

Nicole N. Aljoe and Ian Finseth, eds. *Journeys of the Slave Narrative in the Early Americas*

Nicole N. Aljoe and Ian Finseth, eds. *Journeys of the Slave Narrative in the Early Americas*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014. 256p. ISBN 9780813936383. US \$29.50 (paperback and ebook); US \$59.50 (hardback).

“Books have life spans and life chances... that correlate positively with the race of the author” argues Joanna Brooks in her brilliant essay, “The Unfortunates: What the Life Spans of Early Black Books Tell Us about Book History.” Brooks is particularly interested in “those substantial, more pricey books of more than forty-eight pages.” Still, we can cautiously extend her insight to other racialized material texts, which face some of the same existential challenges, from “being written, published, sold, bought, read, reprinted, [and] circulated” in the first place to being “collected and preserved” over time. Hence the foundational importance of collections like Dorothy Porter’s *Early Negro Writing 1760-1837* (1971) to the institutionalization of Black Studies. However unfashionable such “recovery projects” may have become in English and history departments, African-American literature continues to be enlivened by the ongoing critical resuscitation of early works.

To this end, Nicole N. Aljoe and Ian Finseth have brought together seven other literary scholars and one historian to offer analyses of a genre whose scope is as transnational as the vectors out of which it arose: “institutions of African enslavement,” “missionary and abolitionist movements,” and a rapidly expanding early modern print culture (5). *Journeys of the Slave Narrative in the Early Americas* is only the most recent in a series of anthologies that seek to get *Beyond Douglass* (in the apt title of Michael Drexler and Ed White’s 2008 collection) by setting back the clock and widening the compass of Afro-diasporic life-writing. Briton Hammon, Boyrereau Brinch, Juan Francisco Manzano, and Omar Ibn Said “not Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs” are the key figures here. (The absence of female authors is duly noted.)

Although the focus remains on such conventional narratives, JosÃ© Guadalupe Ortega makes fascinating use of the judicial records housed in the Cuban National Archives to reconstruct the strategic legal self-fashioning of a Bahamian slave who, in the upheaval of the Haitian Revolution, escaped to Cuba. As Juan Antonio, the fugitive English slave forged a new identity as a skilled wage laborer even as Cuba’s slaveholding sugar economy benefited from the influx of such workers.

But the collection’s most original, substantive essays come from its most junior contributors. Basima Kamel Shaheen offers an informative account of the literary, Quranic allusions and structures that, she argues, makes the Arabic *Life of Omar Ibn Said* (1831) a revealing countercontext to the highly publicized life of this purported Christian convert and South Carolina slave. R. J. Boutelle persuasively excavates the Cuban and British literary and political contexts that informed the production and reception of Irish abolitionist R. R. Madden’s compilation of Manzano’s (and Madden’s own) poetry and prose in *Poems by a Slave in the Island of Cuba* (1840).

Yet Boutelle’s efforts to “interrogate the privilege accorded to the author function in slave narrative studies” through a “print cultural methodology” that “shifts us away from the

figurative language of vocality/voice that dominates the field “laudable as they are” points to a central problem with the collection. Published in November 2014 after a very long journey from the 2010 Society of Early Americanists Special Topics conference on Borderlands (ix), the collection feels surprisingly out of date. Boutelle’s excellent essay is only one of the chapters that could have been strengthened by dialogue with (among other recent book-historical projects) Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein’s *Early African American Print Culture*. (Published in spring 2012 by Penn Press, the collection includes Brooks’s “Unfortunates.”) Other than in Kristina Bross’s apparently more recent “Coda,” the only citations to sources published after 2011 are to Marcus Rediker’s *Amistad Rebellion* and editor Aljoe’s own *Creole Testimonies: Slave Narratives from the British West Indies, 1709-1838*. (Citations to 2011 and 2010 sources are nearly as rare.)

As this 2016 review of a 2014 anthology illustrates, academic publishing faces its own challenges to survival. But surely, in the terms of the marketing argot by which we are increasingly asked to “assess” our “outcomes,” the “value-added” of a published volume of critical essays over a conference is its more thorough “and thus enduring” engagement with ongoing critical discussions in the field. It is only by speaking with, not past, each other that scholars can ensure that textualized Black lives continue to matter “and survive” in the future.

Jeannine Marie DeLombard
University of California, Santa Barbara

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