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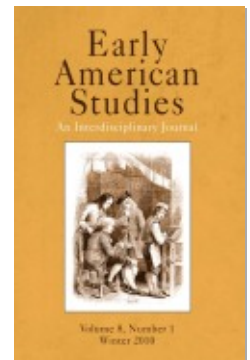
Liberation Technology: Black Printed Protest in the Age of Franklin

Richard S. Newman

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Liberation Technology

Black Printed Protest in the Age of Franklin

RICHARD S. NEWMAN

Rochester Institute of Technology

ABSTRACT Although many scholars still view the nineteenth century as the decisive moment in the development of black print culture, I argue that the eighteenth century witnessed the first major shift in African American literary stylings. Formerly spoken of and for by white masters, politicians, and ministers, early black writers utilized a variety of printed forms—from poetry to pamphlets—to claim their own voices in an emerging trans-Atlantic public sphere. Indeed, by connecting literary emancipation of black voices to the broader aims of abolitionism, early black writers made print media an integral part of racial reform movements well beyond the Age of Franklin.

Sometime during the late 1820s, a young enslaved man in Maryland secured a copy of the *Columbian Orator*. This collection of famous speeches made quite an impression; he carried the book around, committing to memory the words and rhetorical styles that defined oratorical prowess. The book changed his life. After escaping from slavery, the self-emancipated man had another fateful encounter with a printed document: the radical abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*. Its militant tone inspired him to speak publicly about the horrors of bondage and his personal experiences as an enslaved man. His lectures ignited a new wave of abolitionist organizing, and their success eventually convinced him to publish an autobiography. That best-selling book was read

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by people on both sides of the Atlantic and helped him establish his own printing press and newspaper, the first of four papers he would edit during his life. Even in death, books continued to define the image of this celebrated activist. For Frederick Douglass's three autobiographies remain among the most frequently assigned texts in high school and college classrooms in the United States.

As this vignette illustrates, print and print culture framed the life and times of the famed black abolitionist Frederick Douglass and, by extension, African American protest during the nineteenth century. For quite some time scholars assumed that the Age of Douglass was the decisive moment in the formation of black print culture in America and beyond. Other than Henry Louis Gates and Paul Gilroy, few scholars accepted the idea that an entire culture of letters developed among black communities at any time before 1800.¹ The reasons for this view seem obvious. The first independent black newspapers were not created in America until the 1820s and 1830s, and slave narratives did not become a media phenomenon until the 1840s and 1850s. If the first black printers did not appear until the nineteenth century, how could a history of black print culture (as opposed to the scattered production of black-authored texts) begin much earlier?

A new generation of scholars has moved the decisive era of black print culture backward into the Age of Franklin. As historians of black protest, black literacy, and black identity now agree, a major shift occurred in black letters and attitudes toward print during the second half of the eighteenth century.² Challenging the prevailing modes of black representation in the printed realm, African-descended people became authors, publicists, and bearers of the printed word in America, England, Canada, and even the Francophone Caribbean. For many trans-Atlantic black reformers, establishing an autonomous identity in Western print culture became a necessary corollary to the struggle for physical emancipation. If the Marquis de Condorcet was right in 1793 that print had unshackled Europe from medieval modes of thought and action, then it is also true that print was perhaps the first tech-

1. See, for example, Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic* (Boston, 1990).

2. See, for example, John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography* (Chapel Hill, 2004); Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham, N.C., 2002); Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill, 2002), chap. 4; and Joanna Brooks, *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American Literatures* (New York, 2003).

nology to liberate blacks from the servile images that had long haunted their existence in Western culture.³

Critical questions about the development of black print culture in the eighteenth century remain, however. Exactly how did black print culture evolve in the 1700s, and what preceded it? Did the black engagement with print culture establish a link between information technology—broadly defined as communications mechanisms from the printing press to the Internet⁴—and black redemption that carried through the twentieth century? If so, should histories of such information technologies as print be recast to include early black writers, pamphleteers, and publicists? W. E. B. Du Bois certainly thought that black history and print history worked in tandem. Wherever one found newspapers in the post-Civil War South, he observed, one found some form of black freedom.⁵ More recently, John Stauffer has argued that black activists like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth embraced early photography to reshape the image of African Americans in nineteenth-century culture.⁶

Taking cues from scholars of print culture and black history, this essay reexamines African-descended people in the context of the Atlantic world of print during the Age of Franklin. In one sense, it flows from a very basic desire to connect the dots: much recent work in African American and Atlantic world studies revolves around texts (books, pamphlets, broadsides). Printed documents appear on slave plantations in the Dutch West Indies, in the hands of Haitian slave rebels, and on the bookshelves of early African American leaders. That this textual proliferation occurred during the eighteenth century is more than just coincidence. Rather, it tells us that the 1700s

3. See particularly Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book* (Chicago, 1998).

4. Though initially coined to describe the development of twentieth-century business computing applications—both hardware and software—“information technology” now also refers to the broader dissemination of information via any technology. Wikipedia has given a fair definition: “Information technology (IT) is a general term that describes any technology that helps to produce, manipulate, store, communicate, and/or disseminate information.” In this way, we can use IT to bring together the study of print, electronic media, and the Internet. See, for example, Soraj Hongladaram and Charles Ess, eds., *Information Technology Ethics: Cultural Perspectives* (London, 2007). On technology and blacks more broadly, see in particular Bruce Sinclair, ed., *Technology and the African-American Experience: Needs and Opportunities for Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).

5. See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, 1903).

6. John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), chap. 2.

witnessed the remarkable rise of information technology as an organizing principle for everyone, including people of African descent.

On the other hand, this essay challenges print scholars to integrate African Americans more fully into early histories of the book, literacy, and information dispersal, particularly during the Age of Franklin. Most studies of eighteenth-century Western print culture (a formative era in newspaper publishing, pamphlet production, and book dissemination) marginalize African Americans, Afro-Britons, and Haitian slave rebels. To study these topics is to study the self-contained genres of “black history” or “reform history,” not print history. Why should this be so? What if, for example, we compare black print culture in the postrevolutionary northern United States (a literary underground of sorts) with struggles over printed discourse in ancien régime France—are we talking about the same world of print culture? In short, we can learn more about the broader meaning of print in Western society if the experiences of African-descended people are considered as formative and not marginal.⁷

A caveat at the outset: my understanding of the black Atlantic world of print conflates several distinct genres studies—the cultures of print, letters and literacy, the history of the book. For Africans in the Atlantic world, printed discourse was part of a larger “racial complex” that both supported imperial plantation systems and denied people of color equality in the civic realm. This racial complex was constituted in a variety of printed forms, from slave laws stored in dusty bookshelves to denigrating racial labels in popular plays, novels, and pieces of travel writing. By the latter half of the eighteenth century, however, a vanguard of black writers, readers, and letter writers came to view printed discourse as a potential means of surmounting racial oppression. According to the literary scholar John Ernest, letters, literacy, print, and the book all became part of a “liberation historiography”—a “specifically textual” response by black writers to racial hierarchies established not only in law and politics but in print.⁸

7. Compare, for instance, McHenry’s *Forgotten Readers* with Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (New York, 1983) and *The Great Cat Massacre* (New York, 1984), chaps. 4, 5. The full history of the book, of course, promises much in this regard, though African Americans really make their debut in later volumes dealing with the nineteenth century. See Hugh Amory and David Hall, eds., *A History of the Book in America*, vol. 1 (New York, 2000), introduction, and Scott E. Casper, Jeffrey D. Groves, Stephen W. Nissenbaum, and Michael Winship, eds., *A History of the Book in America*, vol. 3, *The Industrial Book, 1840–1880* (Chapel Hill, 2007), esp. Jeannine Marie DeLombard, “African American Cultures of Print,” 360–72.

8. See Ernest, *Liberation Historiography*, quotes at 2, 4, 10–11.

VENTRILOQUISM, VIRTUALIZATION, AND MIMICRY

Our first glimpse into the black Atlantic world of print comes in the form of disembodied African voices. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, just as the international slave trade tilted toward Britain and France and new slave laws solidified definitions of racial bondage in colonial America, white imperial writers began using African-descended figures in a variety of literary genres. Playwrights crafted black heroes and villains, novelists used Africans to define boundaries among Atlantic world cultures, ministers published sermons with black sinners, and travel writers published accounts of African discovery and conquest. The presence of African-descended peoples in both European capitals and colonial settlements put a face to these characterizations of blackness and black people. As Winthrop Jordan once noted, non-African writers and readers came to focus on blackness itself as somehow different, alien, and suspect in Western culture.

Scholars have coined various terms to explain this development in Anglo-American print culture: mimicry, ventriloquism, “othering.” Perhaps the most insightful recent definition has been formulated by the literary critic Srinivas Aravamudan: virtualization. As Aravamudan explains, virtualization was an attempt to comprehend black voices in trans-Atlantic culture through distorted representations of their physical features, speech patterns, and inability to comprehend the power of print. “Non-European 18th-century literary representatives are often . . . inhabitants of the torrid zone,” he writes of the exotic characters conjured by generations of metropolitan writers.⁹ Although most Western authors did not virtualize black characters systematically, they did picture them as collectively outside the realm of enlightened, and therefore civilized, discourse. In short, people of African descent needed to be spoken of and for—not heard. Print itself became a vehicle for expressing racial distinction.

One sees virtualization of black voices in a broad range of early Anglo-American writing. Although Aphra Behn’s 1688 novella *Oroonoko* may be called the first major virtualization—giving rise to a whole genre of literature on “the royal slave”—early depictions of black Atlantic culture came to life in pamphlets, broadsides, and other ephemera. Cotton Mather’s “Rules for the Society of Negroes,” a 1693 broadside republished in Boston in 1714, offers a useful starting point. Mather’s rules for black Christian religious practice in colonial Massachusetts began with the admission that Af-

9. Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* (Durham, N.C., 1999), esp. 17.

ricans were “the miserable children of Adam” who “thankfully” accepted both God’s grace and white paternalism to survive in Western culture. Mather’s protocols attempted to speak for black people. Thus, weekly gatherings could never be convened, he wrote in a virtualized black voice, “without the leave of such as have power over *us*.”¹⁰

A few years later, Mather incorporated virtualized black voices into a longer pamphlet: “*Tremenda: A Dreadful Sound with Which the Wicked are to be Thunderstruck*.” A reprinted sermon on Mather’s favorite theme—man’s sinful nature—the pamphlet revolved around “a miserable African” who faced the gallows for killing his wife. Although the sermon offered broad warnings about “the dreadful sound” of sin in the land, Mather’s reprinted interview with this particular sinner, Joseph Hanno, marked people of color as particularly troubling characters. Like Hanno, a free man who had attained literacy, colonial blacks appreciated neither the responsibilities attending freedom nor the wonders of the book, particularly the Bible. At the beginning of the dialogue, one of the first reprinted conversations with people of African descent in American letters, Mather pointedly asks Hanno why he did not study his Bible before committing murder. “A gentleman, who heard you had no Bible with you, sent a Bible to you [in prison],” Mather observes. “It looks very strangely, very oddly, that you could live quietly so long and have no Bible with you.” Hanno replies simply, “I had no Bible, and knew not where to get one.” An incredulous Mather cries out, “knew not where to get one? There are more than twice 500 Christians in the town, that would have helped you to a Bible.” The jailer even adds a comment: “Joseph, I would have helped you to one at the first word, if you had asked for it.” Without the Bible for such long stretches of his life, Hanno is unable to comprehend Mather’s central question: Do you understand the depth of your sins? An exasperated Mather concludes that there is little else he can do for the condemned man, so ignorant of the power of books to transform souls.¹¹

Mather’s pamphlet and broadside invite us to take a closer look at the emergence of a racial worldview being established in print. Like that of other early Anglo-American writers, Mather’s language stigmatized blackness: he labeled Hanno “so deeply black a character,” not just for committing the sin of murder but “doubly so” for demonstrating a “fondness for freedom.” Indeed, Mather was actually the epitome of the enlightened

10. Cotton Mather, “Rules for the Society of Negroes. 1693” (Boston 1714).

11. Cotton Mather, “*Tremenda: The Dreadful Sound*” (Boston 1721), esp. 31–40.

slaveholder (encouraging black Christianity), but he could not escape the prevailing literary tradition that blackness was not divine. Mather was part of a generation of American writers that used print to establish the dividing line between civilization and barbarism. In Mather's eyes, "this wretched Ethiopian" Hanno had squandered the gift of literacy and biblical insight.

A few decades later in colonial New York, a lesser-known writer named Daniel Horsmanden virtualized black voices in much the same way as Mather. He did so to shed light on the infamous slave uprising of 1741. Arguing that a printed account of the foiled slave rebellion was essential, Horsmanden produced a thick quarto journal of the legal proceedings following the revolt. Because black uprisings seemed to be increasing (colonial papers reported several revolts in the Caribbean), whites needed to gain insight on enslaved peoples' minds. His work would be a "public service." Nevertheless, as he put it in a preface, black deponents offered a particular challenge, for they were not usually literate. "The fatigue in [examining] . . . Negroes, is not to be conceived, but by those that have undergone the drudgery," he commented, for the "difficulty of bringing and holding them to the truth . . . is not to be surmounted but by the closest attention." Africans have "a great deal of craft," he continued, and their "unintelligible jargon stands them in great stead to conceal their meaning." The only recourse was to print: by meticulously transcribing Africans' statements "and thoroughly weigh[ing] and compar[ing] them with each other," he could reveal black revolutionaries' inner evil designs. Of course, he explained, enslaved people could not "deliver themselves precisely in the same words" as his transcriptions. But readers should still trust his reconstructed dialogues, for they pointed to the same broad message: do not trust people of color.¹²

In this manner the culture of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade depended on those who wrote, printed, distributed, and read accounts of blackness, most of which depicted Africans as occupying the fringes of modernity. White culture believed that "barbarians" could not speak for themselves or comprehend the significance of texts produced in the modern, rapidly changing Atlantic world. Even the first slave narratives were virtualized. Unlike subsequent narratives written by former slaves, virtualized slave narratives were white productions—and they did not usually make broader abolitionist claims. They merely raised doubts about specific instances of

12. Daniel Horsmanden, "Journal of the proceedings in the detection of a conspiracy formed by some white people, in conjunction with Negro and other slaves, for burning the city of New-York in America, and murdering the inhabitants" (New York, 1744), iii–v.

enslavement. Indeed, early slave narratives actually reinforced black people's marginalization in the printed realm. Samuel Sewall, Mather's Massachusetts neighbor, is often credited with producing the first virtualized slave narrative, *The Selling of Joseph*, published in Boston in 1700. As Mark Peterson has shown, Judge Sewall's pamphlet stemmed from a real enslaved man's freedom petition. Nevertheless, Sewall had to speak for him in print. "His brief tract," Peterson writes, "refuted all the era's typical justifications for slavery," even going so far as to claim blacks' common humanity. At the same time, his opposition to the slave trade flowed from a concern that "these Ethiopians" would form a permanent outsider class if the slave trade was not ended. "There is such a disparity in their conditions, color, hair," Sewall wrote, "that they can never embody with us."¹³

Interestingly, Peterson links Sewall's pamphlet not merely to black protest in his midst but to changes in Atlantic world politics and economics, and to the freer flow of information at the beginning of the eighteenth century. As Boston became an entrepôt of the international slave trade, New Englanders like Sewall (and Mather) engaged in wide-ranging debates over the saving of black souls. These debates, in turn, flowed from trans-Atlantic pamphlet wars over Protestant Christianity (which occurred in part because of the easing of libel laws in England). Slavery and antislavery formed a small but distinct part of this emerging discourse, and virtualized black voices were a central form of expression in that debate. But that black voices appeared in mimicked form says much. Atlantic slavery and the culture of print would evolve in tandem, even if genuine black voices were not yet part of the discourse.

George Fox, the well-known English Quaker who settled in Pennsylvania, posthumously published *Gospel Family-Order* in 1701, which may also be read as a virtualized slave narrative. Ostensibly recognizing the common humanity of "whites, blacks and Indians," Fox asked Pennsylvania slaveholders to provide religious instruction to people of color. He also asked his readers (whom he assumed to be universally white) to place themselves in the condition of "your slaves." Alluding to the Golden Rule, Fox wrote: "Consider seriously of this, and to you for and to them, as you would willingly have them or any other to do unto you, were you in the like slavish condition." Like Mather and Sewall, Fox was clearly sympathetic to the prospect of Afro-Christianity; like the works of those authors too, Fox's

13. See Mark A. Peterson, "The Selling of Joseph: Bostonians, Antislavery, and the Protestant International, 1689–1733," *Massachusetts Historical Review* 4 (2002): 1–22.

Gospel might also be read as commentary on blacks' inability to appeal for themselves in print. Although owners and slaves lived in close physical proximity, Fox's printed admonitions about blacks' needs and wants created the impression of unbridgeable distance between people of European and African descent, further marginalizing black voices.¹⁴

The story of Job Ben Solomon perhaps best illuminates the trans-Atlantic dimensions of the virtualized slave narrative. The story revolves around a prominent Fulani (West African) family from the Senegal and Gambia rivers area, whose son, Ayuba Suleiman Daillo, was captured in 1730 and sold to British slavers. Later given the name Job, Daillo was eventually sold to a Maryland master and put to work on a colonial tobacco farm. He ran away and was captured. Placed in a local jail, he encountered an attorney who uncovered his royal roots. Daillo penned a letter in Arabic, which, with the linguistic aid of a fellow slave in the region, allowed colonial authorities to hear "his tale of woe." Daillo's letter, intended for his father in Africa, made it only as far as England, where a well-known reformer finally redeemed him. Daillo eventually traveled to London, was feted by many, and was put on a slave ship home.¹⁵

Daillo's story became famous, however, because of the biography written by his original American benefactor, Thomas Bluett. That pamphlet, published in London in 1734, received a wide readership as part of a collection of travel literature printed about a decade later. As Kathryn Gallagher has pointed out, the hallmark of Bluett's narrative is not abolitionism but African slavery's utter normalcy in the Atlantic world. Daillo was erroneously enslaved. Bluett made little mention of other slaves' struggles for freedom. Englishmen were in fact praised for recognizing his royal lineage and sending him home (where, ironically, he became an indigenous slaving contact). As James Campbell observes, Aphra Behn's trope of the royal slave was surely operating in the minds of Daillo's white acquaintances. He was a real-life Oroonoko, a real live African who would live on as "Job Ben Solomon," and not necessarily himself.¹⁶

Virtualization of black voices in print made sense because it represented the realities of Atlantic world slavery. Cotton Mather was well acquainted

14. George Fox, *Gospel Family-Order* (1701).

15. Thomas Bluett, *Some Memoirs of the Life of Job, the Son of Solomon, the High Priest of Boonda in Africa* . . . (London, 1734).

16. See Kathryn Gallagher's edition of Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave* (New York, 1999), 261. James Campbell, *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787–2005* (New York, 2006), 1–8.

with debates over slavery and Afro-Christianity in colonial Boston; British readers of Bluett's *Life of Job* were also familiar with European travelogues of West Africa; Daniel Horsmanden read accounts of slave rebellion in the Caribbean before publishing his own study on the matter closer to home. Poor Richard offers still another example. As a printer and publisher in colonial Philadelphia, Ben Franklin had a bird's-eye view of both black protest and proto-abolitionist pamphleteering in the Atlantic world. His *Pennsylvania Gazette* published a stream of runaway slave notices during the 1730s and 1740s, and Franklin himself printed some of the earliest Quaker antislavery pamphlets (though without identifying himself on the title page). Franklin's familiarity with black protest and black voices may have echoed much later in his own antislavery and even abolitionist flirtations, though in his heyday as a printer he never published any document by an African writer.

Yet, as David Waldstreicher argues, one of Franklin's earliest pieces of satirical commentary assumed the persona of an enslaved African. Writing under the penname "Dingo," Franklin created a character whose mimicry of white political tracts signified American oppression writ large. As Dingo, Franklin was not merely an enslaved person seeking more humane treatment by his master but a colonial figure stripped of power by an arbitrary assembly. As Waldstreicher explains, by "don[ning] blackface in order to protest being treated as less than human," Franklin became one of the earliest minstrel performers in American culture. Significantly, Franklin's character ends his appeal by referring specifically to the power of print. "I publish this my Manifesto," Dingo states, "in hopes some tender hearted gentleman will undertake to be bound with me, and relieve from rigorous justice[.] Your aged Humble Servant." Dingo's signature—the mark of "X"—indicates that Franklin's ruse is transparent: someone else produced this manifesto. Yet read against the backdrop of real slave resistance reported in the *New England Courant*—suspected slave arsons and ominous black gatherings after sunset—Franklin's virtualization of rising black voices looks rather insightful.¹⁷

Franklin eventually joined an English group whose meditations on the meaning of African literacy illuminate some of the inner debates over virtualization. For that group, the Associates of Dr. Bray, formed in 1724 in London under the aegis of the Anglican Church, envisioned African peoples as potentially powerful readers of religious texts. Dedicated to proselyt-

17. David Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* (New York, 2005), 50–60.

izing enslaved people in English colonies, the Associates financed black schools (including one in Franklin's Philadelphia), established a network of philanthropists dedicated to racial outreach, and funded the distribution of Bibles and other printed literature to slaveholders and, it was hoped, to people of African descent. Their exertions set off debates over the ultimate meaning of black conversion—did this entail liberation? The Associates also became enmeshed in arguments over the viability of black literacy. Though some Associates believed strongly in the ability of African people to decipher texts and master colonial languages, others wondered if blacks were destined to be the human equivalent of parrots, as one British writer put it. Africans in the Americas spoke “a wild confused medley of Negro and corrupt English,” he observed. “Though ready to repeat everything as they are instructed,” another itinerant observed, they “have very little Notion or Idea of what they thus repeat.” Baptism may have been warranted, but not literacy.¹⁸

Other members of the group, however, insisted on the viability of black readers. Perhaps the best way to inculcate the virtues of Christianity, the Reverend John Waring of London reported in 1760, was to send boxes of books to sympathetic whites who would then use them in catechism classes for people of African descent. “The Associates presuming on your kind assistance have sent a box of books for the use of the school,” Waring wrote to an Anglican minister in Virginia, who seemed pleased at the prospect of spreading the gospel to slaves (as well as Native Americans). Waring sent twelve different types of books and pamphlets, including sermons, “friendly admonitions,” “the English instructor,” “the Indian instructed,” and “the easy method of instructing youth.” Black conversion was going textual, not merely spiritual. (Significantly, when the Associates met with Franklin in London, they would do so at various booksellers' shops).¹⁹ As John Van Horne notes, this potential body of black readers soon divided white subjects in the British Empire. Though religious enthusiasts in London favored what might be termed biblio-therapy for slaves, colonial masters bristled at the Associates' interest in cultivating black readers and souls. On the eve of the American Revolution, most of the Associates' schools went under.

Through time and space, white virtualizations of African voices simulta-

18. See John Van Horne, ed., *Religious Philanthropy and Colonial Slavery: The American Correspondence of the Associates of Dr Bray, 1717–1777* (Urbana, Ill., 1985), 32–33.

19. Rev. John Waring to Rev. Thomas Dawson, February 29, 1760, *ibid.*, 144–46.

neously highlighted the rising visibility of black people in Western locales while denigrating their ability to inhabit mainstream Anglo-American print culture as autonomous beings. As Emmanuel Eze has argued, this notion would undergird the very conception of enlightenment philosophy. “Scientific classification of humans in the eighteenth century,” he observes, derived to a significant degree from the “numerous published accounts of distant lands and peoples” arriving in Western educational and financial capitals. These “popular travel writings,” he continues, “contributed significantly to the perception of Europe as . . . ‘civilized,’ living in the Age of Light, while the peoples of other lands (Asia, Africa, America) were of strange habits and mores.” In letters, newspaper articles, pamphlets, books, maps, “savagery could then be physically located outside Europe.”²⁰

As Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra has illustrated, Enlightenment-era northern European scholars similarly marginalized Spanish Creole and Amerindian sources as untrustworthy. Printed texts by northern European writers, not indigenous voices, documents, or artifacts, were the norm for writing about the New World. Submerged voices had to find alternative means of being heard.²¹ Or they had to find their own ways into print.²²

THE RISE OF AFRICAN READERS, WRITERS, AND PUBLICISTS

The second half of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth proved to be transformative for the black Atlantic world of print. For the first time African people emerged in newspapers, pamphlets, and books as authors. In addition, they identified themselves publicly as both producers and consumers of printed products. Black reading networks developed in both England and America, and black authorial communities formed throughout the Atlantic basin. To be sure, the overall number of black writers (and even readers) in all corners of the black Atlantic was relatively small: perhaps a quarter of free black northerners—the best study group—attained literacy following the American Revolution. Yet for many black activists, creating autonomous voices in print was a key step to liberating people of African descent from the framing devices and stereotypes of imperial writers.

This remarkable change registers visually via the latest (and perhaps greatest) of early Anglo-American historical research tools, Evans Digital.

20. Emmanuel Eze, ed., *Race and the Enlightenment* (New York, 1997), 5.

21. See Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World* (Stanford, 2001), esp. 3–9.

22. *Ibid.*, preface.

Search for virtually any of the major word groupings defining African-descended people—"African," "slave," "Negro"—and you see the visual equivalent of liberation technology: African voices rising in print. The print genealogy of each of these words begins with early mimicry of African-descended people; there are no autonomous black texts before the 1760s. By the Revolutionary era, however, black authors abounded: Jupiter Hammon, James Gronniosaw, Olaudah Equiano, Richard Allen, Phillis Wheatley. As postcolonial scholars have rightly reminded us, black emancipation in both word and deed was an incomplete process. Virtualized black voices still proliferated in the printed sphere. But the presence of black-authored texts offered new and contrasting views of race, slavery, freedom, and black identity.

A terrific example of this textual movement among black communities comes from Daniel Horsmanden's New York City, where in 1790 a white writer, "Rusticus," launched a newspaper debate over slavery by claiming that African inferiority justified bondage. Coming at a time of vigorous debate over the fate of proposed New York emancipation laws, Rusticus's views represented the mainstream. Right up until the state assembly passed a gradual abolition law in 1799, most legislators opposed emancipation on grounds that blacks could not be integrated into mainstream society. Rusticus opposed black freedom because "the wool hairy negro" (a term he used to signify black inequality) had descended from apes. He must have been surprised when a black writer, "Africanus," replied with a witty retort. "I am wool hairy Negro," he declared, "the son of an African man and woman, who by a train of fortunate events . . . was let free when very young . . . received a common school education, and have been instructed in the Christian religion. . . . And please don't consider me as the link in the creation by which the monkey hangs on the gentleman." Africanus closed with a self-conscious allusion to the power of his printed words: "I hope the penning of my thoughts shall appear worthy of a place in [this] paper . . . as an opponent to the philosophic Rusticus."²³

Africanus's printed appeal was far from a lone voice in postrevolutionary America. According to Roy Finkenbine, coeditor of the Black Antislavery Writings Project,²⁴ who is preparing a forthcoming two-volume compen-

23. For the debates between Rusticus and Africanus, see the *Gazette of the United States*, March 5, 1790. See also Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Philip Lapsansky, eds., *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African-American Protest Literature, 1790–1860* (New York, 2001), 5.

24. The ongoing project is edited by Roy Finkenbine and John Saillant and will be published by the University of North Carolina Press.

dium of early black abolitionist literature, African Americans wrote roughly 1,500 documents between 1760 and 1829. African American portraiture of the early nineteenth century certainly indicated the rising significance of texts in the project of black emancipation. Early national black leaders often posed à la Franklin—with a text in hand (usually a Bible). In perhaps his most famous portrait, Richard Allen pointed viewers' attention to a Bible resting on his lap. Absalom Jones posed in the same manner, whereas Phillis Wheatley was pictured holding a quill. The black New Yorker William Hamilton translated texts into powerful visual iconography in a speech before an African American mutual aid society in 1809. "My friends," he declared, holding up a pamphlet celebrating the end of the slave trade (written by the black reformer Peter Williams), "if we continue to produce specimens like these, we shall soon put our enemies to the blush; abashed and confounded they shall quit the field, and no longer urge their superiority."²⁵

Most scholars working on black print culture similarly mark the age of democratic revolutions as transformative for African-descended writers and readers. Dickson Bruce has written that "the age of revolution, 1760–1800" witnessed the first flowering of African American literature. Along with Patrick Rael, Philip Lapsansky, and Joanna Brooks, I have argued that a distinct brand of Afro-Atlantic pamphlet literature appeared at the close of the eighteenth century, as the inaugural generations of free people of color used print to bolster the establishment of autonomous black churches, reform groups, and benevolent societies. Vincent Carretta has uncovered the beginnings of Anglo-African literary traditions from this same time, and Laurent Dubois has pointed out that Haitian Francophone literature took root against the backdrop of the famed slave revolt. The age of democratic revolutions witnessed a revolution in black print culture as well.²⁶

Why did so many black reformers embrace print precisely at this time? Did the black literary turn result from the same changes operating in Anglo-American, and even broader Western, print cultures? Scholars have traditionally pointed to political and social revolutions to explain the rise of

25. Hamilton cited work by the black New Yorker Peter Williams Jr. See William Hamilton, "An Address to the New York African Society for Mutual Relief" (1809), in Dorothy Porter, ed., *Early Negro Writing, 1760–1837* (Boston, 1971), 37.

26. See Newman et al., *Pamphlets of Protest*, introduction; Dickson D. Bruce Jr., *The Origins of African American Literature, 1680–1865* (Charlottesville, Va., 2001); and Joanna Brooks, "The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic," *William and Mary Quarterly* 62, 1 (January 2005): 67–92.

black freedom movements at the close of the eighteenth century. The onset of trans-Atlantic revivalism, combined with revolutionary uprisings in colonial America and Saint Domingue, made freedom a watchword of oppressed peoples everywhere. As black people became free, the push for racial uplift occurred—and black literacy and writing soon followed. The history of black reading, writing, and eventually printing shows, however, that African-descended people were already active participants in a world increasingly attuned to the power of print. In the south Atlantic, for example, Moravian and African itinerants spawned new interest in black biblical literacy as early as the 1730s and 1740s. According to the religious historian Jon Sensbach, Moravian missionaries in the Dutch West Indies “linked literacy with religious messages” to appeal to enslaved people. They did this by speaking Dutch Creole, addressing enslaved people as “brother” and “sister,” and, perhaps most significantly, holding religious classes in which black people were given “copies of the Dutch Bible and other texts”—texts, astonishingly, that some black people already knew about. As one black man told a Moravian missionary, referring not only to the Bible given him but to the process of learning literacy itself, “the book will make me wise.”²⁷

Sensbach calls this early proselytizing moment transformative, for it linked black uplift (and even the prospect of freedom) to Protestant Christianity and print culture. Graham Hodges has identified a similar link in Revolutionary America, when African Americans came into contact with radical evangelical Christianity through traveling preachers, camp meetings, and a “flood of democratic pamphlets.” After being exposed to white spiritual narratives, black Methodists began producing black evangelical literature of their own.²⁸ Far from limiting freedom, print was viewed by black people as a critical part of emancipation.

Here the mainstream history of Anglo-American print culture fits quite nicely with rising black freedom struggles. Continued reductions in the cost of printing and the better distribution of goods during the latter half of the eighteenth century made it easier to disseminate printed materials far and wide. In each of the centers of black print culture in America—Boston, New York, Philadelphia—the number of printers increased markedly.²⁹ As

27. Jon Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), 54–55.

28. Graham Hodges, ed., *Black Itinerants of the Gospel: The Narratives of John Jea and George White* (Madison, Wis., 1993), 6–11.

29. See Rosalind Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital: Philadelphia Book Publishers in the New Republic* (Philadelphia, 1996).

Ben Franklin once observed, the number of American newspapers during his lifetime rose by a factor of five. As Richard Brown has suggested, the very notion of an “informed citizenry” accelerated during the era of democratic revolutions. Where issues of a free press or civic knowledge had occasionally surfaced in colonial society, by the 1760 and 1770s “suddenly, it mattered greatly that colonists knew their political rights.”³⁰

It should not be surprising, therefore, that the diffusion of knowledge characterizing imperial debates touched, and was in turn shaped by, people of African descent. African Americans had more opportunities to read and write during the age of revolution than ever before. As scholars of orality and indigenous cultures have long observed, the ascension of print had a fateful effect on native voices throughout the Atlantic world, including people of African descent in the Americas. “Literacy is not innocent,” Jonathan Draper has recently reminded us; “it is a form of control, not only of information but people.”³¹ Printed forms—laws, official reports, even newspapers—abetted imperial designs. Yet the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also marked the beginning of what the anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff have labeled a “long conversation” between native and imperial cultures. Neither side could claim dominion over culture, ideology, or even politics. Hierarchies remained unstable. Oral traditions survived because oppressed people found creative ways to maintain and even transform them. In addition, literacy (initially conceived as a way to demarcate civilized from uncivilized people, or at the very least to inculcate the virtues of Christian piety among native peoples) was co-opted by oppressed communities to create new forms of protest.³² Indeed, orality could be combined with literacy to produce a potent new form of black protest. On the North

30. Richard D. Brown, *The Strength of a People: The Idea of an Informed Citizenry in America, 1650–1870* (Chapel Hill, 1996), esp. 49–51, 84–86.

31. For a recent reexamination of issues revolving around orality and print in imperial-native contexts, see especially Jonathan A. Draper, ed., *Orality, Literacy, and Colonialism in Southern Africa* (Atlanta, 2003) (quote at 1). See also James Scott’s now-classic work, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990). The classic treatment of orality is still Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York, 1982). On colonial America, Native Americans, enslaved Africans, and literacy, see especially E. Jennifer Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America* (Amherst, Mass., 2005), chaps. 5, 6.

32. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 1, *Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, 1991), esp. introduction.

American mainland, enslaved people displayed a remarkable “geopolitical literacy,” in the words of Phillip Troutman, about the boundaries of slavery and freedom. They did this by observing masters’ market relations, paying attention to imperial political discussions and newspaper debates, glancing surreptitiously at maps left in libraries or on ships, and, last but not least, collecting tidbits of printed information passed along by literate slaves and free people of color. The result was that enslaved blacks became intimately engaged in the “transfer of knowledge” about their world, particularly a growing abolitionist international.³³

Lord Dunmore’s proposed emancipation policy of November 1775—a printed declaration offering freedom to American slaves who joined British forces—offers a key example of North American slaves’ melding of oral communication networks and literacy. Only a small fraction of fugitive slaves may have experienced Dunmore’s declaration as a printed text; many others—perhaps a majority—heard of Britain’s emancipation act by word of mouth. Indeed, blacks’ contact with Dunmore’s proclamation flowed from communication networks that connected people of color along the mid-Atlantic coast. Literate black mariners and house slaves informed scattered communities of slaves, and runaways sought confirmation of Dunmore’s offer from literate members of the enslaved population. (David Walker would later exploit these same networks to distribute his famous *Appeal* [1829], telling literate blacks to read or perform the text for their unlearned brethren.) In some cases, whole communities of slaves (comprising both literate and nonliterate individuals) made the collective decision to flee to British forces.³⁴ There was no neat dividing line between Dunmore’s text, black literacy, and enslaved peoples’ information grapevine. Several thousand slaves ultimately made it to British lines in what Gary Nash has called “a revolution within a revolution.”³⁵ Geopolitical literacy would soon rise again in the emancipating north when runaway slaves from the Chesapeake region “read” Pennsylvania’s Gradual Abolition Act of 1780 (guaranteeing slaves born in the state freedom at the age of twenty-eight) as a broad proclamation of freedom. By the 1790s so many blacks had attempted to

33. Phillip Troutman, “Grapevine in the Slave Market: African-American Geopolitical Literacy and the 1841 *Creole* Revolt,” in Walter Johnson, ed., *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas* (New Haven, 2004), 206–7.

34. On this key point, see James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion and Identity in Gabriel’s Virginia, 1730–1810* (New York, 1997), 26–27.

35. See Gary B. Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth: African-Americans in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), 67.

claim liberty in Pennsylvania that white abolitionists had to shift tactics from consciousness-raising activities and political maneuvering to providing legal aid for fugitive slaves and kidnapped free blacks. It all began with a textual dividing line: the publication of Pennsylvania's abolition act, which circulated literally and figuratively among communities of color, both free and in the slave South (where no such law was ever adopted).³⁶

By the 1770s and 1780s black voices in print were not hard to find in either Britain or the United States. We can return to Massachusetts, where writers like Cotton Mather and a precocious Franklin had once spoken of and for African Americans. Now, in the midst of revolutionary debates over slavery and freedom in the British Empire, African Americans used print to remind real slaveholders to emancipate real slaves. One of the best if least-known examples comes from a former bondman named Caesar Sarter, who published an extensive appeal for black liberation in a small Massachusetts newspaper (itself evidence of print culture's reach by the Revolutionary era). Sarter politely asked the paper's editor "to give the following address . . . a place in your next" as a means of confronting "those who are advocates for holding the Africans in slavery." Illustrating a keen knowledge of newspaper debates and pamphlet wars, Sarter shrewdly noted inconsistencies in the Patriot argument: "I need not point out the absurdity of your exertions for liberty, while you have slaves in your houses."³⁷

Sarter was joined by a cadre of black petitioners in Revolutionary Massachusetts. "No one was quicker to perceive the tensions between the Revolution's rhetoric of freedom and the reality of slavery than the slaves, ex-slaves, and kin of slaves themselves," David Waldstreicher writes of the men and women who first petitioned colonial and then independent state governments for freedom and then saw these petitions reprinted in official state papers.³⁸ Black petitioners, he states, contested racist conceptions of democracy during the earliest stages of the American Revolution, claiming a newly independent America as their homeland too.

For every black writer who petitioned for his or her liberty, or produced a newspaper essay on the broader cause of black freedom, or wrote a pamphlet

36. On Pennsylvania runaways, see Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism*, chaps. 3, 4.

37. Sarter published his essay in the *Essex Journal and Merrimack Packet*, August 17, 1774. See Gary Nash, *Race and Revolution* (Madison, 1990), 167–69.

38. Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 309. See also Thomas David, "Emancipation Rhetoric, Natural Rights, and Revolutionary New England: A Note on Four Black Petitions in Massachusetts, 1773–1777," *New England Quarterly* 62 (1989), 248–63.

decrying slavery's continued legality in the age of democratic revolutions, there may have been a localized culture of black letters in the background. As the literary historian Elizabeth McHenry argues, the first black mutual aid societies used print as an essential plank in their uplift platforms: they produced written constitutions modeled on those of the majority culture. This form of mimicry illustrated blacks' understanding of constitutional governance. But reverse mimicry also suggested ways that literate black leaders instructed those around them in the value and power of printed discourse.³⁹ Boston's Prince Hall, New York's William Hamilton, and Philadelphia's Richard Allen each produced pamphlets underwritten by black community institutions. These leaders also began to circulate printed productions regionally and nationally; Afro-Philadelphians shared pamphlets with their brethren in New England and vice versa. By the 1790s black churches and Masonic lodges sponsored debates and speakers, underwrote and distributed black-authored pamphlets, and housed early schools.

African American writers and readers also forged alliances with white abolitionists. It is no accident, for instance, that much of the extant black protest literature from the eighteenth century flowed from Anglo-American abolitionist capitals: London, New York, and Philadelphia. Wherever African peoples came into contact with abolitionist groups, black-authored anti-slavery literature appeared. Warner Mifflin, a former slaveholder from Delaware who emancipated his slaves and became an itinerant abolitionist, roamed the mid-Atlantic countryside with copies of black-authored pamphlets by such figures as Richard Allen. (Allen returned the favor by eulogizing Mifflin in a 1799 pamphlet.) The home of the Quaker abolitionist Anthony Benezet became a nexus of trans-Atlantic abolitionist literature, which he distributed to both blacks and whites. Benezet gave way to the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, whose schooling endeavors focused on both penmanship and book literacy in the black community. A sign of rising black literacy in Philadelphia came in the form of abolitionist broadsides and pamphlets posted near blacks' homes during the late 1780s and 1790s. Even if the majority of African-descended people in turn-of-the-century Philadelphia were not literate—fewer than half the signatures on early black political petitions came from literate African Americans—they probably had an understanding of the power of print from the profusion of documents around them.

The formation of black print cultures occurred in other parts of the At-

39. See McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, 42–44.

lantic world. Vincent Carretta offers a wonderful example of African peoples' proactive use of print culture in late eighteenth-century England. Far from passive, Afro-Britons proved quite knowledgeable about the power of texts in the cause of global black redemption. In mid-March 1783, for example, years before he published his famous slave narrative, Olaudah Equiano visited the British abolitionist Granville Sharp to discuss a horrific newspaper story relating to the slave trade. As the famed white reformer noted in his journal, Equiano (whom he had not previously known) referred him to a printed report about "130 Negroes being thrown alive into the sea" by the malicious captain of the slave ship *Zong*. "Equiano probably brought Sharp the report in the *Morning Chronicle, and London Advertiser* (18 March 1783) of the recent court hearing on one of the most notorious atrocities of the slave trade," Carretta writes of what became known as the *Zong* atrocity.⁴⁰ A galvanizing event among British abolitionists, the *Zong* affair pitted a slave trading captain accused of liquidating black cargo for an insurance payout against his British underwriters. For Afro-Britons like Equiano, the incident became a sign of blacks' cultural literacy: they mined British and American papers for information about slavery, the slave trade, and abolitionism, participating in public debates as never before.

Indeed, Equiano was introduced to the formal cause of abolition through newspaper stories, public debates, pamphlets, and broadsides, and not simply through the personal appeals of white philanthropists like Sharp. After Lord Mansfield's famous *Somerset* decision in 1772, declaring slavery inoperable on British soil (which, Carretta asserts, many black activists read as an emancipation proclamation), black writers pushed white statesmen and abolitionists to further aid their cause. No sooner had the decision been rendered than Sharp received a petition "of 10 blacks who believed they were set free." A decade later Equiano wrote a series of book reviews challenging pro slavery English writers. Part of what Carretta characterizes as a "press war over abolition," Equiano's reviews artfully rebuked those who defended the harsh treatment of West Indian slaves. "Sir," he observed in one review, "why do you rob him [an enslaved person] of the common privilege given to all by the Universal and Almighty Legislator? Why exclude him from the enjoyment of benefits which he has equal right to with yourself?"⁴¹

In examining Equiano's use of print to trumpet abolitionism, Carretta neatly points out that the former slave probably read dozens of newspaper

40. Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African* (Athens, Ga., 2005), 237–38.

41. *Ibid.*, 257, 258.

articles, speeches, books, book reviews, and pamphlets. He participated, in other words, not just in a debate about slavery and abolition but in a debate about the relationship of various texts to one another. Before he ever published his canonical slave narrative, Equiano identified printed documents as critical to his success as a black abolitionist. Like other black writers, he envisioned printed documents as a bridge of understanding between white and black readers. In the winter of 1788, for example, Equiano published an appeal to “the Senate of Great Britain,” challenging politicians to repudiate “base-minded men” (planters and their apologists) by ending the slave trade. By then, Carretta argues, Equiano was “a well-enough-known commentator” in British abolitionist circles to have some authority.⁴²

Like virtualization during the first part of the eighteenth century, black authorship and textual mastery stood for a broad cultural movement. Black writers knew that printed materials could defeat problems of time and space—the temporal and geographic reach of their words and ideas. As Jim Green has written in a valuable article on the trans-Atlantic publishing history of Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*, “This book was one of the first contact points between African narrative and Western print culture.” Most people around the world got to know the famed former slave not through interactions with the man but through the medium of print.⁴³ First published by Equiano in 1789 in Britain, the book enjoyed a remarkable life in print; nine editions had been printed by the early 1790s, and translations appeared in Dutch, German, and Russian. A savvy publicist, Equiano sold copies of his narrative from his home as well as through various booksellers in England and America. When he died in the early nineteenth century, the distribution network that he helped establish fell apart. But his text lived on, becoming one of the first slave narratives republished by Garrisonian abolitionists in America during the 1830s.

In British Canada, a vibrant community of former American slaves served as one of the wellsprings of black print culture during the 1780s and 1790s. Comprising three thousand black loyalists who fled to British lines during the Revolution and then settled briefly in Nova Scotia, this community produced several distinguished trans-Atlantic black authors: John Marrant, Boston King, and David George. According to Joanna Brooks and John Saillant, who have written brilliantly on the collective work of these men in early black literary and reform circles, “[Their] late-eighteenth-century

42. Ibid., 263–64, 267.

43. James Green, “The Publishing History of Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*” *Slavery and Abolition* 16, 3 (December 1995): 362–75.

writings represent a foundational moment in black Atlantic intellectual history.”⁴⁴ For all these writers believed that black autonomy and physical freedom required a strong black voice in print. Each man made sure to publish a version of his experiences as a person of African descent in the Atlantic world. Following the conventions of spiritual narratives, they portrayed the suffering of black communities as redemptive. In doing so, the authors pictured African people as a holy community destined for God’s grace, not bastard children destined for tobacco gangs, sugarcane fields, and domestic service.

Far from lone and exceptional individuals who mastered print, Marrant, King, George, and Equiano represented a new generation of race leaders in Atlantic culture. Visible both in community leadership and in the printed realm, they attempted to speak for and about black people’s interests—as representatives of the black community. Around them were communities of black readers and writers who placed increasing value on literacy, persuasive discourse, and printed protest as a necessary part of global black redemption. As John Ernst has written, it is no accident that the 1790s witnessed the first black-authored historical treatments of the African American community. Late eighteenth-century black authors matured in a world where nation building was identified with literacy and print culture. Like the nation rising around them, black people would use print to define themselves historically as well as in the present tense.

SOME CLOSING THOUGHTS: POOR RICHARD . . . ALLEN

Where do the struggles of black writers fit in the trans-Atlantic history of print culture? It may be useful in closing to focus on the rather remarkable story of the African American reformer Richard Allen for some clues. A former slave and Methodist preacher, Allen (1760–1831) remains most famous as the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. Though literate, he is not remembered primarily as a black man of letters, except insofar as he was involved in the production of a key black pamphlet, *Narrative of the Black People During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia* (1794). Coauthored with his longtime friend Absalom Jones, the document challenged racist characterizations made by the printer Matthew Carey, who in the wake of Philadelphia’s yellow fever epidemic of 1793 claimed that many black aid workers had pilfered and plundered white homes. The document also featured Allen’s first abolitionist appeal, “An

44. Joanna Brooks and John Saillant, eds., *“Face Zion Forward”: First Writers of the Black Atlantic, 1785–1798* (Boston, 2002), 18.

Address to Those Who Keep Slaves and Approve the Practice.” Like Equiano (whose slave narrative obscures his other literary endeavors), Allen’s yellow fever narrative often overshadows the surprising range of literary work he engaged in throughout his long life. This began with Bible study in the late 1770s, when Allen was seventeen and enslaved, and continued through the posthumous production of his autobiography in 1833. In between, Allen used a variety of Philadelphia printers to produce everything from standardized preaching certificates for the ever-expanding AME church to hymnals to pamphlets lecturing the black community about piety, industry, and collective uplift. Like other black authors, his motto flowed from the Bible (Job 32: 17–18) to define a life in print: ‘I said, I will answer also my part, I also will shew mine opinion.’ Allen’s contemporary John Marrant had placed the same lines from Job on the front of one of his pamphlets.

Print culture was particularly important to Allen’s rise as a black leader during the 1790s.⁴⁵ In this single decade he published three different abolitionist essays, as well as the official state incorporation for his independent black church. In Philadelphia, the nation’s temporary capital and a center of literary production, Allen became a recognizable reader and writer. Like Ben Franklin, Allen used print culture to escape anonymity and signify his rising status. The black preacher’s stirring eulogy of George Washington, published in the *Philadelphia Gazette* on December 31, 1799, was the first document by an African American commenting on national politics in the early republic. It was also the last abolitionist statement of the eighteenth century—a brief but complex text that simultaneously commended Washington’s emancipationist will (liberating his slaves after his death) and condemned American citizens who sanctioned bondage. Allen’s eulogy actually began as a speech in Bethel Church. Allen then took his oration to the editor of the *Philadelphia Gazette* (who knew him from his yellow fever text), who printed it just a few days later. By January 1800 his eulogy had appeared in newspapers in New York and Baltimore.⁴⁶

Allen’s entry into the world of print was further solidified by his subscrip-

45. On Allen, literacy, and print, see Richard S. Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York, 2008), chaps. 4–5.

46. Allen’s eulogy was printed first in the *Philadelphia Gazette* on December 31, 1799, then in the *New York Spectator* on January 2, 1800, and finally the *Baltimore Federal Gazette* on January 3, 1800. I treat this topic more extensively in “‘We Participate in Common’: Richard Allen’s Eulogy of Washington and the Challenge of Interracial Appeals,” *William and Mary Quarterly* (January 2007): 117–28.

tion to a famous book: *The Whole, Genuine and Complete Works of Flavius Josephus*, the noted first-century Jewish scholar.⁴⁷ Allen subscribed to a copy of the text in 1795 when a Philadelphia printer issued a handsome new edition (the first in two decades in the City of Brotherly Love). The gilt-edged publication attracted Philadelphia's leading public men: Benjamin Rush, William Rawle, David Rittenhouse. Allen was one of only two black subscribers on a list of roughly five hundred patrons. So prized were these volumes in Allen's library that he willed them to another black preacher upon his death.⁴⁸

The Josephus text tells us something about Allen's work as a publicist. He probably used Josephus's writings as a model for his own protest literature. Like Allen, Josephus was a minority figure—a Jewish man—in a hostile majority culture (ancient Rome). After participating in an ill-fated rebellion against Roman authorities, Josephus surrendered and became one of the leading historical writers of the early Christian era. He excelled at folding edgy political commentary into seemingly polite discourse. Indeed, by the end of his life, as a modern commentator has put it, Josephus's literary work aimed at nothing less than the “exalt[ation of] the Jewish people in the eyes of the Greco-Roman world.”⁴⁹ For Allen, Josephus was one key textual model for producing a pamphlet that both decried racism in a hostile white republic and celebrated African Americans as God's chosen people in the New World. Indeed, one cannot help noticing some striking parallels between Allen and Jones's yellow fever pamphlet and Josephus's historical writings, particularly the latter's “Antiquities of the Jews.” “Those who undertake to write histories,” Josephus declared, “do not . . . take that trouble on one and the same account but for many reasons.” Some write history to “gratify” those concerned in a particular story—to flatter, perhaps, great men. Others, Josephus continued, write “of necessity and by force, [and] are driven to write history because they are concerned in the *facts*.” Now consider Allen and Jones's opening lines in the yellow fever pamphlet. They wrote not to flatter themselves or draw attention to black heroism, they claimed, but simply to “declare *facts* as they really were” during the yellow

47. Imported copies of Josephus had been available in the American colonies going back to the 1740s.

48. See the Woodruff and Turner edition of *The Whole Genuine and Complete Works of Flavius Josephus, the Learned and Authentic Jewish Historian*, ed. George Henry Maynard (Philadelphia, 1795). Allen's name appears on the List of Subscribers' Names.

49. See *The Complete Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Philadelphia, 1960), ix.

fever crisis. Despite Carey's claims to the contrary, they wrote, blacks were heroes who helped save Philadelphia from disaster. "Mr. Carey's first, second and third editions are gone forth into the world, and in all probability, have been read by thousands," they observed. "Therefore we apprehend it necessary to publish our thoughts" and correct the historical record.⁵⁰ Allen envisioned himself as a modern-day Josephus whose task was to exalt blacks in the eyes of a racist world.

As his purchase of Josephus indicates, Allen was a keen reader. His eulogy of Washington cited the president's Farewell Address, and his 1794 antislavery address alluded to Ben Franklin's scientific writings. Hoping to encourage abolitionism nationally, Allen issued a remarkable challenge to American slaveholders in Franklinesque terms. "We believe," he observed matter-of-factly, that "if you would try *the experiment* of taking a few black children, and cultivate their minds with the same care . . . as you would wish for your own children, you would find them upon the trial . . . not inferior in mental endowments."⁵¹ Here Allen was speaking not only like Franklin but to him: Allen probably referred to a broadside from the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (bearing Franklin's name) assuring white citizens that free blacks would be guarded by white reformers. "Slavery," the normally irrepressible Franklin observed in uncharacteristically pessimistic tones, "is such an atrocious debasement of human nature, that its very extirpation, if not performed with solicitous care, may sometimes open a source of serious evils." Long treated as "a brute animal," blacks became "machines." Unused to reasonable reflection, they posed a great risk to the American republic. Indeed, Franklin warned, "under such circumstances, freedom may often prove a misfortune to himself, and prejudicial to society."⁵² Disparaging Franklin's "machines" metaphor, Allen argued for an all-encompassing black humanity. Allen's appeal was one of the first instances of the nurture over nature argument. Indeed, we might say that Allen's writings helped launch a tradition of multiracial democracy over and

50. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, "Narrative . . . of the Black People During the Late Awful Calamity," reprinted most recently in Newman et al., *Pamphlets of Protest*, 33–42, esp. 38.

51. Allen, "An Address to those Who Keep Slaves and Uphold the Practice," *ibid.*, 41–42.

52. See the following broadsides from Franklin and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society: "Address to the Public" (Philadelphia, November 1789) and "A Plan for Improving the Condition of the Free Blacks" (Philadelphia, October 1789). Both texts are available via the Evans Early American Imprint Series, or Evans Digital Edition.

against Franklin's (and Jefferson's) fears that black and white people could never live together peaceably. Little wonder that Frederick Douglass himself venerated Richard Allen as the visionary of a new Declaration of Independence.

If we place Allen in the category not of a black reformer but of an Atlantic man of letters whose very productions illuminate the expansive meaning and reach of print culture during the Age of Franklin, perhaps we can begin to respond to Laurent Dubois's recent challenge to rewrite all dominant narratives of trans-Atlantic society. What if, Dubois asks, contemporary scholars defined the Enlightenment in terms of the Haitian rebellion?⁵³ Because Francophone black revolutionaries claimed the mantle of the French Revolution as their own and incorporated books, pamphlets, and revolutionary ideals from the metropolis in their cause, they deserve to be studied in the context of Western intellectual history (and not merely slave rebellions). We may say something very similar about Allen, Equiano, Marrant, and other black writers who transformed the image of African people in print: they deserve a prominent place in new trans-Atlantic narratives of print culture. For they explain as well as anyone or anything else the rise and influence of print culture during the Age of Franklin.

53. See Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens* (Chapel Hill, 2004), introduction.