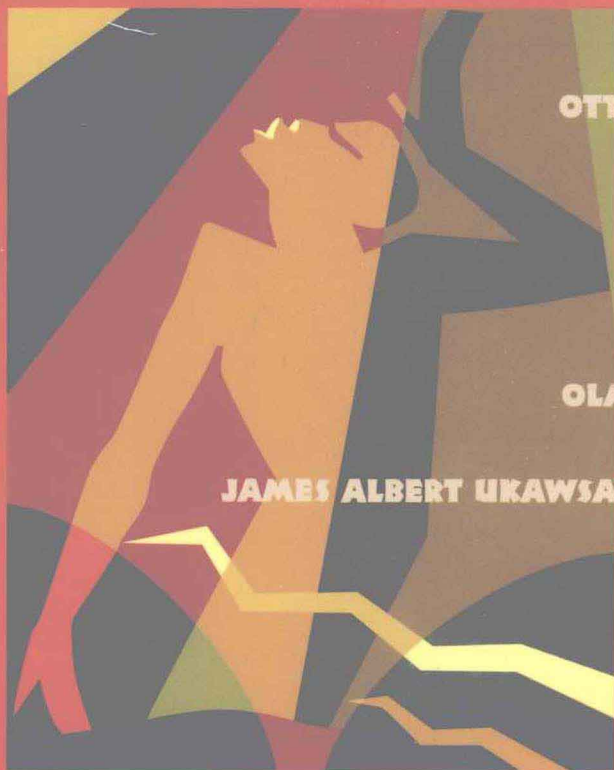


PIONEERS OF THE BLACK ATLANTIC

Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment

1772 – 1815



OTTOBAH CUGOANO

JOHN JEA

JOHN MARRANT

OLAUDAH EQUIANO

JAMES ALBERT UKAWSAW GRONNIO SAW

Henry Louis Gates Jr.
and William L. Andrews

PIONEERS OF THE BLACK ATLANTIC

FIVE SLAVE NARRATIVES FROM
THE ENLIGHTENMENT, 1772-1815

Edited by
Henry Louis Gates Jr.
William L. Andrews

CIVITAS
COUNTERPOINT
Washington, D.C.

Copyright © 1998 by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and William L. Andrews

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American
Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be used or
reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission
from the Publisher, except in the case of brief quotations
embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pioneers of the Black Atlantic : five slave narratives from the Enlightenment,
1772-1815 / edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., William L. Andrews.

p. cm.

1. Slaves—United States—Biography. 2. Slaves—Caribbean Area—
Biography. 3. Afro-Americans—History—To 1863—Sources. 4. Slaves'
writings, American. 5. American prose literature—Afro-American
authors. 6. Autobiography—Afro-American authors. 7. Slavery in
literature. I. Gates, Henry Louis. II. Andrews, William L., 1946-.

E444.P56 1998

973'.0496073—dc21 98-34796

CIP

ISBN 1-887178-98-8 (alk. paper)

Book design by David Bullen

Composition by Wilsted & Taylor Publishing Services

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper that meets the
American National Standards Institute Z39-48 Standard.

COUNTERPOINT

P.O. Box 65793

Washington, D.C. 20035-5793

Counterpoint is a member of the Perseus Books Group.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

FIRST PRINTING

PIONEERS OF THE BLACK ATLANTIC

OTHER BOOKS FROM CIVITAS

*The Civitas Anthology of
African American Slave Narratives*
edited by William L. Andrews
and Henry Louis Gates Jr.

*Black Saga: The African American
Experience: A Chronology*
by Charles M. Christian

*The Ordeal of Integration:
Progress and Resentment in
America's "Racial" Crisis*
by Orlando Patterson

Rituals of Blood
by Orlando Patterson

PREFACE

William L. Andrews

THIS BOOK CONTAINS the best work of the pioneers of the Black Atlantic literary and cultural tradition, now more than two centuries old. Instead of defining the African-descended peoples of the Atlantic world—triangulated by England, Africa, and the Americas—simply according to race, ethnicity, or nationality, Paul Gilroy, author of the widely influential *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), has argued that the Black Atlantic ought to be seen as “one single, complex unit” in which cultural, racial, economic, and political intermixing and exchange have been going on for four centuries. What if we seek the intellectual and expressive roots of English-speaking African-descended peoples of the Atlantic world in a transnational culture that, going back to the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, has always been malleable, multiple, and hybrid? What if we try to re-envision black writers of the past as sharing a common creolized cultural heritage that crossed national and ethnic boundaries and defied conventional political categories, social norms, and even literary genres? If such a creole heritage exists now, when did it begin? When eighteenth-century writers of the Black Atlantic confronted European Enlightenment notions of selfhood, race, and literacy, did their critique of these notions stem from simply a personal standpoint? Or did these early Black Atlantic writers also represent through their personal experience a cultural point of view, a set of beliefs and values embraced by African-descended peoples in the Atlantic world and articulated into a nascent literary tradition for successive generations of Black Atlantic writers to follow? The personal writings of the pioneering Black Atlantic writers in English—James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Ottobah Cugoana, John Marrant, Olaudah Equiano, and John Jea—address these questions, revealing the bed-rock experience and cultural commonalities on which many Black Atlantic literary traditions rest.

The idea of a Black Atlantic community of English-speaking writers, intellectuals, and activists visibly at work in the late eighteenth century, and transnational in their experience and point of view, is still relatively new. But the research of historians and critics such as

Henry Louis Gates Jr., Vincent Carretta, and Paul Edwards has provided considerable convincing evidence of a vibrant community of eighteenth-century black writers who knew and read each other and who shared common themes and aims. As we come to understand the so-called Age of Enlightenment in the West also as an age of unprecedented slave trading among Europe, Africa, and the Western Hemisphere, we realize that the struggle of African-descended people in that era to speak truth to white power and privilege originated in a community of unusually cosmopolitan and sophisticated people of color. *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic* attests to the key role that autobiography played in launching a cosmopolitan, transnational literary tradition by African-descended writers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

At home in a fluid and dynamic Atlantic world defined by multiple identifications with Africa, England, and America, the writers represented in *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic* cannot be easily categorized as African, African-American, or Afro-British. They were all truly men of the world. They were social and cultural creoles—incontestably and unashamedly black but with affinities, either by birth or experience, to various nations, colonies, and peoples. Hardy and adaptable by virtue of their wide travels in the Atlantic world, these writers seem to be at home everywhere and nowhere. Their unwavering commitment to Christianity, a bedrock of faith in their stormy, often perilous lives, reminds us of the spiritual foundation on which the antislavery movement in England and North America was built in the eighteenth century. The literary efforts of these pioneering writers to fashion a distinctly multicultural identity for themselves in their autobiographies resonate powerfully with our contemporary world.

Beginning in the 1770s, a handful of African-born men and women who had grown up in England or the Americas began to contribute in signal ways to the literature of the English-speaking world. In 1772, James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, a sixty-year-old former slave born in what is now Nigeria, interposed his African voice into English autobiography, dictating the harrowing story of his life to a white woman in the English midland town of Leominster. *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, As Related by Himself* was published in Bath in 1772; in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1774; in Dublin in 1790; and in Salem, New York, in 1809. A year after Gronniosaw's notable beginning, Phillis Wheatley, stolen from West Africa and enslaved in Bos-

ton, seized international celebrity through the publication in England of her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773). In a letter to her patron, Selina Hastings, countess of Huntington, to whom Wheatley had dedicated her book, the poet praised the countess for her financial support of and friendship toward Gronniosaw, who had also dedicated his narrative to the countess. In 1785 a third black writer who benefitted from the countess's patronage, John Marrant, gave the Atlantic world his story under the title *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black, (Now Going to Preach the Gospel in Nova Scotia) Born in New York, in North America*. Unlike Gronniosaw and Wheatley, Marrant was born in North America, not Africa. Since his parents were free, Marrant had no direct experience as a slave, although he witnessed the sufferings of slaves in South Carolina, where he spent much of his teenage years. What impressed William Aldridge, the Methodist minister who wrote Marrant's story and got it published in London, was the black man's gripping account of his captivity, deliverance, and successful preaching among the Cherokee Indians of South Carolina. Within three years of its appearance in 1785, Marrant's narrative had gone through six editions in England. As a story of the triumph of Christian faith over the trials of Indian captivity, Marrant's compact autobiography remained in print in multiple editions in England throughout the first three decades of the nineteenth century.

In 1787, a new tone of antislavery militance arose among Black Atlantic writers. Gronniosaw and Marrant said comparatively little about the injustices of slavery, stressing instead their deliverance from the bondage of sin and their dedication to serve as witnesses to God's redemptive work in their lives. In bold contrast, when Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, a native of the coastal regions of Ghana who had been sold into slavery in Grenada as a child, took up his pen, he used his autobiography as a pretext for an uncompromising critique of slavery and the slave trade. Published in London in 1787, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa* recounts enough of the author's past to establish his credentials as a knowledgeable commentator on the slave trade and slavery. The narrative then evolves into a treatise detailing Cugoano's case for the universal abolition of slavery. Translated into French, *Thoughts and Sentiments* appeared in Paris in 1788; in 1791 a short version of the text was published again in London. By

this time Cugoano, a seasoned antislavery agitator in a London-based black civil rights group known as the Sons of Africa, had witnessed the literary success of one of his fellow Sons of Africa activists, Olaudah Equiano, whose two-volume autobiography had created a sensation when it appeared in London in 1789. Authored by probably the most prominent black abolitionist of the Atlantic world, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* knit together the personal and the political so memorably that for the next fifty years it was Equiano's text, not those of Gronniosaw, Marrant, or even Cugoano, that would be cited as the founding narrative of slavery and freedom in English and American letters. More movingly than Gronniosaw or Cugoano, Equiano cast the Africa of his childhood as a pastoral idyll, far removed from the benighted and savage Africa of popular European myth. Equiano's was also a narrative of Christian conversion like that of Gronniosaw and Marrant, but unlike the other-worldliness of his predecessors' perspectives, in the early chapters of Equiano's *Life* the narrator's spiritual and secular aspirations emerge interdependently, leaving the reader with a sense that conversion and freedom are mutual and naturally linked. Written in an engaging plain style, Equiano's book received a number of favorable reviews in the British press, went through eight printings in its first five years, and had a substantial readership in the nineteenth-century United States as well as Great Britain.

As an all-purpose antislavery document and narrative of slavery overcome and Christian salvation attained, Equiano's narrative became, in effect, the canonical text, the measuring standard by which most slave narratives for the next quarter-century were read. During this time only a few slave narratives were published in English, and none had the backing of well-established whites or the reviews and international exposure of the *Life*. Still, John Jea's *Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher, Compiled and Written by Himself* (1815) belongs to the literary fraternity of Gronniosaw, Marrant, Cugoano, and Equiano. One of the last of the Black Atlantic slave narrators, Jea could claim actual African birth and a truly international purview. He had experienced the harsh lot of a slave in New York. After gaining his freedom he had pursued an itinerant preaching career that crisscrossed the Atlantic from the late 1790s to the time of the publication of his autobiography by an unknown English printer. Jea's outrage over slavery was as deep as Cugoano's. His

Christian faith was as firm as Gronniosaw's or Marrant's. His adventures at sea, had he portrayed them as fully as Equiano, had much potential appeal, especially among the English in the wake of the lost War of 1812. But John Jea was primarily a preacher, and his conviction that this part of his life, not his experience as a slave or his travels in the Atlantic world, was what most needed to be recorded suggests one reason why Jea's autobiography was the least read and, until recently, hardly known in comparison to the other four texts reprinted in *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic*.

Still, like his predecessors in the invocation of the "trope of the talking book" (discussed in detail in the introduction to this volume), John Jea was a Black Atlantic writer who featured in a dramatic and highly individualized way his coming to self-consciousness and to a sense of his destiny as a free man through the attainment of literacy. Making literacy the key to both secular and spiritual salvation for black people throughout the Atlantic world, and demonstrating the liberating effect of the power of the word in their own lives, Gronniosaw, Marrant, Cugoano, Equiano, and Jea laid the literary and sociopolitical groundwork for the great slave narratives of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and the North American antislavery crusade of the nineteenth century.

EDITOR'S NOTE

THE TEXTS IN THIS VOLUME have been edited, but not abridged, to facilitate contemporary reading. The long *s* [f], which was used routinely in eighteenth-century English printing, but which looks like an *f* to today's reader, has been printed as an *s* in the texts of this edition. We have modernized and/or emended the spelling of words in these texts to conform to contemporary American English usage. Thus words such as "honour," "defence," "chequered," "staid," "shew," "ancles," and "merchandize" in the original texts are emended to read "honor," "defense," "checkered," "stayed," "show," "ankles," and "merchandise," respectively. Whenever the spelling of a proper name differs significantly from today's spelling, we have emended the spelling of that proper name. Thus "Martinico," "Charles-town," and "Musquito," for instance, have been emended to Martinique, Charleston, and Miskito. Italicized words and passages in the original texts have been preserved in italics in this edition, but some unitalicized terms that are normally italicized in today's usage—such as the names of ships or the titles of books—have been italicized in this edition as an aid to the reader. Single words such as "anything," "everyone," "forever," and "today" that in the eighteenth century usually appeared as two words—"any thing," "every one," "for ever," and "to-day"—are printed in accordance with twentieth-century usage. The archaic term "viz." (an abbreviation of the Latin *videlicet*) has been translated into "namely" in this edition. Obvious inconsistencies in spelling within a given text have been silently corrected, but when a text employs variant spellings of a word, such as "intreat" and "entreat," and there is no clear indication of which spelling would have been the author's preference or in established usage at the time, we have not emended or attempted to regularize the variants. The inconsistent use of "an" and "a" in these texts, yielding constructions such as "an universal good" or "an history," has been regularized in accordance with twentieth-century practices.

We have generally not attempted to regularize inconsistencies in capitalization within or among the texts, nor have we imposed contemporary capitalization style. Terms normally capitalized today, such as Negro or the Bible, often appear in lower case. Punctuation

practices in these texts often diverge markedly from contemporary practices, for example, in the use of commas and the use of dashes. To preserve the flavor of eighteenth-century punctuation, we have generally left punctuation unaltered, substituting contemporary practices only in certain instances for clarity's sake, such as in the treatment of block quotations. Quotations from the Bible in these texts have not been emended or corrected, nor have their accompanying biblical citations been corrected. However, the style of biblical citations has been regularized throughout.

William L. Andrews

PIONEERS OF THE BLACK ATLANTIC

**FIVE SLAVE NARRATIVES FROM
THE ENLIGHTENMENT, 1772-1815**

CONTENTS

Preface *William L. Andrews* vii

Editor's Note xiii

Introduction: The Talking Book *Henry Louis Gates Jr.* 1

I

A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars
in the Life of *James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw*,
an African Prince, As Related by Himself 31

2

Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings
with *John Marrant*, a Black 61

3

Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic
of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species,
Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great Britain,
by *Ottobah Cugoana*, a Native of Africa 83

4

The Interesting Narrative of
the Life of *Olaudah Equiano*, or *Gustavus Vassa*,
the African, Written by Himself 183

5

The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of
John Jea, the African Preacher,
Compiled and Written by Himself 367

INTRODUCTION: THE TALKING BOOK

Henry Louis Gates Jr.

*Let us to the Press Devoted Be,
Its Light will Shine and Speak Us Free.*

—DAVID RUGGLES, 1835

THE AFRO-AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITION begins, tellingly, with the writings of African slaves in the New World. But “the literature of the slave” is an ironic phrase, at the very least. “Literature,” as Samuel Johnson used the term, denoted an “acquaintance with ‘letters’ or books”; it also connoted “polite or humane learning” and “literary culture.” While it is clearly true that the slaves who had managed to “steal” some learning (in Frederick Douglass’s phrase) were keen to demonstrate an acquaintance with letters or books to a skeptical public, it is difficult to claim that slave literature was meant to exemplify polite or humane learning, or to serve as evidence of a black literary culture. Indeed, it is more accurate to say that these texts represent *im-polite* learning, and that they rail against the *arbitrary* and *inhumane* learning that masters foisted on slaves in order to reinforce a perverse fiction of the “natural” order of things. The slave wrote not only to demonstrate humane letters, but also to demonstrate his or her own membership in the human community.

To a remarkable extent, black writers have created works that express a broad “concord of sensibilities”¹ shared by persons of African descent in the Western Hemisphere, works that continue to be strangely resonant, and relevant, as the twenty-first century draws near. Indeed, the texts of the Afro-American literary tradition share patterns and details of striking similarity. But why? Has a common experience—or, more accurately, a shared perception of a common experience—been responsible for the sharing of this text of blackness? It would be foolish to say no. But shared modes of figuration only result when writers read each other’s texts and seize upon themes and

1. The phrase, used to brilliant effect by Ralph Ellison, belongs to Kenneth Burke.

figures to revise in their own texts. This form of revision grounds each individual work in a larger context, and creates formal lines of continuity between the texts that together constitute the shared text of blackness.

What seems clear upon reading the earliest texts by black writers in English—and the critical texts that respond to these black writings—is that the production of literature was taken to be the central arena in which persons of African descent could establish and redefine their status within the human community. Black people, the evidence suggests, had to represent themselves as “speaking subjects” before they could begin to destroy their status as objects, as commodities, within Western culture. For centuries, Europeans had questioned whether the African “species of men” could ever master the arts and sciences; that is, whether they could create literature. If they could, the argument ran, then the African variety of humanity and the European variety were fundamentally related. If not, then it seemed that the African was predestined by nature to be a slave.

To answer that question, several whites in Europe and America undertook experiments in which young African slaves were tutored alongside white children. Phillis Wheatley was the result of one such experiment; other notables include Francis Williams, a Jamaican who took the B.A. at Cambridge before 1750; Jacobus Capitein, who earned several degrees in Holland; Anton Wilhelm Amo, who took the doctorate in philosophy at Halle, Germany; and Ignatius Sancho, who published a volume of letters in 1782. Their published writings, in Latin, Dutch, German, and English, were scrutinized and employed by both sides in the slavery debates.

So widespread was the debate over “the nature of the African” in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that writing by blacks found a large audience, and was often subject to review by the most eminent authorities. (Not until the Harlem Renaissance would black literature again be taken so seriously.) Phillis Wheatley’s reviewers included Voltaire, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Samuel Rush, and James Beatty, to name only a few. Francis Williams’s work was analyzed by David Hume and Immanuel Kant. (Hegel, writing in the *Philosophy of History* in 1813, took the absence of writing among Africans as the sign of their innate inferiority.) The list of commentators is extensive, amounting to a veritable “Who’s Who” of the French, Scottish, and American Enlightenments.

Why was the writing of the African of such importance to the eigh-

teenth century's debate over slavery? I can briefly outline one thesis: after Descartes, reason was privileged over all other human characteristics, and writing was taken to be the visible sign of reason. Blacks were reasonable, and hence "men," only if they could demonstrate mastery of "the arts and sciences"—that is, writing. Although the Enlightenment was predicated on man's ability to reason, it also made the "absence" of reason the criterion by which to circumscribe the humanity of the people and cultures of color that Europeans had been "discovering" since the Renaissance. The concomitant urge to systematize all human knowledge resulted in the relegation of black people to a lower rung on the "Great Chain of Being," a way of ordering the universe and a metaphor that arrayed all of creation on a vertical scale from animals, plants, and insects, to humans, and on to the angels and to God himself. By 1750, "man" had been further subdivided, on a human scale that ascended from "the lowliest Hottentot" to "glorious Milton and Newton."

The stakes were high: if blacks could be shown to be capable of imaginative literature, they might jump a few links of the Chain of Being, in a pernicious game of "Mother, May I?" The Reverend James W. C. Pennington, a former slave and prominent black abolitionist—and also, incidentally, the author of a slave narrative—appealed to this faintly perverse notion in his prefatory note to Ann Plato's 1841 collected writings: "The history of the arts and sciences is the history of individuals, of individual nations." Only by publishing these kinds of books, he argues, can blacks demonstrate "the fallacy of that stupid theory, that nature has done nothing but fit us for slaves, and that art cannot unfit us for slavery!"

If writing, then, was a crucial terrain of black struggles in the Age of Enlightenment, the concern to make themselves heard—that is, to inscribe their voices in the written word—was a primary motivation for those former slaves who chose to narrate the stories of their enslavement and redemption. Among the most compelling documents of this effort to record an authentic black voice in the text of Western letters is the trope of the Talking Book, a strangely insistent metaphor, a curious image that appears in many of the eighteenth-century black texts published in English. The repetition of this figure—and, more importantly, the revision of it—is also our best evidence that the earliest writers of the Anglo-African tradition were self-conscious readers of each other's texts.

While the explication of the trope of the Talking Book enables us to