

“My life. My words. My pen” – Framing Abolitionist Print Culture in *Barracoon*, *The Book of Negroes* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

In his 1892 narrative, *The Life of Times of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass compares the body to a text in which one might read the marks of enslavement: “the overseer had written his character on the living parchment of their backs, and left them callous” (Douglass 119). Douglass continues this textual metaphor in another passage, telling his readers, “my feet have been so cracked with frost that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes” (Douglass 85-6). Douglass’ contemporary, the black abolitionist Samuel Ringgold Ward, also used images of inscription to describe the oppression of slavery. In his 1855 *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro*, Ward writes, “It is not to be denied that a history of the Negro race is unwritten; no, it is written in characters of blood! It is a very compact, succinct chronicle: it comprises but one word and its cognate - slavery, slave trade. There is the history of the Negro” (Ward 269). Douglass’ and Ward’s metaphors draw our attention to the centrality of the written and printed word in the history of abolition. Scholar Leon Jackson argues, however, that historians of African American literature on one hand and historians of the book on the other have examined abolitionist texts from separate theoretical traditions that rarely intersect, leaving the connections between 19th century book history, antislavery movements, and African American literature largely unexplored (Jackson 252). Moreover, while much attention has been paid to writing as an act of self-representation for freed slaves, fewer scholars have examined black abolitionists’ preoccupations with the culture of 19th century print. This paper is a companion piece to my *Phantom Pages, Living Parchment* digital archive, which takes up Jackson’s call to “read both the outsides as well as the insides” of abolitionist texts, tracing the material features, provenance,

and complex publishing histories of some of the antislavery books, pamphlets and newspapers located in research libraries that we visited for the *Phantoms* project (Jackson 293). Using images of writing and inscription in Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, questions of narrative voice in Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon*, and references to visual print culture in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as points of entry, this paper argues that literature sheds light on the important historical relationship between black abolitionists and the culture of print - the tangible and material processes of writing, editing, binding, printing, engraving, illustrating and reproducing photographs that constituted emancipatory and powerful acts of self-fashioning.

My interest in approaching abolitionist literature using the frame of book history began with two works from later periods: Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon*, and Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*. Although these texts were written in the 20th and 21st centuries, they raise the questions of authorship, narrative control, and publication history that resonate with the study of 19th century abolitionist texts. Hurston's work, developed as a manuscript in 1927 but published for the first time in 2018, is a transcribed account of the last surviving African slave to have made the Middle Passage. Kossola's descriptions of his life in west Africa and his enslavement recall the literary genre of the 19th century slave narrative. Even the first words of Hurston's preface to the work immediately align Kossola's story with the paratext of the slave narrative: "This is the life story of Cudjo Lewis, as told by himself" (Hurston 3). Hurston attends not only to setting down the content of Kossola's narrative, but to preserving the patterns of speech and dialect in which it was told to her. Crossing the genres of ethnography, anthropological field notes, slave narrative and history, *Barracoon* is a text that makes great effort to strip away the layers of mediation commonly interposed in slave narratives between black subjects and their white ghost writers, editors, publishers, and readers. As Hurston notes in her preface, she hoped

to “set down a central truth rather than fact of detail, which is so often misleading. Therefore he has been permitted to tell his story in his own way, without the intrusion of interpretation” (Hurstun 3). Nonetheless, *Barracoon* is a complex text with a tangled history of publication. The dedication for instance, notes the role played by Hurston’s white patron, Charlotte Mason, whose interest in “primitive peoples” is cited as the origin of Hurston’s project. Moreover, in her introduction, Hurston writes that the goal of her project is to record on the page “the vast lore that has been blown by the breath of inarticulate ones across the seas and lands of the world” (Hurstun 5). The history of Hurston’s manuscript also illustrates the difficulty in making this translation from oral tradition to print. Her manuscript was accepted for publication by Viking Press, but only on the condition that the text be rewritten “in language rather than dialect” (Hurstun xxii). Hurston’s refusal to alter the text in this way resulted in the manuscript remaining unpublished for over ninety years. In recording Kossola’s story by translating his dialect into typographical forms, Hurston was trying to preserve not just authentic voice, but authentic memory. She writes of the irreplaceable story of the “only man on earth who has in his heart the memory of his African home; the horrors of the slave raid; the barracoon; the Lenten tones of slavery; and who has sixty-seven years of freedom in a foreign land behind him. (Hurstun 16). The urgency about Hurston’s work as a writer echoes the words of the black abolitionist and newspaper editor, Henry Bibb, who wrote in the introduction to his autobiography of the purpose in setting down the story of his life. Bibb writes, “It may be asked why I have written this work, when there has been so much already written and published of the same character from other fugitives? ...I wanted to leave my humble testimony on record against this man-destroying system, to be read by succeeding generations when my body shall lie mouldering in the dust” (Bibb xii). As a material artefact—a site of memory that was all but forgotten for ninety years—

Hurston's work highlights the black abolitionists' concern with dictation, transcription, and publication as a way of bearing witness to the trauma of enslavement.

Mediation, authorship, and textual history are likewise central concerns in Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*. In 2009, Lawrence Hill oversaw the publication of a Harper-Collins illustrated edition of *The Book of Negroes*. Featuring high resolution facsimiles of documents, paintings and engravings depicting the horrors of the Middle Passage and plantation enslavement, and maps charting the trajectories of the triangular trade among other images, the illustrated edition attempts to ground the fictional narrative of Aminata in historical reality. The publishing of the illustrated edition of *The Book of Negroes* recalls Harriet Beecher Stowe's work, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the collection of historical documents, anecdotes, and testimonies that she published in 1853 in response to accusations from pro-slavery groups that her novel had distorted the realities of the Antebellum south. Writing in the mid-19th century, a politically charged literary world in which slave narratives and abolitionist novels were often questioned for their critical and violent depictions of slavery, Stowe's publishing of *A Key* indicates her need to authenticate and legitimize her novel's representations of black moral depth, spirituality, and literacy. In the introduction to *A Key*, Stowe writes that,

At different times, doubt has been expressed whether the scenes and characters portrayed in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' convey a fair representation of slavery as it at present exists. This work, more, perhaps, than any other work of fiction that ever was written, has been a collection of and arrangement of real incidents, of actions really performed, of words and expressions really uttered, grouped together with reference to a general result in the same manner that the mosaic artist groups his fragments of various stones into one general picture. His is a mosaic of gems – this is a mosaic of facts (Stowe 1).

In the same way that Stowe's *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* uses the weight of historical evidence to support the moral truths of her novel, the illustrated *Book of Negroes* assembles a mosaic of

visual evidence that highlights the extensive and meticulous research Hill conducted while crafting the novel.

Most important of the historical documents that the illustrated edition provides to readers is the reproduction of pages from the 1783 Book of Negroes, a British ledger containing the names of Black loyalists who were granted passage to the free colony of Nova Scotia. This material is placed in the central pages of the illustrated edition, an editorial choice that highlights the importance of the document to the narrative frame of the novel. The book-within-the book is a direct representation of intertextuality, and, like the 19th century practice of stitching related texts together to form a new compilation, or “sammelband”, the inclusion of the facsimile draws attention not only to historical context, but to the most powerful images of writing that Hill uses throughout the novel to frame the development of the character of Aminata, who is employed as a scribe to set down the names of black loyalists in the Book of Negroes.

Throughout the novel, Lawrence Hill uses the act of inscription as a metaphor for self definition, a trope frequently found in 19th century slave narratives. In the autobiography of Josiah Henson, for example, Henson recounts buying a small pocketbook and crafting the materials necessary for writing himself: “I had already made some ink out of charcoal, and had cut a goose quill so that it looked like my master’s pen, and I had begun to make scratches on bits of paper I had picked up in the market” (Henson 188). Similarly, in the narrative of Frederick Douglass, Douglass describes learning to write in his youth on any surface that was available to him: “During this time, my copy-book was the board fence, brick wall, and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk. With these, I learned mainly how to write” (Douglass 38). In his *12 Years a Slave*, Solomon Northrup makes four references to his search for “pen, ink and paper” so that he might write home to friends in the North and regain his

freedom. In one passage, Northrup recounts the process of creating ink, fashioning a pen for himself, and stealing pages from a foolscap octavo volume in order to assemble the materials necessary to write a letter: “I appropriated a sheet, concealing it in the cabin, under the board on which I slept. After various experiments I succeeded in making ink, by boiling white maple bark, and with a feather plucked from the wing of a duck, manufactured a pen. When all were asleep in the cabin, by the light of coals, lying on my plank couch, I managed to complete a somewhat lengthy epistle” (Northrup 230-231). In a way that recalls Henson, Douglass and Northrup’s discoveries of the written word, Hill describes Aminata learning to read and write by drawing Arabic characters in the sandy soil outside of her home. Later in the novel, when Aminata arrives in New York and signs her African name on an official document, she notes that, “The mere act of writing it, moving smoothly, unerringly with the quill in the calligraphy that Mrs. Lindo had so patiently taught me, sealed a private contract that I had made with myself. I had now written my name on a public document, and I was a person, with just as much life and liberty as the man who claimed to own me” (Hill 246). A recurring trope in the novel is Aminata’s self-awareness that her story must be told, and that she is the only one who can tell it. At the beginning of book two, Aminata compares the power of the written word to a “sleeping lion”, noting that “in the absence of an audience, I will right down my story so that it waits like a restful beast, with lungs breathing and heart beating (Hill 103). Aminata’s reflections on the power of inscription directly parallel Huston’s comments on the importance of transcribing Kossola’s narrative, and Henry Bibb’s remarks on the permanence of print.

In addition to writing her own story as an act of affirmation, Aminata finds meaning in the act of writing the names of others. When employed as a scribe in New York, Aminata recounts that inscribing a name evokes the humanity of each person:

I liked writing names in the Book of Negroes, recording how people obtained their freedom, how old they were and where they had been born...I wanted to write more about them, but the ledger was cramped and Colonel Baker pressed me to rush through the lineups. The colonel was especially impatient over the descriptions and preferred short phrases...I didn't care for the descriptions, but I loved the way people followed the movement of my hand as I wrote down their names and the way they made me read them aloud once I was done. It excited me to imagine that fifty years later, someone might find an ancestor in the Book of Negroes and say, 'That was my grandmother'" (Hill 298-9).

This passage parallels Hill's own encounter with the material artefact of the Book of Negroes. In the note on the illustrated edition, Hill recalls his first time seeing the historical Book of Negroes in person after visiting the Queen at Buckingham Palace. Hill writes, "I took the tube to Kew and spent the afternoon engrossed in the thick, musty, 215-year-old document. I like to imagine that there is a novel for every one of the people whose names are immortalised in the Book of Negroes" (Hill xv). For Hill and Aminata, the material document is a textual site of memory, each inscribed name representing a story waiting to be told.

Even as the text of *The Book of Negroes* alludes to the power of the written word to find connection and agency, the illustrated edition seems to suggest that words are not always enough to capture the trauma of slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe shared this concern with the value of visual illustration. In a March 9, 1851 letter to Gamaliel Bailey, editor of the *National Era*, Stowe describes the writing of her novel in deeply visual terms: "My vocation is simply that of painter, and my object will be to hold up in the most lifelike and graphic manner possible slavery...There is no arguing with pictures."(Stowe). Even Stowe's identification of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a "mosaic of facts" in *A Key* aligns her work with a piece of visual art. Given Stowe's interest in pictures, it is not surprising that when the reader is introduced to the title character of Tom, Stowe uses a metaphor of 19th century photography and print culture. Stowe writes: "At this table was seated Uncle Tom, Mr. Shelby's best hand, who, as he is to be the hero of this story, we must daguerreotype for our readers" (Stowe 41-2). This passage reminds us that

Stowe's writing of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* coincided with the widespread introduction of the daguerreotype in the United States in the late 1840s. Daguerreotypy was an early photographic technique that used a camera obscura to capture images on specially treated and highly polished metal plates. Material culture scholars have argued that in addition to providing its viewer with a faithful facsimile of a person's outward appearance, the daguerreotype acted as a window through which the viewer could come to understand the inner world of the image's subject. In her book, *The Camera and the Press: American Visual and Print Culture in the Age of the Daguerreotype*, Marcy J. Dinius devotes a chapter to Harriet Beecher Stowe's preoccupation with daguerreotypes, arguing that the medium's materiality was central to Stowe's argument for the moral depth of African Americans in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Dinius writes that "Daguerreotypy differs from all other forms of photography in that it not only records the subject before the camera's lens, but also reflects the viewer's image on its mirror-like surface" (Dinius 133). Dinius's analysis of the daguerreotype as a material object resonates with Frederick Douglass' comments on photography in his 1861 lecture, "Pictures and Progress." In the lecture, Douglass argues that the objectivity of the photograph allows for African Americans to be humanized subjects rather than caricatured objects. Praising the technological innovation of the daguerreotype, Douglass asserts that the photograph portrait more than any other artistic medium allows us to "see our interior selves...as through a looking glass" (Douglass 452). Douglass' comments on the daguerreotype remind us that photography was an important component of abolitionist print culture. By using the language of photography, and by inviting her readers to view an imagined portrait of Tom, it is as though Stowe holds up the polished metal plates of the daguerreotype so that her readers might see their own humanity reflected in Tom's image.

In addition to Stowe's metaphorical daguerreotype, other references to material print culture are scattered throughout the novel. In several passages, for example, Stowe describes fugitive slave advertisements. In chapter 9, when the senator and his wife aid the fugitive Eliza in her flight from Mr. Haley, the senator notes that, before meeting Eliza, his "idea of a fugitive was only an idea of the letters that spell the word – or at the most, the image of a little newspaper picture of a man with a stick and bundle with 'ran away from the subscriber' under it" (Stowe 134). By presenting her readers with complex fugitive characters, Stowe liberates the runaway slave from the two-dimensional page of the fugitive advertisement. In a passage of deep dramatic irony in chapter 11, Stowe describes a group of "raw-boned Kentuckians" reading a fugitive handbill advertising a runaway (Stowe 154). As the slave catchers pore over the description on the handbill ("Ran away from the subscriber, my mulatto boy, George. Said George six feet in height, a very light mulatto, brown curly hair; is very intelligent, speaks handsomely, can read and write, will probably try to pass for a white man"), George, the subject of the advertisement, walks into the tavern and engages with them, without being recognized (Stowe 157). While fugitive slave advertisements of the 19th century tried to reduce their human subjects to short physical descriptions and small woodcut illustrations, Stowe's inclusion of these intertextual fragments subverts their original intentions, juxtaposing the dehumanizing text of the handbill with the deeply human presence of George, who asserts his own humanity in terms that evoke the inscription on the famous Wedgwood medallion: "Look at me, now. Don't I sit before you, every way, just as much a man as you are? Look at my face, - look at my hands - look at my body... why am I *not* a man, as much as anybody?" (Stowe 165). In this respect, Stowe's fictional treatment of the fugitive slave advertisement is in keeping with the historical reality noted by scholar of slavery and visual culture, Charmaine Nelson, who argues that slave

advertisements, though “heinous in intent and dubious in veracity” served as “an unauthorized form of portraiture” that affirmed the agency of those depicted (Nelson 49). Like Lawrence Hill and Aminata who see every name in the *Book of Negroes* as a human story waiting to be made known, Stowe reveals the human story behind every slave advertisement.

Even as Stowe’s text uses a language of visual culture, many illustrations of the novel feature images of material texts. In her article, “Imagining the Past as the Future: Illustrating *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for the 1890s,” Barbara Hochman engages with two illustrated editions of Stowe’s novel – the 1852 Jewett and Co. edition, illustrated by Hammatt Billings, and the 1891 Houghton Mifflin edition, illustrated by E.W. Kemble. Hochman argues that, while Kemble’s illustrations of the 1890s painted a nostalgic and glorified picture of the plantation South, the antebellum illustrations of Billings, produced for the first edition of Stowe’s work, were in keeping with the portrayals of black literacy at the heart of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. For example, in his illustration of the first meeting between Eva and Tom, Billings depicts Tom with the open Bible on his lap. A second illustration depicts Eva teaching Tom to read. In the 1852 edition, the illustration of the auction scene includes an image of text—the same runaway handbill for George Harris that Stowe describes in the tavern scene of chapter 11. As Hochman notes, “pictures with words within them have self-reflexive overtones. They raise questions about the interplay of text and image and draw attention to complexities of reading an interpretation” (Hochman 191). In the 1853 *Uncle Tom’s Cabin an Almanack*, illustrated by George Cruikshank and George Dalziel, a woodcut entitled “The apprehension of the fugitive” shows slave catchers entering the home of a free black family to kidnap the father into slavery. The domestic space in the illustration features a shelf of books mounted on the wall above the mantel, holding a Bible

and several other volumes. The textual imagery in the illustration highlights black literacy and places books at the centre of this space of uncertain freedom.

The depiction of a small library in the home of a free African American family reminds us that the book, and other printed texts, were material objects central to the antislavery movement. For many abolitionists, in fact, books, printing presses, and other materials of print culture became symbolic of freedom. In the first issue of *The North Star*, printed on the 3rd of December, 1841, Frederick Douglass wrote: “It has long been our anxious wish to see in this slave-holding, slave-trading, and negro-hating land, a printing press and paper, permanently established, under the complete control and direction of the immediate victims of slavery and oppression (Douglass “North Star”). Douglass’ comments are echoed in the final passages of *The Book of Negroes*, when Aminata defies the abolitionists’ wishes to control the writing of her narrative: “‘Without guidance, thank you very much,’ I said. ‘My life. My words. My pen. I am capable of writing’” (Hill 472). Both Douglass, the historical figure who printed copies of his autobiography, and Aminata, the literary character who inscribes her own story and the names of others into the Book of Negroes, associate the material production of texts with the crafting of freedom. Both these historical and fictional accounts of writing and printing remind us that, while narratives of enslavement were written in “characters of blood” on “living parchment”, narratives of freedom were inscribed in ink, set in type, and impressed on the printed page.

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