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Rethinking Elocution

The Trope of the Talking Book and Other Figures of Speech

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To read without uttering the words aloud or at least mumbling them is a “modern” experience, unknown for millennia. In earlier times, the reader interiorized the text; he made his voice the body of the other; he was its actor.

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

The performer sits under a spotlight surrounded by books on performance. She touches, smells, and tastes some of the books. She holds one of the books up to her ear. She notices you are there. She looks up to speak.

D. Soyini Madison, “Performing Theory/Embodied Writing”

The intellectual currency of “performance” has stimulated a rediscovery of elocution by literary historians¹ and a resuturing of elocution and oral

interpretation into the intertwining disciplinary genealogies of English, speech, theater, and performance studies (Jackson, 1999; Lee, 1999). Earlier historical studies of elocution and oral interpretation were written from a history of ideas perspective: the explication of theories and practices in order to trace a line of ideas, issues, debates, and pedagogies.² Perhaps the most influential example of this kind of scholarship is Wallace A. Bacon's 1960 article, "The Dangerous Shores: From Elocution to Interpretation," a metadisciplinary essay in which he named and thereby enacted a watershed moment for the field at midcentury. This signal publication—arguably the flagship essay for the new interpretation of literature movement—charted an historical course from elocution's "just and graceful management of the voice, countenance, and gesture" to a "modern view of interpretation as the study of literature through the medium of oral performance" (p. 149). Bacon (1976) theorized the performance of literature as a site for encountering and developing what he called a profound "sense of the other." Drawing on two strands of Bacon's scholarship—his landmark historical research on elocution and his theoretical research on "a sense of the other"—I attempt to rethink and revive interest in elocution by investigating it from the perspectives of those "others" against whom it erected its protocols of taste, civility, and gentility.

Because the major theorists and exemplary practitioners written into the extant history of elocution are overwhelmingly white and privileged, I want to relocate elocution within a wider sociohistorical context of racial tension and class struggle. I approach the elocutionary movement from "below," from the angle of working-class and enslaved people who were excluded from this bourgeois tradition and disciplined by it but who nonetheless raided and redeployed it for their own subversive ends.³ Drawing on slave narratives, working-class histories, and other historical documents, this essay excavates a hidden history and radical tradition of elocution and oral interpretation.

Voices That Matter

To reach the higher rungs of class respectability, voices had to be "legible," assessed in elocutionary terms of "clarity" and "purity of tone." Anna Russell's *The Young Ladies' Elocutionary Reader* (1853) described an uncultivated voice as smudged like a printer's error: "It resembles, in its effect to the ear, that presented to the eye, when the sheet has been accidentally disturbed in the press, and there comes forth, instead of the clear, dark, well-defined letter, executed distinctly on the fair white page, a blur of half-shade" (p. 15). Elocution was tintured with printer's ink. It would do for platform and

social performance what printer's type did for scribal culture: systematize, standardize, and reproduce exemplary models in which the idiosyncrasy and excess of the oral could be repressed, regulated, and recirculated. Elocution developed and flourished in the 18th and 19th centuries during the crucial period of the rise of industrial capitalism and advance of science, reason, engineering, and commitment to progress and improvement. E. P. Thompson (1963) argued that the industrial "pressures towards discipline and order extended from the factory . . . into every aspect of life: leisure, personal relationships, speech, manners" (p. 401). As part of the same historical and cultural milieu, elocution drew from the same vocabulary: One of its early formations was called the "mechanical school" of elocution (Mattingly, 1972; Roach, 1985). Elocution expressed in another key the body discipline so characteristic of industrial capitalism, but this was a discipline imposed on the bourgeoisie, a way for them to mark "distinction" from the masses (Bourdieu, 1984). Punning on the title of Walter Benjamin's (1969) well-known essay, we can think of elocution as the management of voice in the age of mechanical reproduction.

Elocution was designed to recuperate the vitality of the spoken word from rural and rough working-class contexts by regulating and refining its "performative excess" through principles, science, systematic study, and standards of taste and criticism (Butler, 1997, p. 152). Textual enclosure was the technology of control; thus elocution, an art of the spoken word, was circumscribed by literacy. Ambivalently related to orality, elocution sought to tap the power of popular speech but curb its unruly embodiments and refine its coarse and uncouth features. It was the verbal counterpart, in the domain of speech, of the enclosure acts that confiscated the open commons so crucial to the hard-scrabble livelihood and recreation of the poor and privatized them for the privileged classes. Elocution seized the spoken word, the common currency to which the illiterate poor had open access, and made it uncommon, fencing it off with studied rules, regulations, and refinements. An art of linguistic enclosure, elocution's historical rise and development corresponded roughly with the legislative acts of enclosure and displacement, the "clearances," that produced "surplus populations" and cheap labor for urban factories (Marx, 1867/1930, pp. 803–807). The pulpit and the lectern were the *loci classici*, exemplary sites of demonstration, but these capital sites extended to everyday speech and presentation of self. Elocution was practiced by professional public speakers and readers but was also embodied as a general social sign of gentility as the bourgeoisie conversed, read aloud, and entertained in their parlors. The hegemony of the pulpit and lectern extended into the habitus of the class-conscious home. Coextensive with sartorial codes, like dress it was a way of displaying social status and class background.

Elocution promoted a sizing up of bodies and auditing of voices, a critical scrutiny of “the grain of the voice” (Barthes, 1985). There was a political economy of the voice: How one spoke was part of a circuit of comparison and exchange that produced social value, “the ‘sonorous materiality’ of words exchanged” (Certeau, 1997, p. 102). Voices were “cultivated” and traded up. The thriving business of elocutionary lectures, training manuals, exercises, lessons, handbooks, workshops, and demonstrations pivoted on this trading up of voices and acquisition of “vocal superiority,” vocal capital (Rush, 1879, p. 578). According to James Rush (1879), author of a key elocutionary text, *The Philosophy of the Human Voice*, “Intonation and other modes of the voice” betray class pretenders to “a cultivated ear” (p. 480), to “the ear of a refined and educated taste” (p. 518). Rush reveals that elocutionary proprieties were staked in overlapping class and racial tension with his choice of negative examples: “Hence with a Slavery agitator” and “an abolition preacher about the streets, there is equally an ignorant disregard to the proper, and certainly to the elegant uses of the voice” (p. 480).

The opening scene of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s best-selling novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852/1994) dramatizes the elocutionary surveillance and auditing of other bodies and voices. Stowe introduces one of her most contemptible characters, the slave trader Haley, by immediately subjecting him to a close critical examination of body, voice, and demeanor: “He was a short, thick-set man, with coarse, commonplace features, and that swaggering air of pretension which marks a low man who is trying to elbow his way upward in the world” (p. 1). *Air* was a key word grounded in the dramaturgy of social relations; it referred to a style of personal presentation, demeanor, that registered class tension, as in “putting on airs.” Stowe encourages the cultivated reader to “catch” this slave catcher in the act of class pretension. She first tells us that his speech was “in free and easy defiance of Murray’s Grammar” (p. 1) and then dramatizes his slips and class-marked dialect: “Yes, I consider religion a valeyable thing in a nigger, when it’s the genuine article, and no mistake” (p. 2). Later, she describes him as someone who “slowly recited” texts: “He was not a remarkably fluent reader, and was in the habit of reading in a sort of recitative half-aloud” (p. 101). Haley’s labored oral reading skills are in marked contrast to the elocutionary ability of light-skinned blacks, particularly Cassy: “She then read aloud, in a soft voice, and with a beauty of intonation” (p. 313).

Haley’s “gentleman” interlocutor, Mr. Shelby, escapes critical inspection; the narrator keeps at a respectful remove and quickly merges him into the class habitus of his “well-furnished dining parlor”: “Mr. Shelby . . . had the appearance of a gentleman, and the arrangements of the house, and the general air of the housekeeping indicated easy, and even opulent circumstances” (p. 1). Genteel bodies pass as unmarked norms of decorum, whereas

“low-bred” and “vulgar” bodies are marked by their deviancy from bourgeois standards of taste.

Throughout the novel, Stowe articulates racial and class identity and moral character against norms of elocution in complex and troubling ways. The imbrication of colorism and elocution is particularly disturbing. The “full blacks” speak in thick dialect with “barbarous, guttural, half-brute intonation” (p. 300), whereas the light-skinned “mulatto” George Harris “talked so fluently, held himself so erect” (p. 10) and had a self-possessed “attitude, eye, voice, manner” of speaking (p. 172). Stowe’s class animosity is expressed in grotesque descriptions of “low-bred” whites whose coarse features and elocutionary shortcomings correspond with moral flaws. These characters—Haley, Loker, and Legree—speak in dialect and are not quite white (Jacobson, 1998). Stowe’s detailed, head-to-toe inspections of working-class white bodies ironically mirrors the scene of invasive physical examination of black bodies for sale at auction (p. 289).⁴

Elocutionary protocols anticipated Judith Butler’s (1993) theory of performativity as the reiteration, “citation,” of a set of norms, but elocution would rework performativity as disembodied citationality into a re-embodied *recitationality* (p. 14). The normative would become naturalized through habitual performance, and the hegemonic force is captured in Rush’s (1879) description of elocutionary discipline as “frequent repetition” becoming “an efficacious [sic] habit” until “attention [sic] fading into habit” enables “the shore to be reached, and the life to be saved” (p. 479). But the metaphor of swimming, “sucesfully [sic] employed in danger,” reminds us that elocution was part of a punitive regime of body discipline and vocal discrimination (p. 479).

The “natural school” of elocution demonstrates how hegemony works: that is, what is really cultured and acquired masquerades as “nature,” thereby concealing its invention and artifice (Vandraegan, 1949). The artistic bedrock of “natural” expression is revealed in Rush’s (1879) observation that “the world of Taste goes to the Theater to hear the purest style of Elocution” (478). Although every inch a studied disciplining and remaking of body and voice to accrue class distinction, elocution was ideologically masked as “natural language” (Fliegelman, 1993, pp. 79–94). The uncultivated were then marked as aberrant and unnatural, corruptions of nature. Elocution wielded the double-edged sword of “nature” against the poor and untutored. Too little cultivation of taste and manners branded one as coarse and uncouth, a transgressor of “universal” laws of “truth, propriety, and taste” that were “drawn from nature” (Rush, 1879, p. 477). On the other hand, too self-conscious a presentation of refinement led to charges of “affectation [sic]” (p. 477). The upwardly mobile classes had to run an elocutionary gauntlet between “awkwardness” and “affectation,” too little or too much art (p. 477).

But it was the rerouting of literacy through oral communication, however refined and regulated, that rendered elocution vulnerable to penetration and pilfering from the very classes it was erected against. The spoken-word dimension of elocution provided for the “spillage” from the enclosed written word that the unlettered poor swept up and made their own (Linebaugh, 1992, p. 168). According to John Brewer (1997), the elocutionary practice of public readings mediated the divide between literate elite and illiterate laborers:

Reading aloud, both in public and in private, was a universal practice that enabled non-readers to share in the pleasures of the literate. In homes, taverns, coffee houses, in fields and on the street, oral and literate cultures were married through the ministrations of the public reader. (p. 187)

Thompson’s monumental history *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) is replete with examples of “radical reading rooms” where “the custom of reading aloud the Radical periodicals, for the benefit of the illiterate” nurtured “the values of intellectual inquiry and of mutuality” (p. 743). Thompson includes the description of a remarkable, subversive oral reading at a meeting of an underground insurrectionary movement in a field near Sheffield in 1800:

“[A]t 10 o’clock in the Evening—an orator in a Mask harangues the people—reads [aloud] letters from distant societies by the light of a candle and immediately burns them” (p. 474).

Henry Mayhew (1861/1968) amply documented “street elocution” and “street recitations” in his first volume of *London Labour and the London Poor*, thus making clear that the laboring classes and lumpenproletariat “pitched” and repackaged an elite performance form to their own subaltern needs and recycled it within the scrappy survival economy of the streets (pp. 232–238). They developed their own ethno-aesthetics and standards of evaluation; with a wink to his middle-class reader, Mayhew refers to the discriminating judgment of “a critical professor of street elocution” (p. 236).⁵

The Trope of the Talking Book Reconsidered

In his pathfinding scholarship on the African American literary tradition, Henry Louis Gates (1988) identifies the “trope of the Talking Book” as “the central trope” (p. 152), “the ur-trope,” “the fundamental repeated trope” of the Anglo-African tradition that symbolized the tensions between the spoken

word and the written word, the African's journey from orality to literacy (pp. 131, 198). He cites Olaudah Equiano's rendering of this trope in *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano . . . The African: Written by Himself* (1789/1967) and a prototype for the genre of slave narrative:

I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading, and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did, and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book alone, in hopes it would answer me, and I have been very much concerned when it remained silent. (p. 40)

Gates discusses this passage as an allegory for the struggle of blacks to insert their voice into white texts, to register a black presence in Western literature. The text does not speak to Equiano, according to Gates, because his black countenance and speech stand in Western texts as signs of absence. Gates either ignores or is unaware of the elocutionary milieu within which printed texts were generated, received, interpreted, and *performed*. Voice is not just a metaphor, as Gates would have it, and the vocal performance of texts is not just an allegory but a concrete material practice that suffused literacy in 18th- and 19th-century Anglo-American culture. Elocution illustrates Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1998) concept of "orature," that liminal space between speech and writing, performance and print, where these channels of communication constantly overlap, penetrate, and mutually produce one another. Although Gates has many insightful things to say about the trope of the talking book, he misses the obvious fact that Equiano was signifyin(g) on the widespread elocutionary practice of reading books aloud.

Black people in bondage had an ambivalent relationship with the elocutionary movement of white America. On the one hand, it provided them access to written and printed texts from which they were excluded by draconian legislation that outlawed literacy for enslaved people. One enslaved man had his eyes burned out for learning to read (Berlin, Favreau, & Miller, 1998, p. 280). Much valuable information was leaked through public readings and the practice of reading aloud in the domestic sphere. Although Sojourner Truth never learned to read, she was a great admirer of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* after first hearing it publicly read (Reynolds, 1996, p. 148). And during the time of her enslavement, she engaged in insurgent eavesdropping, pressing her ear to the door of her mistress's room when confidential letters were read aloud (Truth, 1850/1993, p. 41).

At the same time, white middle-class voice, gesture, and countenance were constructed against the black voice and body, the "savage" and "barbarous" (Rush, 1879, pp. 578, 579). Thomas Jefferson (1781/1993), well

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schooled in elocution, believed that racial “difference is fixed in nature” and contrasted the communicatively flexible and richly expressive blushing white countenance against the illegible opacity and blank unresponsiveness of the black face:

Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of color in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers the emotions of the other race? (p. 238)

He equated blackness with impediment and incommunicability, the antithesis to elocutionary ideals of clarity, contrast, precision, emphasis, variety, fluency, distinction, and balance on vocal as well as visual registers. And, of course, Jefferson misread a complex, deliberate, embodied survival art of protective cover and veiling of feelings as an absence. Enslaved and other vulnerable people do not have the luxury of transparent, clear, direct, and open communication when interpersonal encounters are framed and reverberate with power (Scott, 1990).

In an article in the *Chautauquan*, a journal connected with the 19th-century elocutionary lecture circuit, Sojourner Truth was described as a “grotesque figure” (Carter, 1887, p. 479). In an *Atlantic Monthly* article titled “Sojourner Truth: The Libyan Sibyl,” Stowe (1863) described Truth’s vocal quality in terms of “the strong barbaric accent of the native African.” For Stowe, Truth seemed “to impersonate the fervor of Ethiopia, wild, savage, the hunted of all nations.” Mixing racial and class condescension with romanticism, she compared Truth’s performance style to that of the French Jewish actress from an impoverished background, Rachel Felix, who “was wont to chant the ‘Marseillaise’ in a manner that made her seem the very spirit and impersonation of the gaunt, wild, hungry, avenging mob” (p. 477).⁶ And Stowe actually performed Truth in dialect for the amusement of her Boston Brahmin social circle (Painter, 1996, p. 154).

If we reconsider the trope of the talking book in early slave narratives as a sign of kidnapped Africans’ initial encounter with the elocutionary practice of reading books aloud, then the racially charged tone of the first recorded example—*A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (1770/1996)—makes more sense. Gronniosaw’s most painful and defining experience of racial difference was his exclusion from elocution, the refusal of the master’s book to speak to him when he put his “ear down close upon it.” Recently sold into slavery and new to the culture of “white folks,” he was a keen observer of embodied signs who “watched

every look” of his new master, a ship captain, so that he could adapt and survive within this new world. His master’s custom of reading aloud to the ship’s crew both startled and delighted him. “I saw the book talk to my master; for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips” (p. 38). Admiration led to imitation, but when he tried to engage the book in dialogue, “open’d it . . . in great hope that it would say something to me,” he was deeply disappointed that “it would not speak.” He experienced this silence as a culminating moment of exile and excommunication and as a profound rejection of his humanity. Despondent, he concluded “that every body and every thing despis’d me *because I was black*” (p. 38; italics added). His dawning racial consciousness and deep alienation emerged from the jarring encounter with elocution, the preeminent performance of whiteness.

Elocution existed in dialectical tension with minstrelsy, the most popular entertainment form of the 19th century (Lott, 1993, p. 4). Elocution had its framed events—public lectures, readings, recitations, orations, lyceum debates and declamations—but they were marketed as instruction more than entertainment. Unlike minstrelsy, the whole idea and motive for attending an elocutionary performance was to identify with, imitate, and extend the platform model of performance into social performance and the everyday performativity of whiteness. Whereas blackface minstrelsy was a theatrically framed mimicry and parody of blackness, elocution can be thought of as the performativity of whiteness naturalized. Exceeding the bounded performance event, elocution was an all-encompassing style of speaking and deportment that extended from the public sphere into the habitus of the home; hence the elocutionary training for “ladies,” who otherwise were not encouraged to speak in public (Ryan, 1994). Because of its hegemonic reach and penetration—“the just and graceful management of the voice, countenance, and gesture”—elocution was more “popular,” in the sense of pervasive, even than minstrelsy.

Antithetical in style, elocution and minstrelsy opposed and played off one another in striking and complex ways. Both performance traditions were enormously invested in voice, demeanor, and class difference. Elocution represented the high end, a respectable interest in vocal quality, dignified presence, and improvement for the rising classes. Minstrelsy expressed the low end, a disreputable fascination with vocal difference, burlesque bodies, and vulgar entertainment. Although their connection is seldom discussed, there was mutual acknowledgment, crossover, and some slippage between these contemporary performance formations. Popular elocutionary readers included “dialect pieces,” such as Beecher’s *Recitations and Readings: Humorous, Serious, Dramatic, Including Prose and Poetical Selections in Dutch, French, Yankee, Irish, Backwoods, Negro, and Other Dialects* (1874). The abolitionist

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lecture circuit, enfolded within elocutionary lecture circuit, titillated staid middle-class audiences by featuring speeches from fugitive and former slaves. Citing an antislavery newspaper account, John Blassingame (1977) documented that, during one of these speeches, the audience “cheered, clapped, stamped, laughed and wept, by turns” (p. 123). After hearing the lecture of a fugitive slave, Lydia Maria Child observed that she had “seldom been more entertained” and that his “obvious want of education” and “the uncouth awkwardness of his language had a sort of charm” (quoted in Blassingame, 1977, p. 151). John Collins, an agent of the American Anti-Slavery Society, noted in 1842 that “the public have itching ears to hear a colored man speak” (quoted in Blassingame, 1977, p. 123).⁷ Coincidentally, the Virginia Minstrels troupe, credited with developing the standard format for the full-fledged minstrel show, formed in the winter of 1842–43 (Lott, 1993, p. 136).

At the opposite pole, minstrel shows included “lectures,” along with songs and dances, in their repertory. These “lectures” were caricatures of elocutionary decorum. Black speech and bodies were made to look all the more ridiculous and degraded within the heightened frame of white bourgeois elocution. But these “lectures,” along with the stock character of the well-spoken “interlocutor” who was “genteel in comportment” (Lott, 1993, p. 140), were also send-ups of elocutionary propriety. W. T. Lhamon (1998) argues provocatively that in the early years of minstrelsy white lumpen youths identified with blackface as a way of defiantly signaling their disdain and distance from the bourgeois society that excluded and harassed them.⁸

A striking example that brings into sharp focus the dialectical relationship between elocution and minstrelsy is Stowe’s strategic response to the minstrelization of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the hugely popular Tom shows (Bowman, 2000). As a rebuttal to the sensationalized theatrical adaptations, she dramatized the novel as an elocutionary platform reading for the anti-slavery lecture circuit. Without recourse to copyright laws, Stowe pitted her own adaptation for dignified solo lectern performance against the minstrelized stage adaptations that were proliferating to her dismay. To further exercise authorial control, she designed her adaptation expressly as a virtuoso vehicle for a designated elocutionary reader whom she had befriended. The title page of the 1855 adaptation reads, *The Christian Slave, a Drama, Founded on a Portion of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Dramatized by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Expressly for the Readings of Mrs. Mary E. Webb*. Trained by the Philadelphia professor of elocution, A. A. Apthorp, Webb drew large and enthusiastic audiences to her dramatic readings of Stowe’s text. In Boston’s Fremont Temple, she performed *The Christian Slave* to a packed house of

3,500 people, one of the largest audiences ever assembled in that place (Clark, 1997, p. 342).

To complicate further the racialized class politics of *The Christian Slave* readings, Stowe's designated elocutionist, Mary E. Webb, was a woman of color, the daughter of an escaped slave and a "wealthy Spanish gentleman," and was dubbed the "Black Siddons" (Clark, 1997, p. 342). One can only imagine how Webb was "read" as she publicly read from Stowe's lectern-mounted text, doing all the voices (27 characters), including white women and men, as well as black men and women, with some of the blacks and the low-class whites, such as Haley, speaking in thick dialect and the middle-class whites and some of the blacks, such as the light-skinned Cassy, speaking in elevated diction. Refracted through Webb's cultivated voice but racially marked body, Stowe's heteroglossic text must have taken on even more levels of mimicry and layers of "multiaccentuality" (Volosinov, 1986, p. 23). The discreetly channeled thrill of cross-racial impersonation, imposture, and gender play that energized Webb's elocutionary readings needs to be read with and against the contemporary minstrel stage productions. In what ways were Webb's elocutionary readings of *The Christian Slave* a counterperformance to minstrelsy, and in what ways were they complicit with minstrelsy? How did the shadow of minstrelsy intensify the interplay of pleasure and subversion that simultaneously consolidated and unsettled the norms of elocution underpinning Webb's readings? Deliberately produced to trump minstrelsy, Webb's staged readings may have tapped its transgressive charge (Stowe interspersed scenes with songs, including "Way Down Upon the Swanee River"). But whatever else one can say about this politically complicated production, a black woman entered the public sphere as the literal embodiment of the trope of the talking book. The text did speak to and through a black voice and body, and Webb made enough money from her highly successful transatlantic reading tours to support her family, providing her husband with the economic security to leave his business and devote time to completing a novel (Clark, 1997, p. 343).

If Webb's enactment of the trope of the talking book was constrained by white patronage and the protocols of elocution, then Sella Martin's signifyin(g) on this trope provides a remarkable example of black counterpublic reading that Gates does not consider. Martin recounts that, after being sold separately from his beloved mother at the age of 10, he worked as an errand boy in a hotel, where he learned all manner of things by eavesdropping on the guests: "I learned, too, from seeing them reading and writing, that they could make paper and the little black marks on it talk" (Blassingame, 1977, p. 709). He made up his mind that he would learn this skill and set about cajoling and tricking the white boys to teach him the alphabet and how to

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read. He saw the liberatory potential of literacy, and after his first underground spelling lesson, “with the A B C ringing in my memory, I saw myself already writing a free-pass” (p. 711). He practiced on found texts, “spelling signs and trying to read placard advertisements for runaway slaves” (p. 710). Hearing him spelling out words all the time, the other slaves believed that he could read. One Sunday, three older slaves took him to the woods under the pretence of gathering wild grapes but, once there, pulled out a newspaper filched from the master and demanded that the young Sella read aloud a passage about abolitionists. Overwhelmed because he had only rudimentary spelling skills and had never attempted to read a newspaper before, but afraid of angering his companions by protesting lack of proficiency, he decided to fake it:

This would be my excuse for looking over the paper with determination to read what I felt they would be pleased to hear, no matter though it should not be in the paper. I handled the paper with a trembling hand, and . . . to my great surprise, I made out this heading of a leading article: “Henry Clay an Abolitionist.” I read on a little further. . . . Of course I did not make out fully all the long words . . . but I made a new discovery about my being able to read at all. . . . What I read, or pretended to read, gave the most intense satisfaction, and awakened the wildest hopes about freedom among my hearers. (p. 711)

He becomes self-consciously literate in the transformative moment of reading aloud for a keenly listening audience. This scene is a rite of passage, a “breakthrough into performance”: He accomplishes what he mimes and pretends (Hymes, 1981, p. 79). Away from overseers, in the runaway space of the woods where his black compatriots are controlling the scene, the stolen text does talk to and through the young slave. This extraordinary example of the trope of the talking text gives new meaning to Certeau’s (1984) subversive analogy of “reading as poaching” (p. 165).

Word spread rapidly, and the same night the hotel kitchen where Martin worked was crowded with slaves from all around, petitioning him to read aloud “some book or newspaper which they had filched from their masters’ libraries” (Blassingame, 1977, pp. 711–712). Thus was launched his underground career, his “regular task,” of counterpublic “reading to the slaves”: He became “an oracle among the slaves” who paid him to perform their poached texts.⁹ These ongoing “clandestine” oral readings forged a fellowship of resistance, created “ties which bound” him “in a confederacy of . . . wrong-doing.” And the solidarity forged in this insurgent performance space overrode even the master’s authority. When his master discovered his illicit elocutionary activity and threatened him with flogging and the

auction block—"Don't let me hear of your reading to the slaves again"—he disobeyed because of the reading-forged "ties that . . . it seemed safer to run the risk of being crushed by, than to attempt to break" (p. 712).

While still enslaved, Frederick Douglass (1855/1969) also galvanized a secret slave counterpublic reading group that attracted as many as 40 members. "[H]olding it in the woods, behind the barn, and in the shade of trees," he read to them from *The Columbian Orator*, a popular elocutionary handbook of the day. Inside this subaltern performance space, "an attachment, deep and lasting," developed among the participants. In his autobiographical *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he says that when looking back on the experiences of his life, he recalled "*none* with more satisfaction" than this secret reading circle that constituted an empowering affective homosocial community: "the ardent friendship of my brother slaves. They were, every one of them, manly, generous and brave, yes; I say they were brave, and I will add, fine-looking" (pp. 267–268).

By far the most inventive and radical example of signifyin(g) on literacy and refiguring the trope of the talking book comes from the obscure biographical sketch of Bartley Townsley (Gates, 1988, does not include Townsley in his landmark study of the trope as key to how "the white written text" was made to "speak with a black voice" [p. 131]). Worth quoting at length, Townsley's story is a dramatically compelling example of how enslaved people raided, short-circuited, and rerouted white texts, re-citing them for their own subversive, liberatory ends:

One night, when he had gone to bed and had fallen to sleep, he dreamed that he was in a white room, and its walls were the whitest he ever saw. He dreamed that some one came in and wrote the alphabet on the wall in large printed letters, and began to teach him every letter, and when he awoke he had learned every letter, and as early as he could get a book, he obtained one and went hard to work. One night very late, when he had come from his coal-kiln, he gathered his books as usual and began to try to spell, but it was not long before he came to a word that he could not pronounce. Now, thought he, what must I do? Then, remembering an old man who was on the farm, about fifty yards away, in a little old cabin, who could read a little, he thought he would go and ask him what the word spelt. The word was i-n-k. So he went quietly through the yard, for it was a very late hour of the night to be moving around, and reaching the cabin, he called him softly, Uncle Jesse! Uncle Jesse! Uncle Jesse! He said (the old man) who is that? Bartley. What do you want this time of the night? I want to know what i-n-k spells! The old man hallooed out, ink! He then returned to his cabin saying ink, ink, ink. After that night he never had any more trouble with ink. In 1852 he began to learn how to write well enough to write his own passes [to steal away]. (Carter, 1888/1969, pp. 112–113)

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It is difficult not to read this account as an allegory: the overwhelming whiteness of the enclosed room where he first encountered the alphabet, the symbolic significance of the word he found in the book but could not speak—i-n-k. In the dream where he first saw the writing on the wall, the pages of a book loomed as white walls of a room—the “whitest” he had ever seen—that engulfed him in whiteness. “Ink!” was the revelatory pronouncement that emptied literacy of whiteness and reinvested it with a distinctive black presence as it signified on the colloquialism, “black as ink.” A strong black voice calling out “ink!” to him in the dark of night revealed the blackness that was inside texts all the time and that he had not been able to recognize in the blinding whiteness of the room. I-n-k performatively coalesced into “ink!” through transposition from the visual medium of the white page to the auditory register of Uncle Jesse’s black voice. Through the synesthesia of recalling printed letters to vocality, first through his oral spelling, i-n-k, and then Uncle Jesse’s robust calling, “halloing out,” he was able to hear/see the blackness that was inextricable from the material substance of printed letters. “Ink!” became the signifyin(g) password that liberated literacy from the “white room” and set it loose on the open road in the form of counterfeit freedom passes: “After that he never had any more trouble with ink.”

Forgery, both literal and metaphorical, was the key operation and driving force behind slave literacy, and the source of slaveholders’ anxiety about slaves learning to read and write. The counterfeit pass was the copy that was both a surrogation and theft of the master’s textual power and a depletion of his capital investment. Elocution provided other opportunities for filching the master’s texts in order to raid knowledge, reroute authority, and undermine power. We know from Sella Martin’s narrative that slaves stole books and newspapers, but they also filched the spoken word. Thomas Johnson (1909) remembered: “While in slavery I would catch at every word that I heard the slave master use, and would repeat it over and over again until I had fixed it on my memory” (p. 40). They also closely studied demeanor and diction and filched elocutionary style. Johnson practiced speaking “with dignity of manner and with much dignity of diction” (p. 40). The acclaimed biographer William S. McFeely (1991) imaginatively reconstructs the young enslaved Frederick Douglass’s elocutionary rehearsals:

If he could say words—say them correctly, say them beautifully—Frederick could act; he could matter in the world. . . . Alone, behind the shipyard wall, Frederick Bailey [Douglass] read aloud. Laboriously, studiously, at first, then fluently, melodically, he recited great speeches. With *The Columbian Orator* in his hand, with the words of the great speakers of the past coming from his mouth, he was rehearsing. He was readying the sounds—and meanings—of words of his own that he would one day speak. (pp. 34–35)

The secret always seeps, enclosures are poached, and hoarded knowledges escape the forms of those who would encrypt them.

Continuities

Recent work in black cultural studies calls for a “black ‘performance studies’” that puts performance at the center of black cultural politics and resistance (Diawara, 1996, p. 304; Gilroy, 1995). Black radical scholars are reclaiming oral interpretation of literature as an emancipatory pedagogy and performative cultural politics. bell hooks (1995) situates the performance of literature at the center of the “live arts” tradition that flourished within black working-class communities and historically links it to elocution: “The roots of black performance arts emerge from an early nineteenth century emphasis on oration and the recitation of poetry” (p. 212). She grew up in that tradition and provides an insider view:

As young black children raised in the post-slavery southern culture of apartheid, we were taught to appreciate and participate in “live arts.” Organized stage shows were one of the primary places where we were encouraged to display talent. Dramatic readings of poetry, monologues, or plays were all central to these shows. Whether we performed in church or school, these displays of talent were seen as both expressions of artistic creativity and as political challenges to racist assumptions about the creative abilities of black folks. . . . In my household we staged performances in my living room, reciting poetry and acting in written or improvised drama. . . . I grew up in a working class family, where the particular skills of black art expressed in writing poetry were honored through the act of performance. We were encouraged to learn the works of black poets, to recite them to one another. In daily life, this was both a means of sharing our cultural legacy and of resisting indoctrination from Eurocentric biases within educational institutions that devalued black expressive culture. (pp. 211, 213)

Significantly, hooks turns to ethnography for the project of reclaiming and revaluing African American traditions of performed literature: “It is useful to think in terms of ethnographic performance when charting a cultural history of African-American participation in the performing arts” (p. 213).

Autobiographies provide rich corroborative evidence for hooks’s claims about the importance and pervasiveness of oral interpretation of literature in black working-class culture. One thinks immediately of Mrs. Bertha Flowers in Maya Angelou’s (1970) *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, who initiated the young Maya into the pleasures of literature. She loaned her books and instructed her to “read them aloud.” Oral interpretation was mandatory, she insisted, because “words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes

the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning” (p. 82). And when Mrs. Flowers performed literature, Angelou remembers the impact: “I heard poetry for the first time in my life” (p. 84).

In his autobiography *Voices and Silences*, James Earl Jones (1994) recounts his glorious experiences of reading Edgar Allen Poe aloud on an improvised stage in his high school gymnasium in Depression-era Michigan. Even more revealing is the passage in which he remembers his Uncle Bob Walker who loved to recite Shakespeare:

He was a fine man, not endowed by society or economy with the chance to be highly educated. He worked in the foundry after his discharge from the army. He was unpretentious in his speech but he read Shakespeare with a full appreciation of the English language. I witnessed the joy he took in the words, and found it contagious. (p. 66)

Jones dedicated his autobiography to his high school teacher of literature and oral interpretation.¹⁰

It is important to take an *other* look at elocution and oral interpretation and to write revisionist histories that include the encounters and experiences of excluded others for at least three reasons: (1) it is long overdue; (2) it complicates in productive ways our understanding of disciplinary genealogies of performance studies; and (3) it provides compelling evidence and inspiring examples of how dispossessed people, in the word of Marta Savigliano (1995), “trick-back” on an apparatus of oppression, how they trip up and turn its overwhelming force and massive weight against itself and thereby leverage an alternative, provisional space of liberatory struggle (p. 17).¹¹

Notes

1. See Fliegelman (1993), Looby (1996), and Portelli (1994). Gerald Graff’s (1987) institutional history of English is also helpful, particularly chap. 3, “Oratorical Culture and the Teaching of English” (pp. 36–51). David Reynolds’s (1996) cultural biography of Walt Whitman is also useful, especially chap. 6, “American Performances: Theatre, Oratory, Music” (pp. 154–193). Garry Wills’s award-winning *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (1992) is a very accessible introduction to the elocutionary milieu of 19-century America. See Cmiel (1990) for more detailed coverage of the same elocutionary ground.

2. See Bacon (1964), Bahn and Bahn (1970), Gray (1960), Howell (1959), Robb (1941), Thompson (1983), and Wallace (1954). For a notable exception from the intellectual history approach, see Mary Strine’s (1983) important cultural study of Rush’s *Philosophy of the Human Voice* (1879).

3. I am particularly indebted to Hobsbawm (1997), Thompson (1963), and Chauncey (1994). Methodologically, I have been influenced by recent work in historical ethnography, notably Comaroff and Comaroff (1991, 1992, 1997), Denning (1996), di Leonardo (1998), Poole (1997), and Savigliano (1995). See also the splendid new performance historiography work of Fuoss (1999), Jackson (1999, 2000), Merrill (1999), Pollock (1998), and Roach (1985, 1996).

4. This essay is not the place, but Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* begs for a critical rereading from the perspective of the elocutionary milieu that engendered and permeated the novel. Stowe often uses voice, as well as hands—e.g., “delicately formed hand” (p. 4), “a peculiar scowling expression of countenance, and a sullen, grumbling voice” (p. 186)—as metonyms for character. She devotes extraordinary attention to vocal quality, countenance, and hands in both narrative summary and scenic description. And the novel is filled with scenes of characters reading aloud.

5. Cuban cigar makers hired lecturers to read aloud literary and sociopolitical texts in the factory to stimulate their minds and provide relief from the mind-numbing labor of cigar rolling. The workers agreed on the reading materials in advance and paid the public reader out of their own pockets. This proletarian elocutionary tradition gained a reputation for being subversive, and in 1866 Cuba passed a law forbidding this practice in all factories. Cuban immigrants brought the tradition of the factory floor lecturer to America, where it continued until the 1920s. See Manguel (1996, pp. 110–114).

6. Stowe (1863) refers to the actress only as “Rachel.” I thank Lisa Merrill for identifying “Rachel” and pointing me to background materials.

7. This is the same John Collins who immediately recruited the fugitive Frederick Douglass to the abolitionist lecture circuit after hearing him speak spontaneously at the first antislavery convention he attended, barely three years after his escape from slavery. Douglass (1855/1969) recalled how Collins would introduce him on the circuit as a “graduate” from “the peculiar institution” of slavery, “*with my diploma written on my back!*” (p. 359; emphasis in original).

8. In addition to the important scholarship on minstrelsy of Lott (1993) and Lhamon (1998), see that of Cockrell (1997), and Bean, Hatch, and McNamara (1996).

9. I am drawing on Nancy Fraser's important work on “counterpublics” in “Rethinking the Public Sphere” (1990). I connected Fraser's work on subaltern counterpublics with performance ethnography in “Rethinking Ethnography” (Conquergood, 1991, p. 189).

10. See also Rogers's (2000) biography of Barbara Jordan for detailed evidence of the persistence and importance of elocutionary activities in 20th-century black working-class communities. See especially chap. 4, “The Gift of the Voice” (pp. 35–59).

11. See also Lowe and Lloyd (1997) for a vigorous analysis of the “alternative” spaces that crack open or can be pried apart within the contradictions of late capitalism (pp. 1–32).

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