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The Significance of African American History for American Studies

As the title suggests, this paper focuses on the ways in which the strivings of African Americans, and the history they created, has been a component of more general trends in American life, and in American social and cultural development. But the main theme will not be so much the contributions African Americans have made to the history of the United States, though they have been enormous, as the challenges their very efforts have posed for white attempts to create a national identity in which color, as such, was a major feature, attempts traced by historians to the earliest days of the American republic.

Although the origins of a color-conscious American nationalism are obscure, the forms that it has taken, and its cultural force, are fairly clear, recently summarized, for instance, by what Nobel Prize author Toni Morrison has called an "Africanist presence" in American life and thought. It is a presence that, as she shows, has pervaded the "canonical" literature, as major white authors have intruded black characters into their works, using the most demeaning stereotypes gratuitously to assert, as Morrison argues, an African inferiority. This presence, she has said, has done much to create what she has called "the quintessential American identity," with color as its defining attribute, providing a yardstick for the measurement of proper American—and by definition "white"—ideals. What Morrison has shown for literature, others have seen in such popular forms as minstrelsy, whose reliance on black stereotypes enabled audiences, especially immigrant working-class audiences, to assert a common "American" identity based on a common whiteness.[1]

More recent scholarship has, however, complicated this picture. Eric Lott, in his 1993 *Love and Theft*, and Howard and Judith Rose Sacks, in *Way Up North in Dixie* (1993), have explored the minstrel tradition in ways that show it to have involved more than white fantasies of people of African descent. Rather, it sought to incorporate and, as Lott emphasizes, control an authentic black voice, elaborating on, even as it caricatured materials drawn from actual African American sources.[2]

This effort to seize and control, as well as to caricature an African presence has been documented in other areas, as well. Eric Sundquist, in *To Wake the Nations* (1993), has shown this effort in such significant white-authored, black-voiced texts as Thomas

1. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), 44-45; for a recent discussion of the debate on color, see Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, vol. I: *Racial Oppression and Social Control* (London: Verso, 1994), 2-21; see, on minstrelsy, David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. London: Verso, 1991.

2. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), esp. 116-19; Howard L. and Judith Rose Sacks, *Way Up North in Dixie: A Black Family's Claim to the Confederate Anthem*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.

Gray's 1831 rendering of the "confession" of captured slave rebel Nat Turner. With somewhat different emphases, Shelly Fisher Fishkin has argued for the influence of a voice rooted in African American traditions on the works of Mark Twain, especially *Huckleberry Finn*.[3]

Such work at least suggests that the roots of the "Africanist presence" were complex. And, indeed, if one looks back to the early national period of American history, there is some evidence for a time when that "presence," while no less strong than it would later be, was far less clearly defined. Sundquist's work is especially important in this regard, because, as he shows Gray struggling to render Turner's confession for a white audience, he also shows Gray struggling with issues of credibility and authority, with the implications raised by giving Turner a voice at all.

Following Sundquist's lead, this paper will also look at the early national period, because the problems he shows for Gray were common at the time. As Sundquist's work suggests, one of the key areas in which this influence appeared was that of voice, an area that, in more general terms, was the subject of controversy in early national America. This, in itself, had much to do with the kinds of challenges African Americans posed to a "white" American nation.

Prior to independence, the issue of voice was closely tied to status in America, as colonial elites assumed a natural connection involving social position, eloquence, and a public voice, tying authority and credibility to narrowly-conceived standards of rhetorical competence. After the American Revolution, this assumption was increasingly challenged by those who, inspired by egalitarian rhetoric, saw political virtue in a "democratic idiom," involving considerably broadened standards of competence and credibility.[4]

Complicating the issue were trends in American religion, notably the democratic tendencies of an emerging American evangelicalism. Stressing a spiritual egalitarianism, evangelicals deliberately overturned hierarchy in religious affairs, celebrating the heart-felt, simple eloquence of the convert over the refined speech of the theologian, developing a "democratic idiom" of their own.[5]

It was in terms of these trends that the African American efforts had their greatest impact. Even at this early date, increasing numbers of black people, slave and free, had begun to assert their right to participate in political and religious affairs. The emergence of this group posed a difficult challenge to whites. As John Saillant has recently shown, many, including Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, understood that to listen to the black voice was to include the black speaker in the larger American community. Already committed to a white America, they responded by asserting ideas of African inferiority, denying even the possibility of competence and credibility to people of African descent. Jefferson's famous dismissal of Phillis Wheatley's poetry as "below the dignity of criticism" was a case in point, but many took a similar view.[6]

Others, however, did not find such a dismissal so easy, and they provide good evidence that, where a black voice was concerned, matters were somewhat less certain than a Jefferson or a Madison might wish. Wheatley's celebration by at least a few opponents of slavery, for instance, was a measure of the extent to which at that date

3. Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), esp. 38-39; Shelly Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

4. Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight Over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 53-57.

5. Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 17-27.

6. John Saillant, "Lemuel Haynes's Black Republicanism and the American Republican Tradition, 1775-1820," *Journal of the Early Republic* 14 (1994), 320-24; for a summary of the debate over Wheatley's poetry, see *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Julian D. Mason, Jr. (Revised and Enlarged ed., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 29-31.

matters were not entirely settled. Among white evangelicals, the situation was especially complex. While most tended to view their religious community as a white community, their spiritual egalitarianism made them, unlike Jefferson, far from quick to reject black testimony altogether. Many even celebrated the value of "African" testimony for Christians of all colors.[7]

The uncertainty this evidence reveals lies at the heart of the issues with which this paper is concerned, because it has much to do with the kind of "Africanist presence" which Morrison and others have discussed, the kind of Africanist presence on which a white American identity came to be based.

To see why this is so, it is useful to examine a series of documents in which the uncertainties of the era had special force. These were documents in which, for various reasons, white authors took the black voice seriously, even as they asserted the validity of a color-based view of American society. By trying to bring the two aims together, they revealed the deeper conflicts that an African American voice created in white American thought, the conflicts that resulted from the challenges it posed.

Among the first of these documents was *Sambo & Toney: A Dialogue in Three Parts*, written in 1808 by Edmund Botsford, a South Carolina Baptist, slaveholder, and missionary to the slaves. It was a fictional dialogue between two "South Carolina Africans," as he called them, "Sambo," a slave convert, and "Toney," whose conversion, as a result of Sambo's labor, the dialogue described. There can be little doubt about Botsford's desire to represent a genuine black voice in the dialogue. He had long believed that slave converts could play an important role in spreading Christianity on the plantations; Sambo, an eloquent and devout Christian, dramatized that idea.[8]

But *Sambo & Toney* also says much about the problems a black voice posed for whites in early national America. Writing in a weird version of black dialect, Botsford left no doubt about his conviction of the inferiority of black people, of their suitability for slave status. He used his dialogue, in part, to try to justify the compatibility of Christianity with slavery, chiefly by portraying Christian slaves expressing contentment with their status. At the same time, as he incorporated the black voice into his dialogue, perhaps influenced by evangelical traditions, he had to give it great power. Most obviously, when he had Sambo, rather than a white minister (like himself) act as the chief agent for Toney's conversion he showed the possibility of a religious eloquence unconstrained by color. Providing further testimony, Botsford even had Sambo suggest that the agent for opening his owner's heart to allow religion on the plantation was not a white minister, but was, instead, another slave, the devout "Uncle Davy."[9]

That the two representations were not entirely compatible should have been clear. Botsford may have hoped to use his dialogue to justify black subordination, but when he presented a black, evangelical voice with significant power, he conceded a credibility and authority to that voice which his dialogue's overt message sought to deny. Indeed, as he relied on an "African" voice to defend slavery, he even raised the possibility that slaves possessed the most relevant voice on the issue. It was an enfranchisement that, however disingenuous, ultimately subverted any effort to define the early American religious or political communities as, somehow, exclusively white.

Botsford himself seems to have been subtly aware of the problem. When recounting Toney's transformation, he had Sambo say, "The word of the Lord speak to every body alike, white people, black people, rich man, poor man, old man and young

7. See Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: "The Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 181-82; James D. Essig, *The Bonds of Wickedness: American Evangelicals Against Slavery, 1770-1808* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 33-34.

8. On Botsford, see Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 135.

9. [Edmund Botsford], *Sambo & Toney: A Dialogue in Three Parts* (Georgetown: Francis M. Baxter, 1808), 43.

man." Using a black voice, as he wished to, could not be separated from acknowledging a common humanity transcending color and condition; the implication of granting a black voice was, thus, made particularly troublesome for a man in Botsford's position.[10]

The same may be said in regard to another document, from about a decade later, Robert Finley's 1818 "Dialogues on the African Colony." Finley was a Presbyterian minister and, in 1816, one of the founders of a group known as the American Colonization Society, a white organization whose chief goal was the removal of free people of color to the west coast of Africa. Although some African Americans had shown interest in black-led colonization projects since Revolutionary times, the Society's purposes led to strong black opposition, the Society being viewed as a movement intended, as one group said, to "exile us from the land of our nativity."[11]

Finley was aware of this African American opposition, and his dialogues were an effort to respond to it. Set in heaven, they envisioned a conversation involving William Penn, Quaker founder of Pennsylvania; Paul Cuffe, a wealthy African American shipowner who had attempted to create a trade-oriented African colony of his own; and Absalom Jones, a noted black minister. Cuffe represented a proponent of colonization; Penn, a neutral observer; and Jones, the opposition. By the end, both Penn and Jones had come to acknowledge the wisdom of Finley's plan.

The "Dialogues on the African Colony" showed the same kinds of conflicts that characterized Botsford's work. Finley's defense of colonization was made on the basis of a radical incompatibility of black and white peoples, leading Penn, for example, to conclude that nothing could "prevent the wall of partition between them and the whites from remaining impassable." But it was Finley's Cuffe, participating in a conversation across the color line, who convinced Penn of such views, denoting the authority Finley felt a black voice could have. That he chose to respond to black opposition at all was, a measure of that voice's authority for him, as well.[12]

The result was that although Finley tried to create a black voice that gave assent to its own exclusion, he, nonetheless, could not avoid the dilemmas that such an assent created for his case. As he dramatized the conversation among Cuffe, Jones, and Penn, tacitly putting all on the same intellectual and moral level, he did more to emphasize similarities among them rather than the endemic differences on which his program was supposed to rest. As he sought to justify exclusion, he did so in a way that at least implicitly undermined that justification itself.

The dilemma one sees in Botsford and Finley took no less striking form a few years later, in another document associated with the Colonization Society. At the end of 1826, the Society's magazine, *The African Repository*, published a memorial signed by a group of free people of color in Baltimore, encouraging whites to contribute to the Society, expressing their own desire to go to Africa—a move several actually did undertake—and, again, responding to black opposition to the Society's work. The circumstances surrounding the memorial remain obscure. The best evidence indicates that Charles Harper and John Latrobe, the Society's two white Baltimore agents, actually wrote the document, although such black signatories as William Cornish and George McGill helped influence its final content. Nevertheless, when published, it was presented without qualification as speaking in a black, procolonization voice, its authenticity vouched for by Harper and Latrobe.[13]

Like the two earlier documents, the 1826 memorial both maintained and subverted the significance of color. At one level, the memorial acknowledged that significance, as white Americans had come to define it by accepting the unlikelihood that black

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10. Botsford, *Sambo*, 9.

11. *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), August 12, 1817.

12. Robert Finley, "Dialogues on the African Colony," in *Memoirs of the Rev. Robert Finley*, ed. Isaac V. Brown (New Brunswick: Terhune & Letson, 1819), 336.

13. "Memorial of the Free People of Colour," *African Repository* 2 (1826).

Americans would ever fully fit into American society: Noting, "we reside among you, and yet are strangers," the memorial acknowledged, for its white readers, that its signatories were "an extraneous mass of men."[14]

At the same time, the memorial, like Finley's dialogue, was still a concession to the necessity for black participation in the colonization debate, one that dramatized the importance of black consent to colonization schemes by representing African Americans speaking for themselves on the Society's behalf. But, unlike either Finley's or Botsford's dialogues, there was a specific denial of fantasy in the memorial's presentation. Here, black Americans—opponents and proponents of colonization alike—were actually incorporated into the deliberative community, a logical conclusion to the taking of a black voice seriously.

This inclusion of the black voice was reinforced, substantively, by the content of the memorial itself. Its signatories described great hopes for the colonizationist venture, hopes not unprecedented in the American experience. Colonization was presented as a chance to build a nation, of which the colonists would themselves be "the fathers." White readers were informed that "an empire may be the result of our emigration," as it had been of their readers' ancestors, invoking a tie between black memorialists and white readers based on the possibility of a common historical experience.[15]

Such connections were directly related to the issue of voice, as it had come to be defined. In conceding the ability of African Americans to create a nation of their own, and one replicating the historical experience upon which America itself was said to be based, they had conceded the very competence which every form of discrimination and exclusion sought to deny. Once they had done this, they had, even more than Finley or Botsford, undermined the foundations of that "partition" of difference upon which their organization's entire program was based.

These early American documents illuminate much that came later in American culture and American letters, because they illustrate how difficult a black voice could be for whites to control, when they felt compelled to take it seriously. In each case, contradictions arose, undermining the case for separation and subordination, based on color, undermining the presentation of an American identity whose "whiteness" was ensured by a sufficiently distinctive imagery of people of African descent.

Thus, it is not surprising that one should find the kinds of processes of seizure and control that students of such forms as the minstrel show, or literary sterotyping, have revealed, because these were processes that responded to an insistent black voice with an effort to deny such a voice could have any credibility at all.

Such processes began even as Finley, Harper, and Latrobe were confronting thorny issues of dialogue and assent. Among the earliest black caricatures were those aimed at undermining the credibility of the most threatening black voice, that which turned American political and evangelical ideals toward the cause of "African" emancipation. As historian Shane White has shown, such caricatures began to appear in the late 1810s, in the so-called "Bobalition" broadsides, parodying, in ridiculous dialect, the growing number of actual African American speeches and pamphlets on behalf of freedom and equality. Caricaturing black speakers, the authors of these broadsides avoided the problem of credibility and inclusion that plagued even Botsford, as he sought to reconcile slavery with his evangelical beliefs.[16]

This effort itself casts some light on that white American obsession Morrison has called the "Africanist presence." If it be the case that white Americans' identity has included, as a strong component, color as such, then it is not difficult to see why the caricature of non-whites Morrison has described should be an important part of

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14. "Memorial," 296.

15. "Memorial," 297-98.

16. Shane White, "'It Was a Proud Day': African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741-1834," *Journal of American History* 81 (1994), 35.

maintaining that identity. However, the early American documents, which actually look in alternative directions, also show why caricature is not simply important, but essential, and why it must be asserted over and over again, as Morrison herself has said.

The problem for white Americans has never been simply a black presence, but, more, a black assertiveness, and a need to maintain whiteness against every proof blacks have provided that the whiteness white Americans have sought to maintain has no real meaning, no real basis in either nature or fact. Only by reducing the African to a "presence" could that voice be handled, and this, too, had to be done constantly to keep it in line. Understanding the power of the voice that presence has had to mask is an important part of understanding what an American identity has, historically, entailed.