

GENIUS  
IN  
BONDAGE

*Literature  
of the  
Early Black Atlantic*

Edited by  
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and  
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## INTRODUCTION

### *Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould*

In June 1780, Ignatius Sancho wrote a letter to one of his many white correspondents describing the Gordon riots that had just erupted on the streets of London. More surprising than Sancho's disdain for the anti-Catholic mob is his description of "the worse than Negro barbarity of the populace."<sup>1</sup> If his association of blackness with savagery disrupts our assumptions about the collective identity of black writing, it also opens up rhetorical possibilities for him. In describing in detail the "burnings and devastations" by the city's "poor, miserable, ragged rabble," Sancho actually dramatizes a savvy reversal of the racial terms for "barbarity." Violence, it would appear, implicitly derives from social condition. Exploiting the cultural distinction between liberty and licentiousness in English culture during this era ("This—is liberty! genuine British liberty!"), the letter denounces the excesses of those who conflate freedom and irresponsibility. In doing so, it implicitly highlights the absence of English "liberty"—freedom responsibly exercised—for most Britons, white and black. At a time when fewer than one in six adult males was qualified to vote in Britain, as the only known black voter Sancho was uniquely positioned to comment on the abuse of "liberty." By the letter's postscript, then, Sancho ironically manipulates the persona of the responsible English citizen to, of all things, invert his initial characterization of the urban mob: "I am not sorry I was born in Afric.—I shall tire you, I fear."<sup>2</sup> Sancho's own reaction to the rioters, the vast majority of whom were white, refutes the belief in "Negro barbarity" he ironically invokes.

This moment in *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African* (1782) is representative of the complex identities and languages of eighteenth-century black writing. Simultaneously British and African, Sancho's identity resists easy national and racial identifications; assuming deferential humility, he soon parlays the persona into cultural critique. The black writing that appeared during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—which included the genres of spiritual autobiography, captivity narrative, travel narrative, public epistle, sea adventure, and economic success story—is a literature of diasporic movement and cultural encounter. Born to enslaved African parents on a ship in the Middle Passage bearing its human cargo from Africa to the Americas and then brought to England, Sancho might serve as an emblem of most of the writers discussed in *Genius in Bondage*. Crossing the Atlantic meant that, while some were born with identities, and some had

identities thrust upon them, by the very act of authoring their texts they all achieved identities they had played some significant role in fashioning.

As an emblematic figure, Sancho fittingly gives us the title for this collection of essays, the first devoted exclusively to transatlantic black writing between 1760, when religion first gave English-speaking black writers a voice, and 1833, when Britain ended slavery in its remaining colonies in the Americas. Not knowing that Phillis Wheatley had been manumitted shortly after her return to America in 1773 after a six-week visit to London, in 1778 Sancho wrote a letter of thanks to a Quaker correspondent in Philadelphia who had sent him a copy of Wheatley's *Poems*. With his comments on Wheatley, Sancho became the first Anglophone critic of a fellow black writer and one of the earliest black critics of the institution of slavery:

Phyllis' poems do credit to nature—and put art—merely as art—to the blush.—It reflects nothing either to the glory or generosity of her master—if she is still his slave—except he glories in the *low vanity* of having in his wanton power a mind animated by Heaven—a genius superior to himself—the list of splendid—titled—learned names, in confirmation of her being the real authoress.—alas! Shews how very poor the acquisition of wealth and knowledge are—without generosity—feeling—and humanity.—These good great folks—all know—and perhaps admired—nay, praised Genius in bondage—and then, like the Priests and the Levites in sacred writ, passed by—not one good Samaritan amongst them.

The appearance of *Genius in Bondage* continues recent critical interests in the field of eighteenth-century black writing. Until fairly recently, critical studies and anthologies of African American literature generally began with the 1830s and 1840s, as American abolitionism gained strength and the African American slave narrative proliferated largely in support of this movement.<sup>1</sup> Prior to 1965, the idea that an early black-British tradition existed, or that any Anglophone black writer could (or perhaps should) be seen as having worked in any tradition other than American, was apparently unthinkable. During the past thirty years, however, several influential critical works of and on African-American, African-British, and transatlantic black literature have extended the historical and conceptual frames for the field into the eighteenth century.

During the 1960s, Paul Edwards led the way in the recovery of eighteenth-century transatlantic literature by people of African descent writing in English. With his magisterial introductions, Edwards's facsimile reprints of the works of Ignatius Sancho, Olaudah Equiano, and Quobna Ottobah Cugoana established the editorial, critical, and scholarly standards against which all subsequent workers in the field are measured.<sup>2</sup> Although criticism of these writers greatly diminished during the next decade, and Edwards's editions went out of print, the 1980s marked a renaissance of interest in early transatlantic black writers. For example, William Robertson, John Shields, and Julian Mason produced authoritative and

deeply researched editions of the works of Phillis Wheatley; Henry Louis Gates Jr. developed the rhetorical and ideological implications of the trope of the talking book repeatedly used by early black writers on both sides of the Atlantic, a trope first identified by Edwards; Houston Baker produced an influential Marxist discussion of Equiano as *homo economicus*; William Andrews located the early writers in the literary history of the African-American slave narrative; and Angelo Costanzo and Keith Sandford published studies of the literary and political contexts of the eighteenth-century authors. The last decade of the century opened with Paul Gilroy's revision of the transatlantic context in which the early texts may be seen. Adam Potkay and Sandra Burr's anthology of black Atlantic writers revived concern with the theological and intellectual influence of religion on early authors. As the decade closed, Vincent Carretta produced the fullest editions to date of the works of Equiano, Sancho, Cugoana, and other eighteenth-century black authors.<sup>3</sup>

This influential body of scholarship and criticism raises important questions about the nature of race and authorship in early black writing. As scholars such as Andrews and Gates emphasize, much of early black autobiography was spoken—rather than written—and transcribed by white editors who inevitably exerted a good deal of textual control. As Andrews has commented, "[F]rom the outset of black autobiography in America the presupposition reigns that a black narrator needs a white reader to complete his text, to build a hierarchy of abstract significance on the mere matter of his facts, to supply a presence where was only 'Negro,' only a dark absence."<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, John Sekora has figured this problem of black literary expression as a matter of the "black message" that resides within the formal and ideological prison of the "white envelope."<sup>5</sup> (For eighteenth-century black writers, this metaphorical envelope would include such powerful cultural institutions and influences as English Methodism—particularly figures like George Whitefield and the Countess of Huntingdon—as well as Anglo-American antislavery and prominent literary publishing houses in places like London and Philadelphia.) It is important to see that African Americanist scholarship did not invent this interrogation of the authenticity of black writing; rather, it derives in part from early postcolonial theory. As Franz Fanon, for example, argued long ago, every colonial society "finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation": "The Antilles Negro who wants to be white will be the whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is."<sup>6</sup>

How, then, do we account for "voice" and "authorship" in a rhetorical process comprising black storytellers and white editors? Perhaps recent thinking about identity politics in cultural studies and post-colonial studies provides a more flexible response to this critical dilemma. Gilroy's influential critical model of the "black Atlantic" questions the "overintegrated sense of cultural and ethnic particularity" in racial studies today and its accompanying "language of ethnic absolutism."<sup>7</sup> Imagining instead a diasporic model of racial identity—and one that is, by the way, suited for the itinerant movements of these black writers, whose travels encompassed West Africa, England, the West Indies, and North America—Gilroy

envisions the Atlantic “as one, single, complex unit of analysis” for “an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective.”<sup>10</sup> Such a critical perspective is in keeping with the de-centering of ethnic identity that the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha claims in the concept of “hybridity”: “The language of critique is effective . . . to the extent to which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes . . . the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics.”<sup>11</sup>

Such critical declarations of the fluidity of identity suggest rhetorical possibilities for the creative engagement between black and white languages in the eighteenth century. They enable us, in other words, to reconsider the trope of the black message imprisoned in the white envelope. As Rafia Zafar recently has remarked, critics must identify in black writing “instances of appropriation from and accommodation to the European-American mainstream as trials and experiments in the development of an African American literary consciousness.”<sup>12</sup> This certainly is in keeping with Karen Weyler’s sense (in her essay below) that the autobiographies of Briton Hammon and John Marrant possessed sufficient “cultural capital” to “have value in the literary marketplace.” Does such value imply fully *conscious* appropriation of white languages? Or do early black writers simply imbibe dominant ideological beliefs? These questions go right to the heart of the nature of what W.E.B. Du Bois (and Ralph Ellison after him) theorized was the crucial trope of the black “mask.” Critics today have employed this trope to argue for black writing’s ability to cultivate careful personae that ingeniously mimic—and subvert—dominant discourses. Consider, for example, a passage from the slave Belinda’s petition to the Massachusetts legislature for her freedom. In describing her capture in Africa as a young girl, the narrative proclaims, “Could the tears, the sighs, the supplications, bursting from tortured parental affection, have blunted the keen edge of avarice, she might have been rescued from agony, which many of her country’s children have felt, but which none ever described. In vain she lifted her supplicating voice to an insulted father, and her guiltless hands to a dishonored deity! She was ravished from the bosom of her country, from the arms of her friends.”<sup>13</sup> For American readers of the English seduction novel (Benjamin Franklin, for example, printed much of Samuel Richardson’s work), the plight of the young girl swept up violently in a world of greed and deception could not but resonate as a tale of seduction. Indeed, the effectiveness of black writing would appear to derive from its ability to re-deploy the language and tropes of the seduction novel in order to conflate the discourses of sentiment and politics that are associated with private and public life. Belinda conflates these discourses by sentimentally dramatizing the dismembered family and the “ravished” woman (both staples of late-eighteenth-century antislavery literature) in order to claim her public—her political—identity. But does her handling of seduction challenge racial stereotypes by incorporating black women—African women—into the world of western sympa-

thy? Does it reproduce these stereotypes by merely victimizing them as objects of sympathetic identification? Or does it do both?

Recent conceptual models of diasporic and hybrid identities are congruent with the very instability of the meaning of “race” in the eighteenth century. Certainly, the period’s rising debates over slavery engendered new theories of racial difference. As David Brion Davis has put it, “Insofar as the Enlightenment divorced anthropology and comparative anatomy from theological assumptions, it opened the way for theories of racial inferiority.”<sup>14</sup> Traditionally, Anglo-Americans generally believed in the account of humanity founded upon biblical authority, specifically the account of Adam and Eve as told in the book of Genesis. Even increasingly “scientific” accounts of human classification, which derived from eighteenth-century natural philosophers such as Linnaeus, Buffon, and Blumenbach, did not challenge the idea that all human beings constituted a single species. However, during the eighteenth century self-consciously “enlightened” thinkers—David Hume, Lord Kames, and Thomas Jefferson among them—contested biblical authority as a form of ignorant superstition. They argued instead for the polygenist position that theorized the division of humanity into different species. It is important to recognize that both monogenist and polygenist theories situated Africans (whether by environment or nature) on an inferior place within a hierarchical order of civilization. “The Speech of Moses Bon Saam” (1735), for example, mocks the denigration of racial blackness by claiming, “What Preference, in the Name of that *mysterious* God, whom these Insulters of our *Colour* pretend to worship; what wild imaginary Superiority of Dignity has their pale sickly *Whiteness* to boast of, when compar’d with our *Majestick Glossiness!*”<sup>15</sup> The concept of race, moreover, was further complicated by the ambiguous potential of the Bible to “argue” for or against slavery. If antislavery advocates relied upon Genesis’s account of creation, as well as New Testament principles of Christian charity (e.g., Acts 17.26), pro-slavery employed Genesis 9 to theorize that blacks were the descendants of the Hamites who (through the so-called “curse of Canaan”) were destined for slavery.<sup>16</sup> Slave owners understandably feared that conversion to Christianity, with its theology of spiritual equality, might bring with it a conversion to an ideology of social, political, and economic equality, especially in the wake of the Great Awakening and the American Revolution, when the rhetoric of enslavement to sin and political enslavement already rendered whites and blacks equals in language if not reality.

The very subject of racial difference was complicated by semantic change during this era. Nicholas Hudson has argued that during the eighteenth century the meaning of “race” gradually changed from its original signification of “nation,” “family,” or a group of people defined geographically to one denoting skin color, appearance, and intellectual and moral qualities.<sup>17</sup> Consider, for example, the comment made by John Atkins in a narrative of a voyage made to Africa and the West Indies during the 1730s: “When the Nakedness, Poverty and Ignorance of these Species of men are considered; it would incline one think it a bettering their Condition, to transport them to the worst of Christian Slavery; but as we find them little mended in those respects at the West-Indies, their Patrons respecting

them only as Beasts of Burden; there is rather Inhumanity in removing them from their Countries and Families."<sup>18</sup> To our ears such a denunciation of West Indian planters belies ethnocentric bias against African culture. In its historical context, however, the passage demonstrates how the category of *culture* mediates the very issue of *racial* difference. That is, Christianity theoretically retained the capacity to transform "savagery" into "civilization." Eighteenth-century black writing thus emerged during an era in which the relations between *race* and *culture* were highly unstable yet significantly contiguous. An example: one may recognize the thematic importance of literacy to black humanity as a motif allowing us to articulate a literary "tradition" that runs from Equiano to Frederick Douglass and beyond. But one must recognize that Equiano—unlike Douglass—thematized black humanity in a historical period in which quasi-scientific theories of "race" had not yet fully evolved.<sup>19</sup>

Early writers of the black Atlantic became the evidentiary material for proving or disputing black humanity—a topic that was of course central to the eighteenth-century debates over slavery. As Gates has argued, in the wake of Cartesian and Lockean philosophy, the subject of black writing was used as an argument for the intellectual enslavement of contemporary blacks. Writers like Phillis Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho became test cases for antislavery and pro-slavery movements as well as monogenist and polygenist racial positions. In *Letters on Slavery* (1789), for example, the English abolitionist and former resident of Barbados, William Dickson, praised Francis Williams's Latin ode, "the beautiful poetical piece of Phillis Wheatley, and the letters of Ignatius Sancho" as admirable "specimens of African literature."<sup>20</sup> Dickson and many other antislavery advocates were obviously responding at such moments to the infamous example of David Hume's "Of National Characters" (1753), which debunked Francis Williams as a representative case of black inferiority: "In Jamaica, indeed they talk of one negro as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly."<sup>21</sup> While Thomas Jefferson's disparaging remarks on Phillis Wheatley's artistic creativity echoed such a claim, the English antislavery writer Thomas Clarkson's *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1786) refuted it by defending Wheatley's work.

The black claim to humanity rhetorically capitalized upon the simultaneously political and religious meanings of "liberty." Wielding Christ's words in John 8 ("Every one that committeth sin is the bondservant of sin") in their own unique ways, writers such as John Marrant, Briton Hammon, and Wheatley assailed the slavery of sin often to call attention to its shadowed double—the sin of chattel slavery. In both England and the American colonies, enslaved blacks understood baptism to confer physical as well as spiritual liberty (at least until judicial and political authorities acted against such assumptions). As Adam Potkay has observed, "Some whites indeed feared that the spiritual enfranchisement of blacks might translate all too easily into expectations of political power."<sup>22</sup> This historical situation lends significant complexity to the rhetorical and racial power of religious "conversion" in these narratives, and asks us as readers to consider the

possible multivalence of religious discourse, particularly its transgressive possibilities.

Part One, "Race" and "Gender" in the Early Black Atlantic," examines eighteenth-century black writings in the context of evolving and unstable cultural assumptions about the nature of both race and gender. In "Betrayed by Some of My Own Complexion": Cugoano, Abolition, and the Contemporary Language of Racialism," Roxann Wheeler reads Ottobah Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1787) as a creative meditation on the nature of "race." Showing how this concept was informed by the uneasy relations among its constitutive discourses of civility, Christianity, and complexion, Wheeler situates Cugoano's famous antislavery treatise (whose title signifies upon Thomas Clarkson's seminal *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*) in the context of complex cultural change marked by the new prominence of skin color, controversy over the environmentalist argument (which antislavery writers used to combat the Negro's "natural inferiority"), and the rise of comparative anatomy as a "scientific" discourse articulating human difference. "As Cugoano's text repeatedly demonstrates, skin color occupied a volatile place in contemporary discourse—ranging from the superficial and inconsequential to the very fabric of identity."

Whereas Wheeler emphasizes the advantages that biblical authority about universal humanity offered Cugoano, Karen Weyler considers the larger trope of Christianity as the touchstone for the mutability of "racial" difference. Examining the spiritual narratives of Briton Hammon or John Marrant, Weyler argues that early black writers refrain from "the marking of racial difference," and dramatize instead, through the narrative conventions of Protestant conversion, their equivalent humanity. Thematically prominent in *Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (1760) and *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* (1785) are the self-representations of true Christians exhibiting virtuous character. In this way, the languages of liberty and slavery signify on dual levels simultaneously: these writers dramatize bodily and spiritual forms of "slavery." Rhetorically, then, their works avoid the sensational qualities of much of eighteenth-century captivity writing, thereby implicitly challenging contemporary stereotypes associating blackness with unregulated passions.

Felicity Nussbaum's "Being a Man: Olandah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho" goes one step further in considering how these two writers engaged—and revised—prevailing gendered stereotypes of male blackness. Like Wheeler and Weyler, Nussbaum similarly argues that "public consensus concerning the actual nature of African men had not jelled and instead vacillated erratically from pro-slavery racism through benevolent amelioration bolstered by Enlightenment humanism to abolitionist sentiments." Yet Nussbaum shows how black men are written out of British codes of masculinity, and, subsequently, how Equiano and Sancho write themselves back into the national narrative of masculinity. In doing so, they debunk

these prevailing stereotypes by placing English "manners" within the reach of black men.

In "Volatile Subjects: *The History of Mary Prince*," Gillian Whitlock employs theories of feminism, narratology, colonial discourse, and reception to discuss the ways in which Prince's as-told-to *History* is carefully framed for its original British audience to appear to be far more about race than sex. The marked body that probably would have been foregrounded in a contemporaneous African-American autobiography becomes carefully contained in the commentary surrounding the text of the life itself. Concerned as much with the editorial marginalia in the texts of both the original 1831 edition and the late twentieth-century editions, Whitlock argues that the *History* represents Prince's identity through her contiguity—her relationships with others—rather than essence—the reconstruction of Prince's authentic self.

Part Two, "Market Culture and Racial Authority," explores how such identities were cultivated during a period characterized by the rise of commercial capitalism. Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson's "Letters of the Old Calabar Slave Trade, 1760–1789" examines the epistolary correspondence between British and Biafran merchants. Their historical analysis of this correspondence argues that literacy in English for the commercial elite took the form of a newly "creolized" language. Rather than see this linguistic development as simply the symptom of cultural hegemony enacted by the slave trade, Lovejoy and Richardson theorize it instead as the rhetorical product of cultural exchange, where both European and African traders exchanged more than captive Africans and market commodities. This involved as well the translation of Efik language into writing, which produced "a pictograph method of writing" that helped govern the world of international trade.

How identities are constructed in black autobiographies mediated by white editors is the subject of Philip Gould's "Remarkable Liberty": Reading the Lives of the Early Black Atlantic." Gould investigates the deployment of liberal rights discourse and its relation to commodification in the as-told-to narratives of John Marrant and Venture Smith. Gould sees Marrant and Smith exploiting the polyvocality of such key terms during this era as "liberty," "property," "mastery" and "slavery." Rather than see the relationship between the black subject and white editor as one of erasure of the former, we might, Gould argues, see it instead as an "act of literary collaboration." While Marrant's captivity narrative inverts the tradition in which the white Christian is taken away from civilization, Smith's tale reveals how one can be at liberty while enslaved and still commodified when free.

Commodification is also the subject of Vincent Carretta's "Property of Author": Olaudah Equiano's Place in the *History of the Book*." Carretta considers Equiano as both writer and businessman, who made a very large profit on the production, distribution, and sale of his life. By choosing to retain the copyright to his autobiography and to register his book with the Stationers' Company as the "Property of author," Equiano kept most of the profits from the nine editions of his book between 1789 and 1794, rather than signing them away to wholesalers

and retailers, as most authors did. His control of the book's production and distribution is manifested in many ways, including the subscription lists and the illustration. Earning him the equivalent of at least \$120,000, Equiano's successful gamble on self-publication made him the richest person of African descent in eighteenth-century Britain, and one of the very few wealthy enough to have left a will.

Part Three, "Language and the 'Other': The Question of Difference," reads early black literature as an ongoing process of cultural encounters with Anglo-American languages and ideologies. The essays in this section trace the rhetorical processes by which black writers shape (and are shaped by) Anglo-American discourses, and they pay particular attention to specific personal and literary relations between black and white writers in the late eighteenth century. As Robert Desrochers argues in "Surprising Deliverance": Slavery and Freedom, Language and Identity in the *Narrative of Briton Hammon, 'A Negro Man*," Hammon's autobiography testifies to "the possibilities and limits of language and freedom in late-colonial Massachusetts and in the Atlantic world." By placing the publication of Hammon's *Narrative* in the context of the precarious state of New England slavery, as well as white anxieties about slave violence, Desrochers argues that the text was "something of an anomaly": "it contradicted familiar roles of blacks in print as chattel to be sold, runaways to be apprehended, and rebels and malcontents to be alternately quashed." Its conservative reception, however, was countered by the image of the diasporic traveler cultivated by writers like Hammon and Equiano, a persona that "tested the limits of national, colonial, imperial, and racial boundaries."

Frank Shuffleton similarly considers the shifting nature of such boundaries for Phillis Wheatley. In "On Her Own Footing: Phillis Wheatley in Freedom," he articulates the increasingly complex position the coming of the American Revolution placed on Wheatley. Creatively eschewing both "conservative" and "radical" readings of Wheatley's poetry, Shuffleton argues that this political crisis in the British empire actually disrupted the alliances she had built in England during her stay there in the early 1770s. This forced Wheatley to create in her later work "a more complex, pluralistic sense of audience" than before. By deploying "enlightened and Christian tropes of universal freedom," Wheatley delicately challenged the codes of zealous patriotism, replacing it instead with an enlightened sense of "cosmopolitan friendship" that reflected her strained position in Revolutionary America.

Rosemary Fithian Guruswamy shows that Wheatley could function as the object (as well as the subject) of such larger negotiations of identity and power. "Thou Hast the Holy Word": Jupiter Hammon's 'Regards' to Phillis Wheatley" argues that the bible served Hammon as a rich rhetorical repository for a particular kind of cultural revisionism. Placing Hammon's status as a slave exhorter within the context of African shamans, Guruswamy makes an argument for cultural syncretism, showing how the "reinterpretive use of the Bible would sometimes involve covert communication through the use of the double entendre familiar to African oral narratives." In Gatesian terms, Hammon's poetic practice "signifies"

upon biblical language to exercise the "pursuit of freedom." In this way, Guruswamy reads the critically undervalued "An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatly [sic]" as a poetic act of "conjuring with Scripture," which connects divine and temporal authority as well as black slaves typologically to the Old Testament's enslaved Israelites.

For Markman Ellis the discourses of sentimentalism provide the crucial rhetorical materials for the sort of cultural revisionism that Guruswamy locates in scripture. Ellis premises "Ignatius Sancho's *Letters*: Sentimental Libertarianism and the Politics of Form" on the critical problem of an interdisciplinaryity that might readily (and dangerously) make Sancho the "parrot" of his famous correspondent, Lawrence Sterne. "Rather than a falling away from his own voice, imitation [of Sterne's "Shandyism"] is a kind of inspiration, the mask that allows Sancho's voice to be heard." By considering the political and rhetorical possibilities for the Shandean traits of excited feeling and libertine imagination, Ellis charts a racial appropriation of an already suspect cultural discourse in eighteenth-century England. As Sancho took the genre of the familiar letter—one that possessed both private and public qualities—he re-worked conventional (though, to some, barely acceptable) Shandean conventions of "spontaneity, sincerity, and naturalness" to argue autobiographically for the black capacity for enlightened manners. "The libertine turn in Sancho's letters," moreover, "thus rounds out, and subverts, the picture of Sancho as a conservative and patriotic Whig."

The abolition of slavery, William Andrews suggests in "Benjamin Banneker's Revision of Thomas Jefferson: Conscience vs. Science in the Early American Antislavery Debate," is the subject not quite directly engaged in the public correspondence between Banneker and Jefferson. Banneker's famous 1791 letter to Jefferson signifies upon the language of the *Declaration of Independence*, recovering old meanings of "liberty" and "equality," and re-deploying them anew to ask when the ideology of the American Revolution will be applied to blacks. Through a careful rhetorical analysis of Banneker's letter, Andrews shows how Jefferson's ambivalent stand in *Notes of the State of Virginia* (1785) on racial inferiority and eventual emancipation, as well as the most famous line in the *Declaration*, may have given Banneker reason to hope that he could enlist the Secretary of State in his abolitionist cause: "Jefferson, in effect, would be thrust into a dialogue with himself."

Combining biography and criticism, Robert Levine's "Fifth of July: Nathaniel Paul and the Construction of Black Nationalism" recovers a relatively little known international and transatlantic abolitionist, and argues for the literary value of his works. Levine notes that Paul anticipated Frederick Douglass in calling on his fellow African Americans to observe the Fifth of July as a way of reminding white citizens of the Fourth's unkept promises. Like Equiano before him and Douglass after, Paul's fund-raising travels in England during the 1830s on behalf of black nationalism in America was a transforming event in his personal and political life. He returned to America with an English wife and a transnational vision of the possibilities for interracial relations. Levine demonstrates that nineteenth-century racist reaction to Paul's marriage accounts for much of the misinformation about

the last years of his life and the unfamiliarity of his writings, many of which compare favorably with those of his contemporaries.

We might conclude by emphasizing that this anthology aims to situate early black writing in its own historical terms. Much of the most important criticism, which initially gave this field new prominence, situated early black writing in a black literary "tradition." This approach maps out important relations among black writers over time (as in Gates' notion of signifying) as well as evolving literary conventions (as in Andrews' sense of the increasing importance the slave narrative invests in black control of literacy). Not only does the paradigm of the black Atlantic challenge the very notion of "African American" literature (Is Olaudah Equiano, for example, the "prophet, if not the father" of this tradition?<sup>23</sup>), but it highlights the unsettling critical ramifications of positioning early black writing within the larger, national "story" of African American literary history. As one critic in the field recently put it, "How, accordingly, to argue for [Phillis] Wheatley and her contemporaries as other than merely prologue? Or does the usual version still hold, Afro-America's first literary presences summoned only on grounds of cultural-historical piety?"<sup>24</sup> In other words, does the value we invest in such scenes as Frederick Douglass' victory over Mr. Covey, or Linda Brent's sentimental "confession" of her sexual affair with a white man, critically determine the aesthetic and cultural material we seek in eighteenth-century black writing? Literary traditions, in other words, create their own teleological distortions. As the essays in *Genius in Bondage* amply demonstrate, the value of the early black Atlantic writers is independent of the achievements of those who followed them.

## NOTES

1. See *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin, 1998), 217.
2. Ed Carretta, 219.
3. The critical literature in this field is of course extremely large, but representative work with this kind of historical frame includes Stephen Butterfield, *Black Autobiography in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974) and Robert Stepto, *From Behind the Veil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).
4. *Sancho's Letters, with Memoirs of His Life by Joseph Jekyll Esqr.* M.P. (London, 1803; Reprinted London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1968), ed. Paul Edwards; *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (London, 1789; Reprinted London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969), ed. Paul Edwards; *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of the Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (London, 1787; Reprinted London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969), ed. Paul Edwards.
5. William H. Robinson, ed., *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc.: 1984); John Shields, ed., *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); William Andrews,

To Tell a Free Story: *The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Angelo Costanzo, *Surprising Narrative: Olaudah Equiano and the Beginnings of Black Autobiography* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987); Keith Sandiford, *Measuring the Moment: Strategies of Protest in Eighteenth-Century Afro-English Writing* (London: Associated University Presses, 1988); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Adam Potkay and Sandra Burr, eds., *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century: Living the New Exodus in England and the Americas* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995); Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1995); *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1998); Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1999); Vincent Carretta, ed., *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).

6. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 32–3.
7. John Sekora, "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative," *Callaloo* 10 (1987), 482–515.
8. *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 18, 38.
9. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 31.
10. Gilroy, 15.
11. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 25.
12. Raifa Zafar, "We Wear the Mask," *African Americans Write American Literature, 1760–1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 3.
13. "Petition of an African slave, to the legislature of Massachusetts," in *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*, ed. Vincent Carretta (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997), 142.
14. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 446.
15. "The Speech of Moses Bon Saam, a Free Negro, to the revolted Slaves in one of the most considerable Colonies of the West Indies." In *Caribbeana: Anthology of English Literature of the West Indies, 1657–1777*, ed. Thomas Krise (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 103. As Krise notes, however, "Readers are divided over the question of whether this speech is a fabrication by a British abolitionist or a genuine representation of an actual maroon leader" (101).
16. Benjamin Braude, "The Sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identities in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 54 (January 1997), 102–142.
17. Nicholas Hudson, "From 'Nation' to 'Race': The Origins of Racial Classification in Eighteenth-Century Thought," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29 (1996), 247–64.
18. John Atkins, *A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West-Indies; in His Majesty's Ships the Swallow and Weymouth* (London: Ward and Chandler, 1737).

19. Some critics have objected to recent critical trends in problematizing the concepts of "nation" and "race." Reviewing the recent anthologies of eighteenth-century black writing, Wilfred Samuels has argued that, "The globalization of the Black Atlantic experience obscures the subtle ways in which their marginalization—due directly to race and despite membership in the Church of England, political platforms from which they spoke, and varying degrees of economic success—forced the writers to adopt veiled or duplicitous

voices to manipulate and revise prevailing paradigms...." See "Enlightened Black Voices: Witnesses and Participants," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 31 (1997–98), 244.

20. William Dickson, *Letters on Slavery* (London: J. Phillips, 1789), 76–77.
21. Hume added these lines to the 1753 and later editions of his essay, debunking Francis Williams as an extraordinary case of black literary achievement.
22. Adam Potkay and Sandra Burr, eds., *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century: Living the New Exodus in England and the Americas* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), 8.
23. See Andrews, 60.
24. A. Robert Lee, "Selves Subscribed: Early Afro-America and the Signifying of Phillis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon, Olaudah Equiano, and David Walker," in *Making America, Making American Literature: Franklin to Cooper*, eds. Lee and W.M. Verhoeven (Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 1996), 278. Curiously, however, Lee's argument then goes on to problematically cite the *Narrative of Frederick Douglass* "as a kind of template or grid for the fuller reading of the prior 'self-subscriptions' of Wheatley, Hammon, Equiano/Vassa and Walker."