equation works like a metaphor, where two distinct things are yoked to a shared denominator, in this case the quality of both being human. But in the case of chattel, the analogy of 'this is equal to that' is not available. Instead, the relationship is metonymic, for the slave body, subjected to the slave master's perverse logic, is *not* dissimilar enough from the implements that are involved in completing the agricultural task. A similar metonymic quality is present in the two most visceral and disturbing scenes of torture: the picketing of John Glasgow and Fed's subjection to Thomas Hamilton's medical experiments.

John Glasgow was a British seaman, who signed on for merchant service to North America and left his wife and family in Scotland. Upon arriving in Charleston, S. C., Glasgow was segregated from the white crew and quarantined in the local jail while the ship remained in port. South Carolina had responded to slave unrest and especially to Denmark Vesey's and Nat Turner's revolts by instituting even tighter restrictions on the importation of slaves and the lives of free people of color. When Glasgow's captain refused to pay the costs associated with his detention, the managers of the prison foreclosed on Glasgow as collateral, and he was sold into slavery where he eventually met John Brown. Brown recounted Glasgow's story to the British and Foreign Antislavery and Abolition Society Secretary, Louis Chamerovzow, who published this account in the BFAAS's newspaper in 1853 and the story was then incorporated into Brown's own narrative, also edited by Chamerovzow, in 1854. Edlie Wong argues that *Slave Life in Georgia* may be best understood as a vehicle to disseminate Glasgow's story. Embracing Glasgow as a British subject, despite racial difference, British readers could follow a Dantean narrative (akin to Solomon Northup's) that invites them on a journey through hell.¹⁸

Glasgow's beatings have to be among the most graphic depictions of slave torture from an eyewitness. Exacted to "flog his nigger pride out of him" and for "having the look and carriage of a free man," these precisely adumbrated methods objectify the slave body (33). As with the metonymy of slave and tool, in these horrible mechanics of torture the body is reduced to a material part of the machinery of its own punishment, annihilating any signs of individual subjectivity and even separating the victim from the collective identity shared by his fellow slaves. We note that Glasgow's offense was to insist on having been falsely imprisoned and illegally sold into slavery, to insist that he already had a wife and didn't need a new one, to insist that he "was free and a British subject" (34). Brown depicts two separate incidents of brutality enacted against Glasgow, comprising two distinct methods of torture: bucking and picketing. That the techniques have colloquial names not only Americanizes the text and authenticates Brown's credibility, but has the eerie effect of transferring the reader's attention from the victim, reduced to being "the poor fellow," to the method, which is described meticulously. Adding to this effect is the shift in narrative point of view from the first person to the third. The master, seeing Glasgow steal away to visit his second wife Nancy on another plantation, "maliciously allows him to get a good distance off, when beckoning to him three other slaves, *myself*, March, and Jack...*they* started in pursuit" (35, emphasis added).¹⁹ The focus shifts twice, away from the suffering victim and away from the complicity of the narrating subject. The new perspective brings the torturers into focus, who cruelly play with the body as if it and the machine of torture were part of the same toy. In bucking, the body is restrained so that the torturers can roll it around like a ball; in picketing, the body is impaled on a stake and spun like a top.

One of the distinctive features of Brown's language is what one historian calls his understated style.²⁰ Looking back on his ten-year-old self, Brown can recall feeling terrorized and then stupefied with grief upon seeing his mother for the last time, but he does not pause for a general comment on the system, in which such scenes are embedded, nor amplify the pathos by responding to it as his adult, knowing self. But understatement may indicate something other than the distancing effect of scientific description. We propose that Brown's style recreates the naïve wonder of the child. Where Douglass shows us the transition from man to slave and then slave to man and emphasizes his resilience, craftiness, and masculine power, Brown rarely presents himself so favorably. Douglass's rhetorical skill, especially his use of chiasmus, fails to capture the experiential perspective of his much younger enslaved self. Rather than demonstrate his personal triumph over adversity or development of an enlightened, post-slavery self, Brown more often enacts comedic astonishment. The result is a narrative persona willing to depict his former self as so overwhelmed by the present scene as to be incapable of critical distance or reflection. How else to capture the world-unmaking trauma of becoming property, kinship destroyed as the subject becomes a thing?²¹ Fed expresses astonishment: "How I watched them whilst they were driving this bargain!" He then describes in great detail the method through which his owner and the slave-speculator, Finney, arrived at his value: by weighing him on the spot and pricing him by the pound (16). Fed describes the contraption as follows:

[A] rope was brought, both ends of which were tied together, so that it formed a large noose or loop. This was hitched over the hook of the stilyard (*sic*), and I was seated in the loop. After I had been weighed, there was a deduction made for the

rope. I do not recollect what I weighed, but the price I was sold for amounted to three hundred and ten dollars. (16)

Fed expresses a similar sense of wonder when he suffers Dr. Thomas Hamilton's Mengele-like medical experiments. Brown here presents himself as a passive observer of his own suffering. He reports that he could do nothing to stop it and thus gave himself up for "passive resignation." Once again, the narrator marvels at the technical practices that will be used on him:

Yet, it was not without curiosity I watched the preparations the Doctor caused to be made. He ordered a hole to be dug in the ground, three feet and a half deep by three feet long, and two feet and a half wide. Into this pit a quantity of dried red oak bark was cast, and fire set to it. It was allowed to burn until the pit became heated like an oven, when the embers were taken out. A plank was then put across the bottom of the pit, and on that a stool. (41)

Fed is then placed in the hole, which is sealed with blankets and leaves only his head exposed. In this condition, he is given various medicines "to ascertain which... enabled me to withstand the greatest degree of heat" (41). His curiosity at the contraptions designed to violate and degrade his body render the scenes disjointed, the horror balanced by amazement.

The series of escape attempts that occupy the middle chapters of *Slave Life in Georgia* show Fed gaining a limited understanding of his condition and a marginal ability to react strategically once entitled to fend for himself. But every move forward tends toward a reversal. He escapes and is captured. He escapes from the slave catchers only to decide

he would have a more likely chance of success by returning to his master and biding his time. He agrees to have a slave stealer take him away figuring a new master must be better than the present one, but, is eventually returned to his original master when the “nigger stealers” fear they are about to be arrested themselves.²² Sold back to Decator Stevens, Brown is subject to one final round of abuse and humiliation. He is harnessed in the “bells and horns,” a wicked inversion of a crown, here constructed of iron bands around the neck and head and four iron rods fixed vertically to each and bent at the end where the bells are attached. The contraption makes escape not only impossible, but also prevents the slave from finding comfort whether working or at rest. Encased in the bells and horns for three months, Fed resolves that once free of this contraption, he will make his final run for freedom.

Reminiscent of Mark Twain’s Jim – cruelly ensnared in Tom Sawyer’s game before finally gaining his freedom – the scenes that follow uncannily anticipate other plot elements from *Huckleberry Finn*, not published until 1884.²³ Like Huck, Brown’s persona is wily and yet still naïve. Fed practices soft deception to prompt a young girl to help him escape; he temporarily dodges slave catchers who send dogs after him through the swamp by tricking the dogs into thinking he is part of the search party; he entertains an internal dialogue about whether to continue in the wilderness or return to ‘civilization;’ and takes a trip on a raft with the object to reach freedom by going *downriver*. Having escaped from Mississippi to Alabama, Fed fears continuing by land. “I considered what I should do; and concluding at last that the river must run into the sea, and that if I once got to the seaside, I should be sure to find some Englishmen there who would tell me the way to England,” Brown writes (81-82). A nine-day journey on his raft, running mostly at night and

concealing himself by day, has him adapting to the river (fishing, stealing potatoes, and disguising himself). Fed also has a frightening, but ultimately comic encounter with the first steam-boat he has ever seen. Once again from the perspective of his then-ignorant self, he describes the steam-boat as a devil with “two big, red eyes” belching out a “shower of sparks shooting up in the air, mingling with red fiery smoke” (84). Dupe of his own devices, he heads to New Orleans, where he expects England to be just steps beyond the water’s edge.

Like Huck and Jim, Fed’s journey south only further enmeshes him in the systemic violence and deception that become the primary operations of the slaveholding south. On arriving in New Orleans, Fed must face one more horrible decision before making his last and successful break north. Crushed to discover that England was not “only just across the water” from New Orleans and suddenly aware of his precarious liberty, Brown once again makes the gut-wrenching choice to return to slavery, rather than face the consequences of being captured as a fugitive. Looking for the slave stealers Buck Hurd or John Murrell, whom he incorrectly assumed he could find just by walking the streets, Brown ultimately offers himself as a runaway to a man who looked to be cut from similar cloth. “Young, and indifferently well dressed, his clothes looking dusty and tumbled,” the man also appears sleepy with puffy and bloodshot eyes (90). Seeing also that he “walked lazily, with rather an irregular step,” Fed puts him down for “a gambler and a drunkard,” who might acquiesce to his plan for want of money (90). While still uncertain about freedom and its exigencies, Fed’s intuition about the white character proves accurate – this is a skill he’s gained from experience, acquitting himself to please when necessary to avoid a master’s ire – and he agrees to be sold at auction, a house run by the notorious Theophilus Freeman.²⁴

The New Orleans slave market presents yet *another* scene where deceptive practices undermine the efficiency of the slave regime, yet another occasion where personal profiteering trumps a regulated institution and its markets.²⁵ Brown here deceives both as a means of survival and to avoid punishment. His auctioneers demand that he perform as salable property; he is expected to express good cheer and docility, in order to conceal any external signs that might register the brutality of his enslaved experience. Brown emphasizes that he chose carefully when to comply and to “take good care to look my brightest and answer my smartest.” Convinced if he remained unsellable for much longer he would suffer another round of torture, he decides the time is ripe. With curious pride, Brown describes the “character I gave myself, never a ‘nigger’ had before” (106). This passage echoes the dominant theme of the latter half of the narrative, the necessity to combat an institution founded on deception, such as slavery, through like deception. Previously, Brown identified the imperative for assuming such “wicked” practices:

In fact, we felt we were living under a system of cheating, and lying, and deceit, and being taught no better, we grew up in it, and did not see the wrong of it, so long as we were not acting against one another. I am sure that, as a rule, any one of us who would have thought nothing of stealing a hog, or a sack of corn, from our master, would have allowed himself to be cut to pieces rather than betray the confidence of his fellow-slave; and, perhaps, my mentioning this fact may be taken as a set-off against the systematic deception we practised, in self-defence, on our master. (71-2)

This claim also points to the influence of a corruptive education under slavery. The slave reduced to brute subject, being “taught no better,” can only assimilate what he has experienced and, thus, learned. Yet, this exception for immorality does NOT extend to relations amongst equals, amongst fellow slaves. Deception must be, then, a practice invested in maintaining or resisting a hierarchy of white versus black in this particular context. Thus, once on the road to freedom, Brown must seek alternative modes of interaction with both blacks and whites.

At last sold to a new master, Jepsey James, Brown assumes the name Benford, the name of the plantation where his father had been enslaved. Taken to James’s prison-like plantation of 150 slaves at Shirt-Tail Bend in Mississippi, Benford once again finds himself subject to a cruel owner and plans another bid to escape. He spends three months on the plantation as if to bear witness to the especially heinous crimes practiced upon slave women. Akin to Dr. Hamilton’s experiments on the young Fed, Benford testifies to the practice of bull-whipping pregnant women by preparing a hole in the ground “for them to lie in more conveniently, so as not to injure the burden they were carrying” (111-112).

Benford’s final escape serves as a foray into freedom through the wilds of the Mississippi River: a journey from salable object, through bestial survival, and ultimately to citizenship in Britain. As he makes his way along the banks of the river, Benford describes himself as a “wild man,” emphasizing the fear-inducing proximity of “snorting and plashing” alligators. Understandably paranoid about recapture, Brown avoids human contact. He mistrusts everyone he meets, even those he must depend upon for survival. Along the way, Brown adopts a nocturnal existence. He will only risk venturing near to secluded homesteads to inquire about necessary navigational information, and this only under the cover of darkness. It is the color-obscuring darkness that makes Benford’s departure from deceptive practice possible; he writes

that as “they could not see [his] colour,” these isolated, white homeowners were never “backward in replying” to his application for information(126). Guided by the small kernels of direction from these encounters, Benford finally arrives at a “settlement of colored people,” where he passes for a freedman and works for two weeks. It is here he assumes the name John Brown. This stopover represents Brown’s first extended involvement in a community of free blacks. Here, though, he must maintain the charade of his identity, thereby precluding his actual immersion into the communal network. Uneasy about suspicions aroused concerning his history, Brown moves on toward Indianapolis. There he learns of the Underground Railroad and the particular generosity of the Quaker community.

Crediting a kind of “superstition” or “instinct,” Brown successfully navigates his way to a northern Quaker family, who harbor and feed him. The “grandness” of the company bewilders him, and Brown struggles to behave appropriately, feeling so out of his element that he feels he has “no eyes, no ears, no understanding.” Brown grapples to maintain civility, afraid to touch the food presented to him for fear that he will reveal his bestial voracity. After over a half hour of encouragement, Brown finally gorges himself. Once again, his narrative persona does not hesitate to present himself comically, ill-equipped to perform nicely in polite society. The family must intervene to prevent Brown from over-indulging and injuring himself.²⁶ After the meal, Brown can sleep comfortably in the security of a “safe retreat” for the first time since escape. He wakes, uncertain of his surroundings, and describes, “I could see the walls of my room, and the curtains all of a dazzling *whiteness* around me” (135, emphasis added). The whiteness of the room astonishes him and provides a stark contrast to the wilderness through which he has made his way. Enveloped in the comparatively luxurious comfort and freedom of white space and finally “alive to the truth” that he is free and safe, Brown has a brief moment to reflect on his

“saviors,” and attempts to pray, reflecting: “I had never learnt to pray; but if what passed in my heart that night was not prayer, I am sure I shall never pray as long as I live” (135).

Brown’s brief but powerful first-person admission exposes him as yet unformed and uneducated as a properly Christian, liberal subject. He has been deprived of a spiritual education, and thus does not consider prayer natural or intuitive. Stowe’s Uncle Tom, by contrast, is a natural at praying. Where Brown’s ineptitude at the Quaker dinner table reveals him as a prototypically naturalist protagonist, Stowe sculpts Tom into the defining figure of the sentimental slave hero. Despite Tom’s deficiency in education, both general and theological, his natural capacity “of mind,” which accounts for his remarkable piety, outstrips that of his fellow slaves and rivals that of “even better educated persons.” Uncle Tom, the “patriarch” and “martyr,” is a portrait of the exceptional slave, set apart from and above any of the other individuals within his various slave communities.²⁷ Uncle Tom’s unimpeachable honesty does not waver even in the face of violence or injustice, even against the arguments of fellow slaves, like the desperate Cassy, who point out the futility of morality when locked in the clutches of a fundamentally amoral system. John Brown’s marked disinterest in religious devotion stands in stark relief against Tom’s innate belief. Furthermore, Tom’s adherence to Christian principles and faith provide him with clear parameters for determining who can be trusted. Brown, however, cannot shake the skepticism inculcated by slave education, that is, the systematic deception practiced by both slave and master. When told that he must move on to the next stop on the Railroad, Brown immediately doubts the intentions of his Christian rescuers; he believes they are deceiving him, and he will be sold back into slavery. Finding this to be untrue, Brown repents harboring such suspicions against his “friends.” Yet, the moment of doubt brings Brown’s evolving conception of “friendship” into focus. For Brown, unlike Tom, friends are

acquired through highly localized interactions, usually involving material exchange. Whereas the slave must rely upon solidarity with his peers and self-defensive deception, the newly free man can develop new parameters for commonality based upon empirical evidence of honest reciprocity. The friendly exchanges of protection and goods Brown experiences along his journey north shape his developing notions not only of equitable market relations, but also of communal citizenship.

The chapter on the Underground Railroad at the very end of *Slave Life in Georgia* includes a notable anecdote of inverted deception, one that offers a decidedly divergent portrait of “white saviors” in the North than that found in Brown’s own account. This capstone of the book was re-published from *The Anti-Slavery Reporter* and included by editor Chamerovzow. Instead of slaveholders or slave stealers practicing deception against slaves, the white conductors of the Underground Railroad manage to spoil the pursuit of slave-hunters in northern Ohio by deceiving them in turn. Hearing news that the slave-hunters are nearing a house harboring fugitives, the white abolitionists quickly smear their skin with soot from the chimney and exchange clothing with the slaves. They successfully trick the hunters into believing that they are indeed black slaves fleeing from pursuit and lure the slave-hunters away from the house with a carriage chase. It is not until the “black faced” subjects are presented before a judge that they are revealed to be free, white American citizens. The abolitionists’ antics provide enough diversion for the slaves to escape further north along the Railroad, thereby saving them from certain capture. This sketch concludes the chapter on the Underground Railroad and highlights, more than anything, the ingenuity, not of the escaped slaves, but of their benevolent, white protectors. Chamerovzow’s addition of this final section deflects Brown’s narrative voice with yet another opportunity for white self-aggrandizement. Polishing off Brown’s rough

conclusion, Chamerovzow ensures that a British audience will leave the reading experience with the gratifying reflection of themselves in the white heroes working toward the abolition of slavery, a goal already accomplished in England. However, the “switching” of places – inverting the traditional power dynamic – is only attainable for the white subject, who very easily washes off “blackness” in the face of a justice system that privileges whiteness, even in the North.

John Brown, then, develops a much different sense of unified action – that which is grounded not in like deception, but rather in just and open resistance. As he nears the Canadian border, Brown gains confidence in his freedom. He meets a group of fugitive slaves, with whom he takes up work. When the master of one of these fugitives finds them out, he threatens to transport his former slave back South. The master, outnumbered by the group of fugitive slaves and friends, is met by the very real threat of violent resistance. This moment solidifies for Brown both his allegiance to his equals and the strength they have as a united front to thwart the intentions of the white slaveholder.

Having thus experienced how empowering communal resistance in the local sense can be, Brown begins seeking opportunities, which would provide like empowerment and community. The answer it seems lies in combined labor. Brown lands in Detroit, Michigan where he begins employment in the mines, under the direction of the British Captain Teague, “native of Redruth, of Cornwall.” In Teague, Brown finds his most promising conduit to the country he has most desperately been trying to reach: England. And yet, when Teague departs for England, Brown does not follow immediately. He decides, instead, to take a visit to a communal living experiment he has heard of: the Dawn Institute of Canada West. In this pivotal decision swerving from what could be envisioned as the powerful climax of the narrative, Brown’s brevity, while characteristic of his style throughout, proves especially

puzzling. Even if Brown does not ask this of himself, we are left to ponder what could possibly induce him to postpone the fulfillment of his driving wish to reach England. Why Canada? What is he doing, now that his physical liberty seems secure? Recalling that Brown's admiration for the British John Glasgow as model free citizen was one of the chief inducements to strike out for freedom in the first place, isn't the conscious decision to remain in North America a significant redirection of his initial, though misinformed, attraction to England as the pinnacle of escape from servitude? Perhaps, John Brown looks to Canada as the last opportunity to secure the success of his escape without abandoning solidarity with his American fugitive and free black peers. Canada could be Brown's opportunity to continue developing his vernacular and localized theory of what freedom means.

The model communities, like the Dawn Institute of Canada West, were designed to showcase how freed slaves could overcome physical and political disenfranchisement to enact a productive civic life. With this in mind, then, Brown's curiosity appears much less enigmatic or banal. In stark contrast to Douglass's romantic hero, Brown's protagonist resists both the standard tropes of exceptional individualism and innate ability. Instead, Brown's travels are his education about the material experiences of liberty, and it is within community, not within himself, that he looks to find information about political subjectivity. Free to explore his options, he remains, not merely to "see" the Institute, but to work actively within the Institute's lumber mill for a period of about five to six months. And it is here in Canada West that the historical-biographical trajectories of two fugitive narrators collide: Brown works with Josiah Henson, who was one of the founding members of the Dawn Institute, to produce the boards to be displayed at the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park. This directs our attention back to the constellation of producers and editors, which we identified in the beginning of this essay: first, Brown, who

produces the boards that Henson claims as the product of his own craftsmanship, and second, Henson, whose autobiography is appropriated by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Much as Henson had smoothed away the rough parts of the boards that John Brown had originally hewn from logs, Stowe refashions Henson's life, a polishing that ironically places him in a meager, roughly cut log cabin, for the sentimental marketplace, where, as Uncle Tom, he thrived. After working for a period of a few months at the Dawn Institute sawmill, Brown ultimately expresses displeasure with Henson's community. In the penultimate chapter of the narrative, Brown offers further insight into his impatience with this particular Canadian settlement, expressing his desire to

show my coloured brethren who are in Canada, that they might do something great for our people in the South, by turning their attention to growing cotton in the West Indies or in Africa. By so doing, they would strike slavery a hard blow, just where it is most likely to feel it. I have been to Canada, and though the coloured people there may, some of them, be doing tolerably well... [t]hey ought to look into the future. They ought to consider those they have left behind them, and how they can help them. My opinion is, they could do so better in the West Indies or in Africa, than in Canada. (171-2)

Brown travels to England, where he may finally assume British citizenship as had John Glasgow; however, he rejects this opportunity, too, in favor of a more active proposal to combat the economic underpinnings of the slave industry; he sought to counter slavery by exploiting its inefficiencies and defeating it in the global cotton market. He identifies the inadequacy of moral revolution on the micro-social level: Glasgow's moral "family man;" Stowe's reconstituted Christian family; as well as the well-intentioned, but ineffectual showcase communities in

Canada West, built to placate white male abolitionists' paternalistic impulses and not designed to alleviate the sufferings "of the millions of men, women, and children [Brown] has left behind in slavery" (200). Brown neither postures as an individual hero (Douglass's Romanticism) nor falls as a martyr (Stowe's sentimentalism). Macro-social revolution can only be achieved, he argues, through macro-economic intervention.

But, as I have already said, slaveholders are not sensible to moral arguments, because they believe their interests are bound up in maintaining the system of slavery. I would not advise the anti-slavery party to leave off arguing out the question on moral grounds; but I would urge them to pay a little more attention to the commercial part of the subject. I do not hesitate to say, that so long as anti-slavery people, or those who profess anti-slavery sentiments, continue to use up slave-grown articles, the slaveholders will keep on, thinking their professions are hollow. I do not see how the system is to be put down except by undermining it. I mean by underselling it in the markets of the world. (169)

Brown criticizes the strategists in the abolitionist community as he elaborates his future plans. That slaveholders are not easily swayed by appeals to their morality comes as no surprise; however, Brown must also debunk the myth that moral suasion can push people opposed to slavery beyond indifference when it comes to putting their money where their mouths are. They'll pay to read a sensational narrative of suffering, but will not suffer a "small advance on the price of an article of free-labour cotton" (170). If people with anti-slavery sentiments will still look to their purse when buying slave-produced commodities, the southern slaveholder, he

writes, will continue to ignore “hollow” abolitionist rhetoric. Knowing he cannot count on changing behavior by begging for charity, Brown crafts a “commercial” plan that will instead target the capitalist, not the consumer. How will slavery be ended? he asks, before answering his own question:

I look upon it that slavery is kept up entirely by those who make it profitable as a system of labour. Bad as slave-holders are, if they did not find their account in working slaves, they would soon leave off doing it. Their badness arises out of the system. (165)

The only way to bring the system down is to strike at slaveholders’ pockets, to sell free cotton for less and thereby make slavery unprofitable. Free cotton production in the West Indies, India, Australia, or Africa must be carried out “systematically” (171). Brown devotes chapters 18-20, respectively titled “The Cultivation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice,” “A Few Words on the Treatment of Slaves,” and “My Reflections,” to a demonstration of his expansive knowledge not only of agricultural methods, but also of the fundamental inefficiencies in slaveholders’ management of their sites of production. In his “Reflections,” Brown admits his belief that he has the experience to improve on these wasteful practices, if only he could acquire the “tools” to enact his knowledge. Selling his narrative is only a means to his end of financing his cotton-growing scheme:

I have no education, and until I can settle down I am not likely to pick much up. But I have just that sort of experience which I believe I could turn to account were the field open. I am what is called a "handy fellow." I am a good carpenter, and

can make just what machinery I want, give me only tools. I understand all about the growth of cotton, from the time of preparing the land to receive the seed, till the wool is jinned and packed... My knowledge has not come naturally to me. I have acquired it in a very hard school, and I want to turn it to account. (170-1)

For Brown, the authorial pen is the kind of tool with which he can craft “just what machinery” he wants to yield a profit. The mighty dollar, he recognizes, rules all both north and south: as long as pockets are full “you may talk, but [they] will [keep] on never minding you.” He concludes that the righteous slaveholder will only be swayed as the dollars slip away (166).

Brown’s theory hinges on his certainty that slaveholders know that what they do is wrong. They beat their slaves because that is the only way to get them to work for nothing. “Cruelty,” he explains, “is inseparable from slavery, as a system of forced labour” (165). And absolute power leads to depravity. “It is not of any use to talk to the slaveholder about the wrongfulness of holding slaves... [for] the chinking of the dollars in his pockets makes such a noise that he cannot hear you” (166). For Brown, the slaves know that their labor power is being stolen from them and that the slaveholders’ law governing chattel “unmakes God’s work,” which would entitle each man “to the use of his own limbs, his own faculties, of his own thoughts” (167). We see that slaveholding, with all its methods of deception and cunningly cruel profiteering, is, at last, a gross form of self-deception. Brown describes witnessing several deathbed scenes where “it is usual for the slaves to be called up on such occasions to say they forgive [their masters] for what they have done.” This convinces the slaves that “[slaveholders’] minds must be dreadfully uneasy about holding slaves, and therefore there cannot be any good in it” (168). Though Brown briefly hints at an innate right to freedom, he is also quite direct that it is only by glimpses through “these little chinks” that slaves “learn that there is something wrong

in slave-holding.” “When we hear them cry out with pain and fear on their death-bed...we understand that they are only poor human creatures like ourselves” (169).

Brown concludes on this note of conciliatory universalism, but it is justification not to preach truth to falsehood, but to deprive the system of the profit motives that cause human beings to treat other human beings as atrociously as they do. This, then, is Brown’s final note: the conditions of the system of capitalism, the all-consuming pursuit of profit, create enslavement and degradation. Far from a pre-capitalist mode of production, slavery must be considered an engine of the modern world economic system. Despite never fulfilling his Liberian alternative, Brown remains an important and missing voice from the abolitionist movement, one committed to systemic change not through moral suasion based on sentimental identification, but through active economic intervention.

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¹ See Webster, *Twilight*. On the Emancipation of the British West Indies and the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, see Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*.

² The Great Exhibition of 1851 was a climactic moment for British self-regard; it anticipated the British Raj, instituted in 1858 and lasting until Indian Independence in 1947, where the government took control over India from the East India Company and instituted reforms aimed at educating and civilizing the Indian subcontinent. By coining this British paternalism ‘the white man’s burden’ in 1899, Rudyard Kipling invited the post-bellum US to join the “thankless” responsibility to improve the non-white, Third World; the poem’s original title was “The White Man’s Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands.” In 1851, however, the English did not view the slaveholding US as a partner-in-benevolence. Stephen Knadler discusses the conflicted feelings generated by the presence of fugitive slaves within the Crystal Palace in “At Home in the Crystal Palace.” For the American reception of Kipling’s poem, see Murphy, *Shadowing*.

³ Henson, *Truth*, 191.

⁴ Knadler reads the scene ironically. In the episode, Henson records the Queen’s ambivalent attention to him, accordingly. But if Henson includes the anecdote to show us how superficially his boards allow him to be recognized as an autonomous and complex subject, this may be less commentary on the limitations of the Queen than on the strategy of doing politics via commodities.

⁵ For more information on the settlements and free black and fugitive slave population in Canada prior to the Civil War, along with Canadian abolitionism, see Paul, “Out of Chatham.” Henson also describes the founding and details of Dawn Institute in his 1858 narrative.

⁶ In this respect, Brown articulates Ed Baptist's recent claim that slavery was the most advanced form of capital accumulation and not a backward economic system ready to be eclipsed by industrial modernity. See Baptist, *The Half*. Despite the renaissance of scholarship addressing the relationship of slavery and capitalism, black radicals (DuBois, C.L.R. James, Eric Williams) had already forcefully and persuasively argued this case. Brown's work demonstrates an even earlier recognition of the same.

⁷ For complete digital texts of the several editions, see, *Documenting the American South: North American Slave Narratives*. UNC-Chapel Hill, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh>. Accessed June 25, 2015.

⁸ Coincidentally, Brown's editor LA Chamerovzow entered into the literary marketplace as a serial novelist writing historical romances about the French Revolution.

⁹ Henson, *Truth*, 189.

¹⁰ One typical way of talking about slave narratives has been to describe them with the literary terms romantic or tragic. The romantic narrative will end with a triumph of the individual over the situation of enslavement. Because most self-emancipated slave narrators continued to fight for a general abolition, even the most romantic narratives end with political expressions about what to do next or lamentations for those left behind in shackles. Often, fugitive slaves left their families behind, hoping to earn enough money to buy their relations' freedom. While there can be comedic moments within slave narratives, Brown's is atypical in that his narrative persona is often the self-deprecating butt of the joke. We believe this is more than a tactic of self-presentation, but underscores a more general theme of the whole; Brown eschews the romantic mode almost entirely whether in terms of individual or collective success. Because he is most

often the object of the joke, Brown's story is not romantically uplifting, even as he escapes to the North and Canada. Freedom turns out to be less a state of being than a variegated and unclearly defined set of options.

¹¹ The term is from David Kazanjian's book title.

¹² *Slave Life in Georgia* was published four years before Benjamin Coates put his own cotton production plan into print. Entitled *Cotton Cultivation in Africa in Reference to the Abolition of Slavery in the United States*, Coates offers similar arguments and justifications. Coates had begun to develop his plan in the late 1840s, teaming up with freeborn Joseph Jenkins Roberts, who had already settled in Liberia and became its first president in 1847. From his leadership post in the African Civilization Society – pointedly differentiated from the American Colonization Society, which most African Americans rejected – Coates reached out and gained support from prominent leaders of African descent including Henry Highland Garnet, Alexander Crummel, and Mary Ann Shadd Cary. The earliest written evidence of Coates' plan appears in a January 1, 1851 letter to Frederick Douglass soliciting his support. Unimpressed and ideologically averse, Douglass refused to offer his support. It may be imagined that Douglass would have reacted similarly to Brown's proposal, though no record exists acknowledging that Douglass ever read *Slave Life in Georgia*. For additional details, see Greene-Power, *Against Wind and Tide: The African American Struggle against the Colonization Movement*, especially pages 164-181; and Lapsansky-Werner, *Back to Africa: Benjamin Coates and the Colonization Movement in America*.

¹³ The connection is less to the early Marx than to Marx's *Capital*, Volume 1 (1867), a study of the exploitive, but immensely productive, form of capitalism.

¹⁴ Brown, *Slave Life*, 5. Subsequent references to the narrative will refer to F.N. Boney's scholarly edition and will appear in textual parentheses.

¹⁵ Hortense Spillers develops this distinction in her widely-cited essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," 4-5. Spillers distinguishes the captive body and its liberated subject-position, or what she calls flesh, "that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse" (5). The "brush of discourse" here, in Brown's narrative, would be the metaphoric and metonymic binding of the body to the machines of plantation agriculture. When Brown graphically describes the tearing of his flesh, "the cutting of the leaders of the right eye, so that it turned quite round in its socket," he asserts that he is not a trope, but flesh.

¹⁶ This passage almost inevitably leads readers to check the image of Brown on the frontispiece where the unhealed eye is still apparent.

¹⁷ A similar point is made in Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*.

¹⁸ See Wong, *Neither Fugitive nor Free*.

¹⁹ Though Glasgow had relented and remarried, he nevertheless drew Stevens' ire for marrying another man's property and thus depriving his master the ownership of any of the couple's children. Glasgow and Nancy had three children.

²⁰ Harriet H. Washington, by contrast, argues that Brown recounts his medical torture at the hands of Thomas Hamilton as a "matter of fact" in Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, 52.

²¹ See Spillers, 75.

²² Incidentally, Brown describes the machinations of Buck Hurd, a member of the John Murrell gang, which operated within a network of stations and safe houses, a seemingly

ironic inversion of the Underground Railroad. Here, instead of routing fugitives north, the Murrell gang transfers their bounty south, sometimes as far as 300 miles from the plantation from which they were stolen. Then, in a perversely incentivized conspiracy with the stolen slaves, they sell their contraband to a new plantation, promising to re-steal the slave and start the process of flight and resale over again. Brown reports hearing of a slave being swapped in and out of servitude three or four times before either making an escape or remaining enslaved and abandoned by the gang of thieves. Of course, the economy of slave stealing is not an equal partnership, a point driven home when Fed reports that he has known the slave stealers to kill any fugitive they may suspect of revealing the conspiracy.

²³ The plot also makes one wonder whether Twain was familiar with Brown's story.

²⁴ Readers may be more familiar with Paul Giamatti's memorable performance as Freeman in the film *Twelve Years a Slave*, directed by Steven McQueen (2013).

²⁵ Saidiya Hartman comments on the preparations for market and focuses on the "enormous effort... expended in demystifying the ruses of the trade, attuning the reader to the difference between the apparent and the actual, narrating the repression of the "real" that occurs by way of this costuming of the contented slaves—hair dyed, faces greased, preening, primping, smiling, dancing, tumbling, et cetera" to demonstrate the "spry and smart disposition of slaves," *Scenes of Subjection*, 39-40.

²⁶ This representation of the freed slave's insatiability, or like an animal, may come dangerously close to negative racial stereotypes and thus contributed to the hesitation to promote this narrative. However, it also draws both a connection and a contrast to a discussion in Frederick

Douglass's narrative in which slaves are punished for stealing food by being forced to eat the same past the point of sickness.

²⁷ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 53.

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