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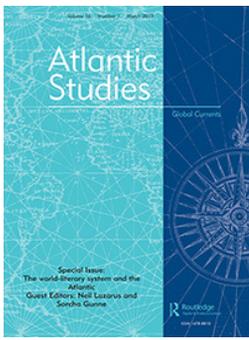
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Contesting slavery in the global market: John Brown's *Slave Life in Georgia*

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ABSTRACT

John Brown, author of *Slave Life in Georgia*, published in London in 1854, proffered a radical approach to ending slavery in the USA in step with Marxian economics. In this paper, we will explain how Brown's representation of subjectivity may have caused critics to neglect it. Brown treats freedom as something foreign and external. He has to learn what freedom means, first through exposure to a model of liberal citizenship and then through the experience of several modulations of fugitive liberty. Brown's social world is wholly determined by external forces. 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 labourer in a copper mine? Will he accompany a patron to England? Brown's hesitancy at each of these modalities of freedom takes him to Canada West, where he serves as a carpenter among other fugitives. These Canadian model communities, designed under the purview of white benefactors, also ultimately displease Brown. He finally leaves for England, where he takes up a new charge: a systematic attack on the economic conditions that support the slaveocracy. He aims to undersell southern cotton and dismantle the Southern economy through competition. Despite failing to execute his design, Brown remains an important voice committed to economic intervention rather than moral suasion.

KEYWORDS

Slavery; abolition; fugitive slave narratives; American South; Harriet Beecher Stowe; Frederick Douglass

By the middle of the nineteenth century, white abolitionists fully embraced fugitive slave narratives as devices of moral suasion. The narratives' accounts of cruelty, 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 long been a broad canvas for demonstrating black agency, recording cultural practices, describing farming techniques and showcasing accomplishments. Authors did not abandon such motivations, even after the unprecedented success of Harriet Beecher Stowe's sentimentalized anti-slavery fiction. Nor did slave narrators embrace any one approach to combatting institutional slavery. In this paper, we attend to one narrator's materialist critique of cotton production to render slave-produced cotton profitless; but before turning to John Brown's *Slave Life in Georgia* (1854), we offer an astonishing coincidence where

Brown's story intersects with the more famous writer at the very centre of the sentimental turn, Josiah Henson.

In the twenty-first chapter of Henson's second autobiographical narrative, *Truth Stranger than Fiction: Father Henson's Story of His Own Life* (1858), the author describes his encounter with the Queen of England in 1851. Henson was the only black exhibitor at the London exhibition of that year. Inside the Crystal Palace, an empire celebrated itself as the world's cultural, industrial, and, most importantly, moral centre. By 1851, England had not only abolished the slave trade, but had endeavoured to "modernize" India and emancipated slaves in its Caribbean colonies.¹ The Exhibition would showcase the self-professed benevolent Empire.²

Though Henson concedes that his "complexion" may have attracted attention to his "humble contribution," his polished lumber was undoubtedly striking. 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? A stage for moral self-aggrandizing? A product of free labour? The black walnut, both mirror and representative for the exoticized, black body, drew in white consumers' gaze and their stereo-optic demand for evidence of good works and exhibits of world-wide exotica. The Queen herself visited and exchanged pleasantries.

A cultural studies approach to Henson's anecdote would have us dwell on the local, mirror-like finish of the boards. Their reflective surface would be a virtual space juxtaposing subjects from wildly different backgrounds. What animates this study, however, cannot be readily seen. Its coordinates lie not on the shiny veneer, but abroad where a sawmill sits in a Canadian landscape and formerly enslaved black hands rip trees into lumber. Some boards will be used to build houses, churches and schools at this settlement, Dawn Institute, intended to model free black civic life and labour. Others will be shipped elsewhere to publicize this successful communal experiment. The settlements of Elgin, Chatham and Dawn, however, do not stand in isolation on the Canadian plain, but in relation to other dreams and agendas.⁴ Abolitionists had proposed various plans: immigration to Haiti or to Africa, armed rebellion and political bargaining. So, too, stands John Brown's personal narrative, *Slave Life in Georgia*, for John Brown was also at Dawn, working as one of the labourers who ripped the very boards that Henson would display overseas. Can we reveal the labourer who disappears once his boards become objects of consumer desire? Brown's narrative rebuts the efficacy of moral suasion. He envisions a direct attack on the bottom line, to make slave-produced cotton unprofitable. We propose a double act of recovery: to reveal the labourer who is displaced when his boards become commodities, and to distinguish his story from popularly marketed abolitionist literature.⁵

Abolitionist propaganda had adapted to consumer taste by mid-century, making Brown's proposals in *Slave Life in Georgia* virtually illegible. Henson, by contrast, leveraged his celebrity after Harriet Beecher Stowe named him as a source for the sentimental hero of *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life among the Lowly* (1852). By 1858, Henson addressed 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 bestselling masterpiece of moral suasion.⁶ We note 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, 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 labour even though his actual work was limited to hiring someone to plane and polish them "in the French style." 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 USA, Henson resists by marring their surface, painting in bold white letters: "THE PRODUCT OF THE INDUSTRY OF A FUGITIVE SLAVE FROM THE UNITED STATES, WHOSE RESIDENCE IS DAWN, CANADA."⁷ To underscore for whom this story is told, a group of English gentlemen, "chuckling with half-suppressed delight," bear witness to the scuffle. This audience illuminates Henson's resistance, for the indelible white marks assert both Henson's blackness and his Canadian identity in opposition to white supremacy in the USA. In *Truth Stranger than Fiction*, Henson transforms himself from raw slave, whose body is 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 products of Henson's labour. The credit is due to the black labourers at Dawn Institute, such as John Brown, a fugitive who had gone by the names Fed and Benford while a slave. Brown's narrative, *Slave Life in Georgia*, reclaims those boards and eschews the romantic mode of self-actualization found, perhaps most recognizably, in Frederick Douglass' 1845 autobiography. In *Slave Life*, Brown retells his desperate attempts to reach England after his escape.⁸ This story of hapless travel finally rewarded leads Brown to a novel 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."⁹ Instead of emigration and resettlement, a proposition first conceived by the white-led American Colonization Society, Brown's plan does not depend on relocation, but capitalizes on the structural inefficiencies in the slave economy.¹⁰ Brown's proposal is neither ameliorative nor compensatory, but formal and aggressive. His narrative exposes the layers of deception that make slavery corruptly profitable, but also wasteful. His plan is a stunning, Marxist analysis of slavery that puts him in opposition to mainstream abolitionists or those advocating immigration to Canada.¹¹

Virtually forgotten beyond offering anecdotal data for historians, 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 yet to gain Brown readers, we point as well to Brown's intervention in the burgeoning genre of slave narratives. His title emphasizes evidentiary realism, bearing likeness to *The Life or Narrative of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and the titles of Charles Ball's (1837) and Henson's (1849) narratives. 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."¹² For Brown, 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 evidenced with Henson, after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, several fugitive slave authors changed their titles to reflect shifting marketing strategies – for example second edition titles: Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), Douglass's *My Bondage, My Freedom* (1855), Henson's *Truth Stranger than Fiction* (1858), and 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 it 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). 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 justifies himself when asked 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's punishments reiterate the brutal lesson that the enslaved black body is just another machine of the trade.¹³ 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).¹⁴ 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. The biblical doctrine of an eye for an eye 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 humanity in sections detailing punishment for a master who killed or maimed his own or another's slave. While a slave would suffer execution for physical aggression against whites, whites who maimed or killed slaves were subject to fines. Black bodies, like any commodity, could be exchanged for coin, the universal equivalent for a certain quantity of property. The logic of capital underwrote the relations between master and

slave. Slave Codes were an early form of cynical market regulation; while giving the appearance of outlawing the worst excesses of individual slave masters, these codes obscured and thus permitted more quotidian and insidious violence.

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. In Brown's recollection, when he attempted to rationalize or explain the inefficient functioning of a tool, his defence was met with a violence that effectively rejected the separation of slave and implements.¹⁵ The slave was not a subject who could comment on structurally independent inefficiencies, but an extension of the tool. If the tool broke, then the slave body must be as well. In place of the 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 implements of agricultural production. This metonymic quality is present in the two most 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, 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 colour. 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. The story was then incorporated into Brown's own narrative, also edited by Chamerovzow, in 1854. Edlie Wong argues that *Slave Life* 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 that invites them on a journey through hell.¹⁶

Glasgow's beatings are among the most graphic depictions of slave torture from an eyewitness. Using racialized language to underpin the particularity of the violence, the flogging was used to exact "the nigger pride out of him" and "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, 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 offence was to insist on having been falsely imprisoned and illegally sold into slavery, to insist that he already had a wife and did not 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 perspective 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).¹⁷ 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.

A distinctive feature of Brown's language is what one historian calls his understated style.¹⁸ Looking back on his 10-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. Understatement, however, 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 favourably. 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 enacts comedic astonishment. The result is a narrative persona willing to depict his former self as overwhelmed, incapable of critical distance or reflection. How else to capture the world-unmaking trauma of being reduced to property, of proscribed kinship?¹⁹ Fed expresses astonishment: "How I watched them whilst they were driving this bargain!" He then exactly describes 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 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." He 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 placed in the hole, which is sealed with blankets, leaving only his head exposed. He is then 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 renders the scenes disjointed, horror balanced by amazement.

The series of escape attempts in the middle chapters of *Slave Life* 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 stealers fear they are about to be arrested themselves.²⁰ Sold back to Decator Stevens, Brown is subject to one final round of abuse. 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 *Huckleberry Finn*, first published in 1884, 30 years after Brown's narrative.²¹ Like Huck, Brown's persona is wily and yet still naïve. Fed practises 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. Brown writes:

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. (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 a steam-boat. From the perspective of his then-ignorant self, the steam-boat is 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 arrives in New Orleans, where he expects England to be just beyond the water's edge.

Like Huck and Jim, Fed's journey south only further enmeshes him in the systemic violence and deception 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" and suddenly aware of his precarious liberty, Brown makes a gut-wrenching choice to sell himself back into slavery, rather than be 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 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 has gained from experience, acquitting himself to please when necessary to avoid a master’s ire – and he agrees to be sold at auction.

The New Orleans slave market presents yet *another* scene where deceptive practices undermine the efficiency of the slave regime, another occasion where profiteering trumps a regulated institution and its markets.²² Brown here deceives both as a means of survival and to avoid punishment. His auctioneers command him to perform as saleable property; he is expected to express good cheer and docility, in order to conceal any signs that might reveal the scars of experience and resistance. 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 writes, “[the] character I gave myself, never a ‘nigger’ had before” (106). This passage echoes the dominant theme of the end 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. (71–72)

This claim also points to the influence of a corruptive education under slavery. The slave reduced to the 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 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, Brown assumes the name Benford, the name of the plantation where his father had been enslaved. Taken to a prison-like plantation of 150 slaves at Shirt-Tail Bend in Mississippi, Benford endures another cruel master. He spends three months on the plantation as if to bear witness to the especially heinous crimes practised 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). Brown’s testimony asserts what Spillers reminds us about the “ungendering” of enslaved female flesh.²³ As these related practices echo those experiments inflicted on Fed’s body earlier, the narrative depicts the “profitable ‘atomizing’ of the captive body

... [T]he procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory."²⁴

Benford's final escape serves as a foray into freedom through the wilds of the Mississippi River: a journey from the saleable 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 colour-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 applications for information (126). Guided by the kernels of direction from these encounters, Benford finally arrives at a "settlement of coloured people," where he passes for a freedman and works for two weeks. Here, he assumes the name John Brown. This stopover represents Brown's first experience of a self-governing, free black community. He feels he must, nevertheless, maintain his anonymity. Uneasy about suspicions concerning his history, Brown moves on toward Indianapolis. There he learns of the Underground Railroad and the peculiar generosity of the Quakers.

Crediting a kind of "superstition" or "instinct," Brown successfully navigates his way to a northern Quaker family, who harbour 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" (134). 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.²⁵ After the meal, Brown can sleep comfortably in the security of a "safe retreat" for the first time since the 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 "saviours," 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.²⁶ 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 within 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 scepticism inculcated by slave education, that is, the systematic deception practised 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 harbouring 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* – re-published from *The Anti-Slavery Reporter* by editor Chamerovzow – includes a notable anecdote of inverted deception, one that offers a decidedly divergent portrait of “white saviours” in the North than that found in Brown’s own account. Instead of slaveholders or slave stealers practising 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 harbouring 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 labour. 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 fulfilment 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 a model-free citizen was one of the chief inducements to strike out for freedom in the first place, is 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 the 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 meagre, 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. (171–172)

Brown travels to England, where, like John Glasgow, he may finally assume British citizenship. However, he rejects this opportunity in favour of a more active proposal to combat the economic underpinnings of the slave industry – working 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" (165). 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 will 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 behaviour 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. (170–171)

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 neverminding 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 labour 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" (168). 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.

Notes

1. See Webster, *Twilight* and Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment*.
2. The Great Exhibition of 1851 was a climactic moment for British self-regard, anticipating the British Raj (1858–1947). 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” (Murphy, *Shadowing*). In 1851, however, the English did not view the slaveholding US as a partner-in-benevolence. See Stephen Knadler, “At Home in the Crystal Palace.”
3. Henson, *Truth*, 191.
4. See also Paul, “Out of Chatham.”
5. Brown articulates Ed Baptist’s recent claim that slavery was the most advanced form of capital accumulation and not a backward economic system to be eclipsed by industrial modernity (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 persuasively argued this case. Brown’s work demonstrates an even earlier recognition of the same.
6. 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>.
7. Henson, *Truth*, 189.
8. 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. 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 contend 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.
9. The term is from David Kazanjian’s book title.
10. *Slave Life in Georgia* was published four years before Benjamin Coates put his own cotton production plan into print with similar arguments and justifications in *Cotton Cultivation in Africa in Reference to the Abolition of Slavery in the United States*. Coates began to develop his plan in the late 1840s, teaming up with freeborn Joseph Jenkins Roberts, who had already settled in Liberia, becoming its first president in 1847. The earliest written evidence of Coates’ plan appears in a 1 January 1851 letter to Douglass soliciting his support who, unimpressed and ideologically averse, refused to offer support. Perhaps Douglass would have reacted similarly to Brown’s proposal, but no record exists acknowledging that he ever read *Slave Life in Georgia*. See Greene-Power, *Against Wind and Tide* and Lapsansky-Werner, *Back to Africa*.
11. The connection is less to early Marx than to Marx’s *Capital*, Volume 1 (1867).
12. Brown, *Slave Life*, 60. Subsequent references to the narrative will refer to F. N. Boney’s scholarly edition and will appear in textual parentheses.
13. Hortense Spillers develops this distinction in her widely cited essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (66–67). She distinguishes the captive “body” from flesh, “that zero degree of social

conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse” (67). The “brush of discourse” 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 he asserts that he is not a trope, but flesh.

14. This passage almost inevitably leads readers to check the image of Brown on the frontispiece where the unhealed eye is still apparent.
15. A similar point is made in Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 169.
16. See Wong, *Neither Fugitive Nor Free*, 228.
17. Though Glasgow had relented and remarried, he drew Stevens’ ire for marrying another man’s property and thus depriving his master the ownership of any of the couple’s children.
18. 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.
19. See Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 75.
20. Brown describes the machinations of Buck Hurd and the John Murrell gang’s operations within a network of stations and safe houses, a seemingly ironic inversion of the Underground Railroad. Instead of routing fugitives north, the Murrell gang transfers their bounty south. 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. The economy of slave stealing is not an equal partnership, as Fed reports that he has known the slave stealers to kill any fugitive they may suspect of revealing the conspiracy.
21. The similarities in plot prompt the question: was Twain familiar with Brown’s story?
22. Hartman comments on the preparations for market, noting 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.
23. See Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 68.
24. *Ibid.*
25. 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 Douglass’s narrative in which slaves are punished for stealing food by being forced to eat the same past the point of sickness.
26. Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 53.

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