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Michaël Roy’s recent monograph gives slave narratives a renewed breath of life. In *Fugitive Texts: Slave Narratives in Antebellum Print Culture*, slave narratives-turned-bound books are critically analyzed as material artifacts. Roy uncovers new layers of the lived experience of the formerly enslaved, and freedpeople who had to regain their freedom, and offers new insights into the creation and distribution of these printed volumes and their meanings for the enslaved, abolitionists, and the general reading population in the increasingly divisive antebellum era.

Growing out of a dissertation, *Fugitive Texts* is the first book-length study of the slave narrative as a material artifact. Roy moves beyond the more well-known narratives in tackling issues and questions regarding production, distribution, publishing practices, markets, advertisement, and print culture. High-selling works, local publications, and self-published narratives are included, presenting an unsteady and fractious world of abolitionist print culture and politics. By applying these choices, Roy argues for a new label for these documents: fugitive texts. For the author, this terminology better shows how manuscripts traveled from place to place (even across the Atlantic) and from person to person until production. Similar to running from enslavement, writing these accounts, in some situations, allowed authors to reclaim themselves within abolitionist society. Ultimately, Roy argues that the “capacity to shift between formats and media” made these narratives “fugitive,” as their ability to be mobile “embodied” the texts into varied formats (p. 10).

Roy’s “book history” answers the call of Laurence Cossu-Beaumont and Claire Parfait to see slave narratives as material artifacts (p. 4).[1] According to Roy, examining production costs, publisher backgrounds and practices, publisher-author interactions, and the appearance of first editions reveals this genre’s heterogenous nature, demonstrating each narrative’s created individuality. Through this methodology, Roy can “foreground the contingent nature of the processes of writing, publication, and, later, canonization,” shedding further light onto “African Americans’ relationship with print artifacts” in antebellum America (p. 9). Not only does Roy’s book seem to transform published narratives into what appear to be living things with their brand of lived experiences, but he also deftly inserts himself into the growing scholarship of the lived experiences of the enslaved and freed African Americans of the era, and even white abolitionists if we consider the context of, for instance, urban texts and reading culture found in David Henkin’s *City Reading*:

Fugitive Texts significantly contributes to studies on slavery, abolition, gender, print culture, the antebellum era, and African American studies. Throughout this work, scholars of the senses, emotions, technology, economics, and the spatial will also find ideas, themes, and subjects to build on and new paths to traverse, all expanding understandings of antebellum lived experiences. Chapter 1 follows narratives published and distributed by an antislavery society for ideological purposes. By design of their publisher-disseminator, these were wholly part of the institutional abolitionist print network. The first institutionally published and controlled narrative of the era, the Narrative of James Williams (1838) by the American Anti-Slave Society (AASS), is a prime example of this brand. Using their “sophisticated infrastructure facilitating the distribution,” the abolition network’s print culture expanded, becoming “rich and diverse” (p. 12). From oral to print/visual, organizations like the AASS used various media formats, including newspapers, pamphlets, almanacs, and slave narratives.

Having professionalized their use of movable type, steam-powered presses, and papermaking machines, the AASS (influenced by the practice of Bible societies printing religious instruction and early British and American antislavery campaigns) set out to create a reading, educated public that would spread arguments and press leadership to abolish slavery. Stimulating “second-wave antislavery print tactics” and “in the context of Black literary activism,” abolitionists put to the eyes and hands of Americans the oral performances of the harrowing adventures of former slaves. Only by reading, they reasoned, could the populace be persuaded to abolish slavery. Committing a narrative or speeches to print served two purposes. First, print “extended the audience” by literally carrying the “voice” to distant readers, and second, it disproved claims of inferiority as manuscripts displayed “their authors’ oratorical skills to a broader audience” (p. 14). To progress from reprinting and disseminating first-wave antislavery literature, the AASS needed its publications to usher in renewed interest in reform. Thus, the life of Virginia-born slave James Williams was created as a propaganda tool, controlled every step of the way toward their readers.

The paratext guaranteed the narrative’s authenticity, inserting an image of Williams via pointillist engraving, enhancing his individuality to readers. Using “eclectic narrative,” Roy maintains that the narrative became a tale in which the white voice “surrounds” the words of the Black slave (p. 19). Throwing in all their resources, the AASS published multiple editions of James Williams in impressive and cheap formats. Southern critics, however, could refute much of the “truth” the AASS had guaranteed, leaving the society to drag its feet in investigations as they continued to publish. Eventually, the AASS voted to discontinue the publication and sale of James Williams. Over time, any mention, verbal or printed, of Williams and his story disappeared from antislavery catalogs. The idea of “fragile” narratives with fictitious elements bolstered the reestablishment of the antislavery’s ideological argument (pp. 27-28). While the credibility question tainted the AASS, the circulation of narratives continued.

In chapter 2, Roy focuses on self-published narratives, revealing how personal literary-political projects enshrined the desire and motives of formerly enslaved people to regain and maintain their agency and ownership of their person via the book format. Frederick Douglass’s two published narratives form the bulk of this chapter (Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass [1845] and My Bondage and My Freedom [1855]). Roy covers the efforts to write, fund, promote, and publish these stories. Though not entirely severed from antislavery institutions, self-published works helped secure financial survival or regained a tarnished reputation while also providing ammuni-
tion to denounce slavery. However, due to their more emotional centrality, these narratives, unequally aided at times by societies and persons, become, for Roy, “itinerant” narratives, as both author and work went from publisher to publisher, city to city (and overseas), before a sense of “place” was secured for publication, distribution, and sale. Even then, these accounts could be run out of their “homes,” searching for another place to publish (p. 50).

Roy notes that the unified movement fractured with the “AASS schism” in the late 1830s (p. 51). The AASS divided on women’s roles, religion, and politics and, with it, the relationship with print culture. The once complex and finely tuned publishing infrastructure of abolitionism just about dissolved. However, the ideological movement never stopped using print to rally the cause. Because of this, former slaves-turned-authors, including Douglass, had to forge ahead themselves, securing any aid through their ambitious endeavors and from agreeable members of the antislavery network if they wanted more than cheaper ephemera to print their stories—even to the point of transatlantic itinerancy to find publishers and backers to help secure financial security as much as possible to empower the antislavery movement. While Ireland and England proved most critical in publishing Douglass’s first narrative, he still faced, according to Roy, racial obstacles by white abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic who saw Douglass as arrogant, demanding, independent, and becoming too enriched. Still, Douglass was able to publish multiple editions and, with aid from a growing base of supporters, became a household name and an essential member of the abolitionist movement.

Of note in this second chapter is an analysis of the book’s power for most Americans. The lecture circuit served as the first and foremost promotional space of distribution and profit for self-publishers like Douglass. However, hearing about his life’s adventures was not enough. With the idea that reading could persuade people, the ability to hold onto the words, literally, of a freed slave was most desirable. Owning meant to support, to confirm the reality of the voice resonating within ears and the ability to revisit the emotions—to reverberate again and again through their eyes. Such an evolution of readership led to the financial security of Douglass and others. It also unveils the power of personal exchange. Finally, it links the author to the audience where, unlike in the Narrative of James Williams, the social dimension of consumerism secured an author’s independence, strengthening antislavery sentiment and action.

Chapter 3 emphasizes the commercialization of slave narratives through mainstream trade publishers. These autobiographical accounts, argues Roy, were built off the success of fictional novels, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852). As the narratives in chapters 1 and 2 acted more on political belief and activism, those in this chapter were primed and ready to profit for the publishing company but did not consistently achieve that goal. Solomon Northup’s disturbing account relating his kidnapping in New York into slavery and his years of survival before regaining his freedom is representative of a successful profit-driven book. Twelve Years A Slave (1853) sacrificed much of its author’s agency and personal interaction as publishers applied strategies to sell Uncle Tom’s Cabin, driving demand, word-of-mouth marketing, and sensationalism for profit. While Northup, writes Roy, did play a role in having his account dictated and went on lecture circuits to regain financial security lost during those years, he lost ownership of this episode of his life to commercialism. For Roy, Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Twelve Years A Slave, having come out in the increasingly tenuous decade of the 1850s, only helped exacerbate both the growing regional divide and the mounting tactics of romanticizing slave narratives only so publishers could broadcast them as “thrilling” to the ever-evolving reading populace (p. 104).
Roy criticizes the continued marginalization of slave narrative authors by publishing companies and many abolitionists. Roy argues that by subverting Northup for Stowe, the publisher’s use of the latter to promote the former demonstrates the apparent ease for fictional books written by white authors to print on their own merit. Abolitionism’s motives for involvement are, thus, suspect. Roy also sees racialism running through the white printing press. For example, the experience of Northup’s narrative drove Douglass, in his second narrative, to emphasize ownership and resistance to the racial nature of white publishers by using “My” in the title: *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) (p. 127).

Roy concludes by asserting that his book history approach to slave narratives “unbound” them from their perceived homogeneity, revealing individual creations with varied agendas, obstacles, and journeys (p. 157). For Roy, this material treatment pushes back against the assumption that slave narratives were not of primary concern for antislavery societies. By reexamining popularity and marketability alongside antislavery motives, Roy joins John W. Blassingame to contend that while abolition wielded these narratives, its application was misguided[2]. Whereas they should have been used as “artillery” running down many proslavery supporters, they were handled as “rifles,” while accurate, used one at a time to secure, if possible, one individual at a time (pp. 158-59). While mobility was key for production and distribution, Roy argues that the need to be mobile was racialized. White authors did not need to become mobile, noting that books by Black authors had no guarantee of secure backing or success. Still, the very publishing of their narratives, states Roy, allowed for voices (the oral) to be made more permanent through text (physical/tactile/visual), illustrating the “liberating power of the book” (p. 162). Roy ends with this analysis: by reframing these narratives as a “discursive practice” instead of a more “distinct literary genre,” we not only “open up the field” of slave testimony to “accommodate different kinds of differently told stories” but also better appreciate what slave narratives meant for antebellum Americans (p. 169).

An ambitious and fastidiously footnoted work such as this is not without faults. Of minor note is the writing style. It reads as a dissertation. As a result, in places it is dense and repetitive. Each chapter is hefty (chapters 2 and 3 are fifty-two pages long). For this English edition, the often-sluggish rhythm of the writing is but a minimal nuisance, as we should credit Susan Pickford for her translation of the 2017 publication. More distracting, there are a handful of sentences and factoids better suited for the endnotes. A stressing concern is Roy’s apparent ease of accepting what previous scholars have declared before without more serious consideration of contexts or other theories. I found several issues but will only address a few. Throughout his work, Roy is far too willing to tag along with other scholars to question the motives and actions of every single white person and institution, claiming racism (and sexism, depending) being the driving forces for their interactions and thoughts. This broad generalization to lump sum all people of a race as racist is too narrow-minded of an approach to take with every primary source cited when he should have examined other considerations and theories. It is an oversimplification to make the claims Roy makes regarding the intentions of white abolitionists and publishers.

Next, Roy argues that even by 1860, formerly enslaved women still encountered more significant difficulties than men in being published. His example is Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, slated for mainstream publication in early 1861. At this time, the nation awaited Abraham Lincoln’s inauguration and what would happen at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. With this contemporaneous context in mind, Roy insists that it is due to racism, sexism, and some “eclectic narrative” handling by (white) abolitionists like Lydia Maria Child that caused the narrative to be
instead self-published and failed to attract the public's attention (p. 142). There is no genuine, serious consideration of the then potentially explosive national events playing out in front of Jacobs's potential readers that were snagging their attention. A controversial candidate winning a volatile election, southern states seceding, and a federal garrison under siege come off as more pressing to publishers than another slave narrative, regardless of the author's gender.

Further, Roy claims that Jacobs's inability to secure publication in England in 1857 centered on Victorian sensitivity and modesty regarding her recounting of sexual harassment. Supposedly, this proved too “challenging” for British publishers to take on (p. 146). However, this contradicts his earlier treatment of Douglass, who, in 1845, faced similar conflicts with Victorian modesty. Roy relates a British supporter's creativity to allude to the forced breeding Douglass wrote about but was still able to publish. Roy only brings up one British supporter who scratched out the allusion to the breeding in Douglass's narrative when he offered a published copy to his daughter. Roy does not explain why Douglass's retelling of slave breeding could be maneuvered around but the same could not be done for Jacobs's sexual harassment. However, Roy writes that Jacobs's Incidents was successfully published the same year in England despite the lackluster experience of publishing and selling Incidents in America. This was done mainly through informal networks and printing practices, with no mention of how they treated her sexual harassment this time around. If left untouched, why? What changed? This is something Roy leaves out and does not offer any theories.

Roy's critique of modern publishing companies' past practices is unsteady. Some, like HarperCollins, then Harper & Brothers, writes Roy, tried to avoid "incendiary" drafts that might be "smacked of anti-slavery," but some ended up on their shelves. Those few were apologized for only after southern criticisms were made public, but Roy does not explain whether they were pulled from the shelves. Throughout this episode, which includes comments on some choices made by the Atlantic Monthly and Ticker & Fields of Boston, Roy relates that during a few years antislavery manuscripts were off and on approved for trade publication alongside proslavery texts but insists on claiming that northern trade publishers made it their sole aim to avoid "subversive" literature (p. 114).

Despite this inconsistent handling, he calls for HarperCollins to expunge themselves of the white supremacy of today for decisions made in the past that, at best, seem half-hearted. Lastly, Roy too readily accepts previous scholarship comparing the novel Uncle Tom's Cabin, a fiction, with the nonfiction narrative of Douglass to argue that Stowe's privilege as a white woman ensured her work's wide-ranging success and celebrity status. Unlike Douglass, she did not need to expend the energy and uncertainty to publish and promote. It seems inaccurate to compare a work of fiction with an autobiography published seven years apart when reading and print culture had evolved. Although abolition is their common goal, each piece is a different genre and serves different agendas. A better comparison is needed.

Although great space has been used to address some of the issues with this work, this book comes at a time when material object studies and sensory and emotions history are not just riding a trendy, popular wave but also critically grasping the lived experience of the past. Treating narratives as an artifact to unveil new layers of how the formerly enslaved asserted themselves and made their voices "heard" broadens our understanding of the antebellum period. It allows us to grasp how people came to form meanings for these printed volumes. Sites of publication, lectures, reading, and advertisements presented here should aid further endeavors into spatial history while assisting more polished efforts to understand slavery as an institution and the enslaved efforts to secure

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liberty, ownership, and agency. One should anticipate a more significant expansion of book history and antebellum print culture from Roy. While not a perfect, easy first book to read, *Fugitive Texts* should at least find itself in the hands of graduate students and not just the shelves of some academic office.

Notes


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