The Black Aesthetic Unbound
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This chapter revisits the dilemma of the unanswerability of the question of what is African in African American literature by looking at the ways in which the writers briefly explored in this chapter are both atypically typical, representative, and yet not representative of writers’ development of an eighteenth-century black aesthetic. Hence, in this chapter I shall consider the implications of the use of various elements of Afro-British American ways of knowing I have outlined in the preceding chapters, through brief readings of the works of Lucy Terry, James Albert Gronniosaw, John Marrant, and Venture Smith. It is my hope that this epilogue of sorts will offer some conclusions about the promise and dilemma of a culturally specific reinterpretation of Africa that recovers a nonstatic and dynamic African cultural and critical presence, even as it opens more questions to be explored through theorizing the ghostly dilemmas of eighteenth-century black aesthetics.

Admittedly, the question “What is ‘African’ in African American Lit-
erature?” deserves a legitimate attempt at a response. However, the quotations above suggest that it can also be a rhetorical question that invites us to consider national, racial, and cultural premises upon which African American—and indeed American—literature is identified. From Countee Cullen’s 1925 “Heritage” poem which asks, ironically, “What is African to me?” to Langston Hughes’s 1949 “Theme for English B,” which ponders race in texuality, issues of African culture and identity loom large in the history of African American literature. As early as 1897, W. E. B. DuBois contemplates, and complicates, the relationship between African Americans and their competing American and African selves. In “The Conservation of Races” DuBois asks, “What, after all, am I? . . . American . . . Negro . . . both?” He answers: “We are Americans, by birth . . . citizenship . . . political ideals . . . language . . . [and] religion. Beyond that, we are members of a vast historic race [asleep] from the very dawn of creation [and] but half awakening in . . . its African fatherland,” contributing to “America, its only American music, fairytales, pathos, humor”—its American identity! (182–83).

With regard to this simultaneously American and African identity, Stepto isolates the practical dilemma of African-centered recovery of indigenously derived African ways of knowing implied in the question: “What is ‘African’ in African American literature?” Extricating eighteenth-century black literature from the ghosts that would bind it solely to sociohistorically British and/or American origins depends upon a self-reflexive interrogation of the pervasiveness of the dislocation and relocation of African cultural and historical memory. Yet, the importance of “employ[ing] in ‘African’ a term that could stand in parity to ‘American’” and that could stand equally as a marker “for a generation of people [who have] insist[ed] that the sign of their racialness, their blackness, should be a whole word, a ‘real’ word—‘African’” (From Behind the Veil, xii) has meaning far beyond a sociolinguistic framework. Indeed, naming is claiming. The power of naming can be clearly seen in the underlying philosophy governing Vincent Carretta’s restatement and relocation of the Western origins of African writers. Significantly, the movement from naming to claiming—they “were called Creoles . . . thus [they are] all African or Creole Black[s]”—is represented within the span of one sentence. Further, while this naming and claiming of an identity for authors who admittedly “do not easily fit into a coherent group united by any organizing principle other than their African heritage” (1) assumes a critical awareness of the powerful process by which “Africa is carved up by imperialist European powers” (1), it does not
account for the totalizing processes by which a continent of indigenous and diversely self-identified ethnic groups was first named, then claimed in the aggregate as Africans.

Historian Sylvia Wynter notes that “there were, of course, no ‘Africans’ then. Indeed it is only within the ‘mode of subjective understanding’ of liberal humanism that ‘Africans’ could have existed” (“1492: A New World View,” 33). Sources of the origin of the word Africa vary, from a country on the southern coast of the Mediterranean, roughly the equivalent to the modern Tunisia, to “south wind” or “land of Carthage” (from Afer or Africus), to the Arabic word afar meaning “dust,” to the Hebrew word ephra meaning “fruitfulness,” which is thought to refer to the hinterland beyond Carthage.

Frameworks which resist reliance on origins or essences also discursively remove Africa from the center, and they do so precisely at historical moments when it is most advantageous for people of the African Diaspora to resituate and recenter themselves within literal and figurative African sites. Consequently, the location of early African authors within an imagined, but nonetheless real, African community is represented as an essentialist distortion or exception to an otherwise logical and more acceptable and liberal Eurocentric framework. Within this type of framework it is the European Diaspora, not the African Diaspora, that is expanded. Moreover, the Western world is resituated in relationship to an a priori and paternalistic relationship with the cultures and peoples of the African Diaspora. As a result, an unproblematized reading, such as Carretta’s, of black writers’ acceptance of the institution of slavery fails to read nondominant modes of resistance. Such unproblematized readings also myopically (and somewhat ahistorically) assume that demonstrated nonacceptance (even for free blacks) is always a viable and practical alternative for eighteenth-century writers. The conflation of blacks’ tolerance and survival of an impossible (and often inescapable) social condition with that of blacks’ acceptance of Western cultural practice of black oppression is akin to Black Atlantic readings of eighteenth-century culture such as those advanced by Paul Gilroy, which problematically support literal applications of DuBoisean double consciousness to a reading of eighteenth-century black literature. In the same way that writers of African descent resisted the institution of slavery even while they engaged in palava with its practitioners, Africans throughout the Diaspora resisted negatively connotative and denotative blackness and positively connotative and denotative whiteness even as they embraced its possibilities and limitations. As Echeruo argues, “What is
at stake is not the possibility of living as an African (or a black) in the modern European (or white) world, but in supposing that both identities are equivalent in ontological terms. For it would not occur to any European advocate of modernity to phrase the European conditions in similarly quixotic terms” (“An African Diaspora: The Ontological Project,” 6).

Thus far, I have read the work of Equiano and Wheatley within theoretical frameworks that accept rather than except their African heritage. Here, I want to further consider and explore what such strategic replacements of Africa within African American literature suggest for less prominently known writers Lucy Terry, James Gronniosaw, Venture Smith, John Marrant, and Briton Hammon by considering some of the ways in which their work and their lives evince a more conflicted relationship with both African and Western origins. Consequently, I revise and restate the question, “What is ‘African’ in African American Literature?” by reading these seemingly ambivalent Afro-Western texts through hybridized African and Western contexts. I contend that while issues such as the division of literary labor and reliance on Western aesthetics and sociopolitical aims, as well as lack of verifiable written historical documentation, make it difficult to locate cultural consciousness or encoded worldviews from both sides of the Atlantic, integrative African-centered approaches should not be abandoned. Admittedly, there are significant challenges with regard to reading early black writers’ attempts at inscribing their personal, racial, and gendered selves into the master narratives of the New World. However, our response to such challenges requires critical and systematic analysis of the aesthetic and philosophical diversity present in early African American cultures, as well as a more extensive integration of indigenously derived African structures into existing frameworks. For example, a more complex understanding of African-centered dynamics of conversion and naming might enable a resituation of Christian conversion, invocation of noble lineage, and other barely audible voicings of subjectivity within an African context.

Before turning to the writing of the first-named African American poet, Lucy Terry, I will briefly examine the complex counternarrative that is her life. Like Wheatley and Equiano, Terry was born in Africa and brought to America as a child. Her talent as a great orator and storyteller is legendary among whites and blacks from Massachusetts to Vermont, especially in the Deerfield community. Moreover, some of the facts of her life suggest that she was something of an activist who insisted
Reading “Others” in 18th-Century Afro-British American Literature

upon equal treatment with regard to education, property, and civil and human rights. She is said to have waged, though lost, a battle with college trustees to gain admittance to Williams College for her son. Often outnumbered, but never outsmarted, Terry is said to have argued convincingly and strategically against powerful opponents from the local Norwich town government to the Supreme Court. Unfortunately, there are currently no existing official written records that substantiate such claims of courageous activism. Much of what is known about her life has been passed down orally, and later recorded by historians George Sheldon, Rodney Field, and David Proper. Of the three, Proper’s work is the most recent and appears to be the most accurate. The verifiable facts of her personal life are the dates of her death, August 21, 1821; marriage, May 17, 1756; baptism, June 15, 1725; her church membership, August 19, 1744; and the birth dates and baptisms of her six children. The absence of a ship’s manifest or a bill of sale—to Ebenezer Wells, any other master prior to Terry’s arrival in Deerfield, or to her husband, Abijah Prince—render any definitive statement about her age, national origin, or slave status conjectural. Although verifiable proof of her successful “petition . . . for redress of grievances” against the Noyes families exists, the most well-known political incidents in Terry’s life, such as her brilliant argument before the trustees of Williams College to gain admittance for her son, cannot be substantiated. Neither is there written evidence of Terry’s eloquent Supreme Court argument against her prominent white neighbor, Colonel Eli Bronson’s encroachment on her family’s land. Proper offers, “as with the tradition connecting Lucy Terry to Williams College, there is probably some truth behind this anecdote, although it defies documentation despite its plausibility” (34).

Ironically, though Terry’s claims to the African American poetic, West African griotte, and Deerfield historical traditions are validated by means of oral transmission, similar evidence which should support her naming within a tradition of politics and activism is regrettably nonexistent due to the lack of written documentation. Given Terry’s relationship to the communities she and her husband, Abijah Prince, lived in, and the supposed lack of historical evidence of central events in her life, in what sense then can she be definitively claimed and named as “African griot and Deerfield historian and storyteller”? I suggest that the validation of Terry’s cultural life and the exclusion of her dynamic political life are connected.

Deirdre Mullane notes that Terry’s “poem recalls the popular captivity
narrative genre of the colonial period, in which the writer recounts his or her experience among the Indians” (Mullane, 24). I agree, and would further argue for a reading of “The Bars Fight” as poetic variation on the traditional late eighteenth-century captivity narrative which subverts dominant anti-Indian sentiments and ideologies in New England communities like Deerfield. In so doing, it provides a complement to the gaps in Terry’s unsubstantiated history of political activism. The Something Else standing beside the comforting domesticated narrative of colorful local character expressed in the entertaining black woman telling homespun stories for the pleasure of the local folk is a more discomforting counternarrative of a politically savvy, intelligent, African woman who would not be denied equal protection and rights to citizenship. To be sure, the sociopolitical counternarrative of eighteenth-century black resistance recuperates remnants of African women’s centrality to the home and hearth as well as the literal and figurative battlefield. Moreover, such a counternarrative of empowerment resituates African orality within the history of early African American literacy, and claims Terry alongside Equiano as yet another Talking Book.

A brief reading of “The Bars Fight” in light of aspects of it that signify upon the heroic history of Deerfield citizens subverts the anti-Native American sentiments it was thought to uphold. In other words, an otherwise seemingly ambivalent poem, “The Bars Fight” actually subverts dominant paradigms even as it appears to celebrate them. Lucy Terry Prince’s “The Bars Fight” was composed about an encounter between Deerfield citizens and Indians in 1746. It has been cited as evidence both of the “last Indian attack on Deerfield” (Proper, 16) and of “the first poetry by any black American” (4). As with the captivity narratives of Hammon and Marrant, her thirty-three-line doggerel radically and simultaneously documents African, Native, and European American history. There is as much to learn from Terry’s repetition of key words and phrases as there is from her indexing of the names of people of Deerfield. In the poem’s historical registering of events, we learn that in the summer of 1746 Native Americans lay in wait to ambush, take away, and kill as many of their neighboring white Deerfield citizens as they could catch. The poet’s cataloging of “some very valiant men . . . whose names she [does] not leave out” (ll.4–7) partly explains why this black poet’s verse was preserved and transmitted orally for more than a century before it was printed in 1855. It must have given the men, women, and children of Deerfield—including Terry, who was said to have been quite fond of singing this verse—a great deal of pride to
celebrate through song the memories of their neighbors, friends, and relatives.\textsuperscript{10}

Also, preserved within the artist’s memory were cultural markers that trigger her association of the horrors of the Middle Passage with the horrors of the capture and murder of Deerfield settlers by its native population. One must wonder from what physical and metaphysical vantage points the poet speaks her representation of the latter (Deerfield) slaughter through remembering of the former (Middle Passage and slavery). After all, Terry was presumably kidnapped from Africa as an infant and whatever minimal cultural memories of Africa she may have brought with her to New England (excepting those transmitted by older Africans she may have met) would have been so deeply embedded within her subconscious that it would require an act of metaphysical excavation, or extreme trauma, to recover such artifactual fragments of her consciousness. However, her memory of the circumstances of the Middle Passage and the reprehensible conditions and violent depredations committed against that community of forced immigrants with whom the infant Terry and her mother or caregiver lived is very likely to have been brought to the surface at a later scene of similar terror. Hence, as the artist paints with broad strokes words that reinforce the Deerfield settlers’ lamentable (and sadly preventable) adversity, the African praise singer composes a sorrow song (a bittersweet refrain) that simultaneously masks and unmasks her understanding of a collective black anguish and mourning of tremendous loss of African lives during the Middle Passage and enslavement in the New World. Unlike traditional captivity narratives of the late eighteenth century which often portray white settlers as helpless victims at the mercy of savage beasts and a providential God, “The Bars Fight” depicts both sides valiantly. While a myopic reading of “The Bars Fight” might suggest that the Indians are presented as quite brutal, Terry’s poem clearly depicts both Native Americans and white settlers as actively engaged in a justifiable act of warfare, spurred by internal conflicts and differences over the encroachment of white settlers onto the rights and property of the indigenous native population of Deerfield. The poem’s title gives the reader a clue as to the equal footing on which the poet places whites and Indians. The poet’s use of “fight” rather than “attack” or “massacre” resituates Native and Anglo-American conflict outside dominant ideological conceptions, which assume that a defense of property and human rights by indigenous America is less honorable than those of immigrant settlers who seek to colonize and dislocate them. The title of the poem sets the
tone for our reading of the last Deerfield Native/Anglo conflict as one final battle in a war as honorable to the indigenous American as it is to its European and African immigrants.\footnote{11}

Finally, both the poem and the counternarrative of Lucy Terry Prince’s life reveal the relationship to orality that both the poet and her community share. This relationship can be most clearly seen by the oral preservation of her poem for more than a century, and the strength given to oral evidence by early Deerfield historian Robert Sheldon with regard to the equal measure of validation he accords the anecdotal and the written documentation in his recording of history. Indeed, “The Bars Fight” might have remained more unsubstantiated anecdotal evidence of a historical event had it not been for the significance of this singular event and the form—song—in which it was composed and transmitted. One can only imagine the pride with which Deerfield sang of “Samuel Allen [who] like a hero foute” (l.1) or the morbid humor with which they may have imagined Eunice Allen’s hysterical flight with “petticoats [that] stopt her” (l.18). One can also imagine the tears with which the death of young Sim(e)on Amsden, age nine, and the presence of the kidnapped young Samuel, age eight, are mourned. The repetition of the words which denote overlapping and differently registered keys of a central motif of death—slay, kill, grief, and slaughter—are used to highlight the interconnectedness between men, women, and children. Indeed, the poem’s narrative progresses from the slaying of valiant men to the outright killing of old and young men alike, to the grief for a slain boy, and the escape of one man from the “dreadful slaughter” (l.15) that claimed five men, one child, and “left . . . for dead” one woman. The slave narrator of Terry’s poem watches and records from a safe distance her master’s and the master narrative. Ultimately, it is through the unsubstantiated, the gaps—for example, the escape of nine-year-old Caleb—that so much more of what is left of the “bitters and the sweets” of both narratives is revealed. In this way, we self-reflexively resist reproducing a type of invisibility by reducing the significance of a single life, text, culture, or cultural experience to myopic and unilineally constructed standards of authentication.

However, as promising as Terry’s work seems in terms of theorizing competing dilemmas of race, class, and gender in the context of an eighteenth-century black woman’s historical spoken (and transcribed) words, I am reminded that genre expectations for poetry are decidedly different from those of narrative. While each genre intersects and parallels with regard to issues of form and content, importantly each
genre also functions and operates within unique frameworks that enable a particular way of relating to its unique subject matter. Nonetheless, reliance on the limitations of form imposed by genre expectations, like the dichotomization and polarization of the sacred and secular, the personal and political, the raced and gendered, is exactly what the unorthodoxy of the early African in New World literature vividly exposes. I do not mean to suggest that unmediated contextual hybridity is either possible or desirable at this—or any other—historical moment. Rather, I offer such genre blending as a type of palava which enables the representation of the un(der)representable within multiple and simultaneous contexts and constructions of Africa. Going beyond the critique of the representation of a single, solitary self, to a community where, in Equiano’s terms, “one will stand for many,” we should be wary of critical stances which assume that unmediated progress is attainable through syntheses or hybridizations of identities; such assumptions often equate to melting pot theories of differently constructed sameness. It is incumbent upon scholars, then, to be self-reflexively aware of the extent to which constructs and conceptualizations of simultaneity, such as those I have presented in this study’s attempt to engage with the dilemma of a ghost, remain grounded in a duality discourse. Indeed, what is most clearly identifiable as African within the narratives of Hammon, Marrant, Gronniosaw, and Smith are the open-ended possibilities for multiple and diverse formulations and articulations of multiple selves, societies, and continuums of simultaneously moving and changing cultures that name and claim Africa and Africanness. Hence, what I initially saw as a dilemma to reading these early narratives—limited as they were by amanuensis–editor relationship, assimilation of dominant sacred and secular themes, structures, untraceable ethnic markers or signifiers, outside initial identification in the title or a minuscule sprinkling in the body of the narrative—I have come to realize as the real promise.

In the same way that Lucy Terry’s extratextual life tells us much about interpreting her poem, John Marrant’s journal and sermons inform our reading of his narrative. Reading his multiple texts in light of distinct aspects of African American spirituality and the relationship of its people to the Divine is central. Significant to this understanding is a close look at the way in which he amends one of John Watts’s hymns as well as a closer look at the itinerant preaching and multiethnic communities that both celebrate and denigrate him. Here, we must consider, as we do with many elements of Terry’s life, the way in which the political has as much to do with class as it has to do with race. Also worth considering
are the ways in which he is drawn toward or away from imagined sites of home. *A Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant* (1785) mediates conventional form and ideology even as it disrupts and upholds the paradigms of otherness they contain. Although it is clear, as scholars have noted, that his black body is meant to heighten the savageness of Native Americans through an associative principle, Marrant’s narrative doubles the associative principle, and in so doing negates the full effect of its representational power as a foil to the more civilized and homogenous nation. His narrative thus reverses the trope of master/servant. In order to read the way in which the reversal occurs, we must shift from a reading of race to that of spirituality. This involves performing an exegetical maneuver to reread and reimagine master/servant simultaneously inside and outside the paradigms of race.

Phillip Gould’s reading of this reversal is a useful entry point. His insightful analysis rests on a rereading of Marrant’s negotiation of “the language of divine deliverance,” his “capitali[zation] on the ambiguities of liberty,” and Marrant’s “fulfill[ment] . . . of the expectations of evangelical Methodism and the anti-authoritarian theme residing just below the narrative surface” (“Free Carpenter,” 670). Further, Gould suggests that Marrant’s “likening [of] himself to a king, and the Cherokee king to a ‘child’ . . . stages yet another successful negotiation of masters” (670). This is because it restages redemption within a chain of signifiers that resituate symbolic and linguistic meaning in the word *child*. The term “child” used in a Christian sense—especially with regard to rebirth and regeneration—suggests that the king’s becoming like a child provides him entry though regeneration into a Christian community (and family) of saints. This aspect of conversion could not have been missed within the context of a conversion narrative.

Indeed, placed within an intertextual moment that links Marrant’s captivity narrative to Gronniosaw’s and Equiano’s is his reference to the little child that indeed does “lead” the family back to Marrant—his sister. Like Gronniosaw’s sister Logwy, Marrant’s younger (unnamed) sister is his only advocate in his Christian journey. Literally and spiritually she is the only one who sees him. While both Logwy and Marrant’s sister remain in their respective cultural communities (Bornou and black colonial America), their roles as mediators and facilitators are interpreted somewhat differently. Logwy ushers Gronniosaw into the Christian world through her unconditional support and encouragement; Marrant’s sister receives him upon his return as a fully converted Christian—from the wilderness experience. Marrant’s sister’s words, her
acceptance of the link (symbolized in her brother) between their community and the white Christian world, underscores Marrant’s physical and metaphysical reentry into the African community. Simultaneously a bridge to Christianity and a signifier of communal constancy and stability, his sister’s warm reception and acceptance of Marrant is a sign of God’s favor, upon his return from the wilderness—as a member both of the Christian family and of their own.

Thus, the subversion of white colonial power occurs in the black narrator’s direct signification of the Christian interpretation and meaning of secularly imposed hierarchical structures. It is the biblical text which questions colonial whites’ rights to ascendancy based on race, class, and even position within the family hierarchy (Christian and “scientific”) as the human family is read alongside the spiritual family in which the white child is first. Marrant relates his narrative “to Aldridge in a way that capitalizes [not only] on the ambiguities of liberty” (670), but his method of narration also takes advantage of his audience’s preconceived notions about children, as well as blacks and others as childlike and therefore innately depraved—as spiritually devoid “naturals.” Moreover, Marrant expands his boundaries as a black convert and interprets the Anglo “ur-text” rather than merely restating or relating the Native American’s conversion. In a radical act of cultural and spiritual redemption, he reorders the Christian chain of being. Marrant’s narrative act is radical because theoretically, at least, in his new schema, conversion places blacks, Indians, and whites into the same family. Consequently, former masters relinquish their possessions, which not only include property like “golden ornaments [and] chains and bracelets” (A Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, 120), but their slaves as well as their claims to power over Africans and Indians. These early black narrators further extend their rhetorical and symbolic engagement with the “paradox of liberty and slavery” by simultaneously confronting the dilemma of race and liberty. Clearly, narrators like Marrant mourned/moored liberty in contexts that directly addressed their experiences of nominal or tenuous freedom, thus invoking an aesthetic and rhetorical image of eighteenth-century black liberty and slavery as different from white liberty and slavery.

This unconventional approach to conversion is achieved through Marrant’s speaking in multiple tongues. His view that all who were equal before God should be ensured an equal opportunity at redemption is demonstrated more fully in his 1790 Journal, which he wrote, published, and sold. Joanna Brooks highlights the significance of this text for a
more complex understanding of the “Lord’s wonderful dealings with John Marrant”:

What fascinates about the Journal is Marrant’s specificity of purpose. Few itinerants assumed roles as covenant theologians, historians, or political activists in the town where they preached. Eighteenth-century Huntingdonian or Methodist missionary writings rarely engage with local “peoples” in an intimacy. But Marrant came to Nova Scotia seeking his own people—Black Loyalists from America, including members of his own family . . . [he] believed himself divinely appointed to serve his “brethren,” the Blacks of Birchtown, as a prophet. (Brooks, “John Marrant’s Journal,” 33)

Not only does Marrant’s journal document a successful and driven mission to convert the blacks of “Birchtown,” but it chronicles an equally successful itinerant ministry among whites, Indians, Irish, and Scottish immigrants, and Armenians as well. His encyclopedic entries of his conversion, meetings, conflicts, encounters with bears, floods, and being lost more than once in the hostile woods of Nova Scotia, among “free thinkers” as well as various other incidents, illustrate the extent to which Marrant’s narrative had been limited by a literary division of labor (as related by Aldridge), and the extent to which he was able to negotiate such limitations.

Just prior to the talking-book sequence and shortly after the “wonderful affect” (Marrant, 118) of his prayer in the tongue of his Indian captors, and the subsequent conversion of the executioner, Marrant begins to sing “two verses of Dr. Watts hymns” (119), the last two lines of which he alters. In a hymn about God’s presence as light in darkness, Marrant establishes a more personal relationship with the Divine by changing “He is my soul’s bright morning star / and he my rising sun” to “Thou art my soul’s bright morning star / and thou my rising sun” (Marrant, Narrative, 119). Such intimacy reveals Marrant’s deeper awareness of the theological implications of culture and literacy. For it is at the moment of his great success in speaking in different cultural tongues—Native American—that he expresses humility at the inability of his “feeble tongue” to translate his “unspeakable joy” in unknown spiritual tongues. These acts of worldly and otherworldly interpretation in oral and aural registers suggest a preeminence of the Word in all its forms. Both Wheatley and Equiano share Marrant’s consummate linguistic artistry. Wheatley masterfully manipulates simultaneously parallel and diverging imagery of
darkness through lightness, visibility through invisibility, vulnerability through power, and the feminine through the masculine, in her recasting of the neoclassical “Niobe” myth. Equiano’s antiphonal narrative structuring is used to depict the complex nature of cultural and spiritual conversion through intertwining and imbedded African and Western cultural images. Clearly, these early black writers share the gift of different and unknown tongues, and more importantly, the gift of spiritual and secular interpretation of these tongues.

My position is counter to Gates’s argument that “Marrant’s gift of tongues backfired, and he was sentenced to die once more for being a witch” (*Signifying Monkey*, 143), and that in Marrant’s “inversion of the trope of the talking book... it is only the black man who can make the text speak” (143–44). Alongside the secular and this worldly talking book which the black man reads and translates is the otherworldly sacred text—the Word—which contains power in oral or written registers. For it is not man or woman, white, black, Native American, or otherwise who can “make” the book speak. The itinerant preacher understands that while he is the medium through which the Word—God, the Divine—speaks, his powers of translation are limited to an earthly realm, and even then only through God’s revelation, as in “the Lord impressed a strong desire upon my mind to turn into their language” (118). Marrant’s refrain “God was with me” and his direct address to that deity using “thou” and “thy” affirms his relationship to the talking book within him—that is, God. This reinterpretation of the talking book is echoed throughout Marrant’s *Journal* and most vividly illustrated in the concluding lines: “These are ever learning, but never able to come to knowledge of the truth; let such as these tremble whilst they read these lines, and no longer reject the spirit of God against their own souls. Now, may God bless them in reading of these words, so that God may be glorified in their conversion” (78). The timbre and tone of these words are intended to invoke an otherworldly spiritual, for as a preacher, the power of the Word is transmitted orally. “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17).

While the implications of an eighteenth-century black aesthetic for the final three narrators in this chapter constitute by far a more comprehensive project than this chapter will contain, I will point briefly to several trajectories for future scholarship. Gronniosaw’s *Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukausaw Gronniosaw* is rich with resonances and cacophonous disharmonies that intersect along lines of class and gender that are heightened by the centrality
of race. The narrator’s invocation of his noble African history warrants further examination, beyond the traditional reading of it as a kind of displacement of inferior Negro slave with the noble and superior black savage, or, what scholars like Andrews describe as a “celebration [albeit critically examined] of the acculturation process” (*To Tell a Free Story*, 39). A deeper investigation into the African religions and spiritual practices in the Upper Volta region of Guinea is necessary to determine if Gronniosaw has been previously exposed to pre-Western Christian religions. Also, significant work remains to be done on Gronniosaw’s experience of poverty and class oppression, which takes into account his interracial marriage and how that may have impacted his economic status.

Importantly, it is the fact that Gronniosaw’s “albino” sister Logwy operates strategically as a foil to the association of whiteness and “fair” skin color with beauty. Logwy’s “outsider/outcast” position as a colorless child in a colored society—white in a black world—parallels Gronniosaw’s own position as outsider both in Bornou (Africa) and in the new worlds (Holland, England, Ivory Coast) he inhabits. It is important that Logwy is figured as an outsider based on her physical appearance—skin color—in her own culture, whereas it is Gronniosaw’s actions—in direct conflict with his African society’s customs and traditions—that ultimately mark him as outsider. However, there is culturally encoded meaning to be derived from understanding the nature of Gronniosaw’s warm relationship with this younger sister—meaning that will allow a more far-reaching grasp of his future relationships with women inside and outside of his culture. Indeed, throughout his narrative we see signs of the inextricability of gender and racial oppression. If Gronniosaw’s narration of his captivity and subsequent removes on the Gold Coast prior to his enslavement in the New World is any indication, patriarchy is an equally complex dilemma in Africa and in the West. It is through dialogues with or about women we gain insight into Gronniosaw’s subversive and subtle resistance to slavery and oppression. Take, for example, Gronniosaw’s invocation of his mother’s anguish at his absence—and his need to proselytize to her and others as a key reason for his wanting to return to Bornou (Africa). The very sympathetic emotion he exhibits in this part of his text suggests a gendered performance of narrative pathos. Most important, like the faithful Logwy who loves and believes in him when others in his community shun him, the white slave mistress becomes a bridge to his Christian conversion.

Hence, his recounting of the “Old Ned” incident also becomes an indictment of white Christian masters’ hypocrisy. Though scholars have
tended to read this passage as Gronniosaw's signifying on his providential state, as Christian convert, they have looked less closely at the unknown gendered tongues through which Gronniosaw speaks. If Gronniosaw is less than direct about his own suffering as an enslaved African and nominally free black man who endures race and class prejudice, the white mistress’s role as buffer between the white man and the black slave makes clear what it means to be black and Christian. Old Ned is punished for failure to properly “school” the new slave (James Albert) on the appropriate way to address one’s mistress. Gronniosaw’s assertion of (verbal and spiritual) authority over his masters (albeit through a missed act of translation) exposes yet another type of black conversion narrative. Like Gronniosaw’s unheeded tearful plea to return home to Africa and spread the gospel, the excessively harsh punishment that Old Ned receives for interpreting and daring to pass on the Word of God suggests the harsh consequences that attend “Negroes Christians, Black as Cain,” who hope to “join the Angelic train” (Wheatley, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” ll.7–8). Old Ned is severely whipped and banished from the house—demoted from house servant to field slave. The revelation of slave mistresses’ relative power through Gronniosaw’s narrative exchange enables a covert but meaningful dialogue about the dual nature of power with respect to race and gender.

Ironically, Marrant has a similar experience to Gronniosaw’s with a Christian slave mistress, on a plantation where he taught slave children the Bible. However, the results are slightly different from those of Gronniosaw. In Marrant’s narrative, the relative power of both the white female and the black preordained Christian convert demonstrate differently manipulated power structures. Like Gronniosaw, Marrant is spared the punishment reserved for other blacks—in this case the slave children—who, despite the brutal consequences, remain faithful to Christian teaching and continue in their lessons. However, unlike Gronniosaw’s mistress, Marrant’s white mistress’s attempt to rely on her relative power—through her verbal request that her husband exact physical punishment on Marrant—is vetoed. The white slave master refuses to violate slave codes and whip “the free carpenter.” Ultimately, the white slave master’s conversion and the white slave mistress’s subsequent “divine” punishment suggest a moment of race/gender dialogue that illustrates the limits of white female relative power and Christian patriarchal authority.

Clearly, while much work has been done on kinship with regard to mother-daughter and husband-wife relations in slavery, the repeated
theme of mother-youngest sons, albinism, brother-sister relationships, and slave mistresses within precolonial West African families needs to be studied in the context of narratives like Gronniosaw’s, Equiano’s, and Smith’s.

With regard to Venture Smith’s *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures*\(^\text{15}\) narrative, which is one of the most unique of all in terms of its use of myth and its almost wholly secular tone, further research needs to be done in the area of the interterritorial conflict to more fully study the underlying cause for capture and seizure of Africans from the continent. This part of his story relates to Equiano’s reference to his watch in the tree for kidnappers. A closer examination of the cultural and historical circumstances on both sides of the Atlantic will enable a better understanding of the African self-presence and identification in a narrative like Smith’s. Like Achebe’s and Acholonu’s corroboration of aspects of Equiano’s story, additional studies in the area of the folklore which underlie the legends of Venture Smith need to be documented.

Ultimately, an approach to reading early African American literature in the way I suggested is not all-encompassing. (It certainly does not present the final answer; rather, it only produces more questions.) What my approach offers is a redirection of the trajectory from which such questions are proceeding. As promised, I have not merely had a conversation with not merely the text or its cultural representations, but I have also tried to present a clearer picture of the significance and the complex nature of eighteenth-century Afro-British American identification of, and with, the concept and reality of Africa.