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RACE, WRITING, AND DIFFERENCE*

Henry Louis Gates††

I

[If one can establish] that the negro intellect is fully equal to that of the white race . . . you not only take away the best argument for keeping him in subjection, but you take away the possibility of doing so. Prima facie, however, the fact that he is a slave, is conclusive against the argument for his freedom, as it is against his equality of claim in respect of intellect . . . Whenever the negro shall be fully fit for freedom, he will make himself free, and no power on earth can prevent him.

— William Gilmore Simms

This article is not about “Moonbeams and Magnolia Blossoms and the North Star.” Nor is it my analysis of the ways in which the Slave Code informed the shape of the black slave’s narratives which in turn informed the shape of the Plantation Novel, or Confederate Romance. Rather, I would like to discuss the curious manner in which the law, specifically the legal prohibition against the literacy-training of the slaves, both reflected larger philosophical ideas of the Enlightenment and determined the shape of the development of the Afro-American literary tradition as well as its criticism.

I wish, then, to examine the relation between the writings of black slaves, on one hand, and their pursuit of legal rights, on the other. What I am about to describe unfolds within a frame, a frame whose contours were shaped by the American judicial system, especially by the American Slave Codes. Let us recall the following summaries of laws taken from William Goodell’s *The American Slave Code* (1853):

We are not now speaking of laws or of usages that directly infringe such rights and prohibit their exercise. *There are such laws*, and we shall give some specimens of them, when we come to inquire after the condition of the slave in relation to *civil society*. At present, we are only unfolding to view “*the legal relation of master and slave*.” We affirm that a recognition of the validity or lawfulness of that relation is equivalent to a denial of the literary and religious *rights* of the slave. And if that relation be an innocent one, then the denial and the withholding of those rights, AS RIGHTS, are innocent likewise. The mere bestowal of *privileges*, with the *permission* to enjoy them, is not the recognition of *rights*; it is rather an implied denial of their existence. Men do not grant *permission* nor confer *privileges* where they recognize *rights*. The power to *permit* and to *confer*, carries with it the power to *refuse* and to *withhold*. Both the master and the slave understand this, where permissions are most frequently given. It is injurious to confer, as it is degrading to accept as a boon, what belongs to every man AS man, by absolute and inherent RIGHT. The rights of investigation, of free speech, of mental culture, of religious liberty, and of conscience, are of this class. Man may no more affect to *confer* them or permit their exercise, than he may presume to take them away.

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The statement, then, is *not* that slave masters do not educate nor permit the education of their slaves, nor allow nor furnish them the benefits of religious instruction and social worship. As a general statement, with particular and local exceptions, it *might* be made and sustained, as will appear in its allotted place. But we waive and pass by all this, for the present, to affirm distinctly that “the legal relation” of slave ownership, in America, as defined by the code that upholds it, is a relation that cannot and does not consist with the recognition (either in theory or practice) of the intellectual and religious RIGHTS of the slave.

The slave “is a chattel.” But chattels have no literary or religious rights. He is a chattel “to all intents, constructions, and *purposes* whatsoever.” He is “in the power of a master, to whom he belongs” — “entirely subject to the will of his master” — “not ranked among *sentient beings*, but among *things*.”

One bright morning in the Spring of 1772, a young African girl walked demurely into the courthouse at Boston, to undergo an oral examination, the results of which would determine the direction of her life and work. Perhaps she was shocked upon entering the appointed room. For there, gathered in a semicircle, sat eighteen of Boston’s most notable citizens. Among them was John Erving, a prominent Boston merchant; the Rev. Charles Chauncey, pastor of the Tenth Congregational Church and a son of Cotton Mather; and John Hancock, who would later gain fame for his signature on the Declaration of Independence. At the center of this group sat His Excellency, Thomas Hutchinson, Governor of the Colony, with Andrew Oliver, his Lieutenant Governor, close by his side.

Why had this august group been assembled? Why had it seen fit to summon this young African girl, scarcely eighteen years old, before it? This group of “the most respectable characters in *Boston*,” as it would later define itself, had assembled to question the African adolescent closely on the slender sheaf of poems that the young woman claimed to have written by herself. We can only speculate on the nature of the questions posed to the fledgling poet. Perhaps they asked her to explain for all to hear exactly who were the Greek and Latin gods and poets alluded to so frequently in her work. Or perhaps they asked her to conjugate a verb in Latin, or even to translate randomly-selected passages from the Latin, which she and her master, John Wheatley, claimed that she “had made some progress in.” Or perhaps they asked her to recite from memory key passages from the texts of Milton and Pope, the two poets by whom the African claimed to be most directly influenced. We do not know.

We do know, however, that the African poet’s responses were more than sufficient to prompt the eighteen august gentlemen to compose, sign, and publish a two paragraph “Attestation,” an open

letter "To the Publick" that prefaces Phillis Wheatley's book, and which reads in part:

We whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the poems specified in the following Page, were (as we veribly believe) written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best judges, and is thought qualified to write them.¹

So important was this document in securing a publisher for Phillis's poems that it forms the signal element in the prefatory matter printed in the opening pages of her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, published at London in 1773.

Without the published "Attestation," Wheatley's publisher claimed, few would believe that an African could possibly have written poetry all by herself. As the eighteen put the matter clearly in their letter, "Numbers would be ready to suspect they were not really the Writings of *Phillis*."² Phillis's master, John Wheatley, and Phillis had attempted to publish a similar volume in 1770 at Boston, but Boston publishers had been incredulous. Three years later, "Attestation" in hand, Phillis and her mistress's son, Nathaniel Wheatley, sailed for England, where they completed arrangements for the publication of a volume of her poems, with the aid of the Countess of Huntington and the Earl of Dartmouth.

This curious anecdote, surely one of the oddest oral examinations on record, is only a tiny part of a larger, and even more curious episode in the eighteenth-century's Enlightenment. At least since 1600, Europeans had wondered aloud whether or not the African "species of men," as they most commonly put it, *could* ever create formal literature, could ever master "the arts and sciences." If they could, the argument ran, then the African variety of humanity and the European variety were fundamentally related. If not, then it seemed clear that the African was destined by nature to be a slave.

Determined to discover the answer to this crucial quandary, several Europeans and Americans undertook experiments in which young African slaves would be tutored and trained along with white children. Phillis Wheatley was merely one result of such an experiment. Francis Williams, a Jamaican who took the B.A. at the University of Cambridge before 1730; Jacobus Capitein, who earned several degrees in Holland; Wilhelm Amo, who took the doctorate degree in philosophy at Halle; and Ignatius Sancho,

1. Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (New York, 1985), p. vii.

2. *Id.*

who became a friend of Sterne's and who published a volume of Letters in 1782, are just a few of the black subjects of such "experiments." The published writings of these black men and one woman, who wrote in Latin, Dutch, German and English, were seized upon both by pro- and anti-slavery groups as proof that their arguments were sound.

So widespread was the debate over "the nature of the African" between 1730 and 1830 that not until the Harlem Renaissance would the work of black writers be as extensively reviewed as it was in the eighteenth-century. Phillis Wheatley's list of reviewers includes Voltaire, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Samuel Rush, and James Beatty, to list only a few. Francis Williams's work was analyzed by no less than David Hume and Immanuel Kant. Hegel, writing in the *Philosophy of History* in 1813, used the writings of these Africans as the sign of their innate inferiority. The list of commentators is extensive, amounting to a "who's who" of the French, English and American Enlightenment.

Why was the *creative writing* of the African of such importance to the eighteenth-century's debate over slavery? I can briefly outline one thesis: after Descartes, *reason* was privileged, or valorized, among all other human characteristics. Writing, especially after the printing press became so widespread, was taken to be the *visible* sign of reason. Blacks were "reasonable," and hence "men," if — and only if — they demonstrated mastery of "the arts and sciences," the eighteenth-century's formula for writing. So, while the Enlightenment is famous for establishing its existence upon man's ability to reason, it simultaneously used the absence and presence of "reason" to delimit and circumscribe the very humanity of the cultures and people of color which Europeans had been "discovering" since the Renaissance. The urge toward the systematization of all human knowledge, by which we characterize the Enlightenment, led directly to the relegation of black people to a lower rung on the Great Chain of Being, an eighteenth-century construct that arranged all of creation on a vertical scale from animals and plants and insects through man to the angels and God himself.

By 1750, the Chain had become individualized; the human scale slid from "the lowliest Huttentot" (a black South African) to "glorious Milton and Newton." If blacks could write and publish imaginative literature, then they could, in effect, take a few Giant Steps up the Chain of Being, in a pernicious game of "Mother, May I?"

II

The relation between what, for lack of a better term I shall call the "non-white writer," and the French, Portuguese, Spanish and English languages and literatures manifests itself in at least two ways of interest to theorists of literature and literary history. I am thinking here of what in psychoanalytic criticism is sometimes called "the other," and more especially of this "other" as the subject and object in literature. What I mean by citing these two over-worked terms is precisely this: how blacks are figures in literature, but also how blacks *figure*, as it were, literature of their own making.

These two poles of a received opposition have been informed, at least since the early seventeenth-century, by an extraordinary sub-discourse of the European philosophies of aesthetic theory and language. The two subjects, often in marginal ways, have addressed directly the supposed relation among "race," defined variously as language use and "place in nature." Human beings wrote books. Beautiful books were reflections of sublime genius. Sublime genius was the province of the European.

Blacks, and other people of color, could not write. Writing, these writers argued, stood alone among the fine arts as the most salient repository of genius, the visible sign of reason itself. In this subordinate role, however, "writing," although secondary to "reason," is nevertheless the *medium* of reason's expression. We know reason by its representations. This representation could assume the spoken or the written form. And while several superb scholars give priority to the *spoken* as the privileged of the pair, in their writing about blacks, at least, Europeans privileged *writing* as the principle measure of the African's humanity, his capacity for progress, his very place in the Great Chain of Being.

This system of signs is arbitrary. Key words, such as "capacity," which became a metaphor for cranial size, reflect the predominance of "scientific" discourse upon metaphysics. That "reason," moreover, could be seen to be "natural," was the key third-term of a homology which, in practice, was put to pernicious uses. The transformation of writing from an activity of mind into a commodity, not only reflects larger mercantile relations between Africa and Europe, but is also the subject I wish to explore here. Let me retrace, in brief, the history of this idea, of the relationship of the absence of "writing" and the absence of "humanity" in European letters after 1600.

We must understand this correlation of language-use and *presence* in language if we are to begin to learn how to read, e.g.,

the slave's narrative within what Geoffrey H. Hartman calls its "text-milieu." The slave narratives, taken together, represent the attempt of blacks to *write themselves into being*. What a curious idea: through the mastery of formal Western languages, the presupposition went, a black person could posit a full and sufficient self, as an act of self-creation through the medium of language. Accused of having no collective history by Hegel, blacks effectively responded by publishing hundreds of individual histories which functioned as the part standing for the whole. As Ralph Ellison defined this relation, "We tell ourselves our individual stories as to become aware of our *general* story."

Writing as the visible sign of Reason, at least since the Renaissance in Europe, had been consistently invoked in Western aesthetic theory when discussing the enslavement and status of the black. The origin of this received association of political salvation and artistic genius can be traced at least to the seventeenth-century. What we arrive at by extracting a rather black and slender thread from among the philosophical discourse of the Enlightenment is a reading of another side of the philosophy of enlightenment, indeed its other side. Writing in *The New Organon* in 1620, Sir Francis Bacon, confronted with the problem of classifying the people of color which a sea-faring Renaissance Europe had discovered, turned to the arts as the ultimate measure of a race's place in nature:

Again let a man only consider what a difference there is between the life of men in the most civilized province of Europe, and in the wildest and most barbarous districts of New India; he will feel it be great enough to justify the saying that "man is a god to man," not only in regard to aid and benefit, but also by comparison of condition. And this difference comes not from soil, not from climate, not from race, but from the arts.

Eleven years later, Peter Heylyn, in his *Little Description of the Great World*, used Bacon's formulation to relegate the blacks to a sub-human status: The black African, he wrote, lacked completely "the use of Reason which is peculiar unto man; [he is] of little Wit; and destitute of all arts and sciences; prone to luxury, and for the greatest part Idolators." All subsequent commentaries on the matter were elaborations upon Heylyn's position.

By 1680, Heylyn's keywords, "Reason" and "Wit," had been reduced to "Reading and Writing," as Morgan Godwyn's summary of received opinion attests:

[A] disingenuous and unmanly *Position* had been formed; and privately (and as it were *in the dark*) handed to and again, which is this, That the Negro's though in their figure they carry some resemblances of manhood, yet are indeed *no* men . . . the consideration of the shape and figure of our Negro's Bodies, their Limbs and members; their Voice and

Countenance, in all things according with other mens; together with their *Risibility* and *Discourse* (man's Peculiar Faculties) should be sufficient Conviction. How should they otherwise be capable of *Trades*, and other no less manly employments; as also of *Reading and Writing*, or show so much Discretion in management of Business . . . but wherein (we know) that many of our own People are *deficient*, were they not truly Men?

Such a direct correlation of political rights and *literacy* helps us to understand both the transformation of writing into a commodity, as well as the sheer burden of received opinion that both motivated the black slave to seek his or her text as well as defined the "frame" against which each black text would be read. The following 1740 South Carolina Statute was concerned to make it impossible for black literacy-mastery even to occur:

And *whereas* the having of slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attending with great inconveniences:

Be it enacted, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach, or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write; every such person or persons shall, for every offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds current money.

Learning to read and to write, then, was not only difficult, it was a violation of law. That Frederick Douglass, Thomas Smallwood, William Wells Brown, Moses Grandy, James Pennington, and John Thompson, among numerous others, all rendered statements about the direct relation between freedom and discourse not only as central scenes of instruction, but also as repeated fundamental structures of their very rhetorical strategies only emphasizes the dialectical relation of black text to a "context"; defined here as "other," racist texts against which the slave's narrative, by definition, was forced to react.

By 1705, a Dutch explorer, William Bosman, had encased Peter Heylyn's bias into a myth which the Africans he had "discovered" had purportedly related to him. It is curious insofar as it justifies human slavery. According to Bosman, the blacks

tell us that in the beginning God created Black as well as White men; thereby giving the Blacks the first Election, who chose Gold, and left the Knowledge of Letters to the White. God granted their request, but being incensed at their Avarice, resolved that the Whites should ever be their masters, and they obliged to wait on them as their slaves.

Bosman's fabrication, of course, was a myth of origins designed to sanction through mythology a political order created by Europeans. It was David Hume, writing at mid-point in the eighteenth-century, who gave to Bosman's myth the sanction of Enlightenment philosophical reasoning.

In a major essay, "Of National Characters" (1748), Hume dis-

cusses the “characteristics” of the world’s major divisions of human beings. In a footnote added to his original text in 1753 (the margins of his discourse), Hume posited with all of the authority of philosophy the fundamental identity of complexion, character, and intellectual capacity:

I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, *no arts, no sciences* Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if *nature* had not made our original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are Negro slaves dispersed all over Europe, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity In Jamaica, indeed they talk of one negro as a man of parts and learning [Francis Williams, the Cambridge-educated poet who wrote verse in Latin]; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly.³

Hume’s opinion on the subject, as we might expect, became prescriptive.

Writing in 1764, in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, Immanuel Kant elaborates upon Hume’s essay, in a fourth section entitled “Of National Characteristics, as far as They Depend upon the Distinct Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime.” Kant first claims that “[s]o fundamental is the difference between [the black and white] races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color.”⁴ Kant, moreover, is one of the earliest major European philosophers to conflate “color” with “intelligence,” a determining relation he posits with dictatorial surety. The excerpt bears citation:

[F]ather Labat reports that a Negro carpenter, whom he reproached for haughty treatment toward his wives, answered: “You whites are indeed fools, for first you make great concessions to your wives, and afterward you complain when they drive you mad.” And it might be that there was something in this which perhaps deserved to be considered; but in short, this fellow was *quite black* from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid.⁵

The correlation of “blackness” and “stupidity” Kant posits as if self-evident.

Writing in “Query XIV” of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson maintained that “[n]ever yet could I find that a black

3. David Hume, “Of National Characters,” *The Philosophical Works*, ed. Thomas Hill Green and Thomas Hodge Grose, 4 vols. (Darmstadt, 1964), 3:251 n.1; my emphasis.

4. Immanuel Kant, *Observations of the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Trans. John T. Goldwait (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1960), p. 111.

5. *Id.*, p. 113; my emphasis.

had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration, never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture." Of Wheatley, the first black person to publish a book of poetry in England, to Jefferson the critic wrote: "Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but not poetry The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism."

In that same year, 1785, Kant, basing his observations on the absence of published writing among blacks, noted as if simply obvious that "Americans [Indians] and blacks are lower in their mental capacities than all other races." Again, Hegel, echoing Hume and Kant, noted the absence of history among black people and derided them for failing to develop indigenous African scripts, or even to master the art of writing in modern languages.

Hegel's strictures on the African about the absence of "history" presume a crucial role of *memory*, a collective, cultural memory in the estimation of a civilization. Metaphors of the "childlike" nature of the slaves, of the masked, puppet-like "personality" of the black, all share this assumption about the absence of memory. Mary Langdon, writing in 1855 in her novel *Ida May: A Story of Things Actual and Possible*, says that "but then they *are* mere children You seldom hear them say much about anything that's past, if they only get enough to eat and drink at the present moment." Without writing, there could exist no *repeatable* sign of the workings of reason, of mind. Without memory or mind, there could exist no history. Without history, there could exist no "humanity," as defined consistently from Vico to Hegel.

III

Ironically, Anglo-African writing arose as a response to allegations of its absence. Black people responded to these profoundly serious allegations about their "nature" as directly as they could: they wrote books, poetry, autobiographical narratives. Political and philosophical discourse were the predominant forms of writing. Among these, autobiographical "deliverance" narratives were the most common, and the most accomplished. Accused of lacking a formal and collective history, blacks published individual histories which, taken together, were intended to narrate, in segments, the larger yet fragmented history of blacks in Africa, now dispersed throughout a cold New World. The narrated, descriptive "eye" was put into service as a literary form to posit both the individual "I" of the black author, as well as the collective "I" of the race. Text created author, and black authors, it was

hoped, would create, or recreate, the image of the race in European discourse. The very *face* of the race, representations of the features of which are common in all sorts of writings about blacks at this time, was contingent upon the recording of the black *voice*. Voice presupposes a face, but also seems to have been thought to determine the contours of the black face.

The recording of an authentic black voice, a voice of deliverance from the deafening discursive silence which an enlightened Europe cited as proof of the absence of the African's humanity, was the millennial instrument of transformation through which the African would become the European, the slave become the ex-slave, brute animal become the human being. So central was this idea to the birth of the black literary tradition in the eighteenth-century that five of the earliest slave narratives draw upon the figure of the voice in the text as crucial "scenes of instruction" in the development of the slave on the road to freedom. James Gronniosaw, in 1770; John Marrant, in 1785; Ottobah Cugoana, in 1787; Olaudah Equiano, in 1789; and John Jea in 1815, all draw upon the trope of the talking book. Gronniosaw's usage bears citing him especially because it repeats Kant's correlation of physical, and, as it were, metaphysical, characteristics.

My master used to read prayers in public to the ship's crew every Sabbath day; and when I first saw him read, I was never so surprised in my life, as when I saw the book talk to my master, for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips. I wished it would do so with me. As soon as my master had done reading, I followed him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I opened it, and put my ear down close upon it, in great hope that it would say something to me; but I was very sorry, and greatly disappointed, when I found that it would not speak. This thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing despised me because I was black.*

Even for this black author, his own mask of black humanity is a negation, a sign of absence. Gronniosaw accepts his role as a non-speaking would-be subject and the absence of his common humanity with the European.

That the figure of the talking book recurs in these five black eighteenth-century texts says much about the degree of presupposition and intertextuality in early black letters, more than we heretofore thought. Equally important, however, this figure itself underscores the received correlation between silence and blackness which we have been tracing, as well as the urgent need

6. James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars of the Life of James Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince* (Bath, 1770).

to make the text speak, the process by which the slave marked his distance from the master. The voice in the text was truly a millennial voice for the African person of letters in the eighteenth-century, for it was that very voice of deliverance and of redemption which would signify a new order for the black.

Blacks, we know, tried to write themselves out of slavery, a slavery even more profound than mere physical bondage. Accepting the challenge of the great white Western Tradition, black writers wrote as if their lives depended upon it — and, in a curious sense, their lives did, the “life” of “the race” in Western discourse. But if blacks accepted this challenge, we also accepted its premises, premises in which perhaps lay concealed a trap. What trap might this be? Let me end, as I began, with an anecdote.

In 1915, Edmond Laforest, a prominent member of the Haitian literary movement called “La Ronde,” made of his death a symbolic, if ironic, statement of the curious relation of the “non-Western” writer to the act of writing in modern language. M. Laforest, with an inimitable, if fatal, flair for the grand gesture, stood upon a bridge, calmly tied a Larousse dictionary around his neck, then proceeded to leap to his death by drowning. While other black writers, before and after M. Laforest, have suffocated as artists beneath the weight of various modern languages, Laforest chose to make his death an emblem of this relation of indenture.

It is our challenge to critique this relation of indenture, an indenture that obtains for our writers and for our critics. The Western critical tradition has a canon, just as does the Western literary tradition. Whereas I once thought it our most important gesture to master the canon of criticism, to *imitate* and *apply* it, I now believe that we must turn to the black tradition itself to arrive at theories of criticism indigenous to our literatures. We must, of course, critique the ways in which writing relates to “race,” how attitudes toward racial differences generate and structure literary texts by us *and* about us; we must determine how critical methods can effectively disclose the traces of racial difference in literature; but we must also understand how certain forms of difference and the *languages* we employ to define those supposed “differences” not only reinforce each other, but tend to create and maintain each other. To begin to do this, we must turn to the black tradition, and more especially to the black vernacular tradition, to isolate the signifying black difference through which to theorize about the so-called Discourse of the Other.

