SKIN GAME: RACE AND THE CONFIDENCE MAN IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

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Abstract

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In the century and a half that has passed since the publication of Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man*, the text has come to be regarded as the quintessential novel on the subject of confidence men and confidence games in mid-nineteenth-century America. Melville's confidence man, however, scarcely resembles the readily recognizable, fast-talking white flimflammer that twentieth- and twenty-first century readers have come to expect. By turns black or white, rich or poor, verbose or mute, greedy or charitable, Melville's confidence man — indeed, the true confidence man of the nineteenth century — proves a far more diverse and interesting subject. In this dissertation I argue that, for the most part, antebellum Americans did not make the same distinctions as modern scholars between white and black confidence men, but rather recognized them as players of the same game, a "skin game" in which actual skin had an important role to play. Evidence for this claim abounds: we find it in the discourse of the pseudosciences of phrenology and physiognomy, in the works of Melville and William Wells Brown, in the writings of proslavery novelists and public letters of abolitionists, and in the works of freemen and women, former slaves, and their descendants. These writers and thinkers were fascinated by the twin problems of race and confidence in equal measure, and were, moreover, inclined to equate these two problems with one another, a fact that has gone largely unexamined in literary scholarship. This dissertation strives to recover that lost connection and restore the confidence man to his rightful place at the heart of American racial discourse.

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INTRODUCTION.

Race and the Confidence Game

In July 1849, the *New York Herald* reported the arrest of William Thompson, ("known as the 'Confidence Man'") on charges of theft. The crime for which he would be convicted, however, was no ordinary robbery; in fact, Thompson's victims had parted with their valuables quite willingly, placing their full confidence in a man whom they had only just met. The *Herald*'s description of their interactions with Thompson offered a cautionary tale in the perils of misplaced trust:

> [Thompson] would go up to a perfect stranger in the street, and being a man of genteel appearance, would easily command an interview. Upon this interview he would say after some little conversation, 'have you confidence in me to trust me with your watch until to-morrow;' the stranger at this novel request, supposing him to be some old acquaintance not at that moment recollected, allows him to take the watch, thus placing 'confidence' in the honesty of the stranger, who walks off laughing and the other supposing it to be a joke allows him to do so. In this way many have been duped. ("Arrest of the Confidence Man")

Though he was the first confidence man to be called by that name, Thompson was certainly not the first person to have taken advantage of the increasingly anonymous environment of the rapidly growing American city or to have exploited the willingness of men and women to place their confidence in a "genteel appearance"; however, the publicity surrounding his arrest did offer a new and memorable name for a deceptive practice known rather awkwardly in the

parlance of the day as "humbugging" or "diddling."[1] The moniker of "confidence man," and its counterpart "confidence game," would gain ready acceptance as terms denoting deceivers and deceptions that practiced upon the confidence of their victims.[2]

The report of Thompson's initial arrest may have caught the eye of a twenty-nine-year-old Herman Melville, though it would be several years before the term "confidence man" would appear in his work.[3] As a writer deeply interested in his own cultural moment, Melville would certainly have been aware of the term's surging popularity by the time William Thompson resurfaced in 1855;[4] stories of other confidence men appeared with regularity in the newspapers and magazines of the day, and confidence-man figures had already begun to appear in fiction and on the stage before he began work on the last novel he would publish during his lifetime, *The Confidence-Man; His Masquerade* (1857).[5] Melville's *The Confidence-Man* has come to be regarded as the quintessential novel on the subject of confidence men and confidence games in mid-nineteenth-century America. His title character and subject for that work was a type increasingly popular in a variety of cultural forms, but the confidence man also had a multitude of real-life counterparts operating on the streets of big cities and small towns, on the rivers and the railroads, in the gold mines and on the cotton plantations throughout the young nation and its territories. *The Confidence-Man* suggests the sheer diversity of these confidence men and their respective schemes through a single, but perplexingly protean, entity — the shape-shifting

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[1] The word "humbug," meaning a hoax or trick, dates to the mid-eighteenth century; for "to diddle" we must look to James Kenney's 1803 farce *Raising the Wind*, which features a shifty swindler called Jeremy Diddler.
[2] For more on the rapid escalation and acceptance of the use of the terms "confidence man" and "confidence game" see Johannes Dietrich Bergmann's "The Original Confidence Man" (1969).
[3] Confidence men were not entirely absent from his work prior to *The Confidence-Man*, however. See for instance, "The Lightning-rod Man" (1854).
[4] For more on Melville's abiding interest in cultural trends, see David S. Reynolds' *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (1988).
[5] For instance, a version of the confidence man's tale was brought to the stage almost immediately after William Thompson's arrest by John Brougham and William E. Burton (Bergmann 568). Melville's last novel, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, would be published posthumously in 1924.

confidence man of the title. By turns black or white, rich or poor, verbose or mute, greedy or charitable, Melville's confidence man scarcely resembles the readily recognizable, fast-talking white flimflammer that twentieth- and twenty-first century readers have come to expect. Melville's confidence man — indeed, the true confidence man of the nineteenth century — proves a far more diverse and interesting subject.

Race, in particular, was at the very center of Melville's exploration of the confidence-man figure, though it is frequently absent from those of literary critics; indeed, *The Confidence-Man* begins with the appearance, in succession, of two "colored" manifestations of the central figure — the deaf and mute "man in cream colors" and the "grotesque negro cripple" Black Guinea (9, 17). White and black respectively, these two expressions of the confidence man are the first indication in this work that, to Melville's mind at least, the confidence game and the race game were never far apart. In this he differed little from his contemporaries, who were, as I will show, fascinated by the twin problems of race and confidence in equal measure. They were, moreover, inclined to equate these two problems with one another, a fact that has gone largely unexamined in literary scholarship. This dissertation strives to recover that lost connection and restore the confidence man to his rightful place at the heart of American racial discourse. Melville's *The Confidence-Man* marks an important turning point in the literary history of race and the confidence game, but it was by no means either the beginning or the end of that history; for the context of his approach we must reexamine the history of the confidence man in nineteenth-century America through the lens of contemporary discourse on the subject of race.

Scholarship on the subject of the confidence game in American literature has seldom considered race in any way. That absence, though, speaks not to a dearth of material upon which to comment, but rather to the particularly tenacious image of the fast-talking *white* confidence

man in modern memory and to the persistent divisions between white and black literary scholarship. In this work I will show that, for the most part, antebellum Americans did not make the same distinctions as modern scholars between white and black confidence men, but rather recognized them as players of the same game, a "skin game" in which actual skin often had an important role to play.[6] This is not to say that they perceived no differences between confidence men of different colors, only that they frequently recognized those differences as variations of a single type rather than as the characteristics of distinct entities. Evidence for this claim abounds: we find it in the discourse of the pseudosciences of phrenology and physiognomy, in Melville's works and in those of William Wells Brown, in the writings of proslavery novelists and in the public letters of abolitionists, and in the works of freemen and women, former slaves, and their descendants. By examining these works, we put Melville's into its appropriate context, but more importantly, we gain a deeper understanding of the conflicts, contradictions, anxieties, and aspirations of the world he inhabited and how that world would become our own.

* * *

Melville's *The Confidence-Man* begins with a vision in white, the deaf-mute "man in cream colors" with his "downy" chin and "flaxen" hair standing "suddenly" on the waterfront in St. Louis awaiting the arrival of a southbound steamboat (9). Once aboard the *Fidèle*, the "floating city" that will serve as setting for the entire novel, he proceeds to scrawl scripture on a slate calling upon his fellow travelers to demonstrate greater "charity," a message that meets the rough indifference of the other passengers (11). His whiteness, his mute tolerance of abuse, and his plea for charity invite the reader to associate him with the meek and lamblike Christ;

[6] I am using the term "skin game" rather anachronistically here and in this title to this dissertation. The Oxford English Dictionary dates the first appearance of the phrase to 1863, and then only as a term for a rigged card game. It was not until 1879 that the phrase acquired its modern meaning as a more general term for a scam or a swindle.

however, within the world of the text his figure proves considerably more difficult to read. The very verses he cites from 1 Corinthians 13 blur the meaning of charity, which at once suggests benevolence, love, and trust: “Charity thinketh no evil” (11). As his slate’s meaning seems fluid, so his physical form inspires a lengthy debate among the travellers who witness his activities and ask one another whether he is a “Green prophet from Utah” or a “Spirit-rapper,” a figure of “Singular innocence” or a “Humbug!“ and agree only that his appearance “Means something” (14). Their interpretative exercise has been repeated for decades as literary critics have debated whether to regard the man in cream colors as the first manifestation of the confidence man or some kind of angelic visitor, perhaps even Christ himself. His silence and mild manner certainly defy our persistent memory of the bold and verbose confidence man; however, his message of greater trust, if heeded, would make his audience more vulnerable to the confidence game. He may be “priming the pump,” so to speak, and if so, he is at the very least in league with the confidence men who will follow him. His appearance on April Fools’ Day only serves to deepen the contradiction; in their haste to interpret the man in cream colors, Melville’s readers, like his passengers, may play the fool to a master confidence man.

This vision in white is immediately followed by one in somewhat darker hues: the apparently disabled, apparently African-American beggar Black Guinea. A “curious object” and thus the subject of much curiosity, Black Guinea seeks the charity the man in cream colors sought to inspire among the passengers (18). Claiming to be a “dog widout a massa,” that is, a freeman and not a slave or a runaway, Black Guinea begs, first by simply moving from passenger to passenger, and later by initiating a game of pitch-penny in which he catches donations with his mouth. Initially successful in his “game of charity,” Black Guinea’s identity, like that of the man in cream colors, soon becomes the subject of debate after being brought into

question by another apparently disabled passenger, the "limping, gimlet-eyed" man with the wooden leg (19). Though Black Guinea certainly appears to have "something wrong about his legs" the man with the wooden leg raises the suspicions of the crowd by suggesting that he is participating in what Ellen Samuels has called the "disability con," in short that his apparent disability is "sham, got up for financial purposes" (19).[7] Rather than a disabled and genuinely needy beggar, he may be a "black Jeremy Diddler," a new iteration of the famously shifty character in James Kenney's 1803 farce *Raising the Wind* whose name had become synonymous with the confidence game (24).

Alternatively, the man with the wooden leg suggests, Black Guinea may be faking his race as well as his disability; he might not be black at all, but a "white operator, betwisted and painted up for a decoy" (21). If the man with the wooden leg is correct, then the passengers have become victims of a confidence game with its basis in contemporary racial discourse. By putting on blackface, Black Guinea would be laying claim to a racial identity that during the antebellum period had become associated with dependence and a lack of innate capability; those who defended the continued use of slave labor in the South and the persistent racial inequality in the North frequently attempted to justify their positions by suggesting that blacks were intellectually, physically, and morally weaker than whites and thus in need of constant assistance. As Susan M. Ryan shows in *The Grammar of Good Intentions*, the idea of black poverty was naturalized "such that the black person as supplicant came to seem commonsensical" to antebellum Americans (67). If indeed Black Guinea is merely masquerading as black, then he is

[7] For more on the treatment of disability in Melville's works, see *Leviathan* 8.1 (2006), which features several articles on this subject including Ellen Samuel's "From Melville to Eddie Murphy: The Disability Con in American Literature and Film."

manipulating his appearance to appear less capable, and therefore more needy, the better to appeal to the impulses of the charitable.

Later the man in gray, another manifestation of the confidence man, will defend Black Guinea against the man with the wooden leg's charge by suggesting the impossibility of such a successful manipulation of racial appearances:

> 'A white masquerading as a black? … do you really think that a white could look the negro so? For one, I should call it pretty good acting.'
>
> 'Not much better than any other man acts.'
>
> 'I ask again, if a white, how could he look the negro so?'
>
> 'Never saw the negro-minstrels, I suppose?'
>
> 'Yes, but they are apt to overdo the ebony; exemplifying the old saying, not more just than charitable, that "the devil is never so black as he is painted."' (40-41)

Like all confidence men, the man in gray encourages his dupes to trust in themselves and their own ability to tell the difference between true and false identities. His argument runs counter not only to the man with the wooden leg's, but also to the increasing awareness of nineteenth-century Americans that race and racial characteristics sometimes supposed to be innate could in fact be faked. Audiences of the minstrel shows referenced by the man with the wooden leg often mistook the whites in blackface for genuine African Americans, and their parody of black culture was frequently thought to mirror the realities of plantation life. Such manipulations were clearly possible, and the man with the wooden leg suggests that Black Guinea merely performs his racial identity, appearing to be a helplessly indigent African American precisely because that is the persona best calculated to elicit sympathy and charitable aid.

The conversation between the man in gray and the man with the wooden leg hinges upon the confidence each purports to feel in his own ability to tell black from white, real from fake, and the genuine article from the counterfeit. Of course, as a confidence man himself the man in gray has a vested interest in encouraging the kind of trust in appearances disdained by the man with the wooden leg. The man in gray insists that the appearance of racial differences is never truly deceiving; even a good disguise is not a perfect one (as when negro minstrels go overboard with their burnt cork), and a bit of investigation will soon reveal the truth. Interestingly, the man with the wooden leg espouses confidence as well, though it is the superior discernment of blanket skepticism in which he places his trust; all men are actors, and therefore all men perform and thereby deceive. Only by suspecting everyone can he keep himself safe from the machinations of the confidence man.

Eager to chart a middle course between (potentially violent) skepticism and naïveté, the passengers attempt to find some external means of verifying Black Guinea's identity, "putting the negro fairly and discreetly to the question … [and] asking him, had he any documentary proof, any plain paper about him, attesting that his case was not a spurious one" (20-21). Appearances having failed to reveal that identity, they might, as many nineteenth-century charitable persons did, put their trust in a piece of paper.[8] Alas, Black Guinea has none of "dem waloable papers," though he can provide a list of passengers willing to vouch for the authenticity of his apparent identity:

> dar is aboard here a werry nice, good ge'mman wid a weed, and a ge'mman wid a big book, too; and a yarb-doctor; and a ge'mman with a yaller west; and a

[8] Such requests for written verification from would-be charitable givers were not uncommon in the nineteenth-century. For more on charitable practices, see Susan M. Ryan's *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence* (2003).

> ge'mman wid a brass plate; and a ge'mman in a wiolet robe; and a ge'mman as is a sodier; and ever so many good, kind, honest ge'mmen more aboard what knows me and will speak for me, God bress 'em; yes, and what knows me as well as dis poor old darkie knows hisself. (21)

As readers will discover, Black Guinea's list of friends is also a list of confidence men (or rather, manifestations of the same confidence man), and therefore presumably a list of those who, like the man in gray, will counsel others to place their trust in appearances.[9] In seeking to unmask the confidence man, the passengers have no recourse beyond application of other confidence men. As so many Americans were discovering in the midcentury, there is no way to verify identity, no way to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the person before us is the person they claim to be.

"Looks are one thing and facts are another," cautions the man with the wooden leg, and for many Americans that statement must have seemed especially true in the years leading up to the Civil War (22). Melville's confidence man harnessed the power of the widespread social change underway in the United States; indeed, he relied upon that change for his very existence. The rapid urbanization of the American population in the first half of the nineteenth century led to an increase in anonymity, a loss of personal connections between individuals, and a growing awareness that individuals were existing in what urban ethnographer Lyn H. Lofland has called the "world of strangers."[10] Onboard the *Fidèle*, Melville creates a microcosm of the modern city, a world of strangers and "strangers still more strange" (15):

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[9] The list Black Guinea provides also proves inaccurate as a map to the confidence men presented by the text; not all of the characters Black Guinea mentions will appear in *The Confidence-Man* though it is unclear whether Melville meant to include these characters and simply failed to do so, or whether Black Guinea's list is itself a confidence game Melville plays upon his readers.

[10] I follow Karen Halttunen in borrowing the phrase "world of strangers" from Lofland's *A World of Strangers: Order and Action in Urban Public Space* (1974).

> Natives of all sorts, and foreigners; men of business and men of pleasure; parlor men and backwoodsmen; farm-hunters and fame-hunters; heiress-hunters, gold-hunters, and still keener hunters after all these hunters. Fine ladies in slippers, and moccasined squaws; Northern speculators and Eastern philosophers; English, Irish, German, Scotch, Danes; Santa Fe traders in striped blankets, and Broadway bucks in cravats of cloth of gold; fine-looking Kentucky boatmen, and Japanese-looking Mississippi cotton-planters; Quakers in full drab, and United States soldiers in full regimentals; slaves, black, mulatto, quadroon; modish young Spanish Creoles, and old-fashioned French Jews; Mormons and Papists; Dives and Lazarus; jesters and mourners, teetotalers and convivialists, deacons and blacklegs; hard-shell Baptists and clay-eaters; grinning negroes, and Sioux chiefs solemn as high-priests. In short, a piebald parliament, an Anacharsis Cloots congress of all kind of that multiform pilgrim species, man. (16)

All types may be present, but as the crowd's reaction to the deaf-mute "man in cream colors" demonstrates, telling those types apart can prove an impossible task.

Hypocrisy, and thus the confidence game, most easily flourished where identities could not be verified and appearances might be taken for reality by those who failed to remain vigilant, or even, as we shall see, those who applied very careful scrutiny. According to Karen Halttunen, sentimentalism, and its attendant focus on sincerity, was the result. The "'sincerity' system" Halttunen detects at work in the conduct manuals and ladies' fashion magazines of the period dominated and dictated modes of polite social conduct ranging from mourning the dead to choosing the right style of bonnet; members of the middle-class demonstrated that they were not hypocrites, and were thus worthy of social advancement, "[b]y donning 'sincere' dress, adhering

to ‘sincere’ forms of courtesy, and practicing ‘sincere’ bereavement” (xvi). Indeed, the very conduct manuals that espoused adherence to the “cult of sincerity” offered guidance in how to *appear* sincere, suggestions that might be adopted by the very hypocrites these works were intended to subvert. Confidence men learned to ape the sincerity and openness that sentimental writers insisted were the hallmarks of the honest, and their dupes, unable to tell true sincerity from its counterfeit fell victim to the confidence game.

The inability to tell the sincere from the hypocritical, the genuine from the fake, and the authentic from the inauthentic is at the heart of Melville’s project, but it was not unknown to his contemporaries. The problem was one Edgar Allan Poe — a writer perhaps as fascinated by confidence men as Melville himself — took up in “Marginalia [Part VIII]” (first published in *Graham’s Magazine*, November 1846), in response to William Newnham’s then recently published *Human Magnetism; Its Claims to Dispassionate Inquiry: Being an Attempt to Show the Utility of Its Application for the Relief of Human Suffering* (1845).[11] In that work, Newnham, a defender of the popular pseudoscience, maintains that the very existence of fraudulent practitioners of human magnetism proves that the genuine practice must be possible — much as the reality of a counterfeit coin *proves* the existence of authentic currency (9-10). “[W]hile agreeing with its general conclusions” on the possibility of magnetism, Poe finds fault with Newnham’s rhetorical maneuvers regarding the nature of the genuine and the counterfeit:

> Counterfeit coin is said to prove the existence of genuine: — this, of course, is no more than the truism that there can be no counterfeit where there is no genuine — just as there can be no badness where there is no goodness — the terms being

[11] Human magnetism, more commonly called animal magnetism or mesmerism and a forerunner of our modern practice of hypnosis, denotes a number of different pseudoscientific beliefs and healing practices based upon the assumption that human beings possessed a kind of life energy or fluid that might be acted upon by other persons. Originated by Franz Mesmer in the eighteenth-century, magnetism experienced widespread popularity in the nineteenth.

> purely relative. But *because* there can be no counterfeit where there is no original, does it in any manner follow that an undemonstrated original exists? In seeing a spurious coin we know it to be such by comparison with coins *admitted* to be genuine; but were *no* coin admitted to be genuine, how should we establish the counterfeit, and what right should we have to talk of counterfeit at all? (Poe, "Marginalia" 247)[12]

Poe's argument rests upon a distinction between the counterfeit coin and the counterfeit man; while suspect coins may be verified by reference to a demonstrated original, a coin already "*admitted* to be genuine," practitioners of human magnetism have no original to which they may appeal, no verifiably authentic practice to which their own may be compared. As such, false practitioners are not counterfeits at all in Poe's estimation, but merely frauds or confidence men.

Between the counterfeit object and the counterfeit man, Poe seems content to draw a broad line, but the case may not be quite as simple as he would have it. The enduring popularity of the analogy between counterfeit coins and confidence men — most clearly evidenced in their shared vocabulary of "passing" — suggests that Newnham, while hopelessly wrong in the particulars of human magnetism, was at least partly right in his choice of comparisons.[13] Poe's response belies the extraordinary difficulties encountered by antebellum Americans in their efforts to separate counterfeit money from true, a difficulty comparable to that of separating confidence men and hypocrites from honest citizens; detecting authentic paper money in the morass created by a thriving counterfeit culture was often a Herculean, or even Sisyphean, feat.

[12] This same passage was of apparent interest to Jacques Derrida, who includes it (with some omissions) as an epigraph at the beginning of chapter four in *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (first published as *Donne le temps* in 1991).

[13] Melville chose the same analogy between counterfeit coins and counterfeit men when he named his African American confidence man Black Guinea. An authentic Guinea would be made of gold and thus should never blacken or tarnish.

Stephen Mihm, in his *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (2007), maintains that the counterfeiter was "arguably the most ubiquitous and sophisticated of all confidence men" operating in the antebellum period (10-11), a fact which may be ascribed at least in part to the cultural context: the lack of a central agency responsible for issuing paper money; the sheer number of corporations permitted to issue that money in their own design; the fragility and volatility of the banking system; and, most importantly, the rapidly increasing degree to which business was conducted between strangers all combined to create an environment in which counterfeit money could and did circulate with impunity alongside "genuine" currency. Unlike personal notes, bank notes did not rely upon a prior or continuing relationship between the two persons involved in the transaction; their success depended upon confidence of a different kind, a confidence in the banking institutions who printed the bill and in the willingness of others to receive it.[14] At the heart of the issue of the counterfeit was confidence: "Bills could function whether counterfeit or not," Mihm writes, "so long as they entered into circulation with enough trust on the part of the person receiving them. … At its core, capitalism was little more than a confidence game" (11). At least in terms of functionality, where money was concerned, in some settings there was *no* difference between the authentic and the inauthentic.

Newnham asserts, and Poe concedes, that the counterfeit coin *proves* the existence of an original genuine currency, but both should have recognized the relationship between the

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[14] "Paper money is itself an indication of the growing contact with strangers," Stephen Mihm explains. "[Bank notes] originated with often distant corporations, entered into the streams of commerce, and floated far away from the legal abstractions that had issued them. Anyone could use them; their worth did not depend on the assets of the individual who presented them, but on confidence in corporate fortunes. Strangers could use them when transacting business with other strangers, and bank notes thus became the preferred payment in retail transactions, where individuals who had never met and might never meet again could do business. And it was in this newly anonymous setting that the counterfeiter, like all confidence men, made his money" (Mihm 12).

counterfeit and its original as somewhat more fraught, hardly the subject for truisms of any kind. Under the circumstances described by Mihm — and experienced first-hand by Newnham, Poe, and virtually all the writers of the first half of the nineteenth century — the existence of the counterfeit serves rather to destabilize the identity of the genuine currency (by rendering its admittance *as* genuine more difficult or impossible) than to prove it. Melville illustrates this dilemma in the final pages of *The Confidence-Man*, in which the old man consults a counterfeit detector in his effort to verify the authenticity of two bank notes. Such detectors, sold by publishers to aid shopkeepers and average citizens in telling true currency from false, were, as Melville demonstrates, virtually impossible to use for the uninitiated and were likely to produce more confusion than clarity. They were also, as Mihm points out, vulnerable to counterfeiting themselves (Mihm 249). The old man in Melville's illustration is forced to give up his efforts as "hopeless," still uncertain of the status of his bills (Melville 248).

Faced with the often impossible task of detecting counterfeits by their physical markings, some took to examining the persons who passed them instead, an effort doomed to failure from the outset since counterfeit persons were even more difficult to detect than their paper counterparts. Like other confidence men, the "shovers" of counterfeit bills put on the outward signifiers of groups most associated with sincerity — working-class women employed as shovers, for instance, donned the clothing of middle-class ladies or borrowed small children in order to appear more trustworthy, thus playing upon their dupes' assumptions regarding middle-class respectability, feminine weakness, or maternal tenderness (Mihm 232). Their confidence games were predicated upon the assumption that appearances would correspond to innate identities — the woman who appeared to the critical eye to be a trustworthy middle-class mother would prove to be such in fact — an assumption that was frequently challenged by reports of

confidence games circulated in local and national presses. As Halttunen has shown, middle-class urbanites fretted over the presence of confidence men and women in their midst and devised complicated, and largely ineffective, means of detecting them. Of course, like the wary shopkeeper inspecting a bill, the more these dupes scrutinized the appearances of confidence men and women the more likely they were to be fooled. As Peter J. Bellis notes in his study of Melville's novels, "interpretation is a labyrinthine entanglement that yields no firm or definite result," and the greater the effort to interpret, the greater that entanglement (166). After all, the very fact that they could be fooled, that identity could be faked, questioned the notion of identity at its very root. If, at its core, all identity was always already a matter of imitation and performance, then might it too prove an undemonstrated original?

These general worries over identity were particularly troubling where race was concerned. Race seemed at times the most stable of American identities; skin color was not just a suit of clothes to be changed on a whim, and linked to that skin color any number of assumptions might be attached. The appearance of blackness carried with it multiple, often contradictory, stereotypes, but those stereotypes often seemed "commonsensical," perhaps even comforting (Ryan 67). There are suggestions that African-Americans frequently acted as counterfeit shovers, perhaps because white shopkeepers were more likely to believe them too foolish to be capable of perpetrating a fraud (Mihm 232). Like white female shovers, black confidence men in general relied upon stereotypes regarding their comparative intelligence, their innate innocence, and their general gullibility. However, these assumptions, based on racialist science and pseudoscience, tradition, and wishful thinking, were undermined by the incredible popularity of the blackface minstrel show as well as the increasing acknowledgment of the successful racial "passing." Skin could, after all, be changed, by the application of burnt cork or by generations of

"amalgamation." Racial identity was not fixed after all, but continually shifting; like animal magnetism, race was proving to have only an "undemonstrated original."

The questions that arise regarding the identity of Black Guinea speak to exactly this point; he is neither black nor white because race itself is nothing more than a masquerade, a confidence game in which one either plays others or is played oneself. Gary Lindberg observes that "the confidence man at his purest seems to have nothing inside" (Lindberg 9). That is to say, he possesses no innate character of his own; rather, like the "revolving Drummond light" of which Melville writes, the confidence man illuminates the character of others and reveals the degree to which that character is itself no more than a performance (*Confidence-Man* 238). Where race is concerned this means that he exposes as baseless the racial assumptions by which a society is run. Like the counterfeit coin, the confidence man serves rather to destabilize than to shore up the status of the genuine original. By revealing the processes by which men of all races are made (not born), the confidence man calls into question the ability of anyone to separate the authentic from the inauthentic, to tell blacks from whites, slaves from freemen, contented bondsmen from devious rascals, and itinerant preachers from roving abolitionists. African-American scholar Stanley Crouch suggests that the idea of race itself may be the greatest confidence game of all in the United States, and it is from that premise that this work proceeds (Crouch, "All-American").

The Confidence Man in Literary Criticism

As this dissertation will show, for Melville and for many other writers, the problem of the confidence man was intimately connected to the nation's ongoing discourse regarding racial identity; however, few scholars have made much of this fact. Susan Kuhlmann, Warwick

Wadlington, Gary Lindberg, Karen Halttunen, and William Lenz — all scholars of confidence man literature — mention not one black confidence man in their texts beyond Black Guinea and seem reluctant to accord his appearance in the text any special status. Carolyn Karcher's *Shadow over the Promised Land: Slavery Race and Violence in Melville's America* (1980), which considers most of Melville's major works in the context of race, remains a notable exception, arguing that it is possible to read the different manifestations of the confidence man in the novel as manifestations of the *black* confidence man, and that the man in cream colors, the man in gray, and the herb doctor may just as easily be black men in whiteface as Black Guinea may be a white man in blackface. According to Karcher, Melville "radically discredit[s] the concept of race" by purposefully "blurring the racial lines between black and white characters altogether … leaving the reader with no means of defining race or recognizing racial identity" (221, 27). Karcher's argument may be extended to other texts, however; Melville was not alone in recognizing the potential of the confidence-man figure to dramatically undermine black stereotypes and ultimately shake the foundations of racial prejudice.

Though they do not treat race in an extended fashion, other critics have outlined a variety of approaches to the confidence man as he appears in American literature. These can be divided roughly into two camps, which we might call the archetypal and the cultural-historical. The first approaches the confidence man as a specific type of the universal trickster archetype. Though perhaps a more popular figure in American cultural artifacts the confidence man is by no means confined to them, nor, according to these scholars, is he to be associated too closely with any one historical period — confidence men are as old as Odysseus and as young as Bernie Madoff. The fast-talking confidence man of cultural memory is just one American manifestation of a type that includes Loki, Coyote, and Brer Rabbit, to name a few; readings of this sort include Lewis

Hyde's *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (1998) and to a lesser extent Kuhlmann's *Knave, Fool, and Genius: The Confidence Man as He Appears in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction* (1973). Where Melville's text is concerned, this approach is especially evident in the Norton Critical edition of text, in which the editors strongly associate Melville's confidence man with the trickster-devil of Christian lore, a claim for which there is much evidence both confirmatory and contradictory.[15] Analysis of this kind has the advantage of connecting cultures and races through commonalities of mythology; however, it also presents a number of difficulties, not the least of which is their tendency to obscure local differences, and, in the case of *The Confidence-Man* to produce a reductive reading of the text in question.

Alternatively, some scholars have approached the confidence-man figure as a specifically American cultural artifact, one deeply embedded in the historical moment of the early nineteenth century. William Lenz argues that the true American confidence man is solely the product of the flush times on the frontier of the 1830s and 40s; thus his approach focuses almost exclusively on the fast-talking flimflammer of modern memory. Earlier figures are not truly confidence men, and later figures are merely the echoes of nostalgia (23). The perils of this approach are obvious; its narrow focus excludes more than it admits, and many of the confidence men Melville presents would fall outside the parameters of the term, which are much stricter than those used at the time. Most scholars do not go so far as Lenz, however, and much is gained by imbedding the confidence man in his historical moment. This dissertation is in part an attempt to improve upon this approach by broadening the historical moment in which we see the confidence man operating. He is not merely the product of frontier flush-times but of everything cultural scholars

[15] While Melville clearly uses figurative language associated with the devil to describe his confidence man, it is not at all clear that the confidence man is intended to *be* the devil; indeed, as Carolyn Karcher has shown, the association between the two may be part of a larger confidence game Melville plays upon his readers. For more on her assessment of these claims, see *Shadow over the Promised Land*.

mean when they say antebellum or even nineteenth-century America, including, but not limited to, the changing nature of racial discourse.

The archetypal and cultural-historical approaches, narrowly defined, have the effect of limiting what figures can be considered confidence men and what kinds of actions may qualify as confidence games, often ignoring characters who are motivated by anything other than greed (for instance, the desire for freedom or the sheer pleasure of the confidence game). More problematically these approaches have often had the effect of segregating black confidence men from their white counterparts or simply excluding them from the discussion entirely. The dominance of the white flimflammer stereotype — largely a product of the late nineteenth century — and the African-American trickster/folk-hero — largely a product of twentieth-century literary criticism — have controlled much of what we recognize as the confidence man, but Melville's text points the way to a broader reading of the figure, and close examination of texts typically excluded from the confidence "canon" reveals that confidence men were as diverse as the population of the nation that gave them their name. For the purposes of this work I follow Gary Lindberg in taking a broader approach to defining the figure of the confidence man as a "manipulator or contriver who creates an inner effect, an impression, an experience of confidence, that surpasses the grounds for it" (7). Confidence men and women are makers of belief, generally for personal profit, though that profit might not necessarily come in financial form. In the case of the race-based confidence game, for instance, motivations might include freedom and opportunity as well as monetary gain.

This has already begun to be established in part by critics and historians beyond the realm of specifically literary scholarship. Benjamin Reiss' *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum's America* (2001) considers race in the productions of one of the world's

most famous real-life American confidence men, P.T. Barnum, and James W. Cook's *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (2001) explores race as a component in the famous showman's exhibits and in those of his contemporaries and competitors. Likewise historians David Waldstreicher and Kenneth S. Greenberg each consider race and deception in the light of slavery, and when viewed through the lens of the confidence game, their research suggests that, not only were black men and women confidence men, and considered as such by their contemporaries, but white men and women associated with racially motivated causes were often accused of being confidence men and women.[16] By drawing these confidence men and women back into the fold this study seeks not only to expand the canon of confidence texts, but to deepen our understanding of the ways in which anxieties over racial identity intertwined with a preoccupation with identity more generally. Many authors, both black and white used the confidence-man figure as a way to frame their anxieties on the subject of race; it is for this reason that we find the confidence man in the works of abolitionists and proslavery apologists alike, as well as in the writings of fugitive slaves and slave-masters, scientists and pseudo-scientists, philosophers, preachers, and politicians.

This study, then, will explore the intersections of race and the confidence game in the nineteenth century in a number of texts both canonical and unfamiliar. Because the confidence man rarely appears as literary protagonist — Melville's "original character" is a notable exception rather than the rule — this project aims to be as inclusive as possible in its presentation of textual evidence; the reader will encounter many noncanonical texts in each of its four

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[16] Waldstreicher's *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* (2005) suggests more connections than divisions between the actions of white and black confidence men by coupling the history of Franklin, America's most famous "self-made man," with the histories of runaway slaves. Greenberg's *Honor & Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, The Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, and Gambling in the Old South* (1996) considers the connections between deceit and racial hierarchies in the antebellum South.

chapters in addition to substantial evidence drawn from nonliterary sources. In addition to shedding new light on the old standbys of the "confidence canon" (Melville's *The Confidence-Man*, for instance), this project also discovers elements of the confidence game in texts not generally associated with it — for example William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853) and William and Ellen Crafts' *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860) — and explores its use in texts that have yet to garner much critical attention, like the anti-Tom novels *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop* (Baynard Rush Hall, 1852) and *The Planter's Northern Bride* (Caroline Lee Hentz, 1854). This project's exploration of these texts may be divided roughly into two parts: the first considering the complex interactions of race and the confidence game in primarily white-authored texts and the second considering the role of the black confidence men specifically, with greater emphasis on the works of black authors both before and after the Civil War.

* * *

Chapter one explores the intersections of racial identity, the confidence game, and the pseudoscience of phrenology. Exceedingly popular in the second third of the nineteenth century, phrenology promised to create a "world without strangers," in which the character and motivations of every person might be recognized at a glance by those who were trained in "reading heads," while simultaneously offering to resolve, for once and all, the truth of racial identities. By locating innate racial identity in the bone, rather than the skin (which might, through generations of "amalgamation," lose all trace of African ancestry), phrenology offered a new and apparently more stable foundation for racial prejudice and even slavery (Otter 108). Surprisingly, however, phrenology was also widely embraced by members of the antislavery movement, who saw in the science of phrenology a vindication of their cause and a testament to

the efficacy of racial uplift; the phrenological organs of the brain found underdeveloped in slaves could be enlarged by the experience of freedom and by exposure to the same influences that had elevated the European brain to its current celebrated state. Regardless of the stance one took on the question of race, however, the practice of reading heads remained for many a confidence game, a trick predicated upon misplaced trust in modern "science" The first chapter of this work thus explores the intersections of the overlapping discourses of race, science, and the confidence game within the "world of strangers."

As the nineteenth century wore on and discourse on both sides of the slavery issue grew increasingly heated, accusations of deception became more and more frequent. Antislavery writers, black and white, accused slaveholders and their supporters of outright lies regarding the conditions on Southern plantations and within Southern households. Harriet Beecher Stowe's wildly popular antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), in particular, raised considerable southern ire by suggesting that slavery was a less than benevolent institution, and the proslavery response (the anti-*Tom* novels of the late 1850s and 60s) returned the compliment by accusing abolitionists of concealing under the banner of liberty and charity their jealousy of the Southern way of life and their desire to enslave African-Americans in their Northern factories. In short, they accused abolitionists of being confidence men. Chapter two continues the examination of primarily white-authored texts by examining the use of the white abolitionist confidence-man figure within the works of noted proslavery novelists. By shifting the blame for runaways and slave insurrections away from freedom-seeking blacks to devious white confidence men, these anti-*Tom* novelists sought to undermine the legitimacy of the antislavery movement while simultaneously denying the actual agency of the slaves in their midst.

That agency was regularly on display, though, however much proslavery writers might have indicated otherwise. Chapter three marks the shift away from the white-authored texts of chapter two to pursue the black confidence man as he appears in antebellum texts as diverse as fugitive slave narratives, African-American folk tales, and the published warning letters of Northern abolitionists. Though Black Guinea alone appears in literary scholarship on the confidence-man figure, this chapter demonstrates that it requires only change in terms to see the antebellum world full of black confidence men; by considering those black figures traditionally labeled tricksters, fugitives, or slave imposters *as* confidence men, we may bring them back into dialogue with their white counterparts. Skillful manipulators of appearances who practiced complex deceits in order to escape punishment, slavery, or poverty, these men and women were successful players of the confidence game. Daring escapes of fugitive slaves featured prominently in both black and white-authored antislavery literature and stood as thrilling (but also troubling) testaments to the slave's capacity for deceit as well as their desire for freedom; fugitive slave narratives often suggested that even well-intentioned antislavery readers could not "read" the runaway completely. Likewise, by considering African-American folk tales, often categorized as examples of the universal trickster tradition, as confidence games we can see that the popular characters of John and Pompey may have more in common with real-world confidence men than trickster gods. They, like the fugitive slaves, defy the attempts of white reader to fully comprehend their intentions. We can see from the open letters of antislavery activists that many white readers did fail when they came face to face with black confidence men in the real world in the form of freemen who practiced upon their charity by pretending to be escaped slaves. The racial confidence game was everywhere in nineteenth-century America, we have only to look for it.

Black writers of fiction, like their white counterparts, were quick to recognize the importance of the confidence-man figure from a literary standpoint, and the novels, short stories, and plays they wrote testify to the usefulness of the figure for signaling the breakdown of racial categories, the transgression of social hierarchies, and even the author's own complex narrative confidence games. Chapter four examines the use of the black confidence-man figure in the fiction of African-American authors from the decade prior to the Civil War through the period Charles W. Chesnutt called "Post-bellum—Pre-Harlem." Beginning with Frank Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857) and William Wells Brown's *Clotel* this chapter looks at the presence of the confidence man as a signal of a "confidence crisis elsewhere" (to modify a phrase borrowed from Marjorie Garber), an indication that the author himself is practicing a confidence game within and through his work. Even brief appearances of the black confidence man may suggest a deeper manipulation on the part of the author, who may make his work appear, like the clever fugitive or wily imposter, conventional and trustworthy where it is in fact deeply subversive. Authors like Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles W. Chesnutt used the black confidence man to assert African-American capability and to mock white pretensions to superiority, even while playing the confidence man themselves; by using traditional forms, they made their works appear to conform to the racist values of their culture, even while undermining those values from within. In the hands of the black fiction writer, the black confidence man emerged as an important tool for signaling the confidence crisis elsewhere, the author's subversive contribution to his nation's ongoing discourse on the subject of race.

The afterword explores the role of the black confidence man in the wake of the significant artistic and social gains of the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Era, and suggests directions for further exploration of the figure as he appears in fiction, and particularly,

in film. Beginning with Ralph Ellison's characterization of Rinehart in *Invisible Man*, the afterword considers the feedback loop created by archetypal criticism and the surge of interest in African-American folklore in the mid to late twentieth century when black authors self-consciously drew upon African and Native American tricksters in their literary works. At the same time, however, a wave of black confidence men (decidedly *not* tricksters) were beginning to appear on the stage and screen. Films like *Skin Game* (1971) and *Trading Places* (1983) experiment with the black confidence-man figure as a symbol of African-American capability, cunning, and independence in the wake of the turbulent civil rights era, while more "serious" works like Wendell B. Harris, Jr.'s *Chameleon Street* (1989) and John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation* (1990) reflect upon the uncertainty, even the impossibility, of African-American self-creation in the twentieth century.

Chapter 1.

Reading the Confidence Man: Phrenology, Slavery, and a World without Strangers

In 1848, Lorenzo Niles Fowler published a book that promised to create, even in the increasingly anonymous environment of the American metropolis, a world without strangers. Between the covers of his *Self-Instructor in Phrenology, Physiology, and Physiognomy: Complete Handbook for the People*, the advertisements ran, readers would find all the instructions necessary to enable them to "read people as [they] would a book" by examining the bumps and depressions of their skulls ("Self-Instructor" 250). If these new readers of heads successfully adopted the principles outlined in the *Self-Instructor* they might never again be in doubt regarding the character of a stranger. The famous phrenological Fowler brothers, Orson and Lorenzo, would make much the same claim dozens of times over the course of their decades-long careers, both for their own writings and for the works of those they published and promoted. Over the years, the formula of the advertisements remained more or less the same: the science of phrenology would guide the reader through the difficult task of recognizing "good, upright, honest, true, kind, charitable, loving, joyous, happy and trustworthy people, such as [they] would like to know" (250). It would also, according to some variations, assist in the more challenging task of differentiating these "good" people from those who were "by nature untrustworthy, treacherous and cruel" ("Heads and Faces" 80). Through the examination of the head, phrenologists promised to put the increasingly elusive inner man on outward display and to expose, among other hypocrites and dangerous deceivers, the most elusive figure of all — the confidence man.

At the peak of its popularity (roughly the second third of the nineteenth century) the discourse of phrenology intersected and intertwined with the discourses of race and of the confidence game, a correspondence that should not be surprising given the era's paradoxical relationship to the problem of appearances. As Karen Halttunen argues, newly urbanized landscapes reduced the efficacy of old social forms of human interaction before new ones had come to take their place; in this space deft manipulators of appearances — confidence men — were able to operate with a degree of impunity. Sincerity became the watchword of the antebellum middle class, and the consistent outward show of that sincerity the criterion for admittance to its ranks. The ability of the confidence man to ape these outward forms of respectability for his own ends posed a significant challenge to this "cult of sincerity," but phrenology offered a new method for detecting deceivers free of the difficulties attendant upon traditional appearance-based judgment (Halttunen 51). Phrenologists like the Fowlers claimed to be able to detect in the shape of the skull the markers of cunning and deceit. For those who believed in the powers of the new science, the confidence man was not merely a shadowy threat but a scientific fact reflected in a particular collection of physical endowments that might be charted and, with practice, recognized at a glance — or, perhaps, a touch.

Phrenology likewise promised simple answers to contemporary debates regarding racial origins, status, and capabilities. Through phrenology, skin — an increasingly problematic index of race — might give way to bone, perceived as "better, more stable evidence of human difference" (Otter 108); the surface of the body might once again be trusted to yield up the truths of racial identity. Popular phrenologists concurred with the scientists of the new "American school" of ethnology that the size and shape of the skull corresponded to the intellectual capacities and qualities of the subject and largely agreed that evidence drawn from these skulls

indicated that persons of African descent were intellectually and morally inferior to those of European descent. Surprisingly, few groups embraced the promise of phrenology with the enthusiasm of the abolitionists; several of the most prominent among them had their skulls read and openly advocated the practice to their followers. Understanding their acceptance of a philosophy that appears to be greatly at odds with their own requires that we return to the confidence man by way of his respectable twin, the self-made man. Phrenologists promised to expose race just as they promised to expose the confidence man — often while playing a unique confidence game of their own — but rather than freeing antebellum Americans from a world of strangers or eradicating the threat of the confidence man, phrenology drew them deeper into a confidence game from which, as Herman Melville ultimately concludes in *The Confidence-Man* (1857), there was no escape.

There are difficulties, however, attendant upon any scholarly discussion of the pseudosciences. In *The Cultural Meaning of Popular Science* (1984), Roger Cooter identifies two primary approaches to the modern study of phrenology, what he refers to as the Whig and the Revisionist interpretations. Broadly speaking, Whigs are those scholars who approach phrenology as a debunked pseudoscience, who dismiss and reject those who participated in the movement as unscientifically minded (by contrast, modern science is conceived of as both "objective and neutral" [17]). Revisionists, on the other hand, concern themselves with the writing of "accurately contextualized history for its own sake," charting phrenology's rise and fall as a serious and significant intellectual movement of the early nineteenth century (20). Both groups consider phrenology a fad, and neither, according to Cooter, fully appreciate the "real value of phrenology's consideration," which "[i]n the absence of any absolute truth … must be seen to lie … in persuading us that when it comes to the Truth about nature and human nature,

there can be no touchstones other than those that exist in the minds of the participants in history" (34-35).

This chapter will attempt to chart a course between the Whig and Revisionist positions by focusing on the touchstone antebellum phrenologists relied upon, the human skull, or rather on the practice of reading skulls as it was popularly understood. This approach necessitates excluding many fruitful areas of research; phrenology's role in education reform, in the development of modern neuroscience, and in the scientific and literary culture of the antebellum United States has already been explored by other scholars and, with the exception of the literary, will not be taken up here. By concentrating on the practice of reading heads, however, this chapter moves its discussion to the heart of antebellum perceptions of phrenology. While its influence was no doubt felt in many areas of antebellum life, phrenology's popular reputation was confined, almost exclusively, to the reading of the head, and it is on the surface of the head that the intersecting discourses of race, phrenology, and confidence converge. This chapter, then, explores the intersecting and overlapping discourses of race and phrenology in order to illuminate a part of the history of the confidence game not yet explored by scholars of confidence literature. The first half of this chapter will attempt to establish connections between phrenology and the confidence game; the second will introduce racial discourse to the argument and consider the ways in which abolitionist acceptance of phrenology and antiphrenological opposition to abolition interact.

A World without Strangers

In October of 1849, mere months after the arrest of William Thompson — the original "Confidence Man" famous for "borrowing" gold watches from gentlemen on the streets of New

York City — the *American Phrenological Journal* published the results of a visit to the Tombs by Lorenzo Niles Fowler, brother of Orson Squire Fowler and with him one of the most prominent American phrenologists of the nineteenth century.[17] While there, Fowler examined a number of inmates, including one "Samuel Thompson," a known alias of William Thompson and undoubtedly the same confidence man whose exploits had recently appeared on the pages of the New York *Herald*.[18] The article, while brief, includes a lengthy description of Thompson's alleged crimes followed by a transcription (written by renowned phrenologist Nelson Sizer) of Fowler's notes taken after conducting a phrenological examination of Thompson's head:

> He is a very independent man — relies on himself — is bold and courageous — not timid, but venturesome. He is a lady's man, and can insinuate himself into their good graces, or gain the confidence of any person, by his urbanity of manners and oily tongue. He has a restless love of variety and novelty, and a traveling, wandering disposition. He is not cruel or revengeful. He has much caution, tact, management, and power to conceal; can suit himself to circumstances; is capable to plan and carry out schemes; is seldom at a loss for means to accomplish ends; is artful, plausible, and insinuating. He has a strong desire to make money, and will plan and speculate to get it. He knows who to take, and how to take them. He reads men intuitively, judges of character very closely, and is able to use them to his own advantage. He has fine conversational power — can talk with remarkable ease and pertinency [sic]. Conscience does not trouble him much — can justify himself in his motives and actions. Great tact and

[17] Phrenologists showed an abiding interest in reading the heads of criminals, thus Lorenzo's visit to the famous prison. For more on phrenology and crime, see Patricia Lucie's "The Sinner and the Phrenologist: Davey Haggart Meets George Combe" (2007).

[18] Johannes Dietrich Bergmann includes Samuel Thompson as one of William Thompson's aliases in his article "The Original Confidence Man" (569).

> self-confidence are strong features of his mind, and a tendency to licentiousness a besetting sin. (Sizer 316)

Whether or not we accept Sizer's assurance that Fowler was entirely unaware of Thompson's history prior to the examination, the description above remains an excellent, though typical, summation of the Confidence Man's perceived mental and moral characteristics.[19] What is unique about Fowler's analysis is the extent to which his phrenology is represented as rendering this enigmatic man knowable. The phrenologist can detect the "artful, plausible, and insinuating" nature that the Confidence Man's marks failed to note; if they could read people as Fowler did, phrenologically, they might have their watches still. Though it was not uncommon for popular phrenologists to publish the results of their readings of celebrities and public figures as proofs of phrenology's accuracy, Fowler's reading of the Confidence Man highlights to an unusual degree the promise phrenology held out to antebellum Americans: a world without strangers in which even the inscrutable Confidence Man could be read like an open book.

The world that welcomed the intervention of the phrenologist was one preoccupied with what must have seemed a relentless multiplication of uncertainties. As I discuss in the introduction to this work, the reliability of personal appearance as an indicator of social status and the basis of social and economic commerce in the towns and villages of the eighteenth century had begun to break down in the early decades of the nineteenth century as more and more people flocked to the newly industrialized urban centers from the surrounding countryside in search of work; between 1820 and 1860, the population of America's cities grew by nearly eight hundred percent, making it the most rapid period of urban growth in the country's history

[19] It seems unlikely, despite the Fowlers' habit of disavowing all recognition of the famous and infamous people for whom they provided readings, that they could have been so utterly unaware of authors and public figures whose images were often before the public eye. Though no such image of Thompson would have been available to Fowler, the phrenologist's use of the word "confidence" may suggest that he had at least some knowledge of the Confidence Man's past or that he or Sizer adjusted the reading after his identity was revealed to them.

(Halttunen 35). Class mobility was on the rise as well, as new modes of production and industry gave rise to new wealth and new candidates for entrance to the middle and upper classes. The resulting socio-economic upheaval left many struggling to navigate what might be called — to borrow a term from Lyn H. Lofland — a "world of strangers," a society in which interactions, both financial and personal, between persons unknown to one another were both anxiety-provoking and unavoidable.[20]

Embodying the anxiety of these city-dwellers was the confidence man, the stranger who used this new urban confusion to his own advantage by manipulating appearances for personal gain. Like the city itself — which in the imaginations of popular writers like George Thompson and George Lippard now teemed with depravity below its pristine surface — the confidence man presented an appearance that concealed rather than revealed his inner life. The face the confidence man presented to the world was an impenetrable mask, one that might hide any motivation or, perhaps most disturbingly, no motivation at all. To a society insistent upon making all outward show conform to inner sentiments, there could be no greater threat than the man who "seems to have nothing inside"; such a man might appear under any mask, manipulate any circumstance, and gain the confidence of any person for any purpose (Lindberg 9).[21] These special abilities of the confidence man posed a significant threat to the social and economic stability of society, but a solution might be found, the practical phrenologists claimed, in their new "science." The confidence man and all his hypocritical counterparts might be rendered readable, knowable, and controllable through the wonders of phrenology.

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[20] Halttunen has called attention to the usefulness of Lofland's terminology for describing the early and mid-century American city. For more on this, see Halttunen 355-38 and Lofland's *A World of Strangers: Order and Action in Urban Public Space* (1973).

[21] For more on sincerity and the conformation of appearances to inner feelings, see Halttunen. James W. Cook offers an astute, if brief, consideration of the confidence man as a symbol of the city in *The Arts of Deception* (2001).

Like physiognomy, the practice of reading character from the outward appearance of the body (particularly the face) popularized by Johann Caspar Lavater, phrenology promised a legible social world in which interactions, even between strangers, might be conducted with some degree of confidence. Unlike physiognomy, however, phrenology claimed to offer direct access to the source and seat of character itself: the human brain. In the late eighteenth-century writings of German physicians Franz Joseph Gall and his follower Johann Spurzheim, phrenology emerged as a serious hypothesis about the function of the different parts of the brain. Gall and Spurzheim correctly asserted that the brain was the seat of the mind, and speculated that it might be divided into separate organs responsible for different aspects of character and behavior. The theory as developed by practical phrenologists in the nineteenth century asserted that the size of these organs corresponded to the degree of influence they had on the human subject, and further, that their size, and thus their influence, might be measured by analyzing the corresponding bumps or depressions they made on the exterior of the skull. By measuring the relative size of these "bumps," practical phrenologists maintained that they were able to accurately describe a person's character. Though, scientifically speaking, such readings were impossible, a great many scientists and respected lay people — including well-known authors, clergymen, and social reformers — attested to the truth of the phrenological readings they received or witnessed.[22]

Already popular in Europe, phrenology met with unrivaled enthusiasm in the antebellum United States, where those who advocated for the practical application of the "science," like the English phrenologist George Combe, met with great success on the lecture circuit and in the

[22] Authors who advocated phrenology famously included Walt Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* would be published in its second edition by the Fowlers. David S. Reynolds offers insights into Whitman's use of phrenology in *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (1996).

publishing houses. Combe's *The Constitution of Man in Relation to External Objects* (1828), for instance, would sell over 200,000 copies in the United States by 1860, twice as many as had been sold in Europe (Cooter 120). Orson and Lorenzo Fowler, the Americans who would carry the standard of practical phrenology in the United States well into the post-bellum period, established a thriving publishing business for the production of guidebooks like *The Self-Instructor*, which offered advice for those wishing to read their own heads or those of others. Receiving a detailed reading, phrenologists argued, was the first step towards self-knowledge and self-improvement. Accordingly, phrenological museums and reading rooms sprang up in cities, and three-dimensional phrenological heads of all sizes were manufactured and advertised for sale in the leading publications of the day. From a serious brain science, phrenology had morphed into one of the most popular self-help movements of an era known for its obsession with personal improvement.

The popularity of phrenology stemmed in part from the promise it made, both implicitly and explicitly, that people might be read and understood. As an anonymous writer for the *Knickerbocker Magazine* asked in 1838, if this is true, "[w]hat science, then, in point of utility and dignity, compares with that under consideration?" Phrenology offered to provide what no other science could: "[i]t is the key to the knowledge of human nature, the varieties of human character, the motives of human actions. It has something for every body to observe, and to profit by in understanding. It makes every man a philosopher, and endows him with no inconsiderable share of wisdom; enables him to know others, and more than that, himself" ("Phrenology Made Easy" 526). The possibility of self-knowledge alluded to in the last line appealed to a generation preoccupied with self-improvement and the potential for reform, both

personal and social. No less appealing, however, must have been the first claim: phrenology offered the key to knowing others in a world in which such knowledge was increasingly scarce.

In a letter to the African-American newspaper *The Christian Recorder*, one writer regretted that so many of his fellow countrymen remained ignorant of the science. The chief virtue of "knowing one's neighbor," according to J. Anderson Raymond, was avoiding the fraud and deception rampant in the new urban environment. A man schooled in phrenology could conduct his business without anxiety because he would "know with whom to deal, that he might have implicit trust, and no doubts nor fears. He [would] know with whom to invest his money, that he might not get cheated." The world was full of those "who were born only to deceive," but the science of phrenology offered the answer: "there is but the one way that these things can be discovered. *Phrenology* unmasks the culprit, tears the sheep's clothing from him that would deceive, reveals the very heart and intent of every man." Even the amateur phrenologist would not fall prey to the schemes and tricks of the confidence men that fooled so many others; the "power" of phrenology to penetrate the masks and hypocrisies of the confidence man was "infallible."

The author Catharine Maria Sedgwick was one who, like Raymond, pronounced the science of phrenology "infallible" in the detection of deceivers. In *Hope Leslie; or, Early Times in the Massachusetts* (1827), the narrator laments that the honest characters of her historical novel do not yet have access to the truths of phrenology, and so fail to identify the duplicity of the villainous and secretly Catholic Sir Philip Gardiner. Mere physiognomy is inadequate to the task of detecting the truth behind his contradictory features as his face is a collection of "contrarieties." His features may be "deeply marked by the ravages of the passions" or perhaps only by "stirring scenes of life." His "loose, open flexible lips" contradict the "concentration of

thought" found on the upper half of his face, and his complexion is "dark and saturnine" yet somehow "enlivened with the ruddy hue of the bon-vivant." Even his nose is a conundrum, being "neither Grecian nor Roman," turning neither up nor down. "In short," the narrator informs us, "the countenance of the stranger was a worthless dial-plate — a practical refutation of the *science* of physiognomy; and, as the infallible art of Phrenology was unknown to our fathers, they were compelled to ascertain the character (as their unlearned descendants still are) by the slow development of the conduct" (128). Phrenology, not yet available to the historical personages of Sedgwick's imagination, provides the only proven shortcut to detecting the confidence man.

For the phrenologist, the confidence man was not a mythological figure or a shadowy villain; his "ethereal" qualities of deceitfulness and hypocrisy, to paraphrase Samuel Otter, "were made material" in the descriptions of his head (121). The confidence man could be identified by a particular combination of physical endowments apparent to the phrenological observer. Gall first identified the "organ of Cunning" after observing several individuals whose behavior was marked first and foremost by deceit including swindlers and chronic debtors. One, a physician, "fleeced all who put any confidence in him" and frequently confessed "that he knew no greater pleasure, no more exquisite enjoyment, than that of duping people, and especially those who distrusted him most" (Gall 120).[23] Spurzheim, and later the Fowlers, would call the organ that governed this behavior "Secretiveness," suggesting that it was specifically linked to the impulse to conceal one's true identity or motives (Spurzheim 188). For Orson Fowler, the "organ of secretiveness" was the faculty that "in its perverted exercise, produces lying, deceit, hypocrisy, and those ten thousand artifices in dress, furniture, equipage, &c., the chief object of which is to

[23] Interestingly, Gall also associates the organ of cunning with the production of fiction (particularly the romance) and poetry (121).

create false appearances" (*Fowler's Practical Phrenology* 101-102). In "large" or "full" development, secretiveness might simply produce tact or a reserved manner; in "very large" development, however, coupled with a large organ of acquisitiveness and a comparatively small organ of conscientiousness, it might produce the confidence man.

In keeping with the history of development of the confidence-man figure, Fowler associates this organ of secretiveness with the North, where he claimed to have observed the organ in larger development in his subjects; the comparatively small organ of secretiveness in the Southerner "produces," according to Fowler, "that frankness and openness which characterize Southern gentlemen" (102). The discovery of the organ of secretiveness afforded phrenologists a "scientific" explanation for what elsewhere might be perceived as a moral or ethical failing; lying, deceit, and hypocrisy were no longer the uncontrollable and unavoidable immoral byproducts of the "world of strangers," but rather the social expressions of a biological characteristic that was not only classified and recognized by experts, but actually written on the surface of the body for all to see. Phrenology reduced the confidence man from a symbol of urban impenetrability to a readable physiological abnormality.

Orson Fowler was eager in *Practical Phrenology* (1844) to draw a direct line between the physical endowments of the head of the confidence man to the deceits he practiced in the real world. In 1835, more than a decade before he would encounter William Thompson, Lorenzo Fowler read the head of another confidence man in Albany, New York. According to Orson, Lorenzo attributed to this man the phrenological features of a confidence criminal: "very large secret[itiveness], acquis[itiveness], combat[iveness], destruct[iveness], firm[ness], and amat[iveness], with small conscien[tiousness] and only moderate benev[olence]" (265). Lorenzo's reading thus described a man who was "selfish, artful, intriguing, and deceitful; as

able and inclined to employ cunning and hypocrisy in every thing, but more especially in getting money … [he] always effected his purposes in an indirect way, and under false pretences, and was always ready to adopt any unfair means by which to possess himself of money" (265). Orson defends the accuracy of his brother's reading by pointing to crimes the subject reportedly committed after his encounter with the phrenologist. According to rumor, the "artful scoundrel" had posed as a merchant and succeeded in taking large quantities of saleable goods from Boston wholesalers without payment. This "sly-dodging money-catcher" and his co-conspirators had also successfully represented themselves as Methodist ministers in a small village, duping the townspeople out of meals and lodging and emptying the contents of their barnyards and smokehouses before disappearing (266). "Thus," Orson concludes, "they peregrinated from place to place, committing petty larcenies, and practising all manner of deceptions and impostures," just as Lorenzo Fowler's phrenological reading had predicted so accurately the previous year (267). The Fowlers' message was clear: phrenology could make the world more knowable and the phrenological practitioner less vulnerable to the deceit and hypocrisy embodied by the confidence man.

The phrenological chart and guidebook thus served a similar purpose to the one Halttunen claims for the conduct manuals printed in Northeastern cities in the 1830s: it enabled readers to avoid the pitfalls of modern life. Also like those guidebooks, however, phrenology might inadvertently *encourage* readers to become confidence men by providing them with the tools to conceal their true selves and to manipulate others. Perhaps the most benign manifestation of this encouragement was the suggestion in *Godey's Lady's Book* that women adopt hairstyles to conceal phrenological deficiencies or highlight phrenological assets ("A Series of Papers" 436). More menacing was Orson Fowler's assertion that "[a] knowledge of phrenology will give

its possessor an almost unlimited command over the minds and feelings of his fellow-men" (*Fowler's Practical Phrenology* 425). By detecting the phrenological constitution of others, one might tailor responses to them in the way best suited to elicit one's desired response. To the lawyer, for instance, Fowler suggested the use of phrenology to determine what course of argument would best persuade a particular jury member: "[h]as one of your jury large benevolence, phrenology not only points out the development, but also shows you how to arouse it powerfully in aid of your cause. The other faculties will then follow in its trait and he is gained" (425-26). To the clergyman, he promised phrenology would help him "become 'all things to all men'," "adapting truth" to the particular phrenological features of the sinner's head. "Thus," Fowler concluded,

> "what is one's meat is another's poison"; and phrenology teaches you how and when to appeal to the reason, or to the feelings, or to the particular *class* of feelings required by the occasion, and also how to avoid arraying against you large combativeness, or firmness, or self-esteem, or destructiveness, and thus how to be *always* successful, "meting out to every man his portion in due season." (426)

In short, a knowledge of phrenology would enable one to read men intuitively, judge character very closely, and use the knowledge gained to one's own advantage, just as Lorenzo Fowler accused William Thompson of doing.

The confidence man and the phrenologist had far more in common than the Fowlers admit. It is hard to say exactly what went on when a phrenologist gave a reading to a client, but we can be reasonably certain that its success or failure did not rely on the shape of the subject's skull. As we now know, and as many scientists of the early nineteenth century had already

guessed, the brain does not consist of discrete organs, and the exterior shape of the skull does not conform to the shape of the brain; human character cannot be determined in any way by the sort of readings phrenologists claimed to provide. In *Head Masters: Phrenology, Secular Education, and Nineteenth-Century Social Thought* (2005), Stephen Tomlinson argues against the tendency of scholars to remember phrenology "as a pseudoscientific fad in which hucksters read character traits from the bumps on a person's skull." This tendency, according to Tomlinson, is "more the product of historiography than of historical fact" and results in an "unfortunate and distorted perception" (xi),[24] but while it is certainly inaccurate to present phrenology as a mere side-show deception, it seems equally inaccurate not to acknowledge the scientific impossibility of what some phrenologists claimed to do or to fail to ask, given that impossibility, what it was that phrenologists actually did when they "read" the surface of a skull. When phrenologists provided clients with characters, and when those clients pronounced them accurate, something was at work that bore more in common with the confidence game than with what we now would consider science.

"Phrenology," as the narrator of Mark Twain's "The Secret History of Eddypus" remarks, "is the 'science' which extracts character from clothes," and it seems likely that reading clothing, along with body language and speech, formed a large part of the (perhaps often unwitting) phrenologist's repertoire (203). In the parlance of today's tarot card readers, psychics, and mediums, such readings are generally referred to as "cold readings"; that is, readings based on the appearance and mannerisms of the subject rather than prior knowledge of his or her character

[24] For the purposes of Tomlinson's project — tracing the influence of phrenology on education reform — this Revisionist approach is illuminating, though it does result in another kind of distortion. In offering an "interior history" of phrenology, that is, one concerned with how phrenology appeared to those who practiced it, Tomlinson tends to underestimate the quality of antiphrenological arguments, as when he discusses Spurzheim's response to Gordon's challenges using only the observations of Andrew Carmichael, "an early and ardent disciple" of Spurzheim's (78-80).

or background. In a cold reading, the practitioner combines close observation of the subject with a general knowledge of human behavior to produce what are in effect informed guesses about his or her character; these guesses are then adjusted in response to the reaction of the subject. Cold readers are assisted by what psychologists call the Forer Effect (or, rather appropriately, the Barnum Effect): the tendency of people to assume that general statements, which might apply to anyone, apply only to themselves, particularly when those statements are largely positive.[25] In short, such readings rely upon a crucial component of the confidence game: the collaboration of the mark. The subjects must wish to be read, and they must believe that such a reading is possible; they must, in short, want to be known. It seems clear that many phrenologists succeeded in convincing themselves, as well as their clients, that they were in fact producing accurate character descriptions on the basis of phrenological examinations of the skull; others were almost certainly aware that their practices were deceptive. These last were confidence men.

Ironically, phrenology contributed to the growth of the very class of criminals it promised to expose, both by purporting to teach students of phrenology to read and manipulate others and by providing the tools for a new kind of confidence game. Phrenology promised to make a rapidly changing society legible and knowable — to transform "the world of strangers" into a world *without* strangers — but by convincing so many that it had made them capable readers of character, it may have made them more, rather than less, vulnerable to the confidence game. Herman Melville's Philosophical Intelligence Officer in *The Confidence-Man* illustrates how placing confidence in phrenology as an authoritative science might enable the confidence game. The PIO's recommendation of a boy for Pitch uses the "marginal observations on [a]

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[25] For a description of the experiment that gave the Forer Effect its name, see Forer's "The fallacy of personal validation" (1949). Its less formal name, the Barnum Effect, ostensibly alludes to the saying, often misattributed to P.T. Barnum, "there's a sucker born every minute." Though the quotation does not belong to him, Barnum certainly used the Effect much as other confidence men did.

phrenological chart" provided by the boy's mother to convince the merchant to take on another boy against his better judgment.[26] Interestingly, no quality but honesty is referred to; the boy is honest "[a]s the day is long," and Pitch "[m]ight trust him with untold millions" (132). Pitch's confidence in the honesty of the PIO, the truth of phrenology, and the trustworthiness of the boy are all interwoven; when he agrees to accept the boy he in a sense accepts the word of a confidence man about dubious pseudoscientific evidence regarding the future honesty of a boy who is probably imaginary. It is a confidence trick with so many moving parts one can scarcely blame Pitch for eventually agreeing to have confidence in the lot.[27]

Roger Cooter has argued that for many in the period phrenology served "as both compass and map for self-orientation in the fragmenting social world," enabling "an exchange of impressions of senselessness, purposelessness, and anarchy for those of order, pattern, and control" (119). That sense of order might be deceiving, however, a fact that Melville took pains to demonstrate. Chapter 14 of *The Confidence-Man*, one "WORTH THE CONSIDERATION OF THOSE TO WHOM IT MAY PROVE WORTH CONSIDERING," contains the narrator's treatise on the subject of consistent characterization in novels and in real life (74). Defending his own narrative practice from expected accusations of inconsistency, the narrator argues that in making his characters inconsistent he better reflects actual human nature, for "is it not a fact, that, in real life, a consistent character is a *rara avis*?" (75). As evidence he points out that "all those sallies of ingenuity, having for their end the revelation of human nature on fixed principles, have, by the

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[26] John Davies notes that providing a phrenological reference for a job was a practice not unheard of among antebellum businessmen (38). Interestingly the practice is mocked by the skeptical proslavery writer Baynard Rush Hall in *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop*: "A first chop phrenologist, for a '*consideration*,' sends his neighbor an apprentice or clerk according to the [phrenological] developments; but the cautious philosopher, when he wants a store boy, says, in his printed advertisement — 'none need apply unless they *come well recommended!*'" (83).
[27] Interestingly, Melville's "man with the weed" will apply a similar approach in his interaction with the collegiate, using the young man's own phrenological development as an argument against his continuing study of Tacitus (Melville 34).

best judges, been excluded with contempt from the ranks of the sciences — palmistry, physiognomy, phrenology, psychology" (76). "Fixed principles" regarding human nature, whether drawn from novels or from the sciences, are apt to be disproven by the endless variety one encounters in the real world; if such principles were accurate, the narrator insists, they ought to function as a "true map" would to "a stranger entering … Boston town; the streets may be very crooked, he may often pause; but thanks to his true map, he does not hopelessly lose his way" (77). Whatever the apparent value of phrenology to its practitioners, it is important to acknowledge that the map phrenology provided bore little resemblance to the territory it sought to describe and often led its followers astray.

Belief, Doubt, and Abolition

Expressing his doubts regarding the "potent and prevailing" religious sentiment of New England in 1840, particularly as embodied in Emersonian transcendentalism, John Quincy Adams suggested that many new reform movements, including non-resistant abolitionism, phrenology, and animal magnetism, might be no more than "wanderings of the mind" that had the fearful potential of "[letting] the wolf into the fold": "all come in," the former president lamented, "furnishing some plausible rascality as an ingredient for our bubbling caldron of religion and politics" (qtd. in Colbert 1). Despite the recent tendency of scholars to downplay the significance of antiphrenological discourse, dissenting voices like Adams's were heard loud and clear throughout the period of phrenology's popularity. Modern scholars like Cynthia Hamilton and Stephen Tomlinson have joined Charles Colbert in arguing that modern perceptions of the phrenologist as a confidence man are merely the product of the humorous hindsight of authors like Twain, and that "by moving beyond such caricatures … we come to a just appreciation of

the science advocated by Gall and Spurzheim" (Colbert 38). Such caricatures, however, are not of so late a vintage as Colbert suggests, and, moreover, offer some of the greatest insights into the beliefs of the period. The common coupling of abolition and phrenology in the minds of those opposed to both movements, for instance, reveals a potent strain of skepticism in antebellum thought that sought to label social reformers confidence men or dupes of the confidence game. For Colbert, phrenology is an example of one of the many "sanguine beliefs of a sanguine era," but it would be more accurate to consider it one of the most highly contested beliefs of an era simultaneously sanguine and skeptical (38).

Hamilton cautions her fellow scholars against "dismiss[ing] the pseudo-science of phrenology as merely discredited, populist and racist" (173); however, a great many people, even in phrenology's heyday, did dismiss it as scientifically discredited, racist, and, importantly, deceptive. In fact, phrenology had been under attack almost from its infancy. As early as 1815, the Edinburgh anatomist John Gordon had published a vitriolic and widely-read review of the theories of Gall and Spurzheim in which he suggested not only that the phrenologists were mistaken in their science, but that they might be guilty of presenting their ideas in bad faith. "We look upon the whole doctrines taught by these two modern peripatetics, anatomical, physiological, and physiognomical," Gordon wrote, "as a piece of *thorough quackery* from beginning to end" (227). Gordon's review, in short, accused Gall and Spurzheim of being itinerant charlatans bent on perpetrating a medical fraud against the scientific community. While Cooter is right to remind us that neither Gordon nor his phrenological adversaries had access to any ultimate scientific truth — they all based their conclusions upon assumptions regarding the structure of the brain that we now recognize as incorrect — it is important to consider the grounds on which this battle was fought. From its inception, much of the criticism directed at

phrenology was grounded in an assumption that phrenology, at least in the hands of some practitioners, was a confidence game, a tool for parting fools from their money by practicing upon the insecurities endemic in a period of rapid social change.

Objections to phrenology naturally took many forms. Many members of the medical establishment, like Gordon, condemned phrenology as without scientific basis, pointing out that the anatomy of the head — including the recently discovered position of the sinus cavities; the presence of the interposing muscles, nerves, and blood vessels of the scalp; and the rigidity of the skull bone — precluded the shape of the brain from making any of the characteristic bumps phrenologists appeared to read. They also pointed to numerous dissections that had failed to locate any of the supposed organs so carefully indicated on the maps and heads sold by practical phrenologists like the Fowlers. There were other reasons to reject phrenology as well: devout Christians worried about the implications of phrenology for the doctrine of free will, while others debated the effect its psychological materialism would have on the criminal justice system. Would it be possible, for instance, to convict the guilty if they were shown to have an unavoidable phrenological predisposition to crime? Would such people be jailed even in the absence of criminal activity on the basis of their heads alone? Still others suggested that the secrets phrenology promised to disclose amounted to an invasion of privacy that was less than desirable. As one writer for the *Savannah Georgian* in 1835 put it: “Who likes to have his humps disclosed, / His hidden thoughts uncover’d, / And sins that ever have reposed, / To each man’s gaze uncovered?” (Alligator).

As in the *Savannah Georgian* poem, ridicule was often marshaled to undermine phrenology’s claims. In “Wandering Thoughts,” a short story from the *Southern Literary Messenger*, the skeptical narrator encounters the “Spirit of Phrenology” who enables him to peer

directly into the thoughts and characters of others, much as the demon Asmodeus peered under the roofs of houses in Alan Rene Le Sage's popular *Le Diable Boiteaux* (1707). While observing the minds of others, the narrator notes that they are in turn observing the heads of those around them; however, their phrenological insights are "nearly as often right, as wrong" and, when right, "generally aided by recourse to the countenance, or to the observer's previous knowledge of the observed" ("Wandering Thoughts" 322). Their observations of the heads are thus tailored to their knowledge of the observed, rather than the other way around. "I was led hence to ponder upon the knack Philosophy has, of finding or making facts to confirm her theories," the narrator concludes, "insomuch that every conceivable theory is sure to be amply supported by observation or experiment, or both … as a coat, made to order, fits better than one found ready made, in a slopshop" (322). "Wandering Thoughts" accuses these amateur phrenologists of a kind of (probably unwitting) deceit; what they claim to do, read character from skulls, is not what they do in fact.

Not the least of the accusations leveled at phrenologists was this of deceit. Phrenology had become a lucrative source of employment for practical phrenologists like the Fowlers; their museum in New York is said to have had as many visitors as P.T. Barnum's enormously popular American Museum (Stern 32), and while their lectures were typically free, readings were not, nor were the plaster busts and guidebooks with which the Fowlers flooded the market.[28] The financial success of the Fowlers and other phrenologists led some to suspect that their motivations were mercenary rather than philanthropic. Even the phrenologists themselves admitted that their practices were open to abuse; *The Phrenological Journal of Science and*

[28] The example of P.T. Barnum is not simply a convenient one; the showman was not against using phrenology to justify the content of some of his shows, as when he invited Lorenzo Fowler's phrenologist wife, Dr. Lydia Folger Fowler, to give a lecture at his National Baby Show in 1855.

Health Evidence, for instance, confessed that the profession had its problems with "Wolves in Sheepskins," saying that "the phrenologist in his professional intercourse with the world, if he wishes to be bad, is not without opportunity" ("Wolves in Sheepskins" 123).

Authors were quick to expand upon these "opportunities" in fiction. In "A New System of English Grammar," a short story from his *Phoenixiana: or, Sketches and Burlesques* (1856), George Horatio Derby (writing under the pen name John Phoenix) describes a phrenologist called Flatbroke B. Dodge, a clearly fraudulent practitioner who, in addition to practicing phrenology, also drinks, chews tobacco, and peddles a questionable hair tonic. Dodge is no reformer; he is a confidence man who is merely using phrenology to line his own pockets (Phoenix 500-502). Twain, who republished "A New System" in his *Library of Humor* in 1888, suspected the itinerant phrenologists of his youth of a similar kind of charlatanism, using flattery to ensure their marks' collaboration in their own duping. These phrenologists were "always wise enough to furnish [their] clients character-charts that would compare favorably with George Washington's" (*Autobiography* 85).[29] This memory he would carry into his characterization of the Duke, Huck Finn's confidence-man companion, who numbers phrenology amongst his many confidence games. New England writer Lucy Larcom recalled the phrenological practitioners she encountered as a young woman in a similar fashion: "numerous 'professors' of it came around lecturing, and examining heads, and making charts of cranial 'bumps'." Their goal, she would conclude was profit, as evidenced by their heavy use of flattery: "This was profitable business to them for a while, as almost everybody who invested in a 'character' received a good one; while

[29] The popular use of George Washington as a flattering point of comparison for phrenologists may suggest an additional level of humor in Ishmael's determination that Queequeg's head reminds him of General Washington's (Melville *Moby-Dick* 55)

many very commonplace people were flattered into the belief that they were geniuses, or might be if they chose" (Larcom 248).

In the case of Larcom, Twain, and to a lesser extent, Derby, these are critiques offered very much after the fact, the reminiscences of a hoax already on the wane. In phrenology's heyday it was New York physician David Meredith Reese who spearheaded the effort to label and dismiss phrenology as a confidence trick. His 1833 *Humbugs of New York* denounces phrenology as the "science falsely so called" and classes it with "fortune-telling, witchcraft, and astrology" as one of the "prevalent and prevailing humbugs of the day" (Reese 63). In a work that proclaims its subject to be "the whole phalanx of the most prominent impostors and their dupes," Reese accuses phrenologists of "itinerat[ing] through the country like other strolling mountebanks, for the purpose of living without labour, by practising upon public gullibility" (vii, 69). In this they are aided by the collaboration of their "dupes," who, according to Reese, are "brought over to phrenology, by the fancied evidence of talents which its professors point out upon their heads … often when nobody else has ever been able to discover that they were above mediocrity" (v, 74). Flattery, as Twain and Larcom suggest, is the greatest aid in the success of this confidence game; the "correct coin," in Reese's words, to circulate "among their dupes" (74).

Like many antiphrenological writers, however, Reese's skepticism on the subject of phrenology and other pseudosciences was not unconnected with his rejection of a number of other popular reform movements including immediate emancipation, which Reese refers to as the "delusion" of "ultra-abolition" (143). As I will argue in chapter two, it was not uncommon for antiabolitionists to argue that their opponents were either confidence men or the dupes of confidence men rather than admit to the sincerity of a movement that sought an immediate end to

American slavery; in this way they tried to undermine the powerful sentimental arguments of abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison and Lydia Maria Child. Southerners in particular were notoriously suspicious of phrenology, a fact that Peter MacCandless attributes in part to the "liberal views of many Northern and European phrenologists" on the subject of slavery (228). Though he professed to oppose slavery, Reese recoiled from the abolitionists' insistence that ownership of slaves was a sin regardless of circumstances. According to Reese, immediate emancipation was a confidence game, and those who died, like Elijah Parrish Lovejoy, in mob violence incited by anti-abolitionist rioters were not martyrs for their cause, but "dupes," "fanatics," and "deluded victims" (Reese v). The well-known popularity of phrenology amongst reformers, and particularly amongst abolitionists, may have fueled the conclusion, already reached by some skeptics, that the apparent benevolence of reformist groups cloaked an agenda driven by profit and that phrenology and abolition were just two more ways of playing, or falling victim to, the confidence game.

If Reese spent the 1830s writing up the follies of abolitionists and pseudoscientists, a very different set of social commentators went to work performing them in the 1840s. Blackface comedians found in phrenology a fruitful source of humor and satire; as the research of William J. Mahar has shown, the so-called "Lecture on Phrenology" was "one of the most popular set pieces of the antebellum burlesque lecture style" (70). Though extant examples of the lectures themselves have yet to be found, Mahar points to William Levison's 1855 *Black Diamonds* as a "representative example" of their style and content (72). Amongst other topics of popular interest, the narrator of *Black Diamonds*, Professor Julius Cesar Hannibal takes up the topic of phrenology, or "freenology," much as a blackface lecturer might have (141). Taking as his example the head of a sheep (which will answer "de same purpos" as that of a black human

"'kase it hab got de wool on" [141]), Hannibal proceeds to detect in the skull the bumps associated with traits accorded to African Americans in the early nineteenth century, namely laziness, drunkenness, combativeness, and amorousness. In the mouth of the black narrator, however, the language of the phrenologists becomes a double-edged sword, mocking both the racial characteristics and dialect of blacks *and* the pretensions of the phrenologists themselves, who hoped to read identity from the surface of the body.[30] On the blackface stage, such mockery would have possessed the additional irony of white actors, their own faces disguised by the minstrel's burnt cork mask, espousing the virtues of judging by appearances. Though in general blackface performances aimed to confirm rather than challenge racial stereotypes, by considering phrenology in the light of a hoax they undermined the very foundation of those stereotypes.[31]

After all, the science of phrenology had played no small part in the rise of the "American school" of ethnology and was sometimes used as a scientific justification for slavery; Combe supplied skulls to Samuel George Morton as he was preparing his *Crania Americana; or a Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America* (1839), a text which sought to construct hierarchies of racial difference through the analysis of differences in the size and shape of the skulls of the various races. Unsurprisingly Morton concluded that of the skulls examined in his research those belonging to African Americans ranked lowest, but despite his own abolitionist leanings, Combe wrote an "Appendix" confirming those conclusions with his own independent (or so he claimed) phrenological

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[30] The title "Professor" bestowed upon the uneducated Hannibal likewise functions not only as a humorous critique of the perceived ignorance of blacks (and the naïveté of the abolitionists who support them), but also of the popular phrenologists who often used the term, though they had seldom earned it in the traditional sense.

[31] The association between phrenology and the minstrel show was still alive and well as late as 1901, when a young Ernest Hogan wrote "The Phrenologist Coon." The popular song casts an African American in the role of the quack phrenologist whose science promises to reveal the deceitful practices of other blacks, ranging from the relatively benign ("if a coon has an egg-shaped head, / Means chickens he will steal!") to the violent ("If his head's shaped like a razor, you can bet that coon will cut; / If his head looks like a billy goat, be-ware! dat coon will butt") (Hogan).

readings. Morton's followers Josiah C. Nott and George Gliddon would rely heavily, like their phrenologist predecessors, on skull shape and size in their landmark *The Types of Mankind* (1855), in which they would use craniometry to support the theory of polygenism, or separate origins for the different races, a radical stance from which even Morton had shied away.[32] The Fowlers likewise joined the chorus of voices proclaiming racial hierarchies and claimed to detect differences amongst the skulls of the different races that confirmed preexisting racial stereotypes; "[t]he various races also accord with phrenological science," the *Self-Instructor* concluded. "Thus, Africans generally have full perceptive, and large Tune and Language, but retiring Causality, and accordingly are deficient in reasoning capacity, yet have excellent memories and lingual and musical powers" (*Self-Instructor* 71). Such assumptions were almost undoubtedly at work during Lorenzo Fowler's visit to the Tombs in 1849, when he read not only the head of the Confidence Man but also that of a black prisoner charged in the murder of a child "not his own"; reportedly without knowledge of the crime in question, Fowler would conclude the man was "governed by impulses rather than reason" (Sizer 316).

It is difficult to see how phrenology, with its deep involvement in the construction of racist stereotypes, could have enjoyed much popularity within the ranks of the antislavery movement, yet the science was embraced by many social reformers including some of the most prominent abolitionists of the age. Henry Ward Beecher — Congregational minister, abolitionist, and "the most famous man in America" — had been at school with Orson Fowler around the time the latter began to espouse phrenological principles and soon overcame his initial skepticism to become an adherent himself. Beecher later credited the practical aspects of the

[32] Despite the influence of phrenological principles on their work, however, Nott and Gliddon were critical of the popularization of the science, which they believed, though "based on a principle indisputably true," had "passed out of the hands of men of science, step by step, till it has now become the property of itinerant charlatans, describing characters for twenty-five cents a head" (xxxii).

pseudoscience as the foundation of his ministry: "if I have had any success in bringing the truths of the gospel to bear practically upon the minds of men, any success in the vigorous application of truths to the wants of the human soul, where they are most needed, I owe it to the clearness which I have gained from this science" ("Phrenology in the Pulpit").[33] An image of the head of his equally famous sister Harriet Beecher Stowe would appear in later editions of the Fowlers' enormously popular *Phrenology Proved, Illustrated, and Applied* (originally published in 1837) as an example of "Firmness and Intuition" (233);[34] their brother William Henry Beecher was also a known supporter of phrenological practice who published an article in the Fowlers' *American Phrenological Journal*. The most widely-read abolitionist newspaper of the era, William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*, regularly featured advertisements for readings, lectures, and publications from the Fowler brothers as well as other prominent phrenologists. Even Frederick Douglass, who was wary of the role phrenology played in constructing hierarchies of race, recalled his meeting with George Combe in 1845 "with much satisfaction" (*Life and Times* 46).[35]

The most famous of all the abolitionist supporters of phrenology was Lydia Maria Child, the renowned author of *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833) who in July 1841 submitted her head to a phrenological reading by Lorenzo Fowler. The resulting character description appeared and reappeared in the Fowlers' own *American*

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[33] The 1855 sermon from which this comment is excerpted was apparently recorded on a phonograph and was widely reported; *The American Phrenological Journal* carried the story in June and was followed by the *Provincial Freeman* and *The Zoist: A Journal of Cerebral Physiology and Mesmerism*.

[34] The enormously popular work appeared in multiple editions, and I have as yet been unable to determine in which edition Stowe's head first appears

[35] Douglass relates, "Whilst in Edinburgh, so famous for its beauty, its educational institutions, its literary men, and its history, I had a very intense desire gratified — and that was to see and converse with George Combe, the eminent mental philosopher, and author of 'Combe's Constitution of Man' … the reading of which had relieved my path of many shadows. … I had the honor to be invited by Mr. Combe to breakfast, and the occasion was one of the most delightful I met in dear old Scotland. Of course in the presence of such men, my part was a very subordinate one. I was a listener. Mr. Combe did the most of the talking, and did it so well that nobody felt like interposing a word, except so far as to draw him on. … He looked at all political and social questions through his peculiar mental science. His manner was remarkably quiet, and he spoke as not expecting opposition to his views. Phrenology explained everything to him, from the finite to the infinite" (170-171).

Phrenological Journal as well as the pages of *The Liberator*, becoming briefly the subject of abolitionist fascination. The enthusiasm the reading provoked stemmed, in part, from the suggestion implicit in Fowler's character description that the tendency toward reform might, like the tendency towards hypocrisy or deception, be inscribed upon the body. In the "letters" from New York she would begin publishing in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* the following month, Child often wrote of her longing for the correspondence of inward and outward things and lamented the deceptions of modern, and particularly urban, life: "I scorn this hated scene / Of masking and disguise, / Where men on men still gleam / With falseness in their eyes; / Where all is counterfeit, / And truth hath never say" (Child 90). Yet in a world populated by confidence men Child could see profound spiritual significance. "Every thing," she wrote in August, 1841, "seems to me to come from the Infinite, to be filled with the Infinite, to be tending toward the Infinite" (10). Perhaps it was a desire to recognize the physical manifestations of the Infinite within herself that led her to the phrenologist, the scientist who promised to make the interior character outwardly knowable.[36]

Though Fowler claimed not to recognize the famous authoress and or to have conversed with her until the reading had been completed, his description is, as Garrison remarked in *The Liberator*, a "*hit*." According to Fowler, Child was of a scholarly turn, "naturally fond of teaching children" and "enjoy[ing] herself with a book and pen," rather than with more mundane domestic pursuits. It was his estimate of her reformist impulses, however, that offered the most recognizable portrait of the abolitionist:

> [she is] always ready to defend herself and the cause she advocates. She is *very* firm, determined, and persevering. There is a good deal of General Jackson about

[36] For more on Child's reaction to phrenology, see Travis M. Foster's "Grotesque Sympathy: Lydia Maria Child, White Reform, and the Embodiment of Urban Space" (2010).

> her in this one particular. She has more than an ordinary degree of moral courage; is never afraid to defend what she thinks right; speaks in unqualified terms of any thing she considers morally wrong; and is a severe critic upon those who violate principles. The strongest trait in her moral character is love of justice. … She is radical in her notions; does not go by old landmarks; is not satisfied with the world as it is, and has more than an ordinary degree of ambition to turn over a new leaf, and bring about moral, social, and intellectual reforms. (Allen 549)

Travis M. Foster has argued that this reading marked a "milestone for antebellum reform culture," providing abolitionists with a vocabulary for their own impulses and affirming their convictions in the power and accuracy of phrenology (1). Abolitionists, like confidence men, could be known by the shape of their heads, as a letter published in *The Liberator*'s October 4, 1844 issue affirms. Reflecting upon a recent lecture, Orson Fowler claimed that "[h]e could tell the heads of leading abolitionists by their large benevolence, conscientiousness, and large combativeness" ("Reformatory").[37]

Surprisingly, abolitionist support for phrenology was not confined to the white members of the movement. William Wells Brown, accompanied by Ellen Craft, followed Frederick Douglass in dining with George Combe while in Edinburgh and "reckon[ed] him amongst the warmest of my friends" (*The American Fugitive* 266). In the United States, the Fowlers occasionally gave lectures on phrenology to enthusiastic black audiences, and, in reporting upon African-American physician James McCune Smith's 1837 lectures against the "pretensions of Phrenologists," the editor of *The Colored American* remarked that the young physician had to

[37] Interestingly, proslavery novelist Maria Jane McIntosh would suggest something similar in *The Lofty and the Lowly* (1853). When two abolitionists approach a runaway slave in the North, the true philanthropist — a kindly but misled clergyman — can be distinguished from his avaricious counterpart, an abolitionist confidence man, by the former's highly developed organs of ideality and benevolence (97).

contend with “the high wrought superstition of his audience” — in other words, with those inclined to believe rather than dismiss phrenology’s claims (“Phrenology”).[38] There were black phrenologists as well, like Henry E. Lewis and H. Jerome Brown, who toured and lectured much as their white counterparts did, though primarily to audiences composed of other African Americans.[39] *The National Era*, an African-American paper, advertised Orson Fowler’s lectures and carried ads for his *Phrenological Journal* and for another phrenological periodical, *Buchanan’s Journal of Man*. Though, in general, African-American run publications, like *The Frederick Douglass’ Paper* and *The Colored American*, produced more criticism of phrenology than did their white-owned abolitionist counterparts, it is clear that many reform-minded Americans of all colors were inclined to give phrenology a fair hearing.

Phrenology, Self-Culture, and Reading Race

To understand the appeal of practical phrenology to abolitionists, both black and white, we must return once again to the confidence man, or rather to the confidence man’s legitimate counterpart, the self-made man. In addition to the promise of a legible social world, phrenology also suggested that all people were capable of bettering themselves and improving their lives through hard work. In a sense, phrenology provided a scientific justification for the growing popularity of self-improvement programs or “self-culture.”[40] In his introductory speech for the appropriately named Franklin Lectures in Boston in 1838, William Ellery Channing described “self-culture,” the process by which one set about to improve one’s life; according to Channing,

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[38] Smith, the first professionally trained African-American physician in the United States, would later go on to publish a collection of ten biographical sketches parodying the language of phrenology entitled “Heads of Colored People” in *The Frederick Douglass Paper* from 1852-54.
[39] For more on the African-American phrenologists, see Hamilton’s “‘Am I Not a Man and a Brother’: Phrenology and Anti-Slavery” (2008).
[40] For more on self-culture, see John T. Lysaker’s *Emerson and Self-Culture* (2008).

such improvement was possible “not only because we can enter into and search ourselves. We have a still nobler power, that of acting on, determining, and forming ourselves” (14). Nearly a decade later Orson Fowler would marry Channing’s notion of self-culture to his own phrenological practice in the preface to his 1847 *Self-Culture and Perfection of Character*. In that work, Fowler insists that phrenology “not only teaches us our characters, but also, what is infinitely more important, how to IMPROVE them. It shows us in what perfection consists, and how to form character and mould mind in accordance with its conditions” (*Self-Culture* v). In the phrenology of Orson Fowler and his brother, the organs of the brain were not fixed in size, but might be enlarged by exercise or diminished through self-restraint. Thus, self-will might be marshaled to remake the self in a more perfect style.[41] The phrenology of the Fowlers seemed the perfect successor to Channing’s philosophy, providing the means, “not only of tracing our powers,” as Channing had put it, “but of guiding and impelling them; not only of watching our passions, but of controlling them; not only of seeing our faculties grow, but of applying to them means and influences to aid their growth” (Channing, *Self-Culture* 14).

Phrenology’s doctrine of self improvement, like Channing’s, complemented a mythology already deeply rooted in the American psyche — the self-made man, who embodied the limitlessness of American potential for honest success. With determination and know-how any man might become rich, attain high social status, or change the world for the better. The example of Benjamin Franklin, whose “The Way to Wealth” (1758) and *Autobiography* (1791) offered

[41] In Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* it is self-culture that forms the foundation of the “man with the weed’s” argument against the skepticism of Tacitus: “Phrenologically, my young friend, you would seem to have a well-developed head, and large; but cribbed within the ugly view, the Tacitus view, your large brain, like your large ox in the contracted field, will but starve the more” (34). According to the man with the weed, Tacitus, with his critical view of human nature, is not the ideal subject for phrenological self-culture; the sophomore should select texts that will encourage rather than restrain impulses towards confidence in his fellow man. Ironically, the confidence man uses phrenology — which encouraged the skeptical reading of heads as a guard against confidence men — to discourage the development of a skeptical approach to human interaction.

practical guidance for those seeking to better themselves and their lot, was continually before Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century. "More than any other individual," as John G. Cawelti explains, Benjamin Franklin "exemplified in his own person and articulated in his writings a new hero, different in character from traditional military, religious, and aristocratic conceptions of human excellence and virtue" (9). Given his status as self-culture icon, it is not surprising that the Fowlers held Franklin up as an example of a man who had literally remade his skull through deliberate self-improvement; amongst its many examples, *Self-Culture* points to the radical growth in Franklin's reflective organs observable when comparing portraits of the man painted in his youth to those painted in his maturity (93-95).

Franklin's was not a character without shadows, however, nor one unconnected to the literature of the confidence man; it is telling that Gary Lindberg, a scholar of the confidence man in American literature, devotes a portion his landmark study *The Confidence Man in American Literature* to Franklin, whose deft manipulation of appearances was responsible in part for his tremendous success. The image of the self created by Franklin in the *Autobiography* is, according to Lindberg, "a figure as historically central to the image of the con man as Melville's protagonist is conceptually central" (11). A runaway apprentice with a carefully crafted public persona, Franklin was not so very different from the confidence man. Half a century after Franklin's death, Ralph Waldo Emerson's description of the American self-made man in "Self-Reliance" (1841) would still bear witness to the family resemblance between the self-made man and the confidence man:

> A sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all the professions, who *teams it*, *farms it*, *peddles*, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township, and so forth, in successive years,

> and always, like a cat, falls on his feet, is worth a hundred of these city dolls. He walks abreast with his days, and feels no shame in not 'studying a profession,' for he does not postpone his life, but lives already. He has not one chance, but a hundred chances. (194-95)

Like the confidence man, the self-made man would lead a life free of the traditional ties to a single location or mode of employment, and indeed the modes of employment Emerson lists here include some of those most frequently imitated by the confidence man: peddling, preaching, and politicking. Emerson's self-made man with his "hundred chances" was not far removed from the confidence man with "his eye on the main chance."

Emerson himself despised phrenology, calling its practitioners "theoretical kidnappers and slave drivers," but, as we have seen, many prominent abolitionists embraced the practice, seeing in it the key not only to their own self knowledge and development, but also to that of the slaves whose emancipation they hoped to bring about ("Experience" 290).[42] Though Combe, for instance, certainly held and espoused views of African-American phrenological development that could be described as racist, he was a passionate abolitionist, and believed that emancipation was the key to the continued development of the race. In his *Lectures on Phrenology* (1833), Combe claimed to detect differences between the skulls of free black men in the North and Southern slaves; based upon his observations in Philadelphia and in Washington, DC, Combe concluded that "the Negroes of the Free States have, for the most part, better organized heads, that those in the few of the Slave States which I have seen" (305). He went on to suggest that the superior skulls of the Northerners "most probably [arise] from their freedom having brought the

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[42] In "Experience" (1844), Ralph Waldo Emerson confesses himself exasperated by this practice of "adapting … conversation to the shape of heads" and accuses phrenologists of "esteem[ing] each man the victim of another, who winds him round his finger by knowing the law of his being, and by such cheap signboards as the color of his beard, or the slope of his occiput, reads the inventory of his fortunes and character" (290).

moral and intellectual faculties into more active employment, which has produced a gradual improvement of the organs" (305). Hamilton traces a similar progression in her reading of a set of illustrations from *The Slave's Friend*. The illustrations — which depict a black man as an African, an American slave, and a free man — chart the development of phrenological differences that accompany a changing social environment and self-improvement; in the final image the sloping forehead seen as typical of the African has become the prominent brow associated with the civilized and educated free man. Just as Franklin's flight from forced labor as an apprentice had spelled phrenological improvement and the opportunity for self-culture, so the fugitive or emancipated slave might develop faculties that would eventually make him the phrenological equal of whites.[43] Phrenology offered a mode of reading the inscrutable black body that went beyond the skin to the more permanent and stable marker of bone, and yet still promised that that very same bone was not perfectly stable but might be changed and improved.

In addition to providing a kind of scientific justification for emancipation, phrenology might provide a much needed answer to the question of how to read African-Americans. "Masters often complained," as Kenneth Greenberg explains, "that they were unable to read the faces of their slaves," a source of considerable anxiety to them (47). Like the confidence man, they seemed to wear a kind of impenetrable mask, one that "had no easily discernible deeper content. Was it a face put on to please a powerful master? Was it a face that constantly changed with circumstances?" (48). Modes of slave resistance were often covert, and slave owners rarely knew if acts of destruction or theft were in deliberate defiance of the slave system or simply the result of the carelessness and immorality supposed to be characteristic of the African race. Efforts besides phrenology had been made to make the body of the slave speak more clearly;

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[43] For a consideration of Benjamin Franklin's status as a runaway, see David Waldstreicher's *Runaway America* (2004).

Samuel A. Cartwright's 1851 identification in *De Bow's Review* of Dysæthesia Ætheopica, or the disease of "rascality," can be seen as one such attempt. This ailment, according to Cartwright, was responsible for the apparent defiance of slaves — the breakage of tools, abuse of livestock, theft, and general laziness — "which appears as if intentional, but is mostly owing to the stupidness of mind and insensibility of the nerves induced by the disease" (37). Even as skin was increasingly considered an unreliable index of human character, Cartwright attempted to reassure slave owners by assigning "physical signs or lesions of the body discoverable to the medical observer" to "rascality" (37). Cartwright's theory poses a kind of proslavery alternative to phrenology (itself not unmarked by racism), in which the surface of the body of the slave yields up the secrets of the inner man. Much as phrenology promised to bestow readability upon the elusive and illegible confidence man, Cartwright promised to detect the wayward slave through lesions on the skin.

Because the new science argued for the vital role played by the environment in the development of the individual head, the racial inferiority phrenology detected in African Americans generally could be explained by a dearth of positive influences. Child, for one, appeared to accept this explanation; after her visit to the American Museum to see the Native Americans on exhibit there, she concluded that the inferiority of their skulls "simply proves that the Caucasian race, through a succession of ages, has been exposed to influences eminently calculated to develop the moral and intellectual faculties" (261). Whites, exposed to a different and superior original environment (complete with the historical influence of Judea, Greece, Rome, and the age of chivalry), naturally boasted heads superior to those groups deprived of these beneficial influences; "[s]imilar influences," however, if "brought to bear on the Indians or the Africans, as a race, would gradually change the structure of their skulls, and enlarge their

perceptions of moral and intellectual truth" (263). By examining the head of a single individual one might trace the development of the entire race and decide what path the race as a whole ought to follow.

Perhaps the most famous example of this was P.T. Barnum's exhibition at the American Museum of the "Nondescript," (also tellingly referred to as "What Is It?"), which called upon viewers to reason out the racial and evolutionary status of a mentally handicapped African-American teenager along a graduated hierarchy of race. An amateur phrenological reading of the young man, published in the *Evening Post*, concluded that his head,

> if subjected to the professional manipulations of Professor Fowler, would be pronounced to have very small perceptive and intellectual faculties, without ideality, reverence or conscientiousness; with large animal propensities, and with a bump of combativeness and destructiveness which would render it unnecessary to explain the command of Peter, 'Rise, kill, and eat,' nor would he have the scruples of Peter against eating things common and unclean. (qtd. in Cook 154)

Phrenology's value as entertainment and its value as a system for charting racial difference were combined in the figure of the Nondescript, enabling racist and racialist judgments of his status as human or subhuman, man or ape. Phrenology offered one method of describing the Nondescript, of making the illegible body readable again.

Thus phrenology offered a way for abolitionists to support emancipation while maintaining a certain degree of critical distance between themselves and the objects of their benevolence; blacks might simultaneously be both the same and other, both subject and object. As Foster argues, scientific racism and the phrenology that supported it enabled white sympathy by emphasizing "the autonomous distinct body as an index to moral and intellectual capacity";

physical difference was meaningful, and that meaning might be determined by an educated viewer, often through the application of phrenological principles (3). By permitting sympathy without identification, phrenology and other pseudoscientific movements allowed abolitionists to "[retain] their sense of decorum and bourgeois personhood," while actively pursuing the cause of abolition (3).

It is this sense of decorum that Melville stands on its head in his consideration of Black Guinea in *The Confidence-Man*. As I have already suggested, depictions of African-Americans identified as confidence men in literature are something of a rarity, a fact that belies the deeply racial nature of the confidence game in the antebellum United States. This is not the case with Melville's Black Guinea. Of the many manifestations of the title character in *The Confidence-Man*, Black Guinea, "a grotesque negro cripple," is only the second to appear (17). Following on the heels of the elusive, deaf-mute "man in cream colors," Black Guinea's "knotted black fleece and good-natured, honest black face" seem to make his identity refreshingly transparent (17). While the "man in cream colors" famously defies the interpretative exercises of the passengers — they are certain he "[m]eans something," but cannot agree upon what that "something" might be — Black Guinea is quite obviously black, a cripple, and a beggar. So immediately recognizable and memorable is Black Guinea's identity as black and disabled that an anonymous reviewer for the *Illustrated Times* in London, otherwise despairing of even counting the number of characters who appear in the novel, declared that he is "sure there is a lame black man" ("Illustrated Times" 499).

In a text known for its unreadability, Black Guinea is initially presented as a uniquely readable character. His body — his dark skin, woolly hair, and twisted legs — speaks, identifying his place in the social hierarchy quite clearly without the need to resort to interpretive

principles like those introduced by phrenologists and physiognomists.[44] Susan M. Ryan argues that Black Guinea's blackness and his indigence are part of a system of "mutually reinforcing" antebellum hierarchies that determine his social status, "such that the black person as supplicant came to seem commonsensical" to antebellum Americans (67). Black Guinea seems readable to the other passengers because his position is natural, even "comforting," since it "reaffirm[s] whites' belief in black incapacity and in their own superiority" (67).[45] As the man with the weed will remark, "nature has placarded the evidence of [his] claims" (Melville *Confidence-Man* 38). Black Guinea is "unproblematically black," according to Ryan, "until he attempts to trade on his blackness" (65), but his unproblematic blackness extends well into the pitch-penny game; in fact, he began trading on his blackness, though perhaps not as successfully, long before the point Ryan marks for the end of his unproblematic status. It is not Black Guinea's attempt to use his "commonsensical" status to earn charity that produces the suspicion of the passengers, but instead the intervention of the man with the wooden leg (20).

The clear readability of Black Guinea once called into question by the wooden-legged man is revealed to have been built upon an unstable base. In fact, the identity of Black Guinea, both his apparent blackness and apparent disability, will become subject to more debate within the text than that of any other manifestation of the Confidence-Man. The deformity of his legs may be, as the wooden-legged man suggests, "a sham, got up for financial purposes" (19) and the natural color of his skin other than it appears. "[H]e's some white operator," the wooden-legged man insists, "betwisted and painted up for a decoy" (21). Unmoored from their secure

[44] For an excellent consideration of the "disability con man" in *The Confidence-Man*, see Ellen Samuels' "From Melville to Eddie Murphy: The Disability Con in American Literature and Film" (2006).
[45] Proslavery texts, like those I examine in chapter 3, frequently made use of the figure of the indigent fugitive slave. Supposedly incapable of caring for themselves, particularly in the capitalistic North, these fictional impoverished freemen served to confirm racist assumptions about the limits of the capabilities of African-Americans and their unsuitability for freedom.

points of reference, Black Guinea's audience cannot regain their state of certainty. Black Guinea may be precisely what he seems, or he may be "some sort of black Jeremy Diddler" — or perhaps even a white one (24).[46] Like the "Canada thistle" to which he is compared (22), the wooden-legged man has sown the seeds of their confusion and cast them out of the knowable world, back into the world of strangers and "strangers still more strange" (15).

In this way, the episode with Black Guinea acts out the social upheaval experienced by antebellum Americans as they passed from secure social networks to the world of strangers that was the newly industrialized city. Unlike the man in cream colors, Black Guinea seems easily readable, until the basis of his identification by the passengers is undermined by doubts sown by the wooden-legged man. Van Wyck Brooks famously referred to *The Confidence-Man*'s "clutter of faceless characters" (qtd. in Renker 114); if Melville's confidence men are for the most part "faceless" (as are, incidentally, all the other figures aboard the *Fidèle*) it is because the face was indexed to truth, knowledge, and identity by the long tradition of physiognomy, a tradition brought into sharp focus by the growing popularity of phrenology. In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville goes beyond merely denouncing phrenology or making its advocates confidence men, he denies his readers even the barest suggestion that anything might be learned by the shape of a head.

In this way he thrusts his readers back into the world of strangers from which phrenology had promised an escape. Within the floating city of the *Fidèle*, phrenology is a tool for confidence men, a misleading map that makes its user more likely to be lead astray rather than less. The knowable, legible world promised by the sciences of the surface is ultimately revealed

[46] The name "Jeremy Diddler," taken from a clever, profit-driven character in James Kenney's 1803 play *Raising the Wind*, was often used to label confidence men, particularly before the 1849 arrest of William Thompson and the subsequent media coverage introduced the name by which they are known today. A "diddle," in nineteenth-century parlance, was a confidence game; the verb "to diddle" meant to con. This is the sense in which Edgar Allan Poe uses the words in his 1843 essay "Raising the Wind; or, Diddling Considered as One of the Exact Sciences."

as an *ignis fatuus* that imperils those who seek it; nothing, not even race, can be reliably determined by outward appearances. Up to this point we have considered those who exploit this truth — the confidence men who encourage their dupes to place their trust in appearances — as a problem of the newly anonymous Northern city, but, as downriver course of the *Fidèle* suggests, the rural regions, small towns, and plantation communities of the antebellum South would not remain untouched by the confidence game. Proslavery novelists would find new use for the confidence-man figure as a symbol of abolitionist treachery.

Chapter 2

The Great White Hoax: Abolitionist Confidence Men and the Proslavery Imagination

In 1857, just one month after the publication of Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man*. William Lloyd Garrison's antislavery weekly *The Liberator* reprinted a curious story from South Carolina. One Mrs. Emerson, apparently a lecturer on phrenology and a rather "tall and robust" woman, was there accused of being both "a man in disguise" and a secret abolitionist: "Upon inspection of her papers, they came to the conclusion that she was a philanthropist of the Madame Beecher Stowe order; and her mission among us, if for no worse purpose, was to collect material for a work similar to Uncle Tom's Cabin" ("An Abolitionist in Disguise"). Not content with the exposure of this one antislavery interloper, a writer for the *Sumter Watchman* concluded that Mrs. Emerson, while perhaps a woman after all, must be part of a larger plan:

> The abolitionists, afraid of receiving the punishment due their rascality, and yet desirous of carrying on their nefarious schemes, are trying to carry out their plans and screen themselves from punishment by the aid and instrumentality of their women. Relying upon Southern gallantry and generosity, they pick up abandoned characters who will do anything for money, and send them down here to corrupt our slaves and belie our institutions, thinking because they are women, they will be safe from Southern violence and reproach. ("An Abolitionist in Disguise")

Whether Garrison reprinted the story for the amusement or the alarm of his readers remains unclear; however, the story itself suggests a mounting degree of paranoia in the proslavery South following the publication of Stowe's famous novel. Several of the novels proslavery authors published in response to Stowe characterize Northern abolitionists travelling in the South not as

devoted, or even fanatical, adherents to a cause, but as confidence men and women intent upon reaping profit from the destruction of the South. This chapter examines the proslavery use of the confidence-man figure to discredit the abolitionist movement. By suggesting that abolitionists were confidence men, authors of so-called anti-*Tom* novels sought to undermine one of the movement's greatest strengths, its sincerity.

Karen Halttunen has argued for the special role played by confidence men in the urban conduct manuals of the midcentury; her confidence men are cunning hypocrites who exploit the social reliance upon appearances to deceive and ultimately enslave young men inexperienced in the ways of the city. When proslavery authors responding to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) deployed the figure of the confidence man, however, they did so in a social setting at considerable variance with that of the Northeast. While dwellers in Northern cities attempted to "shape all social forms into sincere expressions of inner feeling" (Halttunen xvii) — a circumstance that left them vulnerable to the machinations of the confidence man — those living in the plantation South were governed by a different, though nonetheless vulnerable, system. In his study of honor codes in the Old South, *Honor and Slavery* (1996), Kenneth S. Greenberg suggests that Southern gentlemen, like their Northern counterparts, were concerned with the issue of appearances, but while Northerners obsessed over the notion of sincerity, "[s]outhern men of honor were 'superficial.'" According to Greenberg, "They were concerned, to a degree we would consider unusual, with the surface of things — with the world of appearances" (3). This gave rise to the careful cultivation of a social mask, the maintenance of which marked a gentleman as part of "the circle of honor" and set him apart from cowards, slaves, and professional gamblers (48). For men of honor, "character was expressed in what could be publicly displayed, not in what was hidden under clothes or skin" (16). It was this

emphasis on the importance of appearances, of the public face worn by a man of honor in his community, that made the act of nose pulling or tweaking such a grave insult; to demonstrate such disrespect to the most prominent part of that face was to question the sincerity of the public mask, to "give the lie." To give the lie amounted to "announcing that [a gentleman's] appearance differed from his true nature," that he was, in the language of sincerity, a hypocrite, and in the terms of honor, a liar (9).

So it is perhaps not surprising that many slaveholders and proslavery writers, individuals who often boast of the virtues of the honor code, seem to have taken the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) quite personally. In *Fanatical Schemes: Proslavery Rhetoric and the Tragedy of Consensus* (2009), Patricia Roberts-Miller suggests that proslavery rhetors were virtually incapable of taking antislavery speech as anything *but* personal. "[H]yperbole was the norm for Southern public discourse," she argues, and even the mildest critiques of the slave system were likely to be met with disproportionate outrage (73): "[p]roslavery rhetors did not object to the stridency with which abolitionists criticized slavery; they objected to the criticism, and they wanted it silenced" (17). Through the lens of honor, Stowe's book, though in actuality politically mild, was calculated to damage Southern reputations; it gave the lie to slaveholders and supporters of the slave system by suggesting that the image of themselves that they presented to the larger community of the nation was a false one. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and later in *The Key to* Uncle Tom's Cabin (1853), Stowe put on display aspects of slavery in direct contradiction with common Southern portrayals of the South and its institutions as examples of benevolent patriarchy. In a sense, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* amounted to an accusation of hypocrisy because it questioned whether slaveholders were in fact the just and compassionate patriarchs they purported to be in works of both fact and fiction.

Stowe had "pulled the nose" of the plantation owner, and proslavery writers responded in kind. In 1852, George Frederick Holmes, editor of the influential *Southern Literary Messenger*, declared Stowe's novel the direct result of "a criminal desire to propagate a slander" against the South, a work characterized by "deep-dyed hypocrisy" that "veil[ed] with the semblance of truth doctrines known to be dangerous, and intended to generate social disorder and political ruin" (730-31). Using a metaphor that we will see applied time and again to the figure of the confidence man — the "wolf in sheep's clothing" — Holmes accused Stowe's novel of appearing to be what it is not: "The vestments of an angel of light are thrown around the body of a fiend; the wolf has assumed the clothing of the sheep, that it may more successfully prey upon the innocent and delude the shepherd" (731). The criticism leveled at the novel was repeated in reviews that targeted Stowe ad hominem: a reviewer for the *New Orleans Crescent* called the novelist "part quack and part cut-throat," equating the author with medical confidence men as well as killers, and William Gilmore Simms, editor of *The Southern Quarterly Review* and author of the popular anti-*Tom* novel *The Sword and the Distaff* (1852), later charged her with "betray[ing] a malignity so remarkable that the petticoat lifts of itself, and we see the hoof of the beast under the table" (Simms, *Stowe's Key* 226).

Some of these critics called for a more literary response to Stowe's novel, one that would answer *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in its own language and "array fiction against fiction," as one writer for the *Pennsylvanian* suggested (qtd. in Meer 75). The anti-*Tom* novel was the result of efforts to do just that. In the period between the initial publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852 and the start of the Civil War, literarily-minded supporters of Southern slavery struck back at Stowe using the very medium she employed in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; indeed, novels purporting to respond to Stowe's began to appear within months of the appearance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in

bound form.[47] In *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture* (2005), Sarah Meer rightly concludes that some of these replies contain no real response to Stowe at all and were simply linked to Stowe via titles or advertising campaigns as part of a "cynical appeal to the market," but others were clearly prompted by the desire to engage with the arguments made in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* through the medium of the novel. Though some Southern editors and critics, like the aforementioned Holmes, worried that such responses might amount to "mere counter-irritant[s]" "degrading to the serious character of the subject," the novel was nonetheless the chosen weapon of a multitude of proslavery authors (Holmes 727).[48] Within two years of the first appearance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, there were arguably at least a dozen anti-*Tom* novels already on the market. By the beginning of the Civil War, this figure had more than doubled as proslavery sympathizers pitched their tents on a rapidly expanding literary battlefield that they feared would be dominated by the fortifications of Stowe and her antislavery supporters.[49]

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[47] Seven anti-*Tom* novels appeared before the close of 1852: William Gilmore Simm's *The Sword and the Distaff*; Mary Henderson Eastman's *Aunt Phillis's Cabin; or, Southern Life As It Is*; W. L. G. Smith's *Life at the South; or, Uncle Tom's Cabin As It Is*; Robert Criswell's *"Uncle Tom's Cabin" Contrasted With Buckingham Hall, The Planter's Home*; Baynard Rush Hall's *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop: A Tale*; J. Thornton Randolph's *The Cabin and Parlor; or, Slaves and Masters*; and Caroline Rush's *The North and the South; or, Slavery and Its Contrasts*.

[48] Holmes was not against literature on the subject of slavery or the South in general; in fact he encouraged the cultivation of a Southern literary tradition, suggesting that "The only true defence of the South against [Stowe's] attack … is to create and cherish a true Southern literature, whose spontaneous action will repel and refute such accusations" (Holmes725). However, this support for Southern literature should not be taken, as it appears to be by Meer, as an unqualified endorsement of the projects of anti-*Tom* authors (Meer 75).

[49] Figures on anti-*Tom* production vary. Generous estimates, like Meer's, include thirty-four texts that purported to respond to Stowe; my own count suggests even more. However, not all these texts are novels. If one excludes poems, like *The Hireling and the Slave* (1856), extended dialogues, like *The Sable Cloud* (1861), sentimental novels that only touch on slavery, like *Louise Elton* (1853, contrary to Meer's assertion [77], slavery is not a central issue in this text), and works whose initial printings pre-date *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (e.g. Calvin Henderson Wiley's *Life at the South* [1852]), one arrives at the more conservative number of twenty-nine. This count includes the following: Mary Henderson Eastman's *Aunt Phillis's Cabin; or, Southern Life As It Is* (1852); Baynard Rush Hall's *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop* (1852); W. L. G. Smith's *Life at the South; or, Uncle Tom's Cabin As It Is* (1852); Caroline Rush's *The North and the South; or, Slavery and Its Contrasts* (1852); Charles Jacobs Peterson's *The Cabin and Parlor; or, Slaves and Masters* (1852); Robert Criswell's *"Uncle Tom's Cabin" Contrasted With Buckingham Hall, The Planter's Home* (1852); William Gilmore Simms' *The Sword and the Distaff* (1852, later republished as *Woodcraft*); Sarah Josepha Hale's *Liberia; or, Mr. Peyton's Experiments* (1853); M.J. McIntosh's *The Lofty and the Lowly; or, Good in All and None All-Good* (1853); Vidi's *Mr. Frank; or, The Underground Mail Agent* (1853); Martha Haines Butt's *Antifanaticism: A Tale of the South* (1853); J.W. Page's *Uncle Robin in His Cabin in Virginia, And Tom Without One in Boston* (1853); Caroline Lee Hentz's *The Planter's Northern Bride* (1854); Lucien B. Chase's

Nonetheless, the term "anti-*Tom*" can be somewhat misleading. While most of the works classified as anti-*Tom*s were indeed composed as oppositional responses to Stowe's novel, it should not be inferred that they were all *equally* opposed to her message: some, like *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop* (1852) and *The Master's House; A Tale of Southern Life* (1854), espouse approaches to the problem of slavery (colonization, compensation, or gradual emancipation, to name a few) that compare favorably with those of Stowe herself. Indeed, many of the anti-*Toms* have more in common with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* than we might expect; most walked a fine line between repudiation and imitation, seeking to counter many of the specific claims made in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* while at the same time retaining much of the sentimental structure, language, and characterization that had proven so effective for Stowe. Meer highlights some of the many ways in which anti-*Tom* writers — tentatively designated "copycat critics" in her analysis — used Stowe's language, images, and symbols to plead against her argument by turning the rhetorical weapons of the abolitionist against the abolitionist cause. "Copycat" may not be an entirely fair designation, since many of the similarities between the works of Stowe and her detractors are the natural result of shared generic conventions, but some of the apparently deliberate parallels between the anti-*Tom* novels and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are worth consideration.

Meer and other critics have pointed to the obvious similarities between Stowe's title and many of the titles of anti-*Tom* novels, as well as to the more subtle proslavery appropriation of

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English Serfdom and American Slavery; or, Ourselves—As Others See Us (1854); T.B. Thorpe's *The Master's House* (1854); Lawrence's *Edith Allen* (1855); Marion Southwood's *Tit For Tat*: *A Novel* (1856); William MacCreary Burrell's *White Acre vs. Black Acre: A Case at Law* (1856); James M. Smythe's *Ethel Somers; or, The Fate of the Union* (1857); *The Olive Branch; or, White Oak Farm* (Anonymous, 1857); James W. Hungerford's *The Old Plantation, and What I Gathered There in One Autumn Month* (1859); Mary Howard Schoolcraft's *The Black Gauntlet: A Tale of Plantation Life in South Carolina* (1860); G.M. Flanders' *The Ebony Idol* (1860); V.G. Cowdin's *Ellen; or, The Fanatic's Daughter* (1860); Joseph Holt Ingraham's *The Sunny South; or, The Southerner at Home* (1860); *The Yankee Slave-Dealer; or, An Abolitionist Down South: A Tale for the Times* (Anonymous, 1860); Ebenezer Starnes' *The Slaveholder Abroad; or, Billy Buck's Visit, with His Master, to England* (1860); and Desmos' *Old Toney and His Master; or, The Abolitionist and the Land-Pirate* (1861).

Stowe's language, settings, characters, and symbols. The image of the neatly whitewashed slave cabin, for instance, is one used by both Stowe and a number of anti-*Tom* novelists. For Stowe, such neatness testified to the virtue and humanity of the Uncle Tom and Aunt Chloe, but for the anti-*Tom* writer it is "a credit to the master rather than to the slave," a demonstration of *his* virtue and humanity (Meer 81). However, in the action of the plots we often find explicit repudiations of Stowe's claims in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, key episodes that parallel and rewrite moments in Stowe's novel in order to reflect an anti-abolitionist agenda.[50] For example, one of the most famous moments in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Eliza Harris's dramatic crossing of the frozen Ohio River, is replayed again and again in the anti-*Tom* novels, both in the flights of willful or misled slaves *from* slavery and the flights of repentant slaves back *to* slavery (W.L.G. Smith goes so far as to name the slave in question Uncle Tom). The appalling death of the virtuous Tom at the hands of the vicious Simon Legree is replaced in the anti-*Tom* novel by the deaths of other pious slaves, like Mary Henderson Eastman's Aunt Phillis and J.W. Page's Aunt Dinah, who, having been cared for in their old age by their loving masters, pass on to glory after reaching a ripe old age. Proslavery novelists even found a use for the cruel and slothful Marie St. Clair by transforming her from a vicious and useless aging Southern belle into the benevolent and industrious slave mistresses of the anti-*Tom* novel.[51] As one might imagine, Little Eva, perhaps the most memorable and moving of Stowe's characters (at least to her nineteenth-century

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[50] This extensive borrowing from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did not pass without criticism from other pro-Southern writers and critics. In his review of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* George Frederick Holmes reflects on the problems inherent in the pattern of proslavery novelistic response already established in 1852 by Mary Henderson Eastman's *Aunt Phillis's Cabin: or, Southern Life As It Is*. Concerned by what he perceives as the imitative nature of that novel, Holmes cautions other would-be anti-*Tom* novelists that "a reply in this shape too commonly necessitates such an adherence to the dramatic procedure and to the progression of sentiment adopted by the original work, that it places the replicant in a secondary position, and exhibits him in the false light of a mere imitator and plagiarist, by way of opposition, thus obviously yielding the vantage ground to the offender" (727).

[51] Mary Howard Schoolcraft claimed in *The Black Gauntlet* that "Northern ladies never saw a day in their lives that could comprise all the responsibilities of a Southern planter's wife," and T.B. Thorpe's *The Master's House* suggests through one of the female characters that "a planter's wife is the greatest slave that exists" (158).

audiences), has a role to play as well; in the anti-*Tom* novel, however, angelic children suffer not from hereditary consumption but rather from harsh working conditions and the neglect of Northern philanthropists bent on saving the slave but uninterested in the plight of the white working class.[52]

Unlike Stowe's novel, though, the anti-*Tom*s also often found prominent roles for abolitionists. While in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the antislavery movement takes a back seat to the trials, tribulations, and triumphs of its slave characters, a number of the anti-*Tom*s seem almost feverishly concerned with the work of antislavery organizations and individuals. Unable to admit, or perhaps even to believe, that antislavery writers might be in earnest in their appeals for the emancipation of the slaves, anti-*Tom* novelists present the abolitionist as the epitome of *in*sincerity, a character not mad with philosophical zeal but "crazy like a fox" and hell-bent upon some hidden agenda. It is not surprising then that we find so many abolitionists in the anti-*Tom* novels who are also confidence men. In an antebellum culture obsessed with sincerity as a measure of both moral and social standing, the confidence man posed the ultimate threat to supposedly stable social institutions. In the anti-*Tom* novel, the institution under threat is slavery, and it is the abolitionist, and more specifically what I have termed the abolitionist confidence man, who threatens it.

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[52] Caroline Lee Hentz laments the fate of "the poor, starving seamstresses, whose pallid faces mingle their chill, wintry gleams with the summer glow and splendor of the Northern cities" (27). Caroline Rush's *The North and the South* goes further, describing the sufferings a number of sisters abused in the Northern city. Rush's answer to the doomed Eva, Little Ida, is "a heavenly child, with blue eyes and golden hair … Her complexion is of the purest white, and her face is faultless in its outline. … Though she is so young, she talks very plain, and often she climbs upon my mother's lap, and laying her fair head on her bosom, she asks with her little soft voice the strangest questions of heaven and the angels" (71-72). Two of her sisters, bound out to other families, are horribly abused; one goes mad and commits suicide as a result. Comparing the sufferings of another of the sisters, Gazella, to Uncle Tom, Rush concludes: "I do not believe such a being [as Uncle Tom] ever existed, save in the realms of fancy, but the poor white slave, Gazella, with all her starving misery, adds to the history of her sufferings, that most charming of all attributes — 'truth'" (128).

The anti-*Tom* novels, like most other vehicles of proslavery rhetoric, pointed to the North as the primary if not sole source of Southern troubles. Southern explanations of insurrections, for instance, remained more or less constant in proslavery texts throughout the first half of the nineteenth century; according to Roberts-Miller, "proslavery rhetors insisted, as early as 1802, that they [insurrections] were caused by criticism of slavery" (17). Greenberg likewise suggests that "[f]or white gentlemen of the Old South it was Yankee peddlers or abolitionists or tricksters who lay at the root of every rebellion — not slaves voluntarily risking their lives for liberation" (102). Meer also points to a similar phenomenon in Southern responses to the growing problem of runaway slaves, the tendency to insist that "the blame for slave escapes lay with abolitionists" (88). Certainly it must have been more attractive to proslavery apologists to blame white agitators than to confront the reality of slave discontent, and the anti-*Tom* writers produced a number of such agitators in their novels, ranging from the misguided to the murderous.

However, the structure of the antislavery movement in its totality proved difficult to represent in fiction. The range of opinions regarding slavery, even amongst those who disliked the institution, was extraordinarily broad, and it continues to defy efforts at simple categorization. Neither was the proslavery agenda well served by accurate portrayals of abolitionists; the anti-*Tom* novel, and proslavery rhetoric in general, required a simpler enemy, and, in the words of Roberts-Miller, the "accuracy of its characterization of abolitionists was less important than the effectiveness of its alarmism" (233). She argues that

> A single enemy, a specific individual, is more conducive to alarmism than an amorphous political phenomenon because it can be associated with a specific image. The abstract fact of various people who are various degrees of abolitionist for various reasons and in various ways can be reduced to a single individual,

> almost in the way a metaphor or model is literalized. This single individual embodies the movement(s), thereby promising the possibility of killing the movement(s) through the death of a single individual. (Roberts-Miller 233)

David Grimsted has detected this rhetorical scapegoating maneuver as well; in *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (1998), he points to the creation of "an abolitionist straw man" as a "comforting fiction" that justified the most common form of the Southern riot in the antebellum period, the mobbing and lynching of suspected abolitionists (Grimsted 33, xi). The practice of scapegoating — or, as Grimsted occasionally and colorfully calls it, "bearskinning" — resulted in assigning to the idea of the abolitionist multiple "self-contradictory elements" that created a "pastiche of villainy that blotted out any need to think about the real motives of any person questioning slavery and that even obviated rational structuring of the stereotype" (114). Thus abolitionists might simultaneously be both bloodthirsty and effeminate, both fanatical and coldly calculating, as the case required. An internally coherent stereotype was neither necessary nor desirable.[53]

By heaping onto the abolitionist scapegoat the sum of all the fears and sins of the Southern community at large, the anti-abolitionist writer set the stage for the possibility of rhetorical ritual cleansing. Roberts-Miller follows Orlando Patterson's lead (*Rituals of Blood*

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[53] Grimsted points to the description of the abolitionist he found in a letter in the *New Orleans Bee*:

> "The murderous designs of these fiend-like fanatics would not only place the firebrand in our dwellings, but prepare their knives for the cutting of our throats." The self-contradictory elements that followed in this description of the "hydra monster" suggested how abolition became a pastiche of villainy. They were "sickly sentimentalists" *and* "wretches, who delight in confusion and disorder, merely with a view to plunder." Their bloodthirstiness led to "untireing exertions to accomplish the extermination of the white population of the South," *but* expectation of making money was "the true secret of the humbug." They were "bloodless hypocrits" *but* were driven by uncontrolled lust for blacks and "unnatural tastes" that were "peculiarly disgusting" in women. The abolitionist became not only Evil and the Enemy, but a mirror deflecting northward the darker aspects of Southern realities, precisely when the South first came to insist, with at least outward unanimity, that slavery was no evil at all. (114)

[1999]) in suggesting that the practice of lynching occasionally took on quasi-religious significance, offering participants an opportunity to symbolically purge their community of unwanted elements by first projecting them onto an "outsider" and then brutally sacrificing that person in a public ritual. She further suggests that a similar process can be traced in the non-lethal realm of print, where "embodying antislavery sentiment in a single person enabled a kind of community cleansing through rhetorical ritual killing" (233). In this chapter I suggest that the creation of the abolitionist confidence man is one example of this process of scapegoating and literalization as it manifests in the anti-*Tom* novel. Faced with a complex issue, a significant minority of anti-*Tom* novelists tried to move the discussion from the abstract to the concrete, replacing the amorphous antislavery movement with a single identifiable villain, the abolitionist confidence man, against which they might argue, mobilize, and militate.

The abolitionist confidence man as he emerges in these works is something more than the villainous type of abolitionist identified in Thomas F. Gossett's Uncle Tom's Cabin *and American Culture* (1985). Gossett identifies two primary types of abolitionists in the anti-*Tom* novel: there are those who are "well intentioned but foolish and misguided" and there are those who are "mean, narrow, and hypocritical" (231). At the extreme end of this latter category we find the abolitionist confidence man. While he is certainly often "mean, narrow, and hypocritical," he also adds to these characteristics an extraordinary capacity for deception and the skillful manipulation of appearances. He is the wolf in sheep's clothing, often literally donning the garb of the Christian "shepherd" in order to deceive and metaphorically devour an unwary Southern flock.[54] The confidence man's uncanny facility with language — often the

[54] Examples of confidence men masquerading as preachers or using legitimate church authority to spread the gospel of insurrection and escape include characters from Hentz's *The Planter's Northern Bride*, Maria McIntosh's *Lofty and Lowly*, V.G. Cowdin's *Ellen*, and Baynard Rush Hall's *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop*.

language of a religious revivalist — woos not merely the slaves, whose trusting nature is taken as a matter of scientific fact in these novels, but also members of the better educated and more wary master class. As with other confidence men, keys to his practice of deception often include disguises and the use of multiple aliases; indeed, several of the anti-*Tom* novels include unmasking scenes in which the abolitionist confidence man is revealed to be a known criminal, often a veteran counterfeiter or forger (natural professions for those whose skills lie in fabricating appearances).[55] He is invariably a Northerner, generally either a preacher or a teacher, and always an advocate of only the most extreme approaches to ending slavery. The abolitionist confidence man is always an *abolitionist*, favoring the immediate emancipation of the slaves (without compensation for their masters) and calling for an abrupt end to the slave system, regardless of the consequences for the masters, the slaves, or the union at large.

Not all of the anti-*Tom* novelists created abolitionist confidence-man figures, of course. In fact, of the twenty-nine works I classify as anti-*Tom* novels, only seven contain these figures in what I would consider their fully developed forms (though in the case of *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop* and *The Planter's Northern Bride* the figure appears in multiples). However, they represent a significant minority with implications for our understanding of both proslavery rhetorical strategies and for the ongoing study of confidence men in American literature. For the purposes of this chapter I have grouped the abolitionist confidence men of the anti-*Tom* novels into two loose and overlapping categories: the itinerant incendiaries whose primary theater of operations is in the South (where they seek to stir up slave rebellions) and the phony philanthropists and counterfeit conductors who encourage and then abuse runaway slaves. Taken

[55] Some examples include characters from Hentz's *The Planter's Northern Bride*, Baynard Rush Hall's *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop*, and William MacCreary Burrell's *White Acre vs. Black Acre*.

together the collective effect of these characters is a veritable army of confidence men poised to steal slaves, instigate rebellions, and ruin Southern lives and livelihoods. If Stowe "gave the lie" to supporters of slavery, then the anti-*Tom* novelists offered to give it right back. By portraying abolitionists themselves as confidence men concealing avarice and villainy behind a mask of charity or a cloak of social justice, anti-*Tom* novelists sought to call into question the motivations at the heart of the antislavery movement while simultaneously shifting the blame for two of the most obvious contradictions to representations of slavery as a benevolent system: the insurrection and the runaway.

Itinerant Incendiaries

As I have already suggested, the tendency of slavers and proslavery writers to blame any and all slave insurrections on Northern abolitionists is well documented; in fact, it is difficult to find a successful insurrection or even a suspected slave uprising that Southerners did not attribute to the actions of one antislavery group or another. For the most part, these claims bordered on the preposterous.[56] For example, the Southern press in the wake of the Nat Turner rebellion first depicted the leader of the revolt as a confidence man who manipulated otherwise content slaves into rebellion but then increasingly as a reader inspired by the abolitionist publications of David Walker and William Lloyd Garrison. Though it is of course possible that Turner had read either or both of these authors, the insistence that he had in fact done so rested not on evidence but rather on the Southern need to ascribe blame to Northerners for the bloody rebellion. The violent summer of 1835 stands as another example of persistent Southern finger pointing; the assertion, still occasionally repeated by historians, that the American Antislavery Society was responsible

[56] Two well-publicized exceptions to this rule were the white-led attempted exodus aboard *The Pearl* in 1848 and John Brown's ill-fated raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859. For more on the Southern blame game see Patricia Roberts-Miller, Sarah Meer, and David Grimsted.

for the insurrection panic that left dozens dead under lynch law rests on little more than the coincidental timing of a large, and largely unsuccessful, antislavery mail campaign.[57] Nevertheless, defenders of slavery did not let the lack of evidence deter them from placing the blame where they saw fit. Roberts-Miller shows that, at least in the 1830s, "the notion that abolitionists explicitly advocated insurrection [was] so pervasive that abolitionists' interference could be, and was, read in to any rebellion or resistance, real or imagined" (86).

The anti-*Tom* novelists were hard at work not merely reading abolitionist interference into slave insurrections, but actively *writing* it in as well. Anti-*Tom* novelists re-imagined the idea of the insurrection in their fiction in such a way as to absolve the South and Southern slavers of any responsibility for slave uprisings or for the outbreaks of mob violence that generally followed. In some of these texts the inclusion of the abolitionist confidence man, an interfering Northerner who "tampered" with slaves and provoked them to revolt, took actual slave unrest out of the equation; slaves did not revolt because of dissatisfaction or abuse or a longing to be free, but because they had been manipulated by Northern abolitionists. G.M. Flanders' *The Ebony Idol* (1860) imagines Northern antislavery organizations "sending hot-headed, half-educated, addled-brained Yankees to stir up strife and instruct the blacks how to murder their masters and raise insurrection" (66). J.W. Page's *Uncle Robin in His Cabin in Virginia, And Tom Without One in Boston* (1853) likewise argues that insurrections — "these shocking occurrences" — "are not the legitimate consequences of slavery" but are instead the product of "an unpardonable intermeddling on the part of Northern abolitionists with our property; producing dissatisfaction

[57] In *Fanatical Schemes*, Patricia Roberts-Miller demonstrates that the Society's pamphlet campaign, only ever intended to be sent to Charleston, South Carolina in the first place, met with a swift end when the postmaster of New York refused to forward the mailing to its intended recipients; far from igniting a powder keg at the South, the pamphlets never made it past their point of origin (232). Moreover, the pamphlets, mailed in July, were by then already too late to account for the wave of mob violence, which began in late June. White hysteria in response to the largely fictitious memoir of Virgil A. Stewart was more likely the culprit.

among those who otherwise would be contented with their situation, inciting them to resist the authority of their masters, even at the peril of their masters' lives" (90). The anti-*Tom* novelists repeatedly warn Northerners against continued agitation on the slavery issue, insisting that only violence and disunion can be the result.

Though they may have been paranoid, these authors were not entirely delusional. The history of the Underground Railroad reminds us that Northern abolitionists were not complete strangers to the South. However, with the exception of John Brown's ill-fated raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859 — too late to influence most of the anti-*Tom* novelists — authors would have been hard pressed to find a verifiable example of a white-led slave rebellion.[58] Using the abolitionist confidence man as the "single representative" of the antislavery movement, these writers created a scapegoat that bore almost no resemblance to its real-world counterpart but nonetheless served the proslavery purpose. In the absence of a real-world example, some proslavery writers simply invented one and inserted him into their depictions of slave insurrections. Often these insurrections in anti-*Tom* novels appear to be modeled closely on actual historical events; oblique references to Denmark Vesey's uprising, the Nat Turner rebellion, and the John Murrell conspiracy appear frequently, and sometimes directly inform the plot, as in the case of *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop* and *The Planter's Northern Bride* (1854). In these novels, anti-*Tom* writers blended the purely fictional with the factual in an effort to exonerate the South in the court of public opinion, rewriting the history of slave insurrections as the products of Northern interference.

[58] While whites were certainly involved in the Pearl Incident in 1848, the slaves in question were attempting escape not violent revolt. Following Evan Carton, who argues that John Brown's raid may have been the result of proslavery rhetoric that suggested the slaves were on the brink of rebellion and that a "cunning abolitionist" might incite them to revolt on a moment's notice, Roberts-Miller suggests that perhaps "proslavery rhetors' alarmist rant created the reality about which they were so alarmed: an abolitionist trying to start a slave rebellion" (257n9).

Baynard Rush Hall's *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop* is typical of this practice. Hall's novel attempts to rewrite the history of the Denmark Vesey rebellion by inserting an abolitionist confidence man of the author's own invention: the white itinerant preacher Philander Tibbets. In 1822, the court of Charleston, South Carolina executed the freeman Denmark Vesey and 34 others suspected of plotting what in 1861 Thomas Wentworth Higginson called "the most elaborate insurrectionary project ever formed by American slaves" (730).[59] The alleged plan included an uprising of as many as 9,000 blacks who would seize temporary control of the city of Charleston, kill all the whites and any blacks who refused to cooperate, commandeer a ship, and sail for Haiti. This plot, according to the trial records that followed, was foiled at the last moment when a loyal slave reported the conspirators' attempts to recruit him to his master. One hundred thirty-five suspected insurrectionists were tried; 35 were executed, and an additional 43 were sentenced to transportation. In the panic that followed the discovery of the plot, South Carolinians were quick to place the blame on Northern abolitionists even though there was (and still is) no evidence to suggest their involvement. Four white men were in fact convicted under common law of "*a Misdemeanor in inciting Slaves to Insurrection*" and received sentences ranging from three months to one year in prison with accompanying fines; however, none were Northerners (three were foreigners and one a native Carolinian), and it is difficult to tell if any were motivated by antislavery convictions.[60]

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[59] In fact, some scholars have thrown doubt upon the reality of the threat posed by Vesey and his alleged co-conspirators; the scale of the proposed revolt as reported seems exaggerated, and the over-reaction of white communities to rumors of slave rebellion is well documented, but for most Southerners the Vesey rebellion was a matter of historical fact, and it is clear Hall treats it as such. For more on the debate over the Denmark Vesey Rebellion see Richard C. Wade's *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820–1860* (1964); Michael P. Johnson's "Demark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators" (2001); and Edward A. Pearson's "Trials and Errors: Denmark Vesey and His Historians" (2002).

[60] In *Slavery in the Courtroom* (1985), Paul Finkelman remarks that "[i]t is unclear where the sympathies of these men actually lay," though some certainly hoped for financial reward in return for aiding the uprising (207).

The insurrection Hall imagines in *Frank Freeman* bears more than a superficial resemblance to Vesey's. Set in "182-" in the "terraqueous world" of the Sea Island plantations along the coast of the Southeastern United States, the plot is potentially positioned at the same time and in the immediate vicinity of the scene of the planned Vesey uprising. As in that case, many slaves in *Frank Freeman* are implicated in the plot, and a considerable number are tried and executed, though not nearly so many as are actually guilty. The result of so many insurrectionists going unpunished was, according to the narrator, an understandable tightening of the restrictions on slave movements and activities: "[p]rior to the great insurrection fomented by bad white men" the normally kindly slave-master Mr. Wardloe "had advocated the most lenient measures but having barely escaped massacre with his neighbors, he had, for awhile, sought to prevent the recurrence of such a danger by greater strictness, if not severity" (28). By attributing responsibility for the negative actions of proslavery Southerners to the activities of antislavery Northerners, Hall was following a common argument. In his review of Stowe's novel, Holmes laments that "the nefarious practices of the abolitionists, which are so cordially eulogised in Uncle Tom's Cabin, have in some degree modified the relations between master and slave," calling it "but one of the melancholy fruits of that philanthropical fanaticism, which injures by every movement which it makes those whom it pretends so sympathetically to serve" (730).

Like Vesey's rebellion, the insurrection plot we find in Hall's novel is foiled by the timely confession of a faithful slave — in this case, the protagonist Frank Freeman. Interestingly though, Hall devotes far fewer words to creating a character who might represent Vesey than he does to the construction of a white villain to take Vesey's place as the mastermind behind the plot. Hall re-imagines the Denmark Vesey uprising in order to assign blame not to discontented or disloyal Southern blacks but to the interference of Northern abolitionists. In doing so he

followed the lead of Thomas Pinkney, who in the wake of the Vesey uprising had pointed the finger at the "Northern states, who directly or indirectly instigate our Black population to such scenes as they latterly meditated" (Pinkney 7).[61]

In *Frank Freeman,* Hall imagines just what such instigation might have looked like. Philander Tibbets, Hall's abolitionist confidence man, comes to the Sea Island plantations in the guise of an itinerant preacher from the North, a common target of Southern suspicion and a frequent feature of the anti-*Tom* novel. The "clerical scoundrel" Tibbets is never "on stage" in the novel, appearing only in letters and related memories (50); what continues to haunt the community is a specter as insubstantial as the white-led rebellion feared by real-world Southerners. Tibbets is "a devil in an angel's guise" according to the slaveholders, a hypocrite (55); his villainy is recognized primarily in contrast to his appearance of goodness: "Tibbets! infamous villain! how with the smile of an angel, and the form of an Apollo, and the manners of a Chesterfield, and the eloquence of a Cicero, he won our regard and confidence! and yet he was only the paid hireling of some diabolical, Yankee secret association — philanthropic cut-throats!" (49).[62] Possessed of all the classical accomplishments of a gentleman, Tibbets is nonetheless a villain; in fact, the degree of those accomplishments serves to heighten his villainy by the addition of hypocrisy. The narrator reminds the reader that "all may dress in fine black cloth and look like clergy" and cautions them against an excess of the open-hearted Southern

[61] *Frank Freeman* is unique for the degree to which the author goes to exonerate the slaves, and his willingness to acknowledge their natural desires for freedom; for him, the slaves "are not bad, but the love of Liberty makes the black man wish for Freedom, and as ready to strike as the white" (63).

[62] This description of the abolitionist confidence man as a "devil in angel's guise," repeated in a number of the texts discussed here, recalls the episode in Book 3 of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* in which Satan, disguised as an angel, is able to deceive the angel Uriel and so gain admittance to the Garden: "For neither man nor angel can discern / Hypocrisy, the only evil that walks, / Invisible, except to God alone, / By his permissive will through heaven and earth" (3.682-85).

hospitality: “Down South ask — ‘who is that fine-looking gentleman?’ before you make his acquaintance” (83).

The ersatz clergyman was neither a new problem nor one unique to the South; indeed, Cotton Mather devoted a chapter of his *Magnalia Christi Americana* to the deceivers he called “Wolves in Sheeps’ Cloathing” in 1702 and, as Steven C. Bullock has noted, the “colonial confidence man” Tom Bell had successfully duped communities throughout the colonies by posing as an itinerant clergyman. Some anti-*Tom* novelists, however, put the character to a new use, featuring in their novels abolitionist confidence men either masquerading as ministers or, more rarely, using legitimate ministerial authority to promote slave escapes and insurrections, both of which proslavery apologists deemed antithetical to Christianity. *Frank Freeman* includes not one but two of these sinister ministers, both Tibbets and the Rev. Mr. Ananias Sharpinton; Caroline Lee Hentz’s *The Planter’s Northern Bride* (1854) introduces the incendiary Rev. Mr. Brainard; the shifty teacher-preacher Mr. Bates plots a “conspiracy to runaway” in W.L.G. Smith’s *Life at the South; or, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” As It Is*; V.G. Cowdin’s *Ellen; or, The Fanatic’s Daughter* (1860) offers the manipulative Parson Blake; and Desmos’ *Old Toney and His Master; or, The Abolitionist and the Land-Pirate* (1861) features the diabolical Rev. Alfred Orton. The insertion of the abolitionist confidence man in these texts acts to subvert the moral high ground claimed by the antislavery movement and manifested in the considerable support the movement received from Northern churches. In these novels, Northern clergymen who oppose slavery are revealed as operators looking after the main chance with no real religious interest in the plight of the slaves. Far from considering slavery a sin, they often regard it as a rich business opportunity; Tibbets, for instance, encourages runaway slaves to steal from their masters in order to pay him a lavish salary, and the organization he works for, the American Philanthropic

Society (a thinly veiled allusion to the American Antislavery Society), uses the abolitionist debate as political leverage to get their favorite candidates into office.

Like the "reverend rake" David S. Reynolds detects in popular fiction of the period, the religious confidence man in the anti-*Tom* novel critiques and undermines the moral authority of the clergy; unlike that character, however, the abolitionist confidence man also has the interesting effect of projecting outward onto a white subject the troubling religious backgrounds of black insurrectionists like Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner (*Beneath* 60). The religious fervor of slave insurrectionists posed a threat to long-held assertions that Christianity and the teachings of the Bible condoned the practice of chattel slavery in the South; if this were so, would not the most religious slaves also be (as Stowe paradoxically suggests with the character of Uncle Tom) the most contented and the least prone to rebel or run away? By assigning to a white man the charisma of the religious leader, Hall suggests that the slaves themselves *are* practitioners of a contented Christianity and that insurrectionary religious fervor comes from hypocritical whites outside the slave system rather than from blacks within it.

Tibbets is not actually a member of the clergy, but only, like most confidence men, a master of disguise and manipulation. Edward Leamington, a Northern clergyman but a Southern sympathizer and slaveholder, recognizes "Tibbets" as the alias of a former acquaintance, Charles Somerville, a man he remembers as exceptionally engaging: "never was there a man that could so win confidence and even fascinate so quickly" (158-59). Somerville is responsible for crimes that pre-date and go beyond the planned insurrection; while entrusted with escorting Edward's first wife, he used his considerable powers of persuasion to induce her to abandon her husband. For Edward and his new wife, the crimes committed by Somerville and the crimes committed by Somerville-as-Tibbets are nearly one and the same:

> Mr. L observed — "Yes! yes! the atrocious scoundrel that would steal away the wife of one's bosom would, indeed, excite rebellion, and prompt slaves to massacre and pillage!"
>
> "Is not the reverse also true, Edward? Will not the wretches that excite these slaves to murder, steal your wives and violate your daughters?" (56)

The equation of sexual deviance or violence with abolitionism is frequently repeated in the anti-*Tom* novels.

This criminal flexibility of the abolitionist confidence man is typical of confidence men in general. In *The Confidence Man and American Literature* (1982), Gary Lindberg traces a fine distinction between the jack-of-all-trades, an "innocent" self-made man, and the confidence man, who does not merely *do* things, but does them *to* others (165). The anti-*Tom* novel features both types, though neither is regarded as particularly positive; characters like Maria J. McIntosh's "shrewd, calculating New Englander" Uriah Goldwire (*The Lofty and the Lowly* [1853] 63) and Hentz's Mr. Hastings (*The Planter's Northern Bride*) both perform a wide variety of jobs without becoming confidence men, but they lose the integrity of self prized by men of honor (Lindberg 141). Abolitionists are frequently characterized as morally flexible, even on the issue of slavery itself; the anti-*Tom* novels are full of Northern abolitionists who come South only to become slaveholders. Sometimes their conversion to proslavery principles is viewed with approval — like Hentz's Eulalia or Hall's Leamington, they are won over by superior arguments — but the texts also prominently feature abolitionists who abandon their principles when they have the opportunity to make money by marrying a slaveholder's daughter or becoming a slave

trader.[63] In extreme cases, authors manifested the shiftiness of these weak-principled, money-hungry abolitionists in the form of the abolitionist confidence man.

Perhaps the best example of this phenomenon can be found in Hentz's *The Planter's Northern Bride* (1854); the Rev. Mr. Brainard, like Tibbets, uses the appearance of religious legitimacy to infiltrate a Southern plantation and plot insurrection amongst the slaves, but he has a long history of shiftiness. Born with the biblically and literarily resonant name Ichabod Jenkins and renowned even as a child for his "wonderful powers of dissimulation, and his successful villainy," Brainard has at one time or another perpetrated virtually every possible confidence crime (569):

> Possessed of a graceful carriage, a voice of rare and winning power, he never failed to ingratiate himself with strangers, on whose credulity he wished to impose. Under different names, he went from place to place, exciting admiration and commanding attention even from the magnates of the land. Now he was a lawyer, keen in debate, clenching in argument, eloquent in speech; now a young Esculapius, armed with power to crush the Python, disease, in all its hideous convulsions; again a minister of God, with the dew of Hermon on his lips, and the music of David's harp flowing from his tongue. He seemed to glory in detection, exulting over the dupes he had made. As adroit to escape the consequences of his deception as he was skilful to deceive, he flashed, a brilliant *ignis-fatuus*, here and there, the wonder and shame of his native regions. (460)

[63] Examples of abolitionists marrying into slave holding, buying slaves, or becoming slave traders include Mr. Kent in *Aunt Phillis's Cabin* (1852), Mr. Doubleface in *Uncle Tom's Cabin Contrasted* (1852), and Justus in *The Yankee Slave-Dealer* (1860).

Brainard seems scarcely human in this description (indeed, he is equated with the mysterious marsh lights that lead unwary travelers astray in some folkloric traditions), and his constant shape-shifting — from lawyer, to doctor, to preacher — may remind readers of the protagonist of Melville's *The Confidence-Man*. The character of Brainard, like Melville's protagonist, draws on rich cultural associations with the Yankee Peddler, a figure in turn associated with European and American literary manifestations of both the Devil and the Wandering Jew. Like a peddler, Brainard arrives in "humble equipage," a "very plain, unpretending Jersey wagon" that reminds the planter Moreland of New England and leads the slaves to expect a "pedlar" bringing goods to sell from the North (398-99). Instead of a peddler they find an eloquent but ersatz preacher intent upon instigating a widespread and violent slave rebellion that will reduce the region to chaos: Brainard is "Lucifer, in the garb of an angel of light, concealing the cunning of a serpent under the dissembled innocence of the dove… plotting rebellion, bloodshed, and ruin" (479).

The insurrection he has planned shares much in common with the widespread uprising deliberated by John A. Murrell and his "mystic confederacy" of co-conspirators in Augustus Q. Walton's incendiary pamphlet "The History of the Detection, Conviction, Life and Designs of John A. Murel, the Great Western Land Pirate" (1835). Purporting to be a true history of Virgil Stewart's capture of a notorious white "Land Pirate," the pamphlet offered an inside look at a sly and calculating manipulator whose crimes ranged from selling slaves only to steal them back again to plotting a massive and bloody slave revolt. Of course, there is little evidence to suggest that the "mystic confederacy" Stewart claimed to uncover ever existed or that Murel (or, more commonly, Murrell) was anything more than a run-of-the-mill horse thief; in fact the evidence suggests that Stewart himself was a sort of confidence man who penned the pamphlet under a pseudonym hoping to make a profit. Nevertheless, many of his Southern readers took Vigil's tale

as proven fact, and the resulting paranoia was at least in part to blame for the especially intense mob violence of that summer, during which as many as 50 black men were lynched and killed.[64]

It seems likely that, if Hentz did not have direct access to the Stewart text, she had at least some familiarity with the Murrell legend. Like Murrell in that tale, Brainard does not limit his ambitions to a slave insurrection on one plantation but plans to cut a great swath through the South, unifying the slaves on multiple plantations and driving them to rise up together against their owners at the same moment: "He had been strewing a gunpowder train the length and breadth of his journey, and waited the favourable moment to apply the kindling spark and let the blazing track be seen, — a fiery serpent winding through the land!" (453). That favorable moment — Christmas Day — is the same as that first picked by Murrell, as is the method by which the plot is foiled: an overheard conversation between conspirators. The Murrell conspiracy was the product of literary imagination rather than fact, but its effect on Southern understandings of the slavery issue was nonetheless potent. For Hentz, and for her Southern readers, the threat posed by white men like Murrell and Brainard seemed very real, and it is clear that Hentz regards her narrative as one based in fact, not paranoid fiction; "The plot of the insurrection, the manner in which it was instigated and detected" the narrator tells us, "[is] literally true" (9).

To modern eyes, however, paranoia seems very much to have been the order of the day. The enemies of slavery, embodied in Brainard, are equipped with powers that border upon the superhuman; Brainard's uncanny eloquence grants him a kind of mesmeric control over his black victims, who demonstrate a particular vulnerability to influence. Though some of the slaves initially express doubts about Brainard's character — "Hope he ain't no wolf in sheep-skin!"

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[64] For more on the Murrell legend and the violent summer of 1835, see James Lal Penick, Jr.'s *The Great Western Land Pirate* (1981).

(411) — the confidence man's "strong will" soon moves them "to his purpose." He convinces a group of slaves to join in planning and carrying out his insurrection despite their natural contentment and their gratitude to the indulgent Moreland (454): "He promised them riches, honours, and happiness in this world, and crowns of glory in the next, if they *yielded themselves to his will*, in faith and trust" (my italics 490). Extracting a promise of secrecy from Paul, one of his first slave accomplices on the Moreland plantation, Brainard demands that he kiss the Bible; though Paul has considerable doubts, he "mechanically obey[s] the bidding of the master-will, acting upon him with such iron force" (453). The slaves are helpless victims crushed by the superior mental strength of Brainard, "the master spirit," who "clothing himself with the authority of a divine mission, and gifted with an eloquence passing that of the sons of men, had wrapped his influence, like a mantle of fire, round his superstitious victims, and every struggle but drew the burning folds tighter and tighter" (489).

As in most anti-*Tom* novels, the real motivation for slave rebellions — a natural longing for freedom on the part of the slave and a righteous indignation in the face of an unjust and exploitative labor system — is entirely absent; only Brainard's magnetic "influence" can move these contented slaves to rebellion. The pseudoscience of mesmerism and the related idea of animal magnetism flourished in the antebellum period and made frequent appearances in literature. Reynolds notes the prevalence in popular literature of the "villainous pseudoscientist," who uses his "magnetic powers" to conduct seductions and commit crimes (*Beneath* 170). When wielded by one of these villains, mesmerism was thought to render its subjects slaves to the will of another, an effect so troubling to Nathaniel Hawthorne that he strongly cautioned his fiancée

Sophia against exploring the practice.[65] Young women were frequent targets of the mesmerist's art in fiction (Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables* [1851] and *The Blithedale Romance* [1852] are two examples); in the anti-*Tom* novel, however, the target of the mesmerist's enslaving powers was often already a slave. With a constitution that racialist pseudoscientists asserted was particularly vulnerable to suggestion, a person already enslaved in the literal sense might unintentionally exchange his physical slavery for a mental one.[66] By portraying slaves as the helpless dupes of abolitionist confidence men equipped with powers surpassing those of ordinary men, anti-*Tom* novelists acquitted insurrectionary slaves of wrongdoing while simultaneously creating a superhuman antagonist against which slavers and proslavery writers might militate.

Some anti-*Tom* novelists implied that even the abolitionists themselves might be dupes to abolitionist confidence men. In V.G. Cowdin's *Ellen; or the Fanatic's Daughter* (1860), for example, a Northern man, Horace Layton, is so much under the control of his brother-in-law, an abolitionist confidence man and minister named Parson Blake, that he abandons his wife and child in the North without adequate support so that he may better pursue Blake's mission in the South. A hypocrite and a lecher, Parson Blake uses religion "as a mere cloak" with which to conceal his vices (5); he is "a thorough-going abolitionist" with no real sympathy for the slaves:

> in truth, he cared as little for slave as slaveholder — but the abolition of slavery was the popular theme of the day in his locality, and popularity, in his estimation

[65] Hawthorne recognized the threat of mesmerism as a problem akin to slavery; Taylor Stoehr and Angelic Rodgers both point out that Hawthorne cautioned his fiancée Sophia against engaging in mesmeric practices because he feared that "it would allow the mesmerist to enslave her sacred inner space" (Rodgers 128). Halttunen detects the influence of mesmerism in the conduct manuals as well, where the magnetic influence of the confidence man seduces and ultimately enslaves the inexperienced youth in the city (5).
[66] Gossett notes that Stowe herself was convinced that blacks were particularly vulnerable to mesmerism: "'Mesmerists have found,' she said, 'that the negroes are singularly susceptible to all that class of influences which produce catalepsy, mesmeric sleep, and partial clairvoyant phenomena'" (qtd. by Gossett 72).

> was an important object. He likewise, together with this notable sect in general entertained some very ambitious views with regard to the future destination of the South … Parson Blake pretended to view the Southerners as a set of piratical desperadoes, from whom it would be a work of righteousness to wrest their birthrights; and in confidential communications, the fraternity conceived it to be an easy matter of effect their designs, by causing a disaffected state of the slave population toward their owners. … The aspiring party had resolved upon a total revolution in Southern affairs; and a question that required some ingenuity in adjusting, was the disposal of the valuable ruins, after the work of desolation had been accomplished (5).

Naturally, "the wily parson" believes the remaining treasure should be given to the abolitionists as a reward for their good work in freeing the slaves (7). Blake and other members of the "abolitionist party" work to maintain in Northern minds the impression that the slaves are poorly treated in the South in order to further their own ends, "which are, to set the negroes free from their present position, to establish a separate Republic, under the government of the Abolition party, exclusively — to compel the negroes to labor for such wages as they receive North, and to drive all those who prove troublesome off, as the Indians have been" (84).

To this end, Blake has "enslaved" Layton "body and soul" by using his mesmeric powers of persuasion to inspire this honest man to a state of fanaticism (56). "[E]nthralled" and "infatuated," "[l]ike a bird charmed by a snake," Layton is unable to resist Blake's influence despite his personal dislike for the man, and he soon abandons his wife and child to travel South on Blake's errands (75). There he spies on the Southerners, circulates "incendiary pamphlets and documents," and attempts to stir up feelings of rebellion in the slaves (7). Though Layton

eventually becomes aware of Blake's hypocrisy and throws off his "Satanic influence," some of his co-conspirators succeed in launching one of those white-led slave rebellions so common in anti-*Tom* novels and so scarce in real life (75). They meet with a typical Southern response: "The outraged inhabitants lynched the traitors, as they deserved" (87). In Parson Blake, Cowdin creates an abolitionist confidence man with mesmeric powers that enable him to enslave others; the message is clear: even those abolitionists who are seem sincerely concerned for the slaves are in reality merely the dupes of "impious hypocrite[s]" and "unprincipled land pirates" (86, 85).

Like Horace Layton, Mr. Frank of Vidi's *Mr. Frank, the Underground Mail Agent* (1853) is the innocent dupe of abolitionist confidence men. "[A]n honest, good-hearted man" with "the welfare of the whole human family deeply at heart," Mr. Frank believes slavery to be an evil until he travels to the South in service of an antislavery organization where he discovers the benevolence of slavery and uncovers the lies of his antislavery partners (141). Chief amongst the abolitionist confidence men in this text are Bill R. Dixey, a counterfeiter and abolitionist politician who "never could bear the sight of a nigger" (14), and the orator Mr. Burton, a "mealy-mouthed, hypocritical scoundrel" with his eyes on the main chance (139). While Dixey's abolitionism is motivated by his desire to get himself elected to Congress and to put himself in a position from which he can seduce Mr. Frank's daughter, Burton's devotion to antislavery is a product of his "insatiable thirst for oratorical renown" (22). Possessed of a "vivid imagination," "a free flow of language," "a not over-scrupulous regard for dull matters of fact," and an "indomitable enthusiasm," Burton represents the moral vacuity with which Vidi wishes to associate the speakers of the antislavery movement by accusing them of using that movement to achieve personal fame (22). The narrator suggests that Burton, like other abolitionist confidence men, may use his cunning to commit crimes as well as to give speeches; his face wears an

"exceedingly dubious expression, which had, on more than one occasion, induced him to be mistaken for some distinguished personage, travelling *incog*, a Methodist minister on the circuit, or a horse thief on a professional tour" (18).

Men like Burton and Dixey are the reason that good men like Mr. Frank join the ranks of the abolitionists; like the South at large, they are victims of the wicked cunning of the confidence man. By attributing Mr. Frank's actions to the manipulation of confidence men, Vidi attempts to dispel the notion that there could be such a thing as a genuinely sincere, well-informed abolitionist. Such men, according to the anti-*Tom* novel, must be either confidence men themselves or the dupes of confidence men. Through the character of the itinerant incendiary, anti-*Tom* novelists question the sincerity of the Northern antislavery movement, undermine its religious and moral authority, and finally reduce it to no more than a "pastiche of villainy," an ideal scapegoat for the South's ongoing problem of slave unrest. The related and increasingly visible problem of runaways would deserve a somewhat different treatment.

Confidence Man Conductors and Phony Philanthropists

Mr. Frank, the "Underground Mail Agent" of Vidi's novel travels South to distribute antislavery pamphlets; the work of his more incendiary colleagues is to foment a slave insurrection. Somewhere between the two lies the role of the confidence conductor, the antislavery agent who "tampers" with slaves on Southern plantations and causes them to run away. The goal of the confidence conductor is not the violent overthrow of the South but merely the acquisition of its valuable human property. As Vidi's title indicates, anti-*Tom* novelists were naturally aware of the existence of the Underground Railroad, though they exaggerated the length of its reach and greatly misrepresented the motivations of its conductors. According to the

conspiracy theories of anti-*Tom* novelists and other proslavery writers, the agents of the Underground Railroad were everywhere. Often in the pay of Northern antislavery societies, they infiltrated Southern neighborhoods disguised as peddlers, preachers, or medical charlatans in order to steal slaves away from their masters.

Meer and others note that in the anti-*Tom* novel the slaves are almost universally contented with their lot prior to interference from Northern agitators. Like those slaves who participate in the planned insurrections of the incendiaries, runaway slaves are manipulated by masters of the deceptive arts; confidence men work upon their vanity or pride or weak intellect until they become willing to run away — an action they would never have contemplated on their own. Meer has pointed out the apparent indifference of the anti-*Tom* novelists to “the facts about the numbers and the volition of fugitive slaves” (92), noting their continued insistence that slaves are content in slavery unless acted upon by villainous outside forces even while large numbers of them were quite obviously fleeing the South and its peculiar institution. Though it is important to remember that these authors certainly did not have access to the facts of our current historical record — and so would not necessarily have known, as we now do, that the majority of fugitive slaves made their way out of bondage without the assistance of organized whites — Meer makes an important point when she suggests that “the anti-*Tom* novels wrote initiative and ingenuity out of their slave populations” (92). With the important exception of the freedom-loving protagonist of *Frank Freeman’s Barber Shop*, the runaway slaves of the anti-*Tom* novels are depicted as the victims of abolitionist confidence men who practice upon their simplicity with promises of riches and prosperity in the North, not as brave men and women who flee the oppression of slavery because they genuinely long to be free.

W.L.G. Smith re-imagines the problem of the runaway slave in *Life at the South: or Uncle Tom's Cabin As It Is* (1852),[67] which features a foolish slave called Uncle Tom who, having fallen under the influence of the abolitionist confidence man Mr. Bates, runs away from his generous master only to suffer continuously on his long, weary road to the North. Far too lazy and careless to survive outside the safety of the plantation, Tom is lucky to be rescued (not recaptured) by his forgiving master and returned to his cabin. There the illustrator depicts him contentedly smoking his pipe until the end of his days (518). The will to run away and then to remain free must be supplied by an outside source, in this case by the infamous Bates; for Smith, as for many other proslavery writers, the slave cannot desire freedom for freedom's sake.

Bates, the villain who convinced Tom to run away in the first place, infiltrates the plantation of Tom's owner, Mr. Erksine, as a tutor, the supposed beneficiary of the much-lauded (and historically very real) educational opportunities of the North. The reader's perception of his actual intellectual ability is somewhat diminished, however, by indications that his letters of recommendation are fake, and his claims to superior intelligence are rhetorically undermined by the failure of his plot to free Mr. Erksine's slaves. Bates finds his carefully laid plans for a slave escape on Independence Day (incidentally the second day scheduled for the supposed Murrell plot) spoiled by the genuine contentedness of the slaves. Offered a raise in their stipends, the slaves celebrate on the Fourth of July instead of running away. Only Tom is foolish enough to follow Bates' directions and flee the South, and his subsequent experiences there serve to confirm proslavery assertions that black slaves were not designed to prosper as free men. Through his confidence conductor, Smith rewrites the Southern problem of the runaway slave

[67] Sometimes confused with Wiley's *Life at the South: A Companion to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a misleadingly titled reprint of his 1850 publication *The Adventures of Old Dan Tucker*. To my knowledge the two texts are not related.

into a non-threatening form, one that acts to confirm rather than deny racist notions. Not only do the slaves in Smith's text fail to run away of their own volition, most are far too happy to leave even when prompted by a clever white abolitionist.

The "rabid abolitionist" Rev. Alfred Orton meets with similar challenges in his attempts to run slaves off the plantation of Colonel Shelton in Desmos' 1861 *Old Toney and His Master; or, The Abolitionist and the Land-Pirate* (236). The immediate and obstinate refusal of the loyal slave retainer Old Toney to hear a word said against his master retards the progress of the devious minister, who has more success with two of Old Toney's children than with Toney himself. Interestingly, amalgamation is the key to persuading the beautiful mulatto Fanny and her brother George to flee with Orton to the North — Fanny wishes to marry Orton himself, with whom she is having an affair, and George has been convinced that in the North he will have his pick of beautiful white heiresses to marry. Naturally they find the actual accommodations in Philadelphia less welcoming; Fanny and Orton live in a cellar where he drinks, gambles, and beats her, and George discovers that in the North even the poor white men will not shake his hand. When the white woman to whom Orton is still married attempts to shoot him and kills herself instead, Orton flees and Fanny is forced to give birth to their child alone outside on a cold night — both she and the infant die.[68]

Like other confidence men, Orton boasts a long history of legal and moral infractions; in addition to his extramarital interracial affair with Fanny, he has fathered a child with another woman, attempted to seduce a young widow, and enslaved and blinded in one eye his illegitimate child by hurling a fork at him. The South seems an attractive refuge to a man on the

[68] Interestingly, this is not the first of Fanny's children to die in infancy; despite excellent care on the plantation, the beautiful mulatto baby Ella gradually sickens and dies, a pattern suggestive of the author's attempt to write racialist pseudoscience regarding the fragility of mulattos into his narrative.

run from Northern justice, a place where, according to Orton, "ignorant Southerners … will believe anything, however *outré* or absurd, that a Yankee will tell them" (305). Through the character of Orton, Desmos offers a re-imagining of the familiar Yankee peddler character as a debased, violent, and cowardly Northern fugitive. The harmless jack-of-all-trades becomes the conniving and exploitative confidence man who does not merely do things, but does them *to* the unwitting Southerners, abusing their trust with dishonest trades, "from making wooden nutmegs up to coining pewter half dollars; repairing clocks, or putting raw-hide strings into an old banjo or a piano, and calling them 'new-fashioned, lately invented, patent catgut;' in short, anything and everything, about which he knew perhaps little or nothing" (304).

Orton turns his hand to horse-trading and to itinerant preaching, using his impressive oratorical skills and clerical appearance to infiltrate the Shelton household. With his "excellent exterior" and "obsequious manners," Orton, like Brainard, is a wolf in sheep's clothing or a "devil in disguise" (238, 263):

> He was dressed in a decent suit of black broadcloth, and wore a white cravat, which made him *look*, at least, very much like a clergyman. … But are there not those who *look like lambs*, while they are only wolves in sheep's clothing, who devour widow's houses? who *look* like the archangel Gabriel, when they are the arch-fiend himself — the devil in disguise or *en masquerade*? (263)

As with other anti-*Tom* novelists, Desmos counsels paranoia; though a Northerner may seem honest, trustworthy, even virtuous, he is in fact a criminal plotting the destruction of the Southerners' nearest and dearest.

Desmos' abolitionist confidence man is almost supernaturally fiendish. In addition to betraying his host by attempting to run off with a number of his slaves, Orton also makes sexual

advances on Ella Shelton, the planter's daughter, and later kidnaps and tries to rape her, driving her temporarily mad. The equation of abolitionism with sexual misconduct and physical violence — a theme we find in *Frank Freeman* and *Mr. Frank* as well — is peculiarly emphasized and strangely complicated by the parallel sub-plot of the "land-pirate" of the title. Stephen Stevens, a notorious highwayman, is the criminal responsible for the murder of Shelton's manly son Langland, and so is in a sense a figure parallel to the would-be ruiner of Shelton's daughter; he is also related in a backhanded fashion to the cause of abolition himself as "the bold leader of a cohort of that apparently disbanded, but not, in reality, disorganized corps of banditti, known as the "Murrel Band," or "Murrel Gang" (348). Though the reference here is to the criminal rather than political motivations of that imaginary group, we have already seen that by the time of the publication of *Old Toney* a rich literature had sprung up around the legend of John Murrell and his Mystic Conspiracy that suggested ties between the Northern antislavery movement and a plot to inspire a bloody and widespread slave insurrection in the South.

The depiction of Stevens is hardly positive — he is a vicious killer and a cruel husband — but the boldness of his criminal acts juxtaposes favorably with the cowardly actions of Orton. A similarly suggestive parallel is drawn between Orton and the insurrectionist John Brown. Though, like most of the anti-*Tom* novels, *Old Toney and His Master* is set in the 1820s and 30s, Desmos cannot resist commenting on the failed raid at Harper's Ferry: "Had [Orton] lived at the present day, he would have been found in the camp of the outlaw John Brown, saying his hypocritical prayers and singing his psalm-tunes to the Goddess of Liberty" (236). However, unlike Brown, whose bravery in the face of death some Southerners admired, Orton would have fled from the advancing troops and "flung away his psalm-book and denounced the Bible as a book of lies, and by his oaths and blasphemies proven to his captors that a great mistake had

been made — that they had captured not a servant of the Lord, but a servant of the devil!” (236).[69] Unlike Brown, who was willing to die for his principles, Orton has none; he is a bona fide hypocrite and confidence man.

Unable wholly to deny the existence of runaways, some anti-*Tom* novelists constructed a scapegoat — a villainous confidence conductor — who supplied an (implausible) explanation for an increasingly apparent problem. Through the confidence man conductor these authors were able to project and displace slave agency and desire for freedom onto a white agent. By making the argument over slavery a debate between whites, proslavery rhetors could retain unexamined their prejudices against the slaves and the abolitionists alike. The function of the confidence conductor was shared by another related figure I have termed the phony philanthropist. Operating solely in the Northern city, the phony philanthropist lured travelling slaves away from their masters and took in fugitives from the South only to use, abuse, and ultimately discard them. The phony philanthropist, more than the itinerant incendiary or the confidence conductor, was a direct indictment of Northern character and Northern capitalism.

Proslavery authors of all stripes found a common enemy in the Northern practice of “wage labor,” or, as they more often to refer to it, “wage slavery.” One frequent accusation against the Northern abolitionists asserted that their intentions were not actually to free the slaves, in the sense of offering them something approaching equality with whites, but instead simply to introduce them to a different kind of slavery, one already being practiced upon the poor laborers of the North. The anti-*Tom* novels abound with poor whites starving in Northern towns, turned away from the doors of philanthropic abolitionists who offer thousands of dollars

[69] For Southern responses to John Brown, see Kenneth Greenberg’s *Honor and Slavery* (1996), David S. Reynolds’ *John Brown, Abolitionist* (2005), and Brian McGinty’s *John Brown’s Trial* (2009).

to the antislavery cause but have no money to spare the wretches in their midst. (It is no wonder that some proslavery authors considered the telescopically philanthropic Mrs. Jellyby of Dickens' *Bleak House* [1853] a Northern abolitionist of the first water.) Even the worst abuses of the system of slavery, anti-*Tom* novelists suggested, could not compete with the systematic cruelty and avarice of Northern capitalism. In his review of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, George Frederick Holmes complained that the "annual balance sheet of a Northern millionaire symbolizes infinitely greater agony and distress in the labouring or destitute classes than even the foul martyrdom of Uncle Tom" and compared the "the laws of debtor and creditor" and "the hard, grasping, demoniac avarice of a yankee trader" to the "atrocious heart of that fiendish yankee, Simon Legree" (Holmes 728).

The anti-*Tom* novels are almost uniformly hostile to Northern capitalism and industry, drawing a sharp contrast between the lives and lifestyles of Southern planters and those of the Northern titans of industry. Like most plantation novels, anti-*Tom* novels feature the "sunny South" as a peaceful, sleepy dominion ruled by strict but benevolent codes of honor and noblesse oblige. While Northerners in the anti-*Tom* novel have their eyes on the main chance, seeking to profit from even the most mundane exchanges, plantation owners willingly yield up their fortunes to pay even debts of honor unrecoverable by law. Slaves in this environment are depicted as the lesser members of a large, warm, biracial family, the first to receive the benefits of their master's munificence and the last to suffer from the economic consequences of his financial failures. When planters' finances collapse in *Uncle Robin in His Cabin* and *Old Toney and His Master*, for instance, securing local, benevolent masters for the slaves is the first concern, even before attending to the needs of white family members. In contrast, Northern workers in these novels, often fragile white seamstresses, struggle mightily to make ends meet,

suffering from disease, malnutrition, and exposure to the elements, the consequences of extreme poverty that anti-*Tom* novelists argued were absent from the slave system.[70] Unlike the slaves, who are depicted as the constant recipients of their owner's care regardless of their ability to contribute to the work of the plantation, these Northern workers lose their jobs when they are sick and are abandoned by the philanthropic organizations that ought to care for them.

Vidi reverses the charitable poles in *Mr. Frank* when the pampered slaves of the South hold a mock abolitionist meeting lamenting the bondage of Northern laborers; content and well-cared for in slavery, they come together to hear of the sufferings of the far-off Northern "wage slaves" and to pledge their assistance in much the same way that abolitionists gathered to hear of the abuses of slavery in the South. They express in dialect their "feelin's ob indignashun" and vow to fight "tyranny of de mas'rs ob de Norf, an' to 'minister aid an' comfort to de downtrodden bond-children, 'prentices, factory-boys, sewin'-girls, and oder poor persuns ob dat secshun, widout regard to coler or condishun" (176). When Nell, a disabled former bond-child in the service of the cruel abolitionist Mr. Burton, shows the marks she received, the slaves make a groan at the extent of her injuries "somewhat resembling sounds which we have heard in an Abolition meeting, on the exhibition of a pair of heavy handcuffs, which were made by some learned and ingenious Yankee blacksmith, and palmed off as having been taken from a runaway slave" (178). While the manacles of the black slave are deemed fraudulent, the physical scars of the Northern bond girl are judged authentic and trustworthy proofs of Northern slavery.

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[70] Some novels that attempted to illustrate the sufferings of white "wage slaves" in the North include *Mr. Frank*, Caroline Rush's *The North and the South* (1852), and *Ellen* (1860). In addition, Lucien B. Chase's *English Serfdom and American Slavery* (1854) and Marion Southwood's aptly named *Tit for Tat* (1856) contrast the treatment of white workers in England — from whence much support from the antislavery movement was derived — to the treatment of black slaves in the South and conclude, unsurprisingly, that the South is by far the most benevolent.

According to the anti-*Tom* novelists, the abolitionists working in and against the South sought merely to drive the blacks from one form of slavery to another, from the “nominal” benevolent slavery of the South to the actual slavery of poverty in the North. Having given it as her opinion in the preface that “the negroes of the South are the happiest *laboring class* on the face of the globe” (6), Hentz provides the virtuous planter Moreland with a characteristically dramatic speech suggesting the degree to which workers in the North, black and white, are slaves to poverty: “They are not free. Poverty, with a scourge of iron and a scorpion lash, stands behind them and urges on the life-consuming task. … Freedom! God of the white man, as well as the black, if this is freedom, give us bondage and chains instead” (240). She further illustrates her point with the “true” story of the “abduction” of the wayward slave Crissy, who falls prey to the husband and wife abolitionist team of the Softlys (8). Insinuating and insidious rather than incendiary, the Softlys run the confidence game like a seduction; playing upon Crissy’s evident “weak point,” her “love of money,” until she becomes “a passive tool in their soft insinuating hands” (269, 271). They lure Crissy away from her mistress with the promise of wealth and social status, but having successfully guided her escape they abandon her entirely in a boarding house where she is expected to work much harder than she is accustomed to for no wages beyond room and board. When she becomes ill and can no longer work, she is thrown out. The family feeling abolitionists claim to have for the slave disappears the instant that the slave arrives on Northern soil: “The philanthropists who interest themselves so much in his destiny at home, leave him to his own resources when brought within the sphere of their assistance. … At a distance, they stretch out their arms, and call him brother, and exclaim, ‘Are we not children of the same father?’ but when near, they forget the ties of consanguinity, and stand back with a *holier than thou* written on their brows” (202).

Worse than those who ignore the newly free slaves are those who seek to exploit them. Like Halttunen's city confidence men, William MacCreary Burrell's Sneakright and Hall's Rev. Ananias Sharpinton use their near-mesmeric powers of persuasion to entice slaves to leave their generous masters only to re-enslave them within a different economic order. Burrell's allegorical novel *White Acre vs. Black Acre: A Case at Law* (1856) asserts that it is the Northern abolitionist who commodifies the slave, not the Southern slave holder. Henry, a runaway lured off by the conniving peddler/preacher Professor Sneakright, ultimately becomes a "joint stock nigger" in the North, with various white agents contributing to have him exhibited for profit as the "Mutilated Fugitive" (118). In *White Acre vs. Black Acre,* the issue of slavery is re-imagined as a court case between the descendants of a common ancestor in some nonspecific past. These descendants, separated into white and black "acres," inhabit different economic systems and different levels of prosperity; on the Black Acre, dark-skinned slaves farm the land, which is held by a white elite that governs and cares for them, and on the White Acre, whites perform the labor (poorly) and struggle amongst themselves. Jealous of the prosperity of their Black Acre counterparts, the holders of the White Acre decide to bring a lawsuit to free the black slaves on the Black Acre. Though they insist their motivation is the liberty of the slave laborers, they are in fact merely plotting their re-enslavement on the White Acre. Since the newly-freed slaves will have no money with which to pay the legal fees incurred on their behalf they will be required to labor for without remuneration in the service of their new White Acre masters.

The allegorical significance is inescapable; Burrell, like other anti-*Tom* novelists, suspected abolitionists of a desire to be slave masters themselves. Professor Sneakright, an abolitionist confidence man par excellence, embodies this suspicion; the counterfeiter, forger, and master of disguise cajoles slaves to leave their masters only to set them up as travelling

exhibitions for his own profit. Henry, he insists, has been horribly tortured by his White Acre master, and has the scars to show for it; in addition to actual scars on his shins, the result of his own clumsiness rather than physical abuse, Sneakright manufactures scars for him to wear, creating out of leather "an exact representation of a roughly scarified surface, with various letters and figures branded thereon" (123). This he secures to Henry's skin, and then, as evidence of the cruelties of the slave system, forces the fugitive to strip in a sexually charged display. The former slave plays along with these misrepresentations, "counterfeit[ing] great pain," detailing the number of lashes he received, and participating in a pantomime of his escape echoing that "presented by Friday, the savage help of Robinson Crusoe; by prostrating himself and placing the foot of the professor upon his neck" (111, 121). Here it is the Northern abolitionist who enacts his dominance over the slave.

The performances of Henry present a curious amalgam of the blackface minstrel show and the abolitionist lecture circuit; he strips to show his scars and recites abuses he has suffered, typical features of the abolitionist lectures, but he also concludes his performances by playing "git ober double trouble" on the banjo (125).[71] The combination proves so profitable that it inspires a number of imitators:

> the countrymen of Sneakright seeing that it paid very well, began to pass off other black creatures, as enfranchised fugitives, and had even blacked up some of their own people, so skillfully, that by copying Henry's speech and gestures, by imitating his dance and banjo, and above all by an ingenious mixture of burned sole leather and assafoetida for which they took out a patent — they presented

[71] I have had some difficulty tracking down this song; however, the refrain is likely this one recorded in Talley's "Negro Folk Rhymes": "Oh walk chalk, Ginger Blue! / Git over double trouble. / You needn' min' de wedder / So d win' don't blow you double." William Dean Howells also makes reference to this song in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (302).

> such an admirable imitation of an enfranchised fugitive, that Henry himself could not distinguish between the genuine and imitation. (194)

The implication is, naturally, that Sneakright is the inspiration for all fugitive slaves, and that the appearances of blacks on the abolitionist stage are no more real than blackface minstrel performance.[72] Jeannine Marie DeLombard notes that *White Acre*'s chief contribution to the proslavery cause was "demonstrat[ing] how the antislavery movement itself participated in — and profited from — an exploitative capitalist market economy in which the industrialization of print enabled the commodification of formerly enslaved African Americans as spectacles for mass consumption"; however, she fails to recognize the same tendency in any of the other anti-*Tom* novels (190). In truth, the argument that abolitionists themselves were responsible for the commodification of African bodies almost a common one in these texts. For example, a similar argument can be made regarding Vulcan of *The Planter's Northern Bride* or Caesar of *The Ebony Idol*, runaways willing to tell tall tales of suffering to those who are eager to hear them. Caesar, for instance, discovers "that he was expected to gratify their [the abolitionist onlookers] curiosity to the fullest extent, and that he was petted in proportion to the magnitude and marvellousness of the falsehoods he invented. So Caesar went on from one suffering to another, until it may be doubted where his experience would have ended" (137).

The idea that slaves were "put to use" by abolitionists, either as Barnumesque side-show attractions or in the service of political goals, is at the very heart of Hall's *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop* as well. The narrator ruminates continually on the idea that abolitionist furor is mere trumpery and that the slaves are as used by the Northern antislavery proponents as by the Southern slaveholders: "every man may be put to some use, even if he never meant to serve his

[72] See Meer for more on the role of blackface in the anti-*Tom* novel.

generation that way; thus a negro slave answers one end, and a free negro another; while both are rendered very profitable to their several owners" (311). Here the Northern abolitionist functions as an "owner" just as the Southern slaveholder does, though he derives different benefits from his property. The narrator calls attention to what he sees as a vast economic network built, not on principles of racial equality, but on political and financial expediency:

> By [abolition] one man gets into the Assembly, and another into Congress; this one intends to be governor, and that president. One speculator, by it, sells lands; another a house of antislavery purposes. It obtains subscribers for books; and agencies for men out of employment or wishing to travel. And, on this black ground, frothy chaps figure as orators; and come to be regarded as the first chop philanthropists of the age. And here, even music condescends to furnish quartetters to sing for the good of the slaves, and put money enough into their own pockets to "buy themselves a farm." (314)

For the narrator of *Frank Freeman* abolition is just one more fad by which people can line their own pockets.

In order to induce contented slaves to enter into exploitative labor relationships in the North, abolitionists in these texts often resort to elaborate schemes and confidence games to trick slaves into leaving their masters. *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop*, for instance, imagines the Northern slave abduction as an incredibly complicated affair, one requiring the expertise of a master confidence man and a whole host of conspirators. The "'cute, and cunning, and tricky" Rev. Ananias Sharpinton conspires with the American Philanthropic Society to lure Frank and his wife Carrie away from their loving master while they are visiting in Boston. The confidence game the Society deploys to trick the slaves into leaving, one they have clearly played before,

bears a passing resemblance to what David W. Maurer has identified as the "Big Store."[73] An umbrella term for confidence games that rely upon a phony setting (like a fake storefront or bogus gambling establishment) and the cooperation of multiple shills, the Big Store manipulates not just the emotional state of the marks, but their physical environment as well. For the fake storefront, Sharpinton substitutes a church, populated by what appears to be a racially integrated, upwardly mobile congregation; for the conspirators, Sharpinton enlists hotel workers, washwomen, stage coachmen, and children to play upon the pride and naïveté of the slave couple.

Sharpinton weaves a complicated net to ensnare Frank, which the slave is powerless to escape: "how could he disentangle the meshes of so fine-wrought a net — and wholly invisible — and strong by the plausible interweaving of truth and falsehood!" (228). The narrator insists that Frank is trapped, rather than freed, by the actions of the abolitionists. Meeting Sharpinton just as he is leaving his office (an "accidental" meeting carefully orchestrated by the preacher), Frank regrets that he would be interrupting him to ask for a meeting. In reply, Sharpinton literally imprisons Frank in his office: "'Not another word, Mr. F. You are my prisoner, sir;' when, in spite of Frank's remonstrances, Dr. S. half forced his friend into the hall, and immediately locked the door, and put the key into his pocket" (231). Indeed, once he has left his master and entered into the employ of the Philanthropic Society, Frank feels less free than when he was an actual slave: "They look on me as noble and free! — alas! — I feel myself a slave now, and worse than before" (249).

[73] David W. Maurer dates the first Big Store to 1867, the year Ben Marks, a grifter specializing in three-card monte, set up his "Dollar Store" in Cheyenne, Wyoming, so naturally my use of the term here is anachronistic (5); however, as activities generally precede the names that describe them, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Hall intended the scene to play as a large-scale long con of the kind Maurer describes.

The degree of effort the abolitionists are willing to expend in their absurdly elaborate hoax to win over Frank and his young wife Carrie belies their rather limited usefulness to the cause. The fugitive slave that is most useful to the abolitionists, the narrator contends, is the mulatto, and the "jet black" Frank Freeman hardly qualifies (40): "[a] yellow black, a white slave, would be better capital!" (237). The narrator sarcastically calls attention to the antislavery novelists' penchant for featuring only light-skinned mulattos and quadroons in their novels' primary roles: "It is remarkable that writers of *fictions* make their heroes and heroines beautiful mulattos; always so, if they are to come North among the free! … Writers of *fiction kill off* the jet black — not knowing exactly how to *work them* advantageously to the North" (185-86). The narrator objects to the exclusive use of mulattos in antislavery fiction as a coldly calculated tribute to the market. Unable to make dark-skinned slaves "work" rhetorically in the Northern literary market — and thus turn a profit — they prefer to depict only light-skinned slaves as hero and heroines of their fiction. The narrator insists that by drawing a profit from the depiction of slave bodies the antislavery writer is as guilty of using slave as the slaveholder himself.[74]

Like the victims of Brainard, or Bates, or Sneakright, (or for that matter, the victims of Halttunen's city confidence men), Frank loses his liberty just as he sought to gain it. Promising Frank a career and a good living, Sharpinton uses him on the abolitionist lecture circuit and then discards him instead, leaving him alone in Boston to support himself and his wife as a barber. The use and subsequent discarding of runaway slaves by abolitionist confidence men underlines the devious motivations anti-*Tom* authors wished to attribute to the Northern antislavery movement. For these proslavery writers, abolitionists were confidence men motivated by the

[74] *Frank Freeman* might be the anti-*Tom* novel most sympathetic to the plight of the Southern slave. Hall offers black characters remarkable for their intelligence, bravery, and capability, and even seems, if not to condone slave insurrections, at least to attempt to understand their cause as rooted in a genuine longing for liberty.

potential for political or financial gain, not by sympathy for the slave or a belief in social justice. Likewise the slaves themselves were not motivated by an innate desire for freedom, but were instead the victims of master confidence men. Thus the anti-*Tom* novelists insisted it was for the good of the slaves that they wrote and that others took up took up more violent means of quashing the antislavery movement.

Happy Endings: Lynching and the Higher Law

For many of the anti-*Tom* novelists, justifying the use of lynch law in the South was part and parcel with their proslavery, pro-Southern message.[75] Many of the novels that participate in the scapegoating of abolitionists through the creation of an abolitionist confidence man also saw fit to punish those abolitionists with the traditional form of Southern vigilante justice known as lynching. Though for the modern reader the word "lynch" carries an undeniable association with racially motivated violence, prior to the Civil War the violence of the lynch mob was primarily directed against whites by other whites. Likewise, while lynching has become nearly synonymous with death by hanging, in the antebellum period the term was more loosely applied to a number of abuses ranging from dousing the victim with cold water, tar-and-feathering, and rail-riding up through the torture and hanging we associate with the word today. So when I say that anti-*Tom* novelists were interested in redeeming the practice of lynching, I do not mean to suggest that they in any way favored violence against blacks. While most of the anti-*Tom* novelists espoused a political and social system that unquestionably oppressed and victimized black slaves, in their novels at least, they are almost universally opposed to the use of physical violence against those same slaves. Rather, in these novels, they sought to convey their fear of

[75] Anti-*Tom* novels that feature episodes involving lynchings include *The Ebony Idol*, *The Yankee Slave-Dealer*, *Frank Freeman*, *The Master's House*, *Old Toney and His Master*, and *The Sword and the Distaff*.

physical violence *from* the slaves when acted upon by the outside force of the abolitionist confidence man. Ostensibly, the fear of violence, rather than the love of it, drives the anti-*Tom* novelist in the justification of the exercise of lynch law in the South.

Though the abolitionist confidence men of the anti-*Tom* novels are not consistently the targets of lynching, they are consistently portrayed as the kind of men who *ought* to be lynched. Criminal in the extreme, and posing what anti-*Tom* novelists viewed as a dire threat to the health and well-being of the Southern community, the abolitionist confidence man is also too clever to be trusted before a judge and jury. Some, like Brainard of *The Planter's Northern Bride* or Melchezedek Squashum of *Uncle Robin's Cabin*, pass as lawyers themselves; others merely display the facility with language associated with members of the legal profession. A fundamental mistrust of the legal system underwrites the frequent invocation of lynch law in these novels; these are criminals too dangerous and too slippery to be trusted to the rule of law. Such assertions formed the basis for a defense of real-life anti-abolition riots (and the lynchings that often accompanied them), programs of intimidation and arbitrary violence that David Grimsted has called "especially effective modes of social terror" in this period (xi). Jacqueline Goldsby (*A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* [2006]) is correct in her assertion following Richard Maxwell Brown (*Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* [1977]) that advocates and exercisers of lynch law possessed certain "statelike aspirations to govern" that set them apart from run-of-the-mill rioters; however, she woefully overestimates the degree to which these groups were marked by "decorum and restraint" (16). Far from merely "dispensing punishment to outlaws and wrongdoers," as Goldsby asserts, these lynch mobs most frequently targeted suspected abolitionists, seldom with

any evidence that the targeted individual held actual ties to antislavery groups or even possessed views opposing slavery (Grimsted xi).

When they confront the practice of lynching, the anti-*Tom* novelists focus on the guilt of the targeted individuals, seeking to rewrite what was an essentially arbitrary process of accusation and punishment into the exercise of deliberative community authority — a "higher law" that superseded the mere legal authority of the courts. To emphasize this point, the lynching often occurs after the law has been tried and found wanting. The vicious overseer Toadvine of *The Master's House*, for instance, is guilty of murdering a slave by dragging him behind his horse, but his crafty lawyer succeeds in protecting him from the hand of the law. The violent lynching that follows, though viewed somewhat disapprovingly by the text, is therefore the natural application of justice by an outraged community in the absence of legal options. Moreover, the lynching occurs as punishment for the murder of a slave, suggesting simultaneously and in accordance with typical proslavery rhetoric that violence against slaves was abhorrent to Southern communities and that lynching was a tool for deterring such behavior. Problematically the episode also infers that Southern laws governing the treatment of slaves are inadequate to punish those guilty of gross offenses, an assertion most proslavery rhetors firmly denied.

The law is found inadequate as well in the case of Steven Stephens, the land-pirate of *Old Toney and His Master*, who is lynched and killed by the community only after application to the courts has proved unsuccessful. Guilty of countless robberies and murders, including that of the protagonist's son, Stephens succeeds in bribing a judge to declare him innocent; in the absence of a properly functioning legal system free of corruption, "the townspeople lynch him instead"

(387). The narrator offers a rather lengthy defense of this mode of justice, claiming that mobs such as the one that killed Stephens are not really mobs at all:

> A *mob*, we understand, to be a promiscuous crowd of greatly excited persons, acting contrary to law, or without regard to the law when it was within their reach, and they had the power wield it. But, in this case, the law had been repeatedly tried without effect upon Stevens himself. … The law, in short, was either dead or bankrupt, and could build no scaffold high enough, nor provide a rope strong enough, to punish these bold invaders of the rights and property of people. … No, no! it was not a heartless and excited, nor a bloodthirsty mob which condemned Stevens, the Land-Pirate, to the ignominious death of the gallows! It was the voice of a free people, who had a right to make their own laws, and to execute them, if need be, themselves, without the intervention of officers regularly elected and duly appointed by that same people. (387-389)

This re-imagining of what historians now recognize as an almost universally arbitrary and violent mode of social control seeks to impose order on the chaos that was the lynch mob.

The lynching of Alfred Orton, the abolitionist confidence man guilty of adultery, child abuse, "amalgamation," encouraging runaways, and attempted rape, seeks to reconcile extralegal violence to Christian notions of mercy and justice. In this case, the court is never appealed to, and it is primarily the slaves themselves who do the lynching. Old Toney and his son chase Orton down with dogs (as slave-holders were apt to chase down runaways) and allow the animals to bite him severely before beginning to apply more traditional lynching techniques; they succeed in tar-and-feathering the abolitionist confidence man, and only the intervention of an old slave preacher prevents them from carrying out their plans to *"set fire to 'um,* den

drownded 'um, den lick '*um to det';* den, if he lib t'roo all dat … *den we mus' kill 'um, and t'row 'um to de buzzards!*" (340). Convinced by the preacher that God will avenge the wrongs done to Orton's victims, both black and white, they banish him from the area; guilt and fear of God's vengeance eventually drive him to commit suicide by taking strychnine and throwing himself into Lake Michigan. This episode has the uncanny effect of projecting the violent extralegal practices of whites onto the slaves themselves. Strangely, the text seems to advocate mercy and reliance upon God's vengeance in the case of the abolitionist while justifying mob killings in the case of a land-pirate. For the slaves to kill a white man would be murder; for the whites to kill a land-pirate is justice.

The higher law of the Bible and Christian justice is fused with the will of the lynch mob in *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop* through the mobbing and death of Tibbets. Upon hearing that Tibbets has suffered a violent death at the hands of a lynch mob, Frank reflects that "this man may not have deserved death from these that murdered him — yet God is just. This man would have sent me to the gallows and with the brand of traitor and murderer on my name! Yes! — *he* stirred up my intimate friends! — and I saw their quivering bodies as they swung from that frightful gibbet!" (288). The fault for the deaths of Frank's fellow slaves, executed as conspirators in Tibbets' insurrection, lies with the abolitionists and not with the slaveholders, though it was the slaveholders, and not Tibbets, who placed the ropes around their necks. To Frank, the death of Tibbets at the hands of the mob seems an appropriate punishment for his early crimes against the slaves; it is evidence that "God is just," a claim for the divine nature of retribution that he repeats not once but twice (Hall 288). The narrator likewise approves of Tibbets fate, likening the "Lynch Law" practiced by the mob to the "Higher Law" (296).

In Uncle Tom's Cabin *and American Culture*, Thomas F. Gossett notes that Tibbets' death echoes that of Elijah Parish Lovejoy, the abolitionist martyr who was shot and killed, like Tibbets, "in defense of his press" in 1837 (Hall 285).[76] Gossett concludes that the narrator "justifies the killing because the abolitionist agitator had resisted his attackers by force and had fired upon them" (Gossett 46); however, the text has more to offer on this point. The abolitionist printer killed in Hall's text is not, as Gossett claims, "unnamed" (though Gossett is quite right that he is not identified as Lovejoy); the printer is clearly Tibbets and the justification for his killing hinges not merely upon his violent efforts at self-defense, but upon his prior criminal acts. For the narrator, however, the crime to be punished by lynching is not the crime committed against the slaves when Tibbets led them to plot a hopeless rebellion, but rather the perceived crimes against the slave owners committed by the abolitionist press — crimes that were frequently redressed by real-life mobs. Grimsted counts thirteen antislavery presses and newspaper offices destroyed by anti-abolitionist mobs in the antebellum period; Lovejoy was killed defending his fourth (Grimsted 35).

The incendiary writings of Tibbets and the American Philanthropic Society promote slave insurrection, and the narrator condemns them and their real-life counterparts as a direct threat not merely to Southern livelihoods, but to Southern lives: "while an unmuzzled press is a very great blessing, yet if a press foment treason, and rebellion and in connection, promote rape, arson, and murder, it is a direful necessity, and yet somewhat excusable if the people to be

[76] Though Hall's novel is ostensibly set in the 1820s, the narrator rails against an abolitionist press that bears more in common with that of the 1830s, the decade that saw the publication of William Lloyd Garrison's weekly antislavery newspaper *The Liberator* (1831-1866) and the establishment of the American Anti-Slavery Society (1833). Hall's American Philanthropic Society is clearly modeled on the latter, and the shelves of its offices are filled with books and periodicals whose titles are calculated to alarm proslavery Southerners: *Slavery a Sin and a Curse*, *Lash for a Slaver's Back*, *Disunion Better Than Union*, *The Railway Hand Book*, *The Alarm Gun*, *The Castigator*, *Scorpion for Soul-Mongers*, and *The Liberator* itself (173). Tibbets' own publication, *The Scarifier and Renovator*, is no less disturbingly titled.

destroyed throw the types into pi [sic] and compel the rascal to be off with his devil" (296). By the narrator's measure, the actions of the mob that killed Tibbets (and by extension, Lovejoy) are on a level with simply running him out of town, an act of self-preservation that is justified by the extraordinary threat posed by antislavery publications. He even goes so far as to suggest, albeit via a rather weak pun, that similar treatment ought to be accorded to the other abolitionists whose portraits are "painted" and "hung" in the offices of the Philanthropic Society.

That abolitionists only rarely met with this particular fate was both the continual lament of the anti-*Tom* novelists and a key rhetorical maneuver; by allowing some of their abolitionist confidence men to go free they stoked the fires of anti-abolitionist paranoia — these criminals were still out there, so to speak, corrupting the slaves, fomenting rebellions, and spreading lies about the South. Though Brainard eventually succumbs to the law in the North, the monologue that accompanies his initial escape from Moreland's plantation suggests the damage abolitionist confidence men may do if they are not dealt with swiftly:

> Oh! I have a glorious career before me … I have made plenty of dupes. The flames I have kindled will not be quenched. They will burst out afresh, when people think they are gazing on ashes. Yes! I will go back to the North, and deliver such lectures on the South as will curdle the blood with horror. No matter what I say — I'll find fools to believe it all. If I pour falsehoods hot as molten lead down their throats, they will believe them all, and smack their lips with delight. … Thank Heaven for the gift of eloquence! Oh! I'll rave of red-hot pincers, of children roasted alive, of women burned at the stake! They'll believe it all! The more horrors I manufacture the more ecstasy they will feel! (526)

The implication of Brainard's escape, and the escapes of other abolitionist confidence men, is the suggestion that all abolitionist lecturers in the North are like Brainard, cunning villains bent on destroying the South, rather than sincere advocates for the slaves.

Brainard and the Softlys, Tibbets and Sharpinton, Sneakright, Blake, Bates, Burton, and Orton, all deserve — and many receive — the attentions of the lynch mob. As the embodiments of Southern paranoia, such treatment makes sense. In the abolitionist confidence man, anti-*Tom* novelists had found the perfect scapegoat for two of the South's most persistent and visible problems — slave rebellions and runaways. Such scapegoating also opened the possibility for the "rhetorical ritual killing" or punishment of these individuals (Roberts-Miller 233). Lynching, even in fiction, became an opportunity to symbolically rid the South of what it perceived as the only barrier to a happy slave system — the interference of the North. By insisting that it was Northern abolitionists who were to blame for servile insurrections and escapes, these authors effectively projected the sins of their community outwards; real agency on the part of African Americans — in the form of cunning trickery, daring escapes, or confidence games — would have little place in the world created by the proslavery imagination. In order to find examples of black confidence men, readers must look outside the world of proslavery fiction to slave narratives, abolitionist publications, folk tales, and, once again, to Melville's *The Confidence-Man*.

Chapter 3

Trickster, Fugitive, Impostor: On the Trail of the Antebellum Black Confidence Man

The question of who, or rather *what*, Herman Melville's Black Guinea is — the nature of his disability, the true color of his skin, the character of his claim to charity — has occupied scholars no less than it occupies the crowd who surround him in chapter three of *The Confidence-Man; His Masquerade* (1857). Like the charitable among them, we often blindly participate in the "Wild goose chase" for proofs of his identity, for any authenticating voice that we might trust, as though success would finally grant us purchase on what may be Melville's most difficult novel (21). Of course, as many scholars conclude, the chase is doomed to failure, but it does not necessarily follow that it is fruitless.[77] Melville's text invites attempts to prove that Black Guinea is the Devil or a "white operator betwisted and painted up for a decoy" or the true face of the Confidence Man before a whiteface masquerade or any number of other proposed identities (21);[78] going in search of the real Black Guinea or the real confidence man may be an exercise in futility, but it is also at the core of the Melvillean reading experience — the reader pursues Black Guinea as Ahab pursues his white whale. Ultimately Black Guinea's true identity remains fugitive, forever fleeing our grasp. In our pursuit of that identity, however, we find a corollary to the dilemma of Melville's contemporaries as they attempted to cope with a newly mobile, increasingly diverse society in which confidence in individual identities was under constant threat. Melville's Black Guinea stands as proof that antebellum Americans

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[77] See for instance Peter J. Bellis' "Melville's *The Confidence-Man*: An Uncharitable Interpretation" (1987).

[78] For a list of those critics who read the Confidence-Man as an avatar of satanic forces, see Bellis (n3 549), though the most prominent current proponents of this reading are the editors of the Second Norton Critical Edition of *The Confidence-Man*, Hershel Parker and Mark Niemeyer, who advance the argument through the extensive use of explanatory notes. For a reading of the Confidence-Man's voyage as a whiteface masquerade, see chapter seven of Carolyn L. Karcher's *Shadow over the Promised Land* (1980).

equated racial deceptions with a host of other confidence games that both thrilled and threatened them.

This chapter proceeds from the assumption that in Black Guinea Melville presented not one but two of his era's most provocative figures — the confidence man and the fugitive slave — and uses this assumption to explore the intersections of race and the confidence game in antebellum literature. Though this is not the first study to suggest that Black Guinea may be a runaway slave, it is the first that explores the implications of that interpretation and considers the historical and literary antecedents that give such a reading credence. Modern scholarship has tended to minimize the connection between race-based confidence games and the deceptive practices of white confidence men; however, as Melville's inclusion of Black Guinea demonstrates, antebellum Americans often regarded racial deceptions like those practiced by runaway slaves as confidence games, and they experienced similar, contradictory reactions to those games. Like their white counterparts, black confidence men and women were both admired and abhorred, both celebrated and feared. The presence of Black Guinea in a text so central to the confidence tradition calls for the reexamination of the divisions between black and white confidence men and the reconsideration of multiple characters not currently classified as confidence men. Looking back to the writings of Melville's contemporaries, black and white, we find evidence that the figure of the confidence man was imbued with racial significance from its very emergence. This examination of folk tales, slave narratives, and abolitionist publications, then, aims to complicate our literary understanding of race and the figure of the confidence man.

* * *

I began by suggesting that Black Guinea may be a runaway slave playing a complex confidence game onboard the *Fidéle*. If this is the case, then Melville's creation mirrors the

historical reality of black confidence men and runaways operating on the antebellum waterways (as well as in the city, the village, and on the plantation). Though exact numbers are impossible to come by, evidence suggests that perhaps thousands of fugitive slaves made their way to freedom as crew or, less frequently, as passengers or stowaways onboard steamboats like the *Fidéle* (Buchanan 101). Black Guinea's tow-cloth attire is that typically worn by slaves, and his own comments to the contrary are precisely what one would expect from a fugitive slave attempting to pass as a free deck passenger on the Mississippi. Even the downstream direction of the *Fidéle* is no bar to this interpretation; some fugitives clearly knew that by journeying deeper into slave territory they allayed the suspicions of captains, crew, and passengers while putting significant distance between themselves and their masters and drawing closer to New Orleans where they might reship back North or join the crew of a ship bound for the Atlantic (107). For this reason, notices cautioned riverboat captains to be wary of hiring black workers, upstream or down, without demanding proofs that they were either free or permitted by their masters to hire their time. Passes, however, were frequently forged, and captains were often understandably more concerned with crewing their ships than with defending the property rights of slaveholders (107).

Black Guinea's fellow passengers suspect him of precisely the kind of deception practiced by other steamboat runaways. In what Melville's antislavery contemporaries would likely have seen as the repetition of an all-too-common scene in the slave states, the crowd puts Black Guinea "fairly and discretely to the question" by insisting that he produce some kind of pass, some "documentary proof … plain paper … attesting that his case was not a spurious one" (21). It remains unclear whether they desire proof of Black Guinea's race, his disability, or his status as a free man, since all these factors bear directly upon his claim to charity, but in place of

"dem waloable papers" Black Guinea can only offer the testimony of his black, crippled body — "what ge'mman want to own dese here legs?" (18) — a pass that proves insufficient to the now-suspicious crowd.[79] Like the frequently forged free passes and the false coinage evoked by his name, Black Guinea's legs and skin may also be counterfeits.[80] Though the Episcopal clergyman places confidence enough in Black Guinea's body to go in search of the beggar's friends, he cannot bring himself to trust the beggar's appearance without the authenticating word of another white man like himself. In short, he responds to Black Guinea's claims like those of a potential black confidence man, a figure very much on the minds of charitable antebellum Americans but largely ignored by modern critics.

Black Guinea was neither the first nor the last in a line of fictional and nonfictional black confidence men — slaves in the South, freemen in the North, and fugitives on the move — who manipulated the expectations of a racist society, creating confidence in their performances as ignorant and needy (or competent and white) in order to reap the personal benefits of safety, freedom, monetary support, and sometimes even fame on the abolitionist circuit. The slave who pretended to be content, the runaway who pretended to be free, the freeman who pretended to be a fugitive slave, all were confidence men playing confidence games especially suited to their unique social condition. These black confidence men and women, however, have seldom been granted a place in canon of confidence-man texts, in part because, as I will argue, their development has been charted according to the terms of African-American trickster figures. This chapter reconsiders African-Americans as an integral part of the story of the confidence-man figure in America, and, by examining the documents black confidence men left in their wake —

[79] For more on the confidence game and disability see Susan M. Ryan's *The Grammar of Good Intentions* (2005) and Ellen Samuels's "From Melville to Eddie Murphy: The Disability Con in American Literature and Film" (2006)
[80] Black Guinea's name refers not only to his apparent race and origin but also to the challenge he poses to attempts at authentication; guineas were gold currency, and as such should not tarnish or darken. A black guinea then would be a counterfeit made of base metal.

particularly personal narratives and cautionary tales in abolitionist newspapers — it seeks to create a more inclusive history of one of America's "original characters" (237).

Tricksters as Confidence Men

In the character of Black Guinea, Melville gives us a confidence man who is, at least apparently, black; black bodies and black voices, however, are seldom seen or heard in most scholarly histories of the confidence-man figure. The most prominent works in the field mention not one African-American beyond Black Guinea himself within the confidence canon, an especially odd omission given that critical interest in the confidence man in literature peaked in the 1980s, after the reevaluation of the western canon had led to the frequent and open discussion of race in literary criticism and expanded readership for African-American texts. I suspect one cause for the black confidence man's omission can be found in the concurrent recognition of an equally important — though as we shall see in a moment, somewhat different — archetypal figure: the trickster. As a result, seeking out and uncovering these black confidence men is not so much a project of recovery as of recognition, a shift from thinking about African folk figures to thinking about American ones. The literary history of antebellum America is already filled with examples of African-Americans who played confidence games; we have only to look for them.

In 1988, the publication of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s landmark study of African-American literature, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, lent theoretical weight to the already mounting interest in African mythology and its retention within African-American literature; works on the trickster figure in black literature now number in the

dozens, and it is commonplace to refer to clever or devious black characters as tricksters.[81] These studies have made invaluable contributions to our understanding of the survival of African traditions and oral literature in the South; however, little has been done to make works on the trickster figure speak to the already extant literature on the American confidence man, and the result has been a kind of unnecessary separation of literatures that implies different origins for works by or about African-Americans and those by or about whites, despite their shared language and cultural moment. Our conception of the confidence-man figure is thus limited by race in a way that its antebellum counterpart was not. Racial deceptions formed an integral part of the panoply of confidence games in the nineteenth century, and African-Americans were often perceived as being particularly crafty confidence men and women by slaveholders and abolitionists alike.

Apart from a few notable exceptions, scholars slide rather easily between the terms "confidence man" and "trickster," treating them as roughly synonymous.[82] Those who make an effort to differentiate between the two terms tend to regard the confidence man as a specifically American version of a universal trickster archetype, albeit with local particularities — a distinction that makes sense given the relatively recent and American origins of the term "confidence man" and the broad spectrum of examples of trickster myths in cultures worldwide.[83] The persistence of a tradition of specifically *African*-American tricksters alongside American tricksters *called confidence men*, however, should prompt a reevaluation of the two

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[81] A search for "trickster" and "African-American" in the MLA database, for instance, returns 32 hits. Noteworthy examples of scholarship that traces the use of the trickster figure in African-American literature and culture include John W. Roberts' *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (1989) and Jeanne Campbell Reesman's *Trickster Lives: Culture and Myth in American Fiction* (2001).

[82] It is possible and even common (particularly outside the realm of literary scholarship) to use the word trickster merely in the sense of "one who tricks." While there is nothing inherently wrong with this, it has further muddled the terminology.

[83] Interestingly, in "Signifying: The African-American Trickster and the Old Southwest" (2006),Winifred Morgan reverses the terms, seeing the trickster as a specific kind of confidence man (210).

terms if for no other reason than clarity. While it is unlikely, given the trickster's appearance in many diverse cultures, that we can uncover a list of characteristics that will satisfy all comers, certain elements are considered typical in the makeup of a trickster. Speaking of Esu-Elegbara, the supernatural West African trickster at the heart of his study, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. lists the following traits: "individuality, satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, uncertainty, disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty, closure and disclosure, encasement and rupture" (6). Though other tricksters may not reflect all of these elements, the list speaks to the essentially ambiguous and disruptive qualities of tricksters in general.[84] Esu, for instance, uses his powers to disrupt normal social activities and hierarchies and, importantly, to teach lessons; as Lewis Hyde maintains, his is a transformative presence, a world-creating power.[85] Additionally, Esu, and tricksters like him, inhabit a spiritual context quite different from the one slaves encountered in the South, a sacred world of ritual outside of which the trickster is simply "missing" (Hyde 13). Speaking generally, the trickster is a divine or quasi-divine figure that defies and disrupts cultural norms, upsets hierarchies, and unleashes an assault "upon deeply ingrained and culturally sanctioned values" (Levine *Black Culture* 104).

This description, however, is somewhat at odds with most scholars' understandings of the confidence man, who is at his most effective when he best approximates the cultural norms of his place and time. The confidence man does not challenge society's hierarchies or violate its taboos; rather, he uses his understanding of those hierarchies and taboos to manipulate others for personal gain. The confidence man, as Gary Lindberg reminds us, is "a culturally representative

[84] Barbara Babcock-Abrahams suggests that of the many characteristics of the trickster the most important is his "expression of ambiguity and paradox, of a confusion of all customary categories" (160). Similar statements can be found in Hynes and Doty's *Mythical Trickster Figures* (1993).

[85] The frequently noted tale of Esu and his two-colored hat has the trickster teaching villagers a lesson about the nature of perspective. For one version of this tale, see Gates (34-35).

figure, not a marginal one" like the trickster; he collaborates with the society in which he operates by creating *confidence* in that society and in his own apparent role within it (9). Though he may not always be successful, the confidence man as we encounter him in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, or Charles W. Chesnutt acts out the expectations and assumptions of his culture. Poe's "diddler" knows and appears to obey every rule of credit just as Melville's Black Guinea knows all the rules of charity, and Chesnutt's Grandison all the rules of the plantation hierarchy, and though each defies these rules, he does so covertly, leaving the rules themselves fundamentally untouched.[86] When revealed to the reader these performances have profound significance; they demonstrate that the foundations of society — trust, charity, hierarchy — were always castles built upon sand and that the "boundaries [were] already fluid," but for the characters in the stories such revelations rarely come home (Lindberg 9). More often than not the confidence man leaves his society unchanged, and, unlike the trickster, whose antics so often end in outrageous laughter, the confidence man prefers to be elsewhere when and if his manipulations are revealed.

Poe sums up this essential privacy of the confidence game in the concept of the "grin" in his essay "Raising the Wind; or, Diddling Considered as an Exact Science" (1843):

> *Grin:* — Your *true* diddler winds up all with a grin. But this nobody sees but himself. He grins when his daily work is done — when his allotted labors are accomplished — at night — in his own closet, and altogether for his own private entertainment. He goes home. He locks his door. He divests himself of his clothes. He puts out his candle. He gets into bed. He places his head upon the

[86] Poe's "diddler" can be found in "Raising the Wind" (1843). Chesnutt's Grandison appears in "The Passing of Grandison" (1899).

pillow. All this done, and your diddler *grins*. This is no hypothesis. It is a matter of course. I reason *a priori*, and a diddle would be *no* diddle without a grin. (1)

It is only within the privacy of his darkened room that the diddler, or confidence man, permits himself to acknowledge his successful manipulations; the trickster's frequent role as an educator and world creator is, in comparison, a public one. It is not shared by the confidence man who conceals his true motivations and makes use of the world just as he finds it. This is not to say that we find no examples of confidence men admitting to their accomplishments or even taking pleasure in recounting them, but the pleasure itself — let alone the transformative lesson — is rarely the point, and the confidence man operates best in a world in which no one is aware that he is operating at all.

To the literary audience outside the text, on the other hand, he functions as Melville said his "original character" would, "like a revolving Drummond light, raying away from itself all round it" and casting in stark relief the contours of his social environment (*Confidence-Man* 238).[87] The confidence man's role in literature is to illuminate the nature of the characters that surround him, but he does so only in the reception of the reading audience; at the level of the text he remains a culturally representative figure. By this definition we may find that many figures who have their origins in African mythology function more like confidence men than tricksters in their American iterations, shedding their quasi-divine powers and operating as illuminators of culture rather than boundary-breakers. Though the folkloric characters of John (sometimes called Jack or High John the Conqueror) and Pompey, for instance, have generally been considered

[87] It is no accident that America's first Drummond light, or limelight, was installed to attract visitors to P.T. Barnum's American Museum in lower Manhattan. Like the confidence man himself, the Museum's diverse and frequently deceptive attractions often revealed more about the prejudices and preconceptions of their audiences than they did about the natural world or the creatures that inhabit it. For more on race, confidence games, and the American Museum, see Benjamin Reiss's *The Showman and the Slave* (2001) and James W. Cook's *The Arts of Deception* (2001).

tricksters, we can see that their realistic and often covert manipulations of Old Master have as much or more in common with the tradition of the American confidence man as they do with the tricksters of African lore.

Consider for instance, the oft-quoted tale of Pompey and his master:

> Pompey, how do I look?
>
> O, massa, mighty.
>
> What do you mean "mighty," Pompey?
>
> Why, massa, you look noble.
>
> What do you mean by "noble"?
>
> Why, sar, you just look like one *lion*.
>
> Why, Pompey, where have you ever seen a lion?
>
> I see one down in younder field the other day, massa.
>
> Pompey, you foolish fellow, that was a *jackass*.
>
> Was it, massa? Well, you look just like him. (Osofsky 22)

Frequently used as an example of trickster behavior, Pompey's covert rebellion actually bears a strong resemblance to the verbal play of the confidence game. Pompey successfully pokes fun at his master by playing into the slaveholder's assumptions regarding the ignorance of blacks in general; he creates *confidence* in the security of his society's hierarchical categories and in his own performance of his socially determined role. Pompey avoids the punishment that would surely have followed had he simply called his master a jackass because the master believes that Pompey does not, in fact, know the difference between a lion and a donkey. To his master, whose expectations Pompey has manipulated, the slave is merely a "foolish fellow," not a dangerous transgressor; the hierarchal boundaries between the two remain essentially unchanged.

If anything, his master's assumptions regarding black ignorance have been reaffirmed or even strengthened by Pompey's performance. Like other confidence men, Pompey plays his games for the acknowledgment of an audience outside the sphere in which he operates; he must keep his grin to himself. The audience certainly experiences the story differently, seeing within it an example of Pompey's cleverness and the emptiness of the social standards by which both must live, but Pompey does not change his world; he merely reveals it for what it is.

The stories of John and Old Master, when taken as a group, rely upon a similar performance of specific social roles without posing a significant challenge to the continuance of those roles (Dickson 425-36). Whether John succeeds in tricking Old Master (the most common result) or becomes a victim to Old Master's trickery himself, their relationship only rarely experiences any considerable change.[88] Take for instance the familiar tale of a boxing match between John and a champion fighter from another plantation on which Old Master has wagered a significant sum. John arrives late and, depending on the version, kisses or slaps his master's wife in full view of his opponent and the crowd that has gathered to watch the fight. His rival is naturally terrified — a slave who would assault a white woman in full view of her husband must be either crazy or such a consummate fighter no sane man would touch him — and he forfeits the fight to John by running away. As in Pompey's story a violation of the existing order is covered up by the pose of obedience; John has only violated social order for the sake of winning a bet for his master. The tale's outside audience may recognize his behavior as transgressive, but Old Master does not, and the hierarchy remains unchanged. Consistent throughout the majority of these tales is a sense that the relationship between master and slave is a fixed one governed by an essential conflict of roles rather than individuals. Thus John serves in the tales to illuminate the

[88] Tales in which John's success results in his freedom are a rarity and seem to have been a relatively late development in the African-American folkloric tradition (Dickson 422).

degree to which that relationship was founded not upon some innate inferiority of African-Americans but upon social values and hierarchies beyond the control of either party. Through the tales of John and Old Master, black Southerners "acknowledged the social nature of their dilemma," as Bruce Dickson argues; they saw it "as a setting in which they and the slave owners, too, were forced to play certain parts" (429). Naturally this revelation occurs only at the level of audience reception. Within the tales themselves John and Old Master, like true confidence men, seek covert and temporary victories, not social change.

Though the tales of Pompey and John are at least partial inheritors of the West African trickster, in a specifically American environment their development was shaped by different social structures and cross-fertilized with other American traditions. Winifred Morgan suggests that in addition to "Signifying" on African trickster tales, as Gates argues, black storytellers Signified upon the culture of Southwestern humor, producing new creations whose patterns of behavior were more covert, and more human, than those of their African counterparts (221). It makes sense that African tricksters should experience a shift to the more covert operations of the confidence man in their American setting. The slave's environment, with its closely patrolled boundaries and rigid hierarchies, made open transgression a dangerous proposition for slaves in the same way that frontier justice made social deviance perilous for whites.[89] Indeed, one can argue that we see a parallel shift away from open transgression in the creations of Southwestern humorists, with the boisterous prankster Ned Brace of Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's 1835 *Georgia Scenes* giving way to Johnson Jones Hooper's shiftier confidence man Simon Suggs in

[89] Frontier "justice" could be nearly as fierce for white men as plantation justice was for slaves; the various tortures designated by the word "lynching" — tar-and-feathering, rail-riding, partial drowning, and impromptu hanging — were frequent features of white-on-white violence prior to the Civil War. For more on lynching see chapter two of this work.

1840s and Kittrell Warren's slippery Billy Fishback in the 1860s.[90] That these characters, black and white, show a tendency towards the more covert activities of the confidence man reflects the reality of the communities in which they found themselves, both of which demonstrated a propensity towards the violent punishment of transgressors against the norm. Those who wished to flout the rules of either community no doubt learned to do so in ways that attracted as little attention as possible. As Hooper's Simon Suggs observed, "IT'S GOOD TO BE SHIFTY IN A NEW COUNTRY," and that held as true for African-Americans as it did for white men and women on the make (12).

My aim here is not to insist upon a rigid differentiation between tricksters and confidence men — naturally many characters may straddle that divide — but merely to suggest that in our scholastic eagerness to attribute African-American figures to an African source we may lose something of the American, and something of the human, too.[91] Though scholars have aimed to honor the stories of clever African Americans, both real and fictional, by associating their deeds with the quasi-divine tricksters of their ancestors, that association may paradoxically limit our appreciation of their very human strengths and weaknesses. People like Ellen Craft, William Wells Brown, and the host of slave impostors feared by abolitionists manipulated the racial categories of their specific place and time to achieve freedom, financial success, and public notoriety, and those manipulations have much to teach us about the real world that they inhabited. Our analysis of fictional characters as well can be enhanced by recognition of their specifically American origins.

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[90] The character of Simon Suggs first appeared in *Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs* (1845). Billy Fishback appears in Warren's 1865 *Life and Public Services of an Army Straggler*.

[91] Brer Rabbit is a particularly interesting case of a character straddling the divide between confidence man and trickster; his behaviors are generally very human in scope (he does not seek to change his society), but he is also a relatively open transgressor.

In "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," his famous reply to Stanley Edgar Hyman's application of the trickster figure to African-American literature, Ralph Ellison observed that "[a]rchetypes, like taxes, seem doomed to be with us always, and so with literature, one hopes; but between the two there must needs be the living human being in a specific texture of time, place and circumstance" (57). Ellison was arguing for a specifically American identity for the creations of African-American writers, one that cut across racial lines and equated the deceptions of African-American characters with those of whites like Benjamin Franklin; all are "in the American grain" (62). Naturally Ellison might still object to designating his creations, or those of other African-American writers, as confidence men, but for the men and women who appear in this chapter that term has at least the virtue of arising from their own "texture of time, place and circumstance," the antebellum United States.

The Fugitive Confidence Man and the Self-Made Man

In the early 1970s, Phyllis R. Klotman suggested the existence of "a concomitant development of the confidence man tradition in America," one that emerged as "an outgrowth of slavery and the plantation system" (597). Though the suggestion was made almost in passing (her focus was on three twentieth-century texts), the traces of "the first black confidence man" can indeed be found on the plantation and in the lives of the African Americans who succeeded in leaving it (597). Under the threat of the overseer's lash or the suspicious eye of the mistress, slaves soon learned the wisdom of appearing to be what they were not: faithful, ignorant, and contented. As one former slave would later recall, that deception became a kind of second nature for the enslaved: "shame for a lie is unknown to them. A lie is often useful to them, and the truth so often disastrous, and their aptness at a lie is such, that they take in sustaining it, an air of

assurance and tranquility which imposes upon strangers" (Jackson 29). Such proficiency with the arts of deception was often regarded by abolitionists — both black and white — as the direct product of the institution of slavery and of oppression in general. Remarking in 1848 on the clever methods West Indian blacks had developed for secretly siphoning liquor out of barrels, one abolitionist editor concluded that "[t]hose who are most oppressed and have the fewest privileges, are generally the most expert in schemes and tricks of cunning. … wherever there is oppression and tyrannical restriction, it compels a resort to schemes, tricks and cunning" ("Scientific Darky Trick").

Under the Southern regime, slaves did indeed develop tricks and schemes to avoid punishment while reaping the benefits of disobedience. In his 1847 slave narrative, Andrew Jackson suggests that, at least in his own case, the reported fondness of slaves for possum meat was a mere cover for the repeated theft of their masters' pigs (27). Likewise, the cheerful songs and playful dances for which they became famous in the North often masked discontent and rebellious sentiment. By the end of the century, Paul Laurence Dunbar would reflect that these strategies had become integral to African-American identity, writing that blacks "wear the mask that grins and lies" ("We Wear the Mask" 17). It was this very duality that disturbed slaveholders who often suspected something was amiss — complaining about broken tools, feigned illnesses, and theft — but were seldom able to arrive at any definite conclusions regarding the true sentiments and motivations of the slaves themselves (Greenberg 40). One particularly anxious slaveholder complained that "[s]o deceitful is the Negro that as far as my own experience extends I could never in a single instance decipher his character… We planters could never get at the truth" (47). Thus the masters recognized their own vulnerability to what might be called

hypocrisy (though without that word's negative connotations) and acknowledged the possibility that what they took for truth was merely performance.

The runaway slave was in many ways an embodiment of that possibility and of the fears slaveholders attached to it, so it is not surprising that we see an emphasis on the exceptionality of individual slaves in the runaway advertisements published by masters hoping to reclaim their fugitive property. A far cry from the pseudoscientific accounts of black stupidity and docility we encountered in the first chapter, these advertisements describe men and women possessed of keen intellects and abundant shrewdness. They were, as one slaveholder wrote in the *Richmond Enquirer* in 1854, "very smart and well calculated to deceive" (Franklin and Schweninger 224). As John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger conclude, on the whole the fugitive slaves described by slaveholders' advertisements possessed much in common with one another: "most runaways demonstrated self-confidence, self-assurance, self-possession, determination, and self-reliance. … They were resourceful, willful, focused, and purposeful. A number were quick-witted, wily, and intelligent, while most were deceptive and calculating, and not a few were duplicitous and scheming when it came to dealing with whites" (224). It is interesting that slaveholders became most convinced of their property's innate intelligence and capacity for duplicity after their escapes. Though some slaveholders indulged suspicions, it is clear that their slaves often took deliberate measures to minimize those doubts by performing their socially prescribed roles with considerable skill.

It was in the best interests of the would-be runaway to appear to be none of the things slaveholders described the runaways as being in their advertisements. The nearer they approached the date of departure, the more carefully guarded their performance had to be: "At that time, of all times," the successful fugitive Samuel Riggold Ward recalled, the aspiring

runaway “must appear best satisfied with slavery, least anxious for freedom” (162). The historical record suggests that some black Southerners were particularly skilled in avoiding the suspicions of their masters by presenting the face they wanted and expected to see. Though often labeled tricksters, Lunsford Lane, Moses Roper, Henry Bibb, and Ellen Craft were neither quasi-divine taboo-breakers nor mere pranksters; they were intelligent manipulators who capitalized upon their extensive knowledge of social expectations in order to break the bonds of slavery. They were confidence men.

Future runaways like Lunsford Lane often deliberately adopted a performance calculated to mislead powerful whites. In his 1842 narrative, Lane described the policy of imposture he adopted to evade suspicion while secretly storing up the money to free himself and his family from bondage:

> Ever after I entertained the first idea of being free, I had endeavored so to conduct myself as not to become obnoxious to the white inhabitants, knowing as I did their power, and their hostility to the colored people. The two points necessary in such a case I had kept constantly in mind. First, I had made no display of the little property or money I possessed, but in every way I wore as much as possible the aspect of poverty. Second, I had never appeared to be even so intelligent as I really was. This all colored people at the South, free and slaves, find it peculiarly necessary to their own comfort and safety to observe. (Lane 31)

In essence, Lane played dumb, feigning the conditions — poverty and stupidity — expected of blacks by slave-holding whites in order that he might succeed in his bid for escape. He created confidence in this performance and in the endurance and essential correctness of the race-based social hierarchy of the South. The chief strength of his deception was that it encouraged, rather

than challenged, the slaveholders' existing beliefs and their confidence in the social structures that dictated Lane's status and their own. It is only in the telling of his tale to a Northern audience that his performance becomes transgressive, not only by revealing his deceptions (and those of "all colored people at the South") but also by exposing the paternalistic arguments in favor of slavery as baseless; Lane and his fellow slaves only *appear* helpless and stupid.

Four years earlier Moses Roper had recognized a tendency towards this sort of dishonesty among the slaves, a fault he laid squarely at the foot of the slave system itself in his *Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (1848): "The ignorance in which the poor slaves are kept by their masters," he argues, "precludes almost the possibility of their being alive to any moral duties" (8). According to his own account of his escape from slavery, the deceptions that made it possible resulted not from any innate immorality but from a lack of knowledge: "[m]y master here questioned me, as to whether I intended to run away or not; and I then not knowing the sin of lying, at once told him that I would not" (63). Roper maintains that he is not guilty because he is unaware he commits any sin. Though he maintains his innocence on this point, he seems keenly aware of the structures that form the foundation of the Southern society through which he travels; conscious that his light complexion may allow him to pass as white, he constructs a new identity as a runaway apprentice premised upon the knowledge that Southerners sympathetic to the plight of white indentured servants outnumbered those inclined to assist a fugitive slave. Later, recognizing that without a pass attesting to his status as a white man he cannot hope to proceed further, he convinces a poor farmer to ask his barely literate son to write him one; this he then purposefully defaces, knowing — despite his own illiteracy — that the poor penmanship of the writer will render it unconvincing. The unreadable remnant he presents to an educated slaveholder who agrees, based solely upon the

fugitive's possession of the first pass, to create a new (and far more convincing) version. Roper is trading up: first by passing as white, and then by finding increasingly respectable white people to vouch for his own whiteness. Like the confidence man he was, Roper demonstrates keen awareness of the finer points of Southern social structure and proves a particularly adept manipulator of that structure.

Roper had the option of passing as white. Many others were not so lucky, yet fugitives like Henry Bibb found ways to benefit from the commodification of their dark skin. Purchased from a cruel master by a group of riverboat gamblers surprisingly sympathetic to his plight, Bibb struck a bargain to ensure his freedom: "If I would use my influence so as to get some person to buy me while traveling with them, they would give me a portion of the money for which they sold me, and they would also give me direction by which I might yet run away and go to Canada" (149). In order to be successful, Bibb must market himself, acting "very stupid in language and thought," to convince prospective buyers that he poses no threat (149). Bibb's performance of stupidity has monetary value both for his blackleg owners and for himself; he stands to benefit, as they do, by his purchase. It is important to recall, however, that Bibb is not seeking to change the economic structure in which he operates; he is paradoxically dependent upon its rigid structures and racist assumptions for the success of his plan. By effacing his own intelligence and working with, rather than against, the society in which he functions as a commodity, Bibb gains a measure of agency; he is not sold so much as he sells himself, and in selling himself he enables his eventual escape.

If Bibb takes on the role of the slaveholder figuratively — marketing himself to potential buyers and receiving a portion of the proceeds — the fugitive Ellen Craft plays the slaveholder literally, by disguising herself as a young white man and travelling North with her husband

William posing as her slave manservant. While Bibb sold himself, or rather an ignorant version of himself, Craft "sells" her performance as a white slaveholder, so successfully, in fact, that her story became well known throughout the North. Her passing, like Bibb's performance, is profoundly subversive to her story's audience, but it is also dependent upon the very hierarchy it manipulates. "Passing," as David Waldstreicher reminds us, "depends on distinctly marked categories of identity even as it contests them" ("Reading the Runaways" 262). Without strict racial categories implicitly indexed to skin color, the very light-skinned Ellen cannot pass; without gender categories based largely upon clothing, she cannot alter her dress to become the "he" she must be in order to travel with a slave alone. In this way passing occurs at the center of culture, where identity is made, not on the margins. The passing game played by the confidence woman Ellen depends on that centrality, on the racial and gender hierarchies that structured antebellum life.

As the stories of Lane, Roper, Bibb, and Craft illustrate, black Southerners, both in slavery and on the run, often had to collaborate with Southern culture in order to escape it. They played tricks, certainly, but it does not necessarily follow that they were tricksters, at least not in the strict sense that would equate them with the heroes of African folklore. Theirs were covert victories, won through the creation of confidence in the world as it appeared to be. Slaveholders and proslavery Southerners were encouraged to go on believing as they always had that the slave who acted stupidly or dressed poorly *was* both stupid and poor, or that a well-dressed white man on the road *was* both white and a man. The success of their confidence games was dependent upon the privacy in which they played them. Whose grin must be more secret than the light-skinned fugitive's, as he sits at the all-white bar discussing slave prices with the traders? This necessity for secrecy led Frederick Douglass to conceal the methods by which he passed out of

the South for decades, until well after the Civil War had freed the slaves. In his *Narrative* he explained his reticence to share the details of his escape, saying "I would keep the merciless slaveholder profoundly ignorant of the means of flight adopted by the slave" (101). The confidence game as played by fugitive slaves was about doing precisely this.

* * *

Runaway slaves like those mentioned here operated along an uneasy continuum between the twinned figures of the self-made man and the confidence man. The confidence games they played enabled their self-making and created the possibility of uniquely American success stories. Long denied access to fundamental markers of identity — a full name, a birth date, knowledge of their parentage — fugitive slaves made these things for themselves, choosing new names, educating themselves and embarking upon new careers, thus fulfilling as few other groups could the promise of a central American myth. It is no wonder that scholars have long recognized parallels between the narrative of American's most famous self-made man, Benjamin Franklin, and its most famous fugitive slave, Frederick Douglass. Like Franklin, and like the growing number of former slaves now swelling the ranks of Northern cities, Douglass had fled a life of forced labor and had risen from obscurity to social prominence through hard work.[92] Yet also like Franklin, "a figure as historically central to the image of the con man as Melville's [Confidence-Man] is conceptually central," Douglass had reaped the benefits of the occasional fraud or bit of misdirection (Lindberg 11). The significance of Douglass' status as a self-made man was not lost upon his contemporaries, who referred to him as a "representative man," nor

[92] Rafia Zafar has referred to Douglass as Franklin's "alter ego" or "Doppelganger" (89). For more on parallels between their self-narratives, see Zafar's *We Wear the Mask: African Americans Write American Literature, 1760-1870* (1997). For an excellent exploration of Franklin's history as a runaway apprentice, see Waldstreicher's *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* (2004).

was it lost upon Douglass himself who, like other fugitives, charted a wary path along the continuum between two of his culture's most famous figures.

In 1859, before an audience composed of students at the Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Frederick Douglass gave for the first time a speech he had entitled "Self-Made Men." As though aware of the parallels between his subject and the habits of his country's other cultural hero, Douglass is quick to emphasize in "Self-Made Men" that success in life is only worthwhile if it is obtained honestly; "any success," he warned, "which comes through meanness, trickery, fraud and dishonor, is but emptiness and will only be a torment to its possessor" (21). Of course, Douglass's own freedom was dependent upon a bit of trickery; two decades before he had used his extensive knowledge of sailors' language, dress, and mannerisms to pass as a free black sailor.[93] Douglass pretended to be a freeman in order to become one; he had to become a confidence man in order to become a self-made man. The details of his escape would not have been available to his audience at the time of his address, however. For them he presents himself and the self-made men he admired as "men of work" and portrayed honest effort as the only sure path to success. The bright line Douglass draws between the fruits of honest labor and the results of "fraud and dishonor" suggests the degree to which they were already blurred in antebellum culture and in the life of Douglass himself.

Not all abolitionists were as uneasy with the role of deception as Douglass. Stories of slave escapes including detailed descriptions of just how it was done were far more common and in high demand. Just as abolitionists had embraced the practice of phrenology because it underwrote the possibility of personal improvement for African Americans, they celebrated as proofs of black capability the tales of fugitive slaves who triumphed over the myriad challenges

[93] The facts of his escape mentioned here first appeared in 1881 in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*.

of escape in ways that illustrated their capacity to become self-made men and women. In one of her *Letters from New-York* (1841-43), Lydia Maria Child tells the story of a fugitive slave called Zeek who is “sold running” to a slave trader, that is, sold after he had already escaped. Inquiring after Zeek in Philadelphia, the trader encounters a black man called Samuel Johnson who claims to be the runaway’s brother. Zeek, the trader is told, is a “good-for-nothing chap”; he will be “better without him than with him” (46). When Samuel offers to pay the paltry sum of sixty dollars for his brother, the trader, convinced that he has made a bad bargain in purchasing Zeek, agrees, but once the purchase has been finalized is indeed final Samuel makes “low bow to the gentleman” and says, “Your servant, sir; I am Zeek!” (47).

Child’s evident delight in retelling the tale was likely matched by readers, and it is easy to understand why. Zeek is the ultimate self-made man, having created not one but two selves in order to obtain his freedom — Samuel Johnson, a free man whose very name suggests wit and refinement, and Zeek, precisely the lazy, good-for-nothing slave whose description so closely matches the expectations of the slave trader. The moment of recognition, when Samuel and Zeek are merged once more, comes at the expense of the trader, a member of a profession loathed by abolitionists and slaveholders alike. Though considering his tale as an example of the confidence game is complicated by this moment of expose — Zeek/Samuel’s grin is decidedly public — one must remember that the exposé occurs in a Northern state, after the risk of recapture has been removed by the slave. The revelations of Zeek’s confidence game, like those of other fugitive slaves, occurs in the relative safety of the North and is intended not as a lesson to slaveholders but as a demonstration of black ability for abolitionists.

The story of Ellen Craft served a similar purpose; her transformation from black to white and from male to female testified to African-American capability. The first to bring the Crafts’

story to light was William Wells Brown, who reported the history of their escape in a letter to *The Liberator* in January of 1849. Brown would later fictionalize Ellen's account in *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853), his novel of slave life inspired by the Jefferson-Hemings scandal, and as a preface to that work he would include a third-person autobiography, the shortest but also perhaps the most interesting of his attempts at self-writing. Like Douglass (or for that matter P.T. Barnum) Brown would chart the progress of his self-making in multiple versions of his autobiography published over the course of his life, beginning with his *Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave* in 1847 and concluding with *My Southern Home: or, the South and its People* in 1880. The *Clotel* autobiography most closely resembles the first of these, though it includes several episodes that do not appear elsewhere in of Brown's writings. Particularly concerned with his use of deception for personal gain after he had already achieved his freedom, these episodes offer the clearest portrait of Brown as a confidence man who skillfully manipulates the conditions and expectations of his environment to create and recreate a free identity for himself. Like many black confidence men, Brown has often been called a trickster, but that moniker serves only to distance the confidence games he plays from those of white confidence men in the same period. As we shall see, Brown had as much or more in common with the white confidence man as he did with the tricksters of African folklore.

Facing the same difficulties making a living shared by the majority of escaped slaves and freemen in the North, Brown adopts a new identity as an "expert" barber. With little more experience than providing the occasional shave to a disabled gentleman aboard the steamboat he had worked on while still a slave, Brown sets up shop as the "Fashionable Hairdresser from New York, Emperor of the West" (*Clotel* 67). "Of course," Brown recalls, "I had to tell all who came in, that my neighbour on the opposite side did not keep clean towels, that his razors were dull,

and, above all, he never had been to New York to see the fashions. Neither had I" (67). Brown is, in short, a charlatan, a confidence man who pretends to expertise he does not in fact possess. He recognizes that the appearance of expertise is more valuable than the thing itself, a recognition that forms the basis of Brown's confidence games and those of other confidence men.

Confidence in appearances, rather than in substance, underwrites Brown's experience as a banker as well. Having built up some small capital with his barbering business, under contemporary laws Brown is free to establish a wildcat bank and issue his own "shinplasters," bills in small amounts that he circulates without sufficient specie. Brown's shinplasters, like the flashy sign over his shop or the façade of the confidence man, signify nothing solid or real; they are only, by his own admission, "worthless paper" (67). Brown's banknotes, like the fugitive confidence man, rely upon their ability to create confidence in the status quo. So long as buyers and sellers remain confident in their ability to use his shinplasters, the notes retain their value on the market. It is confidence that enables this economy to function. When that confidence fails, as when Brown is faced with a run on his inadequately supplied bank, the threat is not merely bankruptcy, but a systemic crisis that would reveal the ultimate absence of meaning behind a simple piece of paper or a flashy barbershop sign. For Douglass, Zeek, and Brown the ability to create and maintain confidence in their performances — however deceptive — was the first step in becoming self-made men. In order to follow in Franklin's footsteps they had to follow in Franklin's footsteps, so to speak, and learn to walk the fine line between two of America's most famous and infamous cultural figures.

Slave Impostors as Confidence Men

Up to this point we have primarily considered black confidence men and women as they presented themselves in their narratives and focused upon the difference between the faces they

showed to slaveholders and the ones they revealed to the largely abolitionist audience of those narratives. Abolitionists were mistaken, however, if they believed themselves somehow immune to the deceptions of confidence men. As it turns out, the assumptions abolitionists made about blacks left them just as vulnerable to the deceptions of the confidence man as the assumptions of their slaveholding counterparts. In the faces of the fugitives who sought their help abolitionists were as likely to see what they wanted to see as slaveholders were.

The first fugitive slave narrative published by the American Anti-Slavery Society, *The Narrative of James Williams* (1838), featured a sketch of its (soon-to-be-infamous) titular runaway on the frontispiece. The image is not unlike other portraits of fugitive slaves; Williams, well-dressed in jacket, waistcoat, and stiff cravat, glances out of the frame with brows slightly raised. His face is smooth; his expression alert and intelligent. To the modern eye he appears poised, perhaps even tranquil, but to the eyes of one writer to *The Liberator* he seemed anything but: "On the cover of the little book, you see the fugitive slave, in his extremity, standing alone on the earth, against the world… See his garb — his attitude! how utterly man-forsaken! not guilty but fugitive, the very living and speaking personification of helplessness and flight and utter despair of escape" (Cohen 193). That Williams' garb is hardly the tattered tow-cloth associated with the helplessness and desperation of the American slave seems not to bother the writer who sees in the portrait of the fugitive Williams the realization of his own racially-coded expectations. Williams must be in need, not because his image especially suggests it, but because his status as a black fugitive slave mandates that need — a need for the aid of antislavery advocates like the writer, and presumably like the majority of the readers of Williams' narrative. The apparent fugitive's subsequent history would suggest the extent to which some abolitionists

were vulnerable to the manipulations of black confidence men and women, crafty individuals they called "slave impostors."

While, as we have seen, fugitives often became confidence men in order to escape from slavery to freedom and to become self-made men and women, evidence suggests that some free men and women "became" fugitives in order to extract a profit from slavery, or rather, from the abolitionist response to slavery. Just as some fugitive slaves became expert at exploiting the racist assumptions of whites who defended the slave system, some free black men and women became especially adept at manipulating the assumptions and sentiments of abolitionists for personal gain. Through cautionary letters and open warnings regarding these slave impostors, prominent antislavery newspapers like *The Liberator*, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, and *The Provincial Freeman* offer a window into the lives of the men and women who masqueraded as runaway slaves, receiving food, money, clothing, shelter, and occasional notoriety on the abolitionist lecture circuit in return for telling their largely fictitious tales. Of course, the vast majority of runaways seeking support from antislavery organizations and individuals were probably much what they appeared to be, though many may have concealed elements of their past to protect themselves and their loved ones; even faced with the evidence of multiple cases of fraud, William Cooper Nell, a prominent African-American abolitionist, concluded that "many who solicit aid are specially deserving, and proof abundant can be offered that the kindness of their friends has not fallen upon unworthy or ungrateful recipients" (298).

Abolitionists felt themselves in great need of the "abundant proofs" of which Nell wrote. *The Narrative of James Williams* proved not so convincing in the absence of its source, a runaway claiming to be from the Deep South who had dictated his tale to the abolitionist poet John Greenleaf Whittier. Sent to England for his own protection, Williams could not be located

(an oddity within the close-knit abolitionist community) to answer serious charges that his story had been at least partially fabricated.[94] This embarrassment came only a year after *The Slave; or Memoirs of Archy Moore* (1837) had come under fire from the American Anti-Slavery Society for presenting itself as the true narrative of a slave; its author, the white journalist Richard Hildreth, had published the work anonymously and let readers draw their own conclusions about his first-person slave narrator. Few reviewers seemed convinced the work was by a black author, even before Hildreth revealed himself, and fewer still were as concerned as the Anti-Slavery Society that the narrative was misleading; the majority of abolitionists embraced the work even once its white authorship was known.[95]

Nonetheless, problems related to verifying the authenticity of slave stories, printed or otherwise, continued to plague antislavery advocates throughout the period. Instances of misrepresentation or outright deceit, rare though they might have been, were particularly troubling to abolitionists for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the threat such instances posed to their public image as moral crusaders exposing the dark underbelly of the slave system; if the evidence of Southern abuses that formed the basis of their attack on slavery was tainted by misinformation, then that evidence exposed the crusaders themselves (as dupes or deceivers) rather than the slaveholders. Indeed, as chapter two of this work will suggests, proslavery writers eagerly embraced the notion that fugitive slave tales could not be trusted,

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[94] Scholars continue to debate the authenticity of James Williams' narrative. See William L. Andrews' *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography* (1989), Laura Browder's *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (2000), Ann Fabian's *Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (2000), and Lara Langer Cohen's "Counterfeit Presentiments: Fraud and the Production of Nineteenth-Century American Literature" (diss, 2011).

[95] For the most part, revelations about the novel's status as fiction did little to quell to admiration of abolitionist readers. Though he was initially skeptical of the work, Lewis Tappan's imprint appeared on the 1852 edition, and in a letter to William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* Lydia Maria Child praised Hildreth's work above even the true narrative of Charles Ball and declared "[i]f I were a man, I would rather be the author of that work [*The Slave*], than of anything ever published in America" ("Communications").

producing a host of deceptive former slave characters for the novels they wrote in response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). In return for money or protection, these fictional fugitive confidence men told elaborate lies about Southern atrocities, the very sort of stories that inspired real-world abolitionists in their campaign against slavery. Abolitionists, the texts seem to suggest, have either fallen victim to the lies of black confidence men or are confidence men themselves. Accordingly abolitionists in these novels run the gamut from the simply gullible title character of *Mr. Frank, The Underground Mail-Agent* (published anonymously, 1853) to the viciously exploitative Professor Sneakright of William M. Burrell's *White Acre vs. Black Acre* (1856), who, by manufacturing a scarified back out of leather for his "runaway slave," finds a way of making even the black body an unreliable witness.

In short, proslavery forces were intent on reminding readers that abolitionist arguments against slavery hinged largely upon the words and recollections of former slaves whose motives might not always be the purest or who might be unduly influenced by profit-seeking abolitionists. Their stories, these authors suggested, ought not to be trusted. It is no wonder then that the antislavery community appears somewhat anxious in its obsession with verifying the stories of fugitive slaves, particularly when those stories were destined to appear in print. Fugitive authors could expect to be interviewed repeatedly, their tales fact-checked with letters to their former masters and neighbors, and their written works prefaced by multiple statements from white abolitionists attesting to their veracity (Osofsky 12).[96]

For all its potential difficulties, establishing the authenticity of a fugitive slave narrative was in some ways easier than the task which abolitionists undertook with greater frequency:

[96] Ryan points out the contradiction at the heart of these kinds of verification methods in the larger charitable community: "So while the fear of being tricked impelled charity workers' repeated inquiries into the credibility of need, their representations of such inquiries had contradictory effects, figuring the white benevolent establishment as both exceptionally discerning and essentially trickable — else why the vigilance?" (49)

establishing the authenticity of the fugitive slave himself. The average antislavery activist might rarely be faced with a fugitive slave narrative's claims to evaluate, but they would likely be met repeatedly with claims upon their charity, either from individual fugitives or on behalf of organizations seeking to benefit them, and such requests possessed a degree of urgency unmatched by the written narratives, which might wait for publication until their truth was confirmed by multiple (white) sources. The needy fugitive, like the beggar on the street, required aid now, and the uneasiness of abolitionists regarding the subjects of their generosity reflected the larger anxieties of the charitable community in the antebellum period. As individuals became less knowable in the wake of urbanization, it became increasingly difficult to determine who was genuinely deserving of the charitable donations of the middle class and who was merely exploiting their compassion for personal gain. Deceptive beggars — those who wore clothing below their means, feigned various physical disabilities, used ragged children as props, or told false stories to solicit aid — posed a significant complication to those already committed to providing assistance to those in need.[97]

In 1846, it was still possible to conceive of a solution to the problem of verifying fugitive slave identities; the New Bedford abolitionist John Bailey, in a letter to *The Liberator*, proposed a possible solution in the form of certificates that might be issued to fugitives newly arrived in the border states: "some person residing in the border States should, if the fugitive called on him, give him a certificate that to the best of his knowledge, he or she was a fugitive slave, and direct it to some person well known, residing in the most probable stopping place, and to be by him endorsed and directed to the next" ("Fugitive Slaves"). Feeling his organization's limited resources stretched beyond their ability to bear, Bailey's tone is likewise strained; this was the

[97] For a thorough exploration of antebellum charity, see Ryan's *The Grammar of Good Intentions* (2005).

second time he had written to Garrison's paper for assistance in implementing his scheme without conclusive response. Fugitive slave impostors "would be but a few drops in that ocean of human beings" that is New York City, Bailey lamented, but in a smaller abolitionist community like New Bedford, fugitives "preserve their identity. They are strangers and we take them in. In so doing we are sometimes taken in ourselves" ("Fugitive Slaves").[98] Like charitable antebellum Americans of all stripes, Bailey expresses distress at the vulnerability of the donor in an increasingly mobile age, but his suggestion that this vulnerability is compounded in the small town runs counter to accounts of the confidence man that locate his nexus in the anonymous world of the big city.[99] It is the preservation of identity in New Bedford, as opposed to its presumptive loss in New York, that threatens the success of their charitable enterprise.

Bailey likely overestimated the power of the large community to disperse the influence and the burden of the slave impostor. If New Bedford's abolitionists suffered a number of suspected slave impostors over the years, they were hardly alone. In the very year of Bailey's letter, the Committee of Vigilance in Boston (a city much larger than New Bedford in terms of population) recorded its suspicions that not one but two of the nineteen fugitives they had assisted that year were impostors.[100] Less than a decade later Boston's antislavery organizations would reach a kind of breaking point in their tolerance of impostors. Boston correspondents to *Frederick Douglass' Paper* reported in 1855 their intention to "establish a society to protect ourselves against the host of swindling impostors who go about begging money to buy their relatives or for other charitable purposes, and whose object is really to get a dishonest living at

[98] For more on Bailey's role in New Bedford antislavery organizations, see Kathryn Grover's *The Fugitive's Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford, Massachusetts* (2001).
[99] See, for instance, Halttunen's *Confidence Men and Painted Women* (1986).
[100] One of these suspected impostors, William Brown, may have lost the support of the Committee because his story was *too* good and his performance almost too convincing to those who expected less artful tales from ignorant fugitives (Bartlett 108).

the expense of the little sympathy there is for the colored people" ("Our Correspondents"). This society would "investigate all claims for sympathy," recommending those "found worthy" and cautioning the public against "any persons soliciting aid without the proper credentials." Both Bailey and the abolitionists in Boston perceived the slave impostor as a direct threat to the genuine claims of real fugitives and blamed the presence of impostors for their own suspicions and for their organizations' limited resources: "[m]any a worthy object of charity is obliged to suffer because so little confidence can be placed in the mass of those who solicit aid for benevolent purposes" ("Our Correspondents"). These plans to establish formal authentication methods for fugitives speak to the considerable anxieties of the abolitionist communities regarding black confidence men whom they imagined were both numerous enough and dangerous enough to warrant the implementation of burdensome precautions.

As with the study of runaway slave advertisements, information about fugitive confidence men is almost always given at second-hand. While advertisements for runaways carry the indelible mark of the slaveholders who wrote them, the warnings about slave impostors published by the antislavery press are shaped by the concerns of the abolitionist communities who created them. As a result, the number of "slave impostors" appearing in warnings posted to antislavery publications were likely inflated by the anxiety of abolitionists disturbed by the independent ownership of the black antislavery movement. Regarding the possibility of blackface beggars in early nineteenth-century England, Audrey A. Fisch remarks that "[c]harges of imposture, fed by white abolitionists in positions of authority in the British antislavery campaign, offer questions about 'real' identity but often betray anxiety surrounding the power of African-Americans to run their own political campaign and the encroachment of those African-Americans on the domain of white men" (118-19 n2). This was doubtless true in a limited way

about America as well; however, warnings about black confidence men masquerading as fugitives appear with frequency even in black-owned abolitionist publications. It is clear that while runaways were often lauded for their cleverness and independence of thought and action, these very characteristics may have felt dangerous to abolitionists whose political rhetoric proclaimed them the heroes of otherwise defenseless and ignorant slaves.

* * *

Though, like all confidence men, their actions exist on the fringes of what might be considered legal (let alone ethical), black confidence men and women demonstrated admirable cunning. Job opportunities for free blacks were scarce even in the North, but the confidence men and women who posed as fugitives found a way to turn their skin color into an asset by capitalizing on abolitionist expectations. Like genuine fugitive slaves, these men and women found a way to enter into the marketplace as both seller and commodity, turning their appearances and their stories into financial profit. Naturally, most abolitionists did not take such a favorable view of their enterprising spirits. Cautionary letters regarding these slave impostors appear with regularity in the antislavery press and were frequently reprinted as abolitionists sought to prevent itinerant confidence men from perpetrating a fraud on antislavery communities in other cities. A typical example from 1844 warns readers against "[a] man, calling himself Gaines" who

> came to Boston … and represented himself to be a fugitive from slavery. … It has since been ascertained that he was an impostor. His complexion is dark — he is in height about five feet — stoutly built — and has a sharp appearance naturally. He is a freeman, and has lived in this State and others for four or five years. Friends

> of humanity, be on your guard! There are many deceivers going abroad as fugitive slaves, to impose on your generosity. ("Caution to Abolitionists")

As was typical the warning contains a physical description, but one wonders to what extent the writer has projected his own knowledge of Gaines' behavior onto the face of the confidence man, which he now sees has a "sharp appearance naturally" (one presumes its sharpness was not so apparent initially). As with phrenology, the body here is expected to yield up the secrets of the interior even while those secrets remain increasingly elusive. Gaines, it is noted, is a resident of the North and a freeman, yet he presents himself as a slave, suggesting, problematically for the abolitionists, that it was in some sense better to appear to be a slave than it was to be a freeman. Like Melville's soldier of fortune, Gaines chooses to tell a story that better accords with the beliefs abolitionists preferred to hold — that slaves were in need of assistance, while free men and women prospered in an equitable society. Indeed, his presence exposes the degree to which the North, despite its claims, was not yet truly a land of equality.

Men were not alone in taking this approach to imposing upon abolitionist groups; in fact, warnings against female impostors appeared with surprising frequency, perhaps because women were particularly well equipped to inspire the charity of abolitionists by claiming that monetary donation would be used to purchase family members, especially children, out of slavery. Such may have been the tactic of one "colored woman" described in a letter to *The Liberator* in April 1844. Claiming to be the mother of several children still held in slavery, she succeeded in duping the citizens of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania out of the not insubstantial sum of one hundred and fifty dollars. Though her story was eventually exposed as a "vile fabrication" — she was not a former slave as she had claimed and presumably the children did not exist — by the time the truth had

been discovered she had already made good her escape ("Items").[101] Like Gaines, she knew how to use the expectations of abolitionists against them, appealing to the same sentimental vein as abolitionist fiction. No faithful reader of Stowe or Child, for example, could fail to recognize the separation of families as one of the chief crimes of slavery, nor fail to aid a woman hoping to be reunited with her children. In both cases, the black confidence man exposes the desires and expectations of the dupe — revealing the sometimes overly simplistic worldview of the abolitionists.

It was not uncommon for these warnings against fugitive confidence men to go into some detail regarding the nature of the specific confidence games they played. Beyond describing physical appearances as aids for identification, they explained how the fake fugitives used confidence games as an alternative source of income. In 1844 *The Liberator* published news of the arrest of one William Johnson, who represented himself as a former slave who had purchased his freedom but whose "wife and children were yet in bondage in one of the Southern States": "His tale was very ingeniously told," the writer recalled, "and at once enlisted the sympathies of all upon whom he called" ("A Singular Occurrence"). Rather than using the sums he raised to purchase family members out of the South, however, Johnson reinvested the money by purchasing produce from Ohio and forwarding it to Pittsburg, where it was sold by his associates (some of them white) at a profit. Of course, apart from his unusual method of raising capital, little distinguishes Johnson's scheme from many other successful business plans; it is his particular ability to transform a good story into money that disturbs the abolitionist. The writer to *The Liberator* cannot help but imagine that Johnson must have been travelling the country for

[101] For another female impostor, see "Notice" in *The Liberator* (July 26, 1850). For examples of male fugitives using the excuse of family members see "Lockport" in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (June 28, 1852), "A bill has been introduced" in *The Liberator* (November 18, 1859), and "Look out for a Rascal" in the *Provincial Freeman* (September 29, 1855).

years and have “amassed quite a neat fortune in telling his pitiful tale of woe!” (“A Singular Occurrence”). The worry that somehow free men and women were making an excellent living at the expense of abolitionist charity was probably rarely, if ever, justified, though Frado, the narrator of Harriet Wilson’s autobiographical novel *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) also reports that, like Johnson, her husband posed as a fugitive in lieu of performing honest labor.[102]

In 1850, Douglass’ *North Star* reprinted a notice from *The Tribune* warning “all who are disposed to assist the true fugitive” to beware of another William Johnson who claimed to be a recently escaped slave in search of his wife, but who was actually “on a tour of speculation among the friends of the colored race in the Northern and Eastern States”:[103]

> His address is good and statements very plausible, and by means of them he has obtained a few letters of introduction to gentlemen prominent for their benevolence, who have sided him with money and clothing. He pursues his journey from place to place, repeating the same statements, exhibiting his letters and mentioning freely the names of different persons who were induced to give because of others having done so. It has been lately ascertained that he has deserted his wife and left her entirely unprovided for, with whom he only became acquainted in July last, and it is believed that he is now pursuing the same means to obtain a living by exciting the sympathies of charitable persons, of which he is entirely unworthy. (“A Correspondent of *The Tribune*”)

[102] Before abandoning her, Frado’s husband Samuel confesses that “he had never seen the South, and that his illiterate harangues were humbugs for hungry abolitionists” (Wilson 128).
[103] I find no evidence to justify a claim that these Johnsons are the same man. Johnson, then as now, was a common enough name and a popular pseudonym.

Like that of the first Johnson, this confidence game is referred to as a kind of labor or investment, his deception is his “means to obtain a living,” and he is on a “tour of speculation.” The fine line between legitimate and illegitimate labor distinguishes the actions of the Johnsons from those of self-made African Americans like Brown.

This second Johnson is especially remarkable for his ability to turn letters and relationships with abolitionists into profits; like Black Guinea, he recognizes the value of friends. Letters of the kind he obtained were often taken as absolute proofs of a slave’s story; however, some fake fugitives, like Johnson, could provide letters from prominent abolitionists testifying to the truth of their claims.[104] A warning reprinted in *The Liberator* in June of 1852 cautions readers against a “colored man who has taken up the fugitive slave business”; the letter warns that though he is in possession of letters from two prominent abolitionists in Rhode Island, “neither of the gentlemen named has the honor of his acquaintance or at least knows no good of him” (“The Christian Matters”). The letters are presumably forgeries acquired by a black confidence man, so in this case the presence of verifying documents spoke to the illegitimacy of the confidence man’s claim. The most famous case of forgery, however, was that of a journeyman barber named Baker who also claimed to be Leo Lloyd, the only son of the late King of Nubia. In 1856, Baker published a refutation of the various accusations of fraud that had appeared in abolitionist publications. His defense centered upon a letter from several African explorers vouching for the truth of his claims, but, as the *Liberator* takes great apparent pleasure in reporting, the letter was an “impudent hoax,” a forgery in his own hand (“The ‘Prince of Nubia’, Once More”).

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[104] For examples of impostors who succeeded in obtaining letters, see “Look out for an Imposter,” *The Liberator* (January 9, 1846). The success of the black confidence man George Thompson, for instance, rested upon his ability to recognize and repeat the names of important abolitionists when questioned about his history (“We publish all”).

Just as the presence of forged letters could expose the confidence man, the absence of letters could condemn an innocent one. According to the *Frederick Douglass Paper*, Rev. Charles Smith, an actual escaped slave genuinely raising funds to free his wife and children, was wrongly imprisoned for several weeks on suspicion of being an impostor because he could not provide documents testifying to the truth of his claim:

> A few weeks since, we noticed that Rev. Charles Smith, a colored preacher, who had been soliciting aid in this community, to redeem his wife and children from slavery, had been arrested on the charge of obtaining money under false pretences … Since that time, some gentlemen interested in the matter, have been making inquires to ascertain the truth concerning it, and we believe they are now satisfied that he has been wrongly accused. The man was a slave, and his wife and children are now in slavery and his collections were made with a view to secure their freedom. Through fear, he changed his name, which led him into the difficulty in which he now is. We have understood that he would be discharged from prison at an early date. ("Not an impostor")

This error would ultimately be remedied, and Smith set free, but it is easy to imagine that other similar cases had more unfortunate results for the accused despite the precautions of the abolitionist community. The vigilance of the abolitionists could, and at least occasionally did, lead to precisely the wrong outcome.

We can look to Douglass himself for a more famous example of misdirected skepticism, since his evident learning and poise made him a frequent target for accusations of fraud: "[p]eople doubted if I had ever been a slave. They said I did not talk like a slave, look like a slave, nor act like a slave, and that they believed I had never been south of Mason and Dixon's

line" (*My Bondage* 266). Indeed he recalled that early in his speaking career he was encouraged to "have a *little* of the plantation manner of speech," so as not to bring into question his origins (266). Again it was the plausibility of his performance, rather than actual truth, that was in question. In order to be believable as a fugitive slave, Douglass needed to behave in accordance with the expectations of abolitionists regarding fugitive slave behavior. Luckily for Douglass, his claims, unlike those of many others, were easy enough to verify. He would even record his gratitude to those slaveholders who attempted to discredit him; their quarrels with petty elements of the narrative confirmed its broader accuracy. Douglass' experience, however, like so many aspects of his life was both representative and extraordinary; if suspicions of his honesty were by and large unfounded they were not so for a number of the African Americans who played a cunning and often successful confidence game that exploited the vulnerabilities of abolitionist discourse.

"[A] dabster at invention"

In conclusion, let us return for a moment to the case of James Williams, whose ill-timed disappearance meant that questions regarding the veracity of his narrative could not be answered by the abolitionist community that was so eager to do so. If Williams was indeed a confidence man, his physical presence seems to have been necessary for the continued success of his game. In *To Tell a Free Story* (1988), William L. Andrews argues that abolitionist confidence in the veracity of Williams's tale was inextricably linked to his continuing performance of an apparently stable and believable black fugitive identity, one that accorded with the abolitionists' expectations: "his emotional restraint, reticence about feelings and judgments, and apparent propensity to forgive and pity … played to or, through lucky coincidence, conformed to his

audiences expectations of the fugitive slave and autobiographer" (89). Without that continuing performance, confidence in Williams wavered.

Meanwhile, proslavery writers were mounting a sustained attack on the narrative they rightly saw as an accusation of Southern cruelty and dishonor in connection with the practice of slavery. Soon after the work's publication J.B. Rittenhouse, editor of the Alabama *Beacon*, began a correspondence with *The Liberator* that called into question the whole of Williams' claims about the South. Most provocatively, he published a letter from one George T. F. Larimer (whose name looks suspiciously like that of the "George Lorrimer" Williams named as his master) accusing the apparent fugitive slave of being Shadrach Wilkins, a coachman wanted for the attempted poisoning of a Southern family and for devious collaboration with a white abolitionist confidence man. According to Larimer's account, Wilkins/Williams had joined forces with this abolitionist in the kind of far-fetched sell-steal confidence game introduced by Virgil Stewart's fictionalized 1835 account of the "land pirate" John Murrell and popularized in proslavery fiction over the following decades.[105] Naturally these accusations likely include little to nothing of the truth, but the Society distanced itself from the work nonetheless. The Williams scandal threatened to expose the antislavery movement at large as unable to tell slave from free or truth from deception, a serious handicap indeed for a group dedicated to freeing the slave and revealing the dark truths of Southern slavery. The vehement reaction of abolitionists to the accusations regarding Williams indicates the distinction they made between the deceptions practiced upon slaveholders by fugitive confidence men and those to which abolitionists

[105] This description of Williams' alleged crimes is largely drawn from Ann Fabian's *Unvarnished Truth* (89-90). See Patricia Roberts-Miller's *Fanatical Schemes* and chapter two of this work for more on John Murrell and the motives attributed to abolitionists by proslavery writers.

themselves might fall victim (Fabian 100). Unsurprisingly, the Drummond light of the confidence man is more comfortable when directed at someone else.

Still, during the period of intense speculation and scrutiny that followed the challenges to Williams's narrative, the editor of the *Herald of Freedom* reflected upon the possibility of a middle path, one between rejection of the Williams narrative as falsehood and wholehearted endorsement of the text as true. If the events of his tale had indeed been fabricated, the editor mused, then Williams "is a dabster at invention, for an 'inferior race,' and in time will be sharp enough for freedom, if he keeps on" ("The Vermont Chronicle"). If anything, he suggests, accusations of falsehood argued in favor of Williams's fitness for freedom, a status that, by the editor's tacit admission, requires one to be "sharp." Despite this interesting beginning he ultimately concludes that Williams is not such a "dabster" and that "there must be something down south, pretty much resembling plantation slavery, that the creature had undergone"; however, subsequent events suggest strongly that his first instinct was the correct one. A number of scholars have attempted to verify Williams' claims as they appear in his narrative, though without much success. Laura Langer Cohen's exploration is perhaps the most thorough, and she is forced to conclude that there is little evidence in the historical record to support Williams' claims, indeed that the abundance of factual information he provides instead "mark[s] the narrative as a fake" (176). Of course, we will likely never learn Williams's whole history nor know for certain why he told his story the way that he did, but if his narrative is a fake, then Williams deserves a place alongside the other black confidence men in this chapter. Like Ellen Craft, William Wells Brown, or William Johnson, Williams used his knowledge of social expectations and racially motivated assumptions to manipulate others for his own gain, operating

covertly in an exploitive society to win his freedom not just from slaveholding whites but from charitably-minded abolitionists as well.

In this chapter we have been on the trail of the black confidence man, recognizing his features in figures like the African-American trickster and the fugitive slave and discovering his covert operations in the Northern states, but like the charitable clergyman who gamely goes in search of the friends mentioned by Black Guinea, we follow the clues provided by our sources only to end more uncertain than we began. Was James Williams a fugitive slave? Is Black Guinea? Or are both black confidence men exploiting the prejudices of a world perplexed by the impossibility of establishing stable identities? The black confidence man (though he certainly existed and so ought to be included in our histories of that quintessential American figure) ultimately defies our efforts to verify and authenticate his true self; however, though his identity may remain a fugitive one, his significance in the writings of African Americans would only grow as they embraced the confidence-man figure as a symbol of the ultimate emptiness American racial discourse.

Chapter 4.

Minstrels, Conjurers, Dandies: Black Confidence Men "Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem"

In 1857, the same year that would see the publication of Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man; His Masquerade*, Frank J. Webb, an African-American writer from Philadelphia, introduced in *The Garies and Their Friends* a confidence man of his own, a clever hotel valet who cons on behalf of the Underground Railroad. Webb was not alone among African-American fiction writers in making use of a figure that, as previous chapters have demonstrated, appeared with far greater frequency in the nineteenth century than literary critics have heretofore noted. Indeed, the antebellum period saw the publication of four novels by African-Americans — William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853), Webb's *The Garies*, Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig; or, Sketches in the Life of a Free Black* (1859), and Martin Delany's *Blake; or, The Huts of America* (1859, 1861-62) — and of these, three feature appearances by black confidence men. Nor did interest in the figure disappear in the decades following the Civil War; to the contrary, Charles W. Chesnutt's so-called "conjure tales" and Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Heart of Happy Hollow* (1904) testify that the appeal of the black confidence-man figure endured throughout the whole of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.[106]

This chapter examines the ways in which those black writers used the black confidence man and his games both to illuminate the emptiness at the heart of American racial categorization and to signal their own complex authorial confidence games. While the previous

[106] It is important to use the term "conjure tale" advisedly; not all of the plantation tales written by Chesnutt feature acts of conjure (consider, for instance, "Dave's Neckliss" [1889]) nor were all his "conjure tales" published in the collection *The Conjure Woman* (1899).

chapters have focused on works written and generally published before the Civil War, this chapter takes a broader view; beginning with Webb's publication of *The Garies* in 1857 it looks backwards to Brown's *Clotel* and forward to the fiction of "post-bellum—pre-Harlem" writers Chesnutt and Dunbar. Far from disappearing as the century progressed, the black confidence-man figure made ever more frequent appearances — in the guise of the savvy swindler and the clever slave, the shifty story-teller and the ubiquitous "dandies" — in African-American fiction and drama as authors born after the Civil War turned to the confidence man as a tool to critique the continuing injustice of racial prejudice and to move white audiences towards attitudes more congenial to racial equality.

I wish to consider the ways in which the confidence-man figure is used in a somewhat different light here, however, paying closer attention to how African-American authors used the confidence man to signal larger confidence games at work in their texts. For this approach, I have in mind something akin to Marjorie Garber's consideration of the figure of the transvestite in *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (1992). Garber points to the presence of the transvestite or cross-dresser in culture "as an index … of many different kinds of 'category crisis'" (16), not merely those directly related to gender. For Garber the figure of the cross-dresser acts as an indicator of "an irresolvable conflict or epistemological crux that destabilizes comfortable binarity, and displaces the resulting discomfort onto a figure that already inhabits, indeed incarnates, the margin" (17). Thus the presence of the cross-dresser might signal the "*category crisis elsewhere*," the transgression or breakdown of category distinctions between races or classes, as well as (or instead of) between genders (17, italics original). I have already argued that the figure of the confidence man exists not on the margins, but at the center of culture; however, like the cross-dresser, the confidence-man figure "uncovers as it covers," and

"reveals the masquerade that is already in place" (282). The presence of the confidence man can, and often does, indicate a *confidence* crisis elsewhere; it suggests, even at its most benign, that appearances cannot be trusted, that authorities (and authors) may deceive, and that the very nature of identity may be no more than a construction, a confidence game in which we all play a part.

The black confidence man suggests this last point most clearly. Identity — particularly racial identity — is culturally constructed, not dictated by an essence, and the more firmly one mistakenly believes in its essential, rather than constructed, nature, the more vulnerable one becomes to the confidence game. We have seen the results of overconfidence in knowable racial identities in the stories of duped slaveholders and easily deceived abolitionists in chapter three of this work. The converse is also true, or so it seems: the more one recognizes the performance of race *as* performance (or as the "mask" of which Dunbar writes, for instance) the less likely one is to be taken in by that performance. However, the skepticism towards racial categorization that is encouraged by the texts discussed here was often a component in a much larger confidence game played by the author himself. Upon closer examination, the black confidence-man figure in each of these works seems to participate in a pattern of exposé not unlike the one favored by P.T. Barnum. The most famous showman of the nineteenth century routinely exposed portions of his exhibits as fraudulent, often writing and publishing skeptical reviews of his own shows in order to generate controversy, and with it, skepticism. Interestingly, those very exposés not only made his shows more popular, but they may also have made his audiences more vulnerable to precisely the kind of confidence games he favored.[107] By encouraging audiences to trust in their own

[107] Such exposés were by 1852 an established component of the confidence game; as James W. Cook explains, "artful deceptions" like those of the confidence man "routinely involved a calculated intermixing of the genuine and the fake, enchantment and disenchantment, energetic public exposé and monetary suspension of disbelief" (17).

capacity for reason, to decide for themselves, and to place confidence in their ability to separate fact from fiction, Barnum suggested that skepticism could protect one from falling victim to a confidence game, when in fact he knew that no man is so likely to be duped as one who believes he cannot be.

When black authors revealed the black confidence man to their audiences and encouraged them to laugh along with his triumphs, secure in the belief that they themselves could never be so naïve, they ensured that that very same audience would fall prey to their own games, for creating skepticism towards racially stereotypical behavior was often the first step in leading audiences to new and better racial sentiments. In order that blacks might be treated fairly, based on individual behaviors rather than group stereotypes, it was necessary to undo much of the damage done by texts both pro- and antislavery, both overtly and covertly racist, and both realist and sentimental. Such exposés disturbed and disrupted the complacent acceptance of racial categories and stereotypes, sending audiences back into the world perhaps more uncertain of what to expect from African Americans and less trusting of their own initial appearance-based judgments. By using and exposing black confidence men within their texts, authors like Webb, Brown, Chesnutt, and Dunbar created confidence in the powers of reason to detect performances of race and undermined confidence in the received wisdom that suggested stereotypes as accurate reflections of African-American identity.

The first half of this chapter considers two antebellum novels by Webb and Brown that present seemingly straightforward and humorous episodes in which black confidence men perform racial stereotypes for the consumption of white audiences; however, these performances suggest an additional confidence game at the level of the author who exposes his confidence-man creation while concealing his own more radical agenda. Webb and Brown become confidence-

man authors, using fiction to lead reading audiences away from a reliance upon stereotypes and towards a skepticism beneficial to the cause of racial equality. In the decades following the Civil War two more black authors, Chesnutt and Dunbar, adopted the role of confidence man to combat the rising tide of post-Reconstruction racial stereotyping, often by using the very forms that made such stereotyping attractive in the first place. Webb, Brown, Chesnutt, and Dunbar were by no means the only authors in the period to use the black confidence-man figure, of course (we have already seen many other examples), but in their works the figure takes on a new and more important mission: to combat the notion that the nature of racial difference was knowable at a historical moment in which popular culture and political rhetoric insisted it was precisely that.

Webb and *The Garies*

The Garies provides an ideal opportunity to demonstrate the ways in which black authors used the confidence-man figure to encourage skepticism towards damaging racial stereotypes. Taking as its subject the fate of "a Family of Peculiar Construction" — consisting of a slaveholder, his manumitted wife, and their mixed-race children — the work describes their emigration to the North and their struggles in a society still very much in thrall to racist ideology despite its claims to liberty and equality (Webb xxiii). Much of the work is devoted to describing the attempts of the Garies' children and their friends and neighbors (particularly the darker-skinned Ellises) to navigate the unequal and sometimes staggeringly violent environment in which they find themselves. Perhaps it was the text's consideration of Northern racism that resulted in its failure to garner much attention in the nineteenth century and indeed for the greater part of the twentieth; though *The Garies* was the second novel by an African American to be published (Brown's *Clotel* preceded it by four years) and the first to consider the plight of blacks

in the North at any great length, even now it remains somewhat less examined than the other novels of African Americans that emerged before the Civil War (Reid-Pharr xii).[108]

Much of the criticism that has been published focuses on the distinctions between the Garies and the Ellises: the first family interracial, light-skinned, and prosperous, the second all-black, dark-skinned, and, at least initially, working class. Upon the tragic deaths of their parents, the Garie children, Clarence and Emily, have the opportunity to go through life as passers, capitalizing on their light skin to enjoy the privileges accorded to Northern whites. Clarence does so with much success for many years, but he is haunted by the fear that his race will be revealed. When those fears prove justified and his white fiancée abandons him, he dies. The Ellis children, on the other hand, thrive in an upwardly mobile all-black community, triumphing over the significant obstacles posed by a racist society. This contrast between the fates the Garies and the Ellises, along with other factors, seems to suggest that the text offers a tacit endorsement for an "integrationist" but not "interracialist" position, one that encourages the adoption of white middle-class values, but not interracial marriage or passing.[109] Robert Reid-Pharr considers this the central message of the text: African Americans should form communities "at once the same and different" from those of their white counterparts (viii).

The presence of Webb's black confidence man, a waiter and valet (who, like America's most famous self-made man, is named Ben), problematizes this position by suggesting a confidence crisis elsewhere. Upon closer examination, Ben's con (and, importantly, his choice of dupe) unsettles the very premise upon which the integrationist position is largely reliant: the existence of observable differences between the races (without them, there could be no

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[108] Interestingly, the treatment of African Americans in the North was a favorite subject of the white, pro-Southern authors of anti-Tom novels, as we saw in chapter two.

[109] I have taken these terms from Robert Reid-Pharr's discussion of the integrationist and interracialist positions in his introduction to *The Garies*.

difference in “the same and different”). His confidence game, too, is reliant upon that very premise and so serves to illuminate it for the reading audience.

The components of his confidence game should feel familiar to us by now, for they adopt and exaggerate those expected racial differences. In the one episode in which he appears, Ben plays the ignorant, submissive slave. Speaking in heavy dialect, he shows extraordinary deference to a man he presumes is a slaveholder, taking care to offer him “more ‘tention dan I does to dese yer Northern folk, ‘cause yer see I knows dey’r used to it, and can’t get on widout it” (39). This dialect is merely a pose, of course; out of the sight of Southerners Ben speaks “correct English … with as pure Northern an accent as any one could boast,” but with his slaveholding dupes he aims to conform to their expectations of African-American behavior, much as we have seen would-be runaways do in slave narratives (40). He claims to miss the South terribly and to long to return to his “kind marster” and “the old place” where he did not have to work so “dreddful hard” (39). He hopes to resemble, one imagines, that famous proslavery stereotype, the regretful runaway (though he insists he was set free rather than having escaped). Such types populate the anti-Tom novels, as we have seen, and were popular on the antebellum minstrel stage, where performers — often whites in blackface — sang of their longing to return to their idyllic Southern homes.[110] Of course, to return to the home they both presumably miss Ben would need money to make the journey, and the reader is assured that had the mark proved sympathetic to Ben’s tale a request for cash would have followed. Rather than use the money to return to the South, however, Ben is in the habit of placing it in the service of the abolitionist cause, helping runaway slaves on their journey to Canada and freedom.

[110] Many of Stephen Foster’s songs partake of this nostalgic tone, including “Old Folks at Home” (1851) and “My Old Kentucky Home” (1853).

Though at this point in the novel Ben is unsuccessful in his confidence game (he has grossly misjudged his mark, an error we will return to presently), the narrator is quick to show us that he is not alone in playing. Ben belongs to the Vigilance Committee of the Underground Railroad Company, "a society formed for the assistance of fugitive slaves" (40), which, in addition to running off any slaves travelling with masters foolish enough to stop at their hotel, makes those Southerners travelling without slaves "contribute, unconsciously and most amusingly, to the escape of those of their friends":

> When a gentleman presented himself at the bar wearing boots entirely too small for him, with his hat so far down upon his forehead as almost to obscure his eyes, and whose mouth was filled with oaths and tobacco, he was generally looked upon as a favourable specimen to operate upon; and if he cursed the waiters, addressed any old man amongst them as "boy," and was continually drinking cock-tails and mint-juleps, they were sure of their man; and then would tell him the most astonishing and distressing tales of their destitution, expressing, almost with tears in their eyes, their deep desire to return to their former masters; whilst perhaps the person from whose mouth this tale of woe proceeded had been born in a neighbouring street, and had never been south of Mason and Dixon's line. This flattering testimony in favour of "the peculiar institution" generally had the effect of extracting a dollar or two from the purse of the sympathetic Southerner; which money went immediately into the coffers of the Vigilance Committee. (41)

Despite Ben's momentary lapse in judgment, these black confidence men are presented as expert readers of character who recognize proslavery Southerners through a series of identifying characteristics and behaviors — the too-small shoes, the too-low hat, the cursing,

drinking, and disrespect of grown black men — which generally allow them to be "sure of their man." That surety then dictates the behavior of the confidence men themselves. They conform to the very expectations they believe the slaveholder has for them, adopting accents, dialects, and submissive behaviors not their own in order to create confidence; they make a learned performance — one based more on the minstrel stage than the Southern plantation — appear to be the product of an innate racial makeup. This is a confidence game, and it is revealed to the audience as such; Ben's motivations and the motivations of his fellow Vigilance Committee members are shared with the audience precisely so that such behaviors will *not* be taken as natural or innate. In this episode, blacks only behave as slaveholders expect them to *because* they are expected to and because they have something to gain by meeting those expectations. The episode should remind us strongly of the submissive personas former slaves report adopting in the days, months, and even years before making an escape attempt.[111]

If Ben's confidence game shakes the premise of observable racial differences by demonstrating how easily those differences may be fabricated, his choice of dupe flattens it utterly. Unbeknownst to Ben, his dupe is not a slaveholder; he is a former slave and something of a confidence man himself. Mr. Winston, to whom we are introduced in the first pages of the novel, is a passer of legendary proportions who has just returned from a journey South during which he was accepted as white by a prominent slaveholder who "prides himself on being able to detect evidences of the least drop of African blood in any one" (4). Winston was even permitted to escort the ladies of the family to a ball. His coloring, wardrobe, and refined manner are

[111] For more on the confidence games played by runaways and would-be runaways, see chapter three of this work. Interestingly, this passage reverses the pattern we saw in the anti-*Tom* novels; just as proslavery writers often suggested that the tales of Southern abuses told by escaped slaves were the products of confidence men or criminals, this exchange suggests that the stories of Northern racism and labor abuses were likewise falsehoods, mere components in a confidence game practiced upon gullible Southern travellers. The passage implies that though black workers are not in actually abused in the North — or at least not in the ways proslavery literature claims — they are not opposed to appearing as though they are, if by doing so they can profit their cause.

remarked upon repeatedly in the novel; it is impossible, we are told, to tell him from a white man:

> Mr. Winston had been a slave. Yes! that fine-looking gentleman seated near Mr. Garie and losing nothing by the comparison that their proximity would suggest, had been fifteen years before sold on the auction-block in the neighbouring town of Savanah — had been made to jump, show his teeth, shout to test his lungs, and had been handled and examined by professed negro traders and amateur buyers, with less gentleness and commiseration than every humane man would feel for a horse or an ox. Now do not doubt me — I mean that very gentleman, whose polished manners and irreproachable appearance might have led you to suppose him descended from a long line of illustrious ancestors. Yes — he was the offspring of a mulatto field-hand by her master. He who was now clothed in fine linen, had once rejoiced in a tow shirt that scarcely covered his nakedness, and had sustained life on a peck of corn a week, receiving the while kicks and curses from a tyrannical overseer.

Blacks and whites, even those who knew him when he was a slave, fail to detect in Winston anything other than a white gentleman. The narrator posits even the reader's disbelief in this passage, insisting again and again that, "Yes," Winston really is black.

Of course, the Garies themselves provide a tacit refutation of such differences. The first Emily Garie is of a "light-brown complexion," but her children, Emily and Clarence, show "no trace whatever of African origin"; they are both capable of passing undetected for white (2). In addition, the episode in which the villainous Mr. Stevens, disguised in tattered clothing and smeared with tar during a riot, is taken for black and subjected to a vicious lynching suggests that

such misreadings can cut both ways; whites may pass as black in addition to blacks passing as white.[112] As we have seen, the threat (or promise?) of racial misreading is borne out in Ben's confidence game. Because Ben has mistaken his man he receives a serious dressing down for his want of independence and his lack of appreciation for the joys of freedom instead of the money he expected. His ability to judge based on appearances, described with such confidence, must come under serious question, but so too must that of his mark, who as a black man passing for white fails to detect in Ben a fellow confidence man. Both are guilty of significant misreadings because both are confident of their own ability to avoid such misreadings, despite, or perhaps because of, their success in encouraging precisely those same misreadings in others. Racial misreading, based on a mistaken reliance upon observable differences, is not only possible in *The Garies*, it seems inevitable. How is one to tell black and white apart when even confidence men themselves are liable to be conned?

Thus, though Webb encourages us to laugh along with his confidence men — at the traveling slaveholders who fall victim to Ben and at the plantation gentleman who cannot detect in Winston the slightest hint of African-American blood — they signal something more at work: a confidence crisis that goes to the very root of racial identity. This should not undo the reading of the text as integrationist (rather than interracial), of course, but it does suggest that Webb was aware, at least subconsciously, of the problems inherent in integration. Blacks might be better off seeking success within their own "same and different" communities; however, the line dividing those communities from their white counterparts was always already blurred by the existence of the light-skinned African American, the result of interracial unions. And the text does not seem

[112] That the ruffians who abuse him attempt to paint his face with lime to make "a white man of him … a glorious fellow-citizen" only takes the play upon appearances to the next logical step: a white man may also pass as a black man passing as a white man (191).

to reject their passing as white quite so wholeheartedly as the histories of the ill-fated Garies may suggest. After all, Winston, the able passer, may live under the threat of exposure, but he likewise threatens with exposure the baseless racial expectations of a racist society.

William Wells Brown and *Clotel*

The confidence crisis at which Webb hints had received a far more radical treatment four years prior to the publication of *The Garies* when William Wells Brown became the first African American to publish a novel. Brown's *Clotel* took its inspiration from the well-known rumor (now at least partially substantiated) of Thomas Jefferson's sexual relationship with one of his slaves and of the possibility of children resulting from that union.[113] The novel imagines such a child in the person of a fictitious mulatto daughter called Clotel. Clotel's tragic history — her broken marriage to the white man who had purchased her, her escape, her desperate attempts to locate her children, and her final heart-breaking suicide — is interwoven with tales Brown had gathered from his time in slavery, from his abolitionist work, and from the antislavery writings of other abolitionists; Lydia Maria Child's "The Quadroons" (1842) appears almost in its entirety, and the story of William and Ellen Crafts' cunning escape from slavery (which Brown had first introduced to the public in *The Liberator*) is refashioned as Clotel's.[114] Thus, like *The Garies*, *Clotel* includes multiple instances of passing, the relatively open discussion of miscegenation, and the depiction of the tragic fragmentation of family as a result of slavery. Also

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[113] Rumors regarding the possibility of black descendants of Jefferson entered the mainstream through the journalist James T. Callendar in 1802. Though initially politically motivated, these rumors had staying power, particularly within the black community. In 1998, Eugene Foster offered DNA evidence that suggests (though it does not completely confirm) that at least one of the children born to Jefferson's slave Sally Hemings was also his own. For more on the relationship between Jefferson and Hemings and the controversy over their descendants, see Annette Gordon-Reed's *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (1998).

[114] Child's short stories "The Quadroons" (1842) and "Slavery's Pleasant Homes" (1843) were largely responsible for the development of the "tragic mulatta" character type. For more on Child and the "tragic mulatta" see Eve Allegra Raimon's *The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Fiction* (2004).

like that later work, *Clotel* includes a black confidence man among its cast of characters. Though Sam, the dark-skinned servant of Reverend Peck, plays a relatively minor role in the novel, his presence should alert us, as always, to a confidence crisis elsewhere. Like Sam — and like Brown himself — *Clotel* may not be precisely what it seems.

The character of Sam, it has been regularly noted, draws heavily upon the tradition of blackface minstrelsy, the most popular cultural phenomenon of the nineteenth century.[115] Unlike the many mulattos and passers of the text, and despite his insistence that his mother was half white, Sam is "one of the blackest of his race" and acts in a way that recalls the "darky" performances of white actors (135). He takes on airs, attempts (and fails) to perform correctly the medical responsibilities assigned to him by his master, objects to mulattos marrying darker-skinned slaves, and generally acts the fool to other more dignified black characters. Holding forth at the dinner table with his hair buttered and his shirt ruffled, Sam cuts a comic figure worthy of emulation in a blackface performance, and the anecdotes he relates of his stint as the "negro doctor" and inept dentist "could have come directly from a minstrel show," as Paul Gilmore notes; it is "a skit that represents blacks as inherently comic and incapable of performing the more intellectual tasks involved in professions such as medicine" (757). In a similar vein is Sam's ironic dislike of other slaves and of "dis malgemation of blacks and mulattoes" (Brown 136). Despite his dark skin, the narrator informs us, "no one was more prejudiced against the blacks than he" (137). In short, Sam appears to be a particular kind of black stereotype, one calculated to reassure whites of African-American inferiority in matters both professional and moral.

[115] For more on Sam and the influence of blackface minstrelsy on the construction of black masculinity in *Clotel*, see Paul Gilmore's *The Genuine Article: Race, Mass Culture, and American Literary Manhood* (2002).

It becomes clear, however, that Sam's performance of black stereotypes is in fact a mask adopted self-consciously in order to disguise his rebellious impulses. We catch a glimpse of the Sam that exists beneath the blackface performance when Georgiana and Mr. Carlton, the master's daughter and her future husband, listen in secret to a song he sings to commemorate the death of Reverend Peck. Unaware that he is being watched, Sam displays very different feelings about his master than those encountered at the table:

> We'll no longer be roused by the blowing of his horn,
> Our backs no longer he will score;
> He no more will feed us on cotton-seeds and corn;
> For his reign of oppression now is o'er.
> He no more will hang our children on the tree,
> To be ate by the carrion crow;
> He no more will send our wives to Tennessee;
> For he's gone where the slaveholders go.[116] (154)

Ironically, it is Sam's performance of this song that reveals the performance he has been engaging in all along; the minstrel Sam gives way to the rebel Sam. Never having seen this side of the man before, Carlton is shocked: "I could not have believed that that fellow was capable of so much deception" (155). Sam's performance of deference to his master has been so perfect as not to admit the least suspicion of his true feelings. In answer to Carlton's surprise, Georgiana points the finger at the institution that created Sam: "Our system of slavery is one of deception;

[116] There is some disagreement regarding the origins of Sam's song. It appears to me to be a re-appropriation of Foster's minstrel song "Old Uncle Ned" (1848); the two songs share a similar chorus ("he's gone where the good niggas go" in "Old Uncle Ned"), but Gilmore suggests instead Foster's "Massa's in De Cold Ground" (1852), which, though it shares a subject (the death of the master), seems further from Sam's in terms of meter and style (Gilmore 53-54). Interestingly, a very similar song appears in Delany's *Blake*. Eric Lott points to "Old Uncle Ned" as the source Delany's song; however, *Clotel* may be an additional source text (Lott 236).

and Sam, you see, has only been a good scholar. … he is as honest a fellow as you will find among the slave population here. If we would have them more honest, we should give them their liberty, and then the inducement to be dishonest would be gone" (155). The message is clear: it is slavery that creates dishonesty in otherwise honest men.

It was a popular notion — that black deception was caused by white transgression — and one that appears frequently in the antislavery publications of abolitionist blacks and whites alike. As we saw in chapter three of this work, former slaves like Moses Roper attributed any apparent dishonesty on the part of the slave to the necessity of "masking" their true feelings about their masters, of concealing acts of theft, and of covertly planning escapes, a claim that was often echoed by white antislavery authors. But as I have already suggested, a tension always exists between the lamentation and celebration of black cunning in abolitionist texts. Those who longed for an end to slavery battled cultural stereotypes that labeled African Americans innately devious while simultaneously applauding their use of deception in tale after tale of clever runaways; indeed, *Clotel* itself includes multiple stories of precisely these kinds of escapes.[117] In a nation that revered the clever (but often less than entirely honest) Benjamin Franklin, were these cunning slaves less fit for freedom given their ability and willingness to deceive? Or more?

Brown's text, perhaps more than any other, recognizes this tension, and because of that recognition we ought to be very careful in taking any revelation or moment of exposé at face value, as we would do if were we to take Georgiana's as the last word on Sam. Though no doubt Sam deceives in part because, given his position as a slave, he must conceal his rebellious

[117] In addition to the episode modeled upon the history of William and Ellen Craft, Brown tells us of two men who escape by pretending to be a slave catcher and his unfortunate prize, a trick they call the "ride and tie" (166). By performing the roles of their enslavers, the two men are able to proceed safely for a distance of two hundred miles. A similar tale tells of a runaway slave who drives a large pig ahead of him as he travels North. When questioned about his destination, he simply indicates that he is taking his master's prize pig to his plantation, always "just up de road" (165).

sentiments, it does not necessarily follow that the "inducement to be dishonest" would vanish along with slavery. Indeed, the shortened version of Brown's own autobiography that serves as a preface to the novel would seem to suggest otherwise, including as it does multiple instances of Brown's confidence games in the free North after his escape from slavery.[118] The inclusion of Brown's own history suggests that he is up to something in this episode beyond the pat analysis we receive from Georgiana; perhaps Brown's exposé of Sam, like those Barnum engaged in throughout his career, conceals more than it reveals about his project in the novel. The revelation of Sam's identity as a black confidence man only draws us deeper into a confidence game that is not truly Sam's at all, but Brown's.

Like all fiction, *Clotel* has something in common with the confidence game; it creates confidence, drawing readers into a suspension of disbelief.[119] In the case of *Clotel*, however, the goal of the confidence game goes beyond the temporary creation of confidence, for to feel sympathy for the mulatto Clotel and for her descendants is to accept at least subconsciously a history of American identity in which black and white are fused and interdependent; if one accepts Brown's premise, Americans must trace the history of their nation's founders through black bloodlines as well as white ones. Barnum himself had engaged in a similar practice with his exhibition of Joice Heth in the 1830s and 40s, though it is unlikely his motivations were at all altruistic. Heth, an elderly African-American woman, was exhibited as the 131-year-old former wet nurse to George Washington, and she too would have drawn viewers to reconsider their nation's history in the light of the contributions of African Americans.[120] Heth was a hoax, of course; an autopsy at her death revealed her to have been in her eighties, but in this too she was

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[118] For a discussion of Brown's career as a confidence man, see chapter three of this work.
[119] In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville points up this connection between literature and the confidence game many times, from the work's setting on April Fools' Day to the narrator's commentary on consistent characters.
[120] For more on the history of Barnum and Heth, see Benjamin Reiss's *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum's America* (2001).

not unlike Brown's Clotel who was similarly the product of a fertile imagination rather than confirmed fact. Both Barnum and Brown played confidence games dependent upon blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction and tracing a new history of the United States in which African Americans played no small part.

The confidence Brown's text inspires in that history was likely not total, of course. His readers would certainly have recognized the work as a novel of some kind, for instance. However, Brown goes further than most to blur the edges between fiction and fact, or rather, to reveal that the distinctions between the two may never have been so sharp as readers have assumed. Literary scholars have long struggled to arrive at a satisfactory term to describe Brown's narrative technique, which unites well-known antislavery fiction and autobiography with material both borrowed and original; words like *bricolage* and *pastiche* appear with great frequency in the criticism of *Clotel*.[121] By presenting Clotel's history alongside, and in some cases through, both genuine tales (like those of the Crafts or Salomé Müller) and purely fictional ones (like Child's "The Quadroons"), Brown "suggest[s] the limits of their truth-telling capacities," as Robert S. Levine has argued, thus "undermining the narratives and texts of the dominant culture" (7). The comparatively simple masquerade of Sam the black confidence man and the revelation of his dishonesty in song signals this larger game on the part of the author, who carries his own identity as a black confidence man from his initial introduction in the autobiographical preface throughout the novel itself. In *Clotel*, history and storytelling — the one presumed fact and the other fiction — become indistinguishable; neither can make a reliable claim to truth.

[121] Robert S. Levine does an excellent job summing up the arguments regarding the text's peculiar construction in his introduction to the Bedford Cultural edition of *Clotel*.

Thus the experience of reading *Clotel* was a lesson in the kind of skepticism that kept Barnum afloat and which Webb sought to encourage with his novel. Modern editions of the text, with their copious footnotes and citations, have made *Clotel* much easier to read by identifying Brown's sources, but they have also altered this key element of the reading experience of the novel's original audience. Though readers likely recognized some or all of Brown's borrowing *as* borrowing, without referencing his source texts they would have been hard pressed to draw a line where fact ended and fiction began. "Slavery has never been represented," as Brown himself declared in 1847; it "never can be represented" (Garrett and Robins 3). *Clotel* is no exception, and by unsettling the conviction of readers — both antislavery and pro — that they *knew* the true nature of slavery, or of African Americans, the text serves the aim of all the writers discussed in this chapter; it encourages readers to abandon stereotypes and dismiss culturally constructed notions of race.

From Antebellum to "Post-bellum—Pre-Harlem"

If Brown's Georgiana had been correct in her assessment that slavery was the only inducement to dishonesty, the end of slavery ought to have brought about the end of the black confidence man, but, fortunately for this study and for American literature as a whole, it did not. Though we are hard-pressed to find any black confidence men in the literature that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, the figure would reappear with a vengeance in the works of black authors of the period Chesnutt referred to as "Post-bellum—Pre-Harlem" (McCaskill and Gebhard 1).[122] Frequently relegated to the sidelines of African-American literary studies in years past, a growing number of scholars are recognizing the pivotal role played by

[122] William Lenz notes a similar dying off and reemergence of the white confidence-man figure in *Fast Talk and Flush Times: The Confidence Man as a Literary Convention* (1985) and suggests that it was the result of the strong need in the wake of the war for more idealistic fiction (150).

those few decades that separate the failure of Reconstruction and the withdrawal of federal protections for African Americans in the South from the great blossoming of black literature and art in the Northern city.[123] Those years, marked by violence, disappointment, and fear, were also the years that produced Chesnutt and Dunbar, two black authors who, by adopting the strategies of the confidence man, successfully navigated a uniquely challenging environment. To place their works in context, however, we must consider first the rise of the Lost Cause mentality, the growing popularity of local color writing and "minstrel" realism, and the particularly tenuous position of African-American authors in the post-bellum, pre-Harlem literary market.

"The spirit of secession," Frederick Douglass opined in 1871, "is stronger today than ever" (Gallagher and Nolan 2). Though the military conclusion of the Civil War was six years past, he recognized that as a political and racial struggle the battle was far from over, particularly in the hearts and minds of defeated white Southerners. Indeed, if anything, anti-Union sentiment had increased with the emergence of revisionist histories of the war penned by Southerners understandably eager to ennoble their part in the bloody and protracted conflict. In 1866, Edward A. Pollard became the first to put into print the history of what he called "The Lost Cause," a term that remains with us to this day. In *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates* he explained that the defeat of the South had been the result, not of military or political missteps, but of the overwhelming resources and numbers of their Northern foes. According to Pollard, the confederate soldiers and their leaders had fought bravely to defend their tranquil homeland and their way of life from federal interference only to be crushed by a barbaric and overwhelming Northern force; their cause had been just, he argued, and their fighting men the very pictures of bravery, but for all that it had been doomed at the outset. For

[123] McCaskill and Nolan's *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem* (2006) focuses attention on this period and on Chesnutt and Dunbar particularly.

Pollard and for those who would join him in writing pro-Southern histories of the war, theirs had been a noble but a "lost" cause. It was a story calculated to soothe the Southern soul, one that justified past actions, explained away past defeats, and relegated the troubling issue of slavery to the sidelines. "All that is left the South" in the wake of its defeat, Pollard wrote, "is the 'war of ideas'," and it was that war that he was fighting (750).

As the battle to control America's understanding of its own past got underway, Douglass voiced his fear that the same forces that had lost in physical combat might claim a victory in the "war of ideas." Disturbed by the growing popularity of the Lost Cause mentality, Douglass lamented that "[i]t is now a deeply rooted, devoutly cherished sentiment, which the half measures of the Government towards the traitors have helped to cultivate and strengthen … The South has a past not to be contemplated with pleasure, but with a shudder. She has been selling agony, trading in blood and in the souls of men" (Gallagher 2). His assessment was in direct contradiction to those of writers like General Jubal A. Early, a Confederate veteran who would emerge as the chief standard-bearer of the Lost Cause in the 1870s. In a series of articles he wrote as president of the Southern Historical Society, Early reiterated the military arguments of Pollard and others, in addition to producing an apology for the Southern institution of race slavery. The "prototypical unreconstructed Rebel," Early maintained his conviction that slavery itself had been a necessary and benevolent civilizing institution for Southern blacks (Foster 55). "The conditions of domestic slavery, as it existed in the South," he argued, "had not only resulted in a great improvement in the moral and physical condition of the negro race, but had furnished a class of laborers as happy and contented as any in the world" (Early ix). Arguments of this kind — suggesting that slavery had been a "positive good" rather than a mere necessary

evil — had been popular in the South for decades; now, even after the War that had done away with the peculiar institution, they came to the service of the Lost Cause.[124]

This insistence upon slavery's beneficial effects would be echoed in the following decade by the former president of the Confederacy Jefferson Davis in his *Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (1881), a text that recalled a South ruled by honor and a stern, paternal kindness, a utopian space in which whites and blacks lived in harmony until the fatal influence of Northern abolitionists:

> [The] servile instincts [of slaves] rendered them contented with their lot, and their patient toil blessed the land of their abode with unmeasured riches. Their strong local and personal attachment secured faithful service ... never was there happier dependence of labor and capital on each other. The tempter came, like the serpent of Eden, and decoyed them with the majic [sic] word of "freedom" ... He put arms in their hands, and trained their humble but emotional natures to deeds of violence and bloodshed, and sent them out to devastate their benefactors. (161-62)

As we have seen repeatedly in this study, the rebellious and freedom-loving impulses of black Southerners are attributed solely to the influence of radical Northerners bent upon destroying the peace and prosperity of the South, here imagined as a kind of multiracial second Eden.[125] Like Satan in the garden, the abolitionists sought the breakup of an otherwise harmonious family.

Lost Cause arguments like those expressed by Pollard, Early, and Davis formed the philosophical foundation for the cultural impulse, shared on both sides of the Mason-Dixon, to limit — often violently — the rights of blacks. The history of the Lost Cause would prove as

[124] John C. Calhoun argued in 1837 that slavery was a positive good, "a great blessing to both of the races … a great stay of the Union and our free institutions, and one of the main sources of the unbounded prosperity of the whole" (Tise 101).

[125] These Northern abolitionist interlopers were often portrayed as confidence men, as we saw in chapter two of this work.

inextricably connected to the rise of Jim Crow “as the war was from slavery” (Thornton 237); indeed, Pollard’s *Lost Cause* appeared in the same year as the founding of the Ku Klux Klan. Early’s Southern Historical Society writings played against the backdrop of increasing violence towards African-Americans, including the 1873 Colfax Massacre and the creation in 1874 of the paramilitary White League. Likewise, the publication of Davis’s *Rise and Fall* in 1881 coincided with the passing of the first “Jim Crow” law, which officially segregated the railroads. Though it would be overly simplistic to blame Jim Crow in its entirety on the idea of the Lost Cause, its twinned messages of Southern innocence and black inferiority offered both justification for past abuses and an excuse for future ones.

Less visible but perhaps more insidious was the way in which the vision of the antebellum South as a biracial utopia crept into popular consciousness by way of its entertainments. Long a staple of plantation fiction, the “sunny South” was rapidly becoming a fashionable feature of novels and short stories. Abram Joseph Ryan, whose “The Conquered Banner” (1865) was arguably the first poetic work of the Lost Cause, soon gave way to Southern writers like Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris who commanded large Northern audiences for their antebellum slave stories, which often depicted the relationships between whites and blacks on the plantation in warm, familial terms. Their tales partook of a prevailing Lost Cause sentiment that was simultaneously undermining the rights of blacks. The depiction of African Americans as the cheerful and childlike servants of benevolent masters, while certainly tame when compared with the actual violence of widespread lynchings, could not but contribute to the increasingly pervasive stereotype of blacks as somehow less than fully human. The black characters that appear in the works of Harris and Page and the figure of the blackface minstrel so

popular on the Northern stage exhibited the same traits and represented the same pro-Southern values that the Lost Cause had sought to espouse.

Interestingly, these highly artificial constructions of Southern antebellum life arose alongside, and in part because of, the growing popularity of literary realism in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The audience for local color fictions insisted upon their being true-to-life; the measure for realism, however, was largely determined by the works that had gone before. The conformity of the depictions of African Americans in these works to the minstrel stage, plantation literature, and, crucially, to one another became the most important evidence of their realism. Harris, Page, and the whole host of local color writers feeding the seemingly insatiable appetite of audiences for tales of the South were judged as realistic when they reinforced already extant stereotypes of African-American speech, culture, and behavior. As Thomas L. Morgan notes, "[o]nce these types of characters had been established in the public's mind" through minstrelsy and plantation fiction, "they became a part of the formulaic structure through which realism's mimetic efficacy was measured … Fiction that did not replicate acceptable literary types was dismissed for its lack of fidelity to the established codes of ethnic description" (213-14). In other words, the degree to which a given work conformed to the already-held beliefs of its audience, particularly where race was concerned, determined the degree to which that work would be deemed realistic.

Gene Jarrett calls the result of this phenomenon "minstrel realism," a term that "recalls the postbellum appreciation of minstrel shows as true to life" ("We Must Write" 303). Just as blackface performances somehow came to be recognized and praised for reflecting the true nature of African Americans, slavery, and the South, stories featuring "'Black' dialect, 'Old Negro' caricatures, and nostalgic plantation imagery" were identified as realistic depictions of

black life. Anything less than a wholehearted endorsement of existing stereotypes was likely to be condemned as unrealistic (303). This posed, as one can imagine, a considerable problem for black authors seeking publication in this period, but it also offered an opening for those same authors to play a deliberate confidence game. As I have already shown, environments in which social expectations are strictly defined and enforced often provide the best opportunities for the confidence man. By appearing to conform to the conventions of minstrel realism, authors like Chesnutt and Dunbar were able to find an outlet for messages of racial equality that otherwise might have been deemed unrealistic or confined to a far more narrow, progressive audience. Though their apparent conformity to racist stereotypes has sometimes earned Chesnutt and Dunbar the censure of literary scholars and authors like Ralph Ellison (who considered their works reflective of the "*white* stereotype of the Negro minstrel tradition" [Robinson 219]), we should not overlook the degree to which both authors used that appearance of conformity to advance a radical agenda. This authorial subterfuge is signaled, as we have seen in the works of Webb and Brown, by the presence of the black confidence man.

Chesnutt and Uncle Julius

"The Negro's part is to prepare himself for recognition and equality," Chesnutt wrote in his journal in 1879, "and it is the province of literature to open the way for him to get it — to accustom the public mind to the idea; and while amusing them, to lead people out, imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step, to the desired state of feeling" ("Excerpts"). Even at this early date, what the prospective author proposed for himself was a kind of literary confidence game, one that would attempt to fundamentally alter white readers' perceptions of African Americans, without those readers being entirely aware that any change was taking place. It was a canny

observation — that the racism of white culture might be susceptible to the con even if it was impervious to direct attack — and one that would have a considerable effect on the whole of Chesnutt's work, but perhaps nowhere is it more apparent than in the short stories generally referred to as the "conjure tales." In these tales Chesnutt not only plays the confidence man himself, "lead[ing] people out, imperceptibly, unconsciously … to the desired state of feeling," but also employs a confidence man, the ex-slave Uncle Julius, whose games rely upon and paradoxically reveal the pitfalls of minstrel realism.

Seven years after he had privately observed the need for such literary legerdemain, Chesnutt introduced Uncle Julius, a black confidence man who told a series of seemingly straightforward tales about slave life to a pair of eager white listeners in the post-bellum South. Like Uncle Remus, Harris's ex-slave narrator, Julius is full of amusing anecdotes, but unlike that popular character, Julius's tales come with an ulterior motive. The pragmatic John and his sentimental wife Annie, recently arrived from the North, listen to and interpret Julius's stories (often quite differently), and frequently fall victim to his clever manipulations. In the first of these tales ("The Goophered Grapevine" [1887]), for instance, Julius attempts to dissuade the new arrivals from purchasing the vineyard from which he derives an independent income by telling a story of the land's bewitchment. Failing at that, Julius later succeeds in convincing the couple to preserve an old schoolhouse he wants to use as a meeting place in "Po' Sandy" (1888) and in helping John and Annie lose their appetite for the hams he wishes to consume himself in "Dave's Neckliss" (1889).[126]

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[126] "Dave's Neckliss" would not appear in *The Conjure Woman* (1899), the collection of Chesnutt's Uncle Julius tales, perhaps in part because it contains a more graphic and straightforward criticism of Southern slavery than any of the other Julius stories.

The stories Chesnutt wrote for publication in *The Conjure Woman* (1899), his collection of Uncle Julius tales, would repeat the pattern of these early stories: Uncle Julius narrates an entertaining and often pathetic tale for John and his wife with the end result of some benefit or other accruing to himself. In "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" he convinces Annie to purchase his lucky rabbit's foot; in "Hot Foot Hannibal" he uses the tale to ensure a meeting between John's ward and her lover (a service he has been paid to provide); in "The Conjurer's Revenge" John is convinced by the tale to purchase of a horse that is both lame and blind, and in "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt" Julius nearly succeeds in protecting his exclusive rights to a neighboring bee-tree and its ample supply of honey. Of course, even when he succeeds, Julius's gains are limited — a nice portion of ham, the proceeds of the sale of a rabbit's foot, perhaps a kickback from the seller of the lame horse — but readers of Melville's *Confidence-Man* will remember that it is not the sum of money gained that makes the confidence game; the act of confidence creation and the exploitation of that confidence are the only true criteria, and these Julius meets more than sufficiently.[127] Julius is a black confidence man, skillfully manipulating the expectations of the most powerful whites in his immediate community for his own benefit.[128]

How else to explain that both John and Annie, two wildly different readers, see in Julius precisely what they expect to see? For John, Julius appears the wily slave of plantation literature, a character perhaps not unlike Harris's Brer Rabbit; he is clever, but not *too* clever, revealing just enough of his ulterior motivations to allow John the opportunity for self-congratulatory condescension: he flatters himself that *he* sees through Julius' fantastical tales to his practical

[127] According to David Britt, for instance, Julius is a "singularly unsuccessful as a hustler" receiving only "picayune amounts of cash" (362). But Melville reminds that motivations for the confidence game go beyond financial gain: "Money, you think, is the sole motive to pains and hazard, deception and deviltry, in this world. How much money did the devil make by gulling Eve?" (*Confidence-Man* 41).

[128] Though they are not the subject of this chapter, Chesnutt's tales contain white confidence men as well. The Yankee who swindles MacDugal in "The Goophered Grapevine" is one example, but MacDugal himself is not above playing the confidence game from time to time.

aims. Yet Annie too sees in Julius the fulfillment of her own sentimental expectations, shaped perhaps by the sentimental antislavery literature so popular before the war and literature of minstrel realism than followed it.[129] For Annie, Julius and the host of characters whose lives he narrates are tragic victims of a period of violence now confined to the past. "What a system it *was* … under which such things *were* possible," she gasps in response to the brutal conclusion of "Po' Sandy" (in which the titular character, transformed into a tree, is cut into pieces while his wife watches on helplessly) (53). Julius's behavior somehow conforms to both his listener's very different expectations, appealing to John's pride and Annie's pity simultaneously.

Annie and John are both deceived in Julius, however, precisely because they are confident that they read the confidence man accurately. John wrongly identifies his relationship with Julius as a particular kind of exchange in which he believes his own acuity grants him the upper hand. Playing the role of the benevolent master to the mischievous slave, John conceives of their relationship in the terms of a gift cycle, with John offering gifts that far exceed, in his opinion, the things he receives or takes from Julius. For instance, John considers the job of coachman, for which he has hired Julius, "more than equivalent for anything he lost by the sale of the vineyard" (43). John is mistaken, of course; the relationship between him and Julius is governed not by the terms of the gift cycle, but by the rules of the confidence game, as we can see when we compare their relative states at the conclusion of each tale. Julius is rarely the worse off for his tale-telling; though sometimes he fails to convince the couple to do as he wishes, his losses are those he would have incurred even if he had not told his story. John, on the other hand, finds himself saddled with a worthless horse ("The Conjurer's Revenge"), down several hams ("Dave's Neckliss"), stalled in the road ("The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt"), and employing Julius's lazy

[129] Heather Tirado Gilligan places Annie's reactions squarely within this tradition, see "Reading, Race, and Charles Chesnutt's 'Uncle Julius' Tales" (2007).

nephew ("Mars Jeem's Nightmare"), just to name a few examples. What Julius offers hardly equals what he receives. Unless we believe that in telling his stories Julius has somehow become poorer, we must conclude that the confidence man emerges the victor and that John has been quite thoroughly duped.[130] John may believe he sees Julius clearly, but it is he himself who is seen and exposed, and it is that very confidence in his own interpretation of Julius that proves his undoing.

Even without recognizing the nature of the exchange between John and Julius, the limitations of the former's interpretation are immediately apparent; his dismissal of Julius as a harmless trickster whose tales lack literal truth would likely seem inadequate to any reader who has felt herself moved by the tragic fate of a man like Sandy. Indeed, Chesnutt ensures readers will notice this deficiency by including the character of Annie, whose emotional response repeatedly undermines John's more pragmatic one. It is less apparent, though nonetheless true, that Annie's own appreciation of the tales is seriously flawed; indeed, she has sometimes been taken for a version of Chesnutt's "model reader," one who "urges magazine readers back toward antebellum modes of reading race, advocating a return to sentiment in response to the cultural shift toward the objective examination of racial difference" (Gilligan 203, 211). It is an appealing notion, but ultimately an unsatisfying one in light of Chesnutt's characterization of Annie herself. Annie is "the victim of a settled melancholy"; she is, quite literally, on the brink of being bored to death and remains dependent upon Julius for the entertainment that keeps her alive

[130] Some critics do conclude that Julius is the poorer for having told his stories, even suggesting that his tales somehow impoverish his culture. Brodhead argues that Julius "is giving up his people's life as other people's entertainment. Like a long line of black show business successes in American white culture he wins an enhanced social place for himself by making American-American expressive forms and 'soul' available to others' imaginative participation and consumption" (12). Of course, in order to reach Brodhead's conclusion, one must agree that Julius's tales are authentic representations of Southern black life and that he sees them as the products of that culture and not of his own efforts, a premise some other scholars have been reluctant to concede. See Gilligan as well as Elizabeth Hewitt's "Charles W. Chesnutt's Capitalist Conjurings" (2009).

(Chesnutt 82). Though her passivity and illness may align her with a growing middle class "in which women are leisured, unproductively employed, and given to neurasthenia," as Brodhead argues, contrasted with Chesnutt's heroines in other works — particularly Mandy Oxendine — Annie seems unflatteringly paralytic (7). Through Annie, Chesnutt seems rather to suggest the limits of sentimental identification than to endorse it, for pity rarely prompts Annie to progressive action all the while blinding her to Julius's more pragmatic motives, those readily apparent to her husband. So fixated is she upon the emotional catharsis provided by Julius's tales that when, as in the case of "The Conjurer's Revenge," a tale resists her desire for a "moral" or fails to be "pathetic" enough to provoke her sympathetic response, she berates Julius for telling a story "not up to [his] usual mark" (79). Like John, Annie's ability to read Julius is severely limited by her own expectations.[131]

It seems unlikely that Chesnutt chose as his model reader either John or Annie; to adopt John's reading of Julius is to limit the power of his tales to mere tricks, but to accept Annie's is to fail to see the trick at all. Neither John's amused superiority nor Annie's clueless sentimentality yields an accurate interpretation of Julius, and by playing the two auditors off one another (with John's pragmatism exposing Annie's gullibility and Annie's sensitivity revealing John's callousness), Chesnutt is able to undermine the pattern of white narrative authority in plantation tales without resorting to direct attack.[132] If neither John nor Annie sees Julius clearly, what then must Chesnutt's reading audience make of his storyteller? In Julius, Chesnutt poses a

[131] Richard E. Baldwin notes that the sentimental response was not sufficient to meet Chesnutt's goals; something more was needed: "The sentiments of white Americans could easily enough be touched, but the important and difficult take was changing their perceptions. Whites had to be trained to perceive black experience from the black point of view, for until the white man was so changed no serious black literature could receive a hearing because it would not be understood" (385).

[132] Robert C. Nowatzki points out that John lacks the narrative authority of Page and Harris's white narrators in part because of Annie, whose sensitivity to the emotional import of the tales highlights John's lack thereof ("Passing" 25-26).

conundrum, a black man who defies white attempts to read him by playing into culturally controlled expectations of black behavior. Like the other black confidence men we have considered, Julius is an adept reader, one who, through his performance, illuminates the culture he inhabits. If Chesnutt offers us a model reader, it is Julius himself, whose subtle critique of both realistic and sentimental modes of reading (embodied by John and Annie respectively) casts in a new light attempts by whites to read and understand African Americans.

Though neither Annie nor John ought to be taken for Chesnutt's "model reader," together they offer a pair of likely corollaries for Chesnutt's contemporary readers. Like John and Annie, those readers would have been familiar with the conventions of minstrel realism, and they would have come to the text with a set of assumptions of their own regarding the shape and style of the tales they were about to read. Like Julius, his black confidence man, Chesnutt recognizes and manipulates those assumptions, and, like Webb and Brown, he plays a confidence game of his own. Chesnutt's conjure tales have been noted for their "cool mastery" of the plantation literature form, seeming as they do almost entirely submissive to the dictates of what by the end of the century had become a relatively rigid narrative formula. The Julius tales bear many of the same features seen in the post-war plantation fiction of writers like Harris and Page — a former slave as a narrator, a white auditor, and the use of dialect — and for readers who came to Chesnutt's works looking merely for amusement, little would appear to be out of place. His readers find their expectations of humor, dialect, and white interpretation met and even reinforced, rather than challenged, by what they find in the Uncle Julius tales. Scholars have long supposed that the popularity of the conjure tales was in no small part due to Chesnutt's ability to conform to those expectations. This is not to say, of course, that the Julius stories never departed from the conventions of plantation literature; upon closer inspection it is clear that the nostalgic

mode of the plantation tale is entirely lacking from Chesnutt's, for instance. That absence, however, would likely pass unnoticed by readers interested only in an entertaining story, rather than a lesson in the history of slavery.

This was, however, merely "an elaborate show of conformity" intended to disguise ulterior motivations; in a 1889 letter to Albion W. Tourgée, Chesnutt reveals that he had long wrestled with the conventions of the plantation genre and particularly with his use of Julius as narrator: "I think I have about used up the old Negro who serves as mouthpiece," Chesnutt mused, "and I shall drop him in future stories, as well as much of the dialect" (Brodhead 6, 13). Clearly Chesnutt regarded Julius as a tool, something to be used and eventually "used up"; however, the ex-slave narrator so perfectly encapsulated the plantation mode that had proved so popular on the literary market that Chesnutt found success without him difficult to achieve. And, as we have seen, the reading audience was likely to reject depictions of African Americans that failed to conform to the conventions of minstrel realism. Thus it was quite difficult for Chesnutt to find a venue for his own experiments in realism, those based on lived experience as an African American and not audience expectations. Indeed he would find those works virtually impossible to publish prior to the success of the *The Conjure Woman*.[133]

Scholars have longed debated the implications of the author's decision to return to the plantation mode in *The Conjure Woman* (1899), sometimes even accusing the author of commodifying and making available African-American cultural experience for (white) consumption and monetary gain. However, these critiques miss a critical point: the Uncle Julius

[133] Chesnutt met with resistance from editors on several occasions during the period he referred to as his "years of silence" (Brodhead 15).

tales were always about "playing" the literary market by conforming to popular tastes.[134] They were always Chesnutt's confidence game. In order to gain access to a white literary audience, Chesnutt found it necessary to play the confidence man by offering tales whose conventional structure (and frequently conventional content) belied their radical message. In order to achieve his goal of drawing whites "imperceptibly … to the desired state of feeling" it was necessary to do so in a familiar and unthreatening mode, one which, on the surface, appears to conform to known conventions and to reinforce common expectations. That the author chafed at the necessity of those conventions is natural, but beneath his show of conformity, Chesnutt was hard at work challenging the expectations and conventions of minstrel realism through the characters of John and Annie, as we have seen. Readers alert, even unconsciously, to the implicit criticism of two common forms of reading (or misreading) African Americans in print and in life might emerge less inclined to judge blacks based upon the stereotypes popularized by local color writing.

Chesnutt's own confidence game is signaled by the presence of the black confidence man who is notably a storyteller like himself. David D. Britt suggests that Chesnutt is the true conjurer of the conjure tales, "wu'kin his roots' on an unperceiving audience," but I suspect the author is more akin to Julius than the conjure woman (271). Like his black confidence man, Chesnutt tells his tales for a white audience, and like him as well he seeks a benefit for himself and his community that can only be gained through subterfuge and the skillful playing of the confidence game. Chesnutt would return to the idea of misreading many times in his literary career, and he would employ black confidence men to do so repeatedly (consider for instance

[134] Chesnutt was certainly not above "playing" the literary market by producing financially motivated work (indeed, an early journal entry shows him taking an interest in collecting black spirituals not because of their inherent cultural or literary value, but because of Northern demand for them [Brodhead 4]);

"The Passing of Grandison" [1899] or "Baxter's Procrustes" [1904]), but after *The Conjure Woman* he would never again feature the Julius-style narrator. Having conformed to convention long enough to gain the confidence of a reading audience, Chesnutt was finally free of Julius and able to experiment with realism, producing tales that considered the problems of whites interpreting blacks in a more straightforward way. By simplifying the narrative structure of his tales — eliminating the frame and the device of white listeners — Chesnutt placed his own readers in direct relationship with the tales being told; asking them to try their own interpretations out on a new set of black confidence men.

Paul Laurence Dunbar and "The Mission of Mr. Scatters"

Though critics as of yet rarely note it, that set of black confidence men was rapidly expanding in the latter part of the nineteenth century, in large part due to the steady evolution of a character popular in minstrel shows since the 1840s but only then taking shape as an agent of the confidence game: the dandy. The urban counterpart to the cheerful Southern slave figure in blackface performances, the dandy (sometimes called Zip Coon) imitated the dress and behavior of members of the white upper classes, without much success but with a great deal of parodic humor; Brown's Sam is one literary example of this type. In his pretentiousness the dandy functioned as a send-up both of the white upper crust and of the ascendant blacks who aspired to live like them, if not with them (Toll 69). As the nineteenth century drew to a close, however, the dandy had begun to wear a different aspect, particularly in stage shows written and performed by African Americans. Many of the more comic aspects of the dandy figure gave way to cunning and cleverness in the performances of black actors like Bert Williams and George Walker. Indeed, when a reviewer for the *New York Times* in 1916 recalled the "great days of minstrelsy"

he remembered not the dandy of Zip Coon fame, but the "very fat and very black confidence man" ("Minute Visits in the Wings").

In a sense it was only natural that the dandy would, at least in some cases, become the black confidence man.[135] As a class pretender, the dandy was only ever once removed from the pretender *par excellence*, and as an astute reader and performer of upper-class whiteness his position was well suited for the kind of social critique I have identified in this study as a unique component of the confidence game. So it is not surprising to see the black confidence man emerge in the dandy's place at the turn of the century, particularly in shows written, directed, and performed entirely by African Americans. Bob Cole's production of *A Trip to Coontown* (1898), arguably the first stage musical to meet this description, features a black confidence man, tellingly called Jim Flimflammer, who uses his considerable cunning to attempt to rob a middle-class black man of his pension.[136] Jim is a clear descendant of the dandy — he is urbane and quick-witted, verbal where the minstrel slave was physical — but is he far more confidence man than Zip-Coon buffoon. Genteel rather than garish in dress and well-spoken rather than merely loquacious, Jim represents a new breed of black confidence men, this time on stage as well as page.

He was not alone. Two years later, Williams and Walker would produce the *Sons of Ham* (1900), which Walker starred as Harty Lafter, another smooth-talking confidence man who poses along with his slow-witted partner Tobias Wormwood (Williams) as the long-absent sons of a well-to-do African-American man. Clever and verbally acute, Harty even manages to convince

[135] William Mahar suggests that even in its earlier states the dandy figure was a "pretender, a charlatan, a confidence man" (209).

[136] Composer Will Marion Cook's *Clorindy, or the Origin of the Cakewalk* (on which Paul Laurence Dunbar collaborated) appeared a few months later, but Eileen Southern argues that there were many all-black musicals before either *Clorindy* or *Coontown*. See Southern's "The Origin and Development of the Black Musical Theater: A Preliminary Report" (1981-82).

the townspeople that his less bright partner is the renowned Professor Skinnerbunch, "a palmist, occultist, chiropodist, odontologist, dentist, florist, ahem-ist, mind reader, and fortune-teller" (Graziano 70). Ernest Hogan's popular song "The Phrenologist Coon" — a descendant of the mock-phrenological lecture that had played an important role in the minstrel show since the midcentury — first appeared as a part of this show. In 1902 *In Dahomey*, the first financially successful production from the famous duo, would again feature Williams and Walker playing the confidence game by posing as detectives — the suggestively named Shylock Homestead and Rareback Pinkerton — who set out to recover the lost property of the president of the Dahomey Colonization Society and, by doing so, turn a tidy profit.[137] At the same time African-American actor Tim Moore, who would later become famous for his role as George "Kingfish" Stevens in the television adaptation of *Amos 'n' Andy*, was busy perfecting the confidence-man type on the vaudeville stage.

In short, by the late 1890s the black confidence man had hit the mainstream, a fact that may reflect the growing ease with which post-bellum Americans regarded the performative nature of social interaction in general. The second half of the century, marked by the rise of parlor theatricals and ever-more complicated social rituals, showed increasing comfort with the notion that all social roles were to a greater or lesser extent performative, and that even respectable men and women played a part in an on-going social drama. They were coming to recognize, as Karen Halttunen argues, that "[t]he struggle for genteel status … was a confidence game": "[t]hey were learning to place confidence not in the sincere countenance but in the social

[137] All three of these productions depart from racist stereotypes in more ways than one — *A Trip to Coontown* is set in a middle-class black town, *Sons of Ham* presents college-educated and financially successful blacks, and *In Dahomey* features "Swing Along," a song celebrating African-American racial pride. Texts of these plays can be challenging to find, but Thomas L. Riis has prepared the scripts and score for *In Dahomey*.

mask; to trust not in simple dress but in elaborate disguise" (186, 188).[138] By the turn of the century, racial discourse could not but take part in this growing awareness, and the burnt cork mask (worn by black performers as well as white) stood as a testament to the recognition, however subconscious, that race might be but one social disguise among many.

This is not to say that the minstrel show or even the black musical of the turn of the century was necessarily racially progressive. Even when they were written, produced, and performed entirely by African Americans, these shows were rife with damaging racial stereotypes. The black confidence man, for all his sophistication relative to earlier dandy types, was still often unflattering to African Americans as a race, and the slow-witted partners with whom he was frequently paired still brought along many of the old "darky" character traits that had proven so popular over decades of performance. However, as we have seen with Chesnutt, some black authors of the period refused to shy away from the racist conventions of popular literary and dramatic modes, but rather conformed to those conventions in order first to find an audience and then to lead them on gently towards viewpoints more compatible with racial equality. For Paul Laurence Dunbar the stage, and particularly the emerging character of the black confidence man, provided the inspiration for several tales that conform to racist expectations in order to undermine their very foundations.

The young author was not at all unfamiliar with the African-American theater, having contributed lyrics to several all-black musical shows, including Will Marion Cook's *Clorindy; or, The Origin of the Cakewalk* (1898) and *Jes Lak White Folks* (1899).[139] The stage features strongly in his 1902 novel *The Sport of the Gods*, as well, but it was for his collection of short

[138] For more on this shift, see Halttunen's *Confidence Men and Painted Woman* (1982), particularly chapter six.
[139] Much of Dunbar's dialogue for *Clorindy* was done away with in rehearsals (Sundquist 283), and, though Dunbar would be credited on *Cannibal King* and *In Dahomey*, these were essentially revisions of *Jes Lak Folks*, and Dunbar does not appear to have contributed new material to either (Krasner 55).

stories *The Heart of Happy Hollow* that he created Mr. Scatters, a black confidence man who, like the newly revised dandy figure of the black stage, uses his skills as a performer of upper-class social roles to fool both blacks and whites alike.[140] "The Mission of Mr. Scatters," like Mark Twain's "The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg" (1899), involves the appearance of a mysterious package supposed to contain an immense sum. Dunbar's is brought to the sleepy Kentucky town of Miltonville by the impeccably dressed Mr. Scatters, who claims to be the executor of the will of Mr. Isaac Jackson's long-lost brother. His package, closed with the government seal of Cuba and not to be broken until an appointed time, is stored in the local safe and soon becomes the sole topic of town discussion as well as the security for a number of loans Scatters requests and receives from the townspeople. By demonstrating a degree of perception considerably beyond that of Twain's Hadleyburg residents, Scatters' dupes soon find him out and place him on trial before a white judge and jury. Though the case against him is airtight, Scatters succeeds in winning an acquittal by appealing both to the jury's racist assumptions regarding their black neighbors and to their Southern pride.

Like the theatrical black confidence man with whom Dunbar would have been intimately familiar, Scatters looks the part of the newly transformed dandy; he is "gorgeous of person and attire … dead black, from his shiny top hat to his not less shiny boots" with an "indefinable air of distinction" (330). Gone are the tattered, padded, ill-fitting costumes of the antebellum minstrel; Mr. Scatters is a "resplendent figure," complete with manners "entertaining and ingratiating" and

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[140] Scatters was not Dunbar's only black confidence man, of course. An earlier story from *Folks from Dixie* reveals the tender heart of the conniving Mr. Ruggles (whose motto is "[i]t is better to be plausible than to be right" [52]), "The Ingrate" from *The Strength of Gideon* (1900) features a clever slave confidence man outwitting his master, and *The Sport of the Gods* contains a number of stage-going corrupters of youth who sponge off the wayward son of an African-American family newly arrived in New York in a fashion that should be familiar to readers of Halttunen and the urban conduct manuals of the first half of the nineteenth century.

clearly modeled upon those of the white middle and upper classes (331).[141] His language, unlike the malapropism-laden speech of the antebellum minstrel dandy, is "painfully, unforgivably correct" (perhaps too correct, the narrator suggests) (330). Everything about the "smooth-tongued stranger" has been calculated to persuade his audience of his superior education, wealth, and importance and to conceal that he is in fact quite broke (331). Like other confidence men, he is most successful when he conforms to the expectations of those he intends to dupe, as Scatters does when with his "charming manners" he confirms "all that preconceived notions had said of him" (334). The townspeople fall under his spell and are held "captive to his charm," the almost supernatural power to persuade frequently accorded to the confidence man (331).[142]

Like the black confidence men Jim Flimflammer, Rareback Pinkerton, or Harty Lafter, Mr. Scatters performs the role of the upwardly mobile African American in order to gain the confidence of other African Americans, and it is interesting that, as with the stage productions, Scatters first targets are those of his own race. Unlike the black confidence men of the stage, however, Scatters reserves his most impressive con for the whites of Miltonville. Caught in a lie and placed on trial for borrowing money under false pretenses, he makes an appeal to the white judge and jury based not upon disputed facts, but upon the beliefs that form the very foundation of their racism. He asserts that in duping the black inhabitants of Miltonville he has done them all a favor; he has "put a check upon their credulity and made them wary of unheralded strangers" (338). Scatters claims he has offered a lesson in confidence to the town's African Americans, for which he ought to be rewarded rather than punished, and his white listeners,

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[141] The dandy of the early minstrel tradition dressed in a costume that was "a ludicrous parody of upper-class dress: coats with tails and padded shoulders, white gloves, monocles, fake mustaches, and gaudy watch chains. They spent their time primping and preening, going to parties, dancing and strutting, and wooing women. Like other urban black characters, the dandies' pretentiousness showed that they had no place in white society while sending up social changes like nouveau-riche white culture" (Toll 68-69).

[142] For more on the near-supernatural powers of the confidence man, see chapter two of this work.

convinced of their own superior discernment (an astuteness to which they believe the blacks ought to aspire) are inclined to agree, but Scatters goes one step further by appealing to their pride in their white heritage:

> Straightening his form and raising his great voice, he cried: "Gentlemen, I am guilty according to the letter of the law, but from that I appeal to the men who make and have made the law. From the hard detail of this new day, I appeal to the chivalry of the old South which has been told in story and sung in song. From men of vindictiveness I appeal to men of mercy. From plebeians to aristocrats. By the memory of the sacred names of the Richardsons" — the Major sat bolt upright and dropped his snuffbox — "the Durbins" — the ex-judge couldn't for his life get his pince-nez on — "the Howards" — the captain openly rubbed his hands — "to the memory that those names call up I appeal, and to the living and honourable bearers of them present. And to you, gentlemen of the jury, the lives of whose fathers went to purchase this dark and bloody ground, I appeal from the accusation of these men, who are not my victims, not my dupes, but their own." (338)

This appeal is of course a tremendous success with Major Richardson — the object of "awed respect which all Miltonvillians, white and black, showed" — offering not only his carriage but also a printed history of his family for Scatters' perusal (339).

Scatters' appeal directly invokes the very traditions his existence belies, the "old South which has been told in story and sung in song," the South of slave-holding aristocrats who believed African Americans to be of a race inferior to their own. The irony of course inheres in the fact that it is not so much the blacks who are their own victims, but the whites. Dunbar makes

it clear that town's black inhabitants are misled sometimes by greed, but more often by their over-interest in one another's affairs and by their desire to transcend their modest social positions (Jackson, for instance, is initially flattered by Scatters' request for a loan because it seems to place the two men, one an uneducated laborer and the other an apparently refined government official, upon the same social level [335]). As sins go, these are comparatively minor ones, and the sinners are themselves responsible for discovering and repenting their own foolishness. The whites who sit in judgment over the black confidence man, on the other hand, remain entirely duped by his final cunning speech; so flattered are they by his appreciation of their superiority and by his deference to their family histories that they completely fail to recognize his true motives. To his black dupes, Scatters matched their preconceived notions of what an ascendant black man ought to look like, but to his white dupes, he appears somehow oddly different.

This brings us to perhaps Dunbar's greatest contribution to the figure of the black confidence man. Scatters cons the white judges of Miltonville, not as previous black confidence men might have done, by offering a comforting and familiar example of the cheerful and ignorant darky or by capitalizing on light skin to pass as white, but by giving an eloquent speech. He harnesses the power of his literacy, which previous black confidence men often concealed as a liability, to align himself with the interests of the whites who judge him, and in return they align themselves with his, delivering a favorable verdict.[143] Because "he had spoken of their families and their traditions" and "knew their names," he was not to be judged like other African Americans: "he was a good fellow after all" (338). According to Richardson and the other whites, Scatters is decidedly not the dandy of antebellum minstrel shows or the "darky" of plantation literature; instead he had "taught the darkies a lesson" (338). The weakness upon

[143] For examples of black confidence men concealing their literacy see chapter three of this work.

which Scatters preys is not their tendency to place confidence in behavior that accords with racist stereotypes, but instead their deep-rooted conviction that they and their families represent a superior type, not just racially but historically. Just as Jackson is flattered by Scatters' attention, so too are the Miltonville whites.

Interestingly, Dunbar is sometimes accused of holding views not unlike those of his white dupes and of presenting a whitewashed portrait of Southern life. Dunbar shared this in common with Chesnutt, though his prose was on the whole more experimental than his contemporary's, but Scatters, like Uncle Julius, should make readers think twice about assigning racist or sentimental views of the Old South to the author of *The Heart of Happy Hollow*. Like Chesnutt (and for that matter Webb and Brown), Dunbar was something of a literary confidence man, exposing the machinations of the black confidence man he created while concealing his own. Mr. Scatters, the eloquent "pure black" who charms racist whites with his deference to their heritage, stands in, in a sense, for the author, himself dark-skinned and eloquent, who tells tales that seem at least superficially to reinforce black stereotypes and to romanticize the South. Dunbar exposes not himself but those who, like the whites of Miltonville, believe in the Lost Cause and the Old South of legend.

Like Chesnutt, Dunbar needed to find a way to be successful in a market dominated by racist local color, the products of minstrel realism. Indeed, his early novels, in which the primary characters are white or racially unmarked — *The Uncalled* (1898), *The Love of Landry* (1900), and *The Fanatics* (1901) — were criticized for departing from the dialect and minstrel style of his *Folks from Dixie* (1898) short stories. Indeed, one reviewer for *The Uncalled* suggested that he "return to those lines along which … lie his best chances of actual, not relative, success" (Jarrett "Introduction" xviii). Dunbar's greatest strengths, according white critics, lay in his

“realistic” depictions of black life and particularly in his skillful use of dialect. William Dean Howell’s famous review of Dunbar’s *Majors and Minors* (1895), a book of poetry containing both dialect and standard English poems, proclaimed that the dialect poems were superior, like the dialect poems of Robert Burns “when he was most Burns, when he was most Scotch” (630). According to Howells, these were the true expressions, not only of Dunbar’s artistic power, but of his identity: when he “writes literary English … he is least himself” (630). It was an assessment that would come to haunt the young writer, who would eventually conclude that Howell’s review had done him “irrevocable harm” by labeling him a dialect writer (Jarrett “‘We Must Write’” 304). To James Weldon Johnson, he confessed “I didn’t start as a dialect poet. I simply came to the conclusion that I could write it as well, if not better, than anybody else I knew, and that by doing so I should gain a hearing. I gained the hearing, and now they don’t want me to write anything but dialect” (Morgan, “The City as Refuge” 217). Minstrel realism thus confined Dunbar, much as it had confined Chesnutt, but it also provided the author with an opportunity to critique racist expectations of black behavior by playing a confidence game of his own. By adopting the conventions of minstrel realism, Dunbar did indeed “gain a hearing,” and through Mr. Scatters he had his say, although it was necessary that it “wear the mask.”

In this chapter we have seen the figure of the black confidence man as he appears in the works of African-American authors both before and after the Civil War: not only as a useful tool for the critique of race relations, but also as a signal for the confidence games played by the authors themselves. Clearly these authors, and others like them, were not unaware of the widespread contemporary popularity of the confidence-man figure in literature (as their current absence from scholarly works on the subject might suggest); indeed their use of the confidence man indicates that they were at least as awake to the possibilities of the figure as white authors

like Herman Melville and Mark Twain. But the appearance of the *black* confidence man in their works suggests something more than simple awareness of a popular character type; the confidence men of Webb, Brown, Chesnutt, and Dunbar cut to the heart of racial stereotypes and Lost Cause sentimentalism, insisting that "innate" characteristics and behaviors never are what they seem to be, and that the line between fact and fiction may be less distinct than it first appears.

Afterword.

The Long Shadow of the Confidence Man

Among the writers we have encountered so far, Charles W. Chesnutt alone would live to see the neighborhood of Harlem become the bustling center of African-American arts and culture in the early twentieth century. The remarkable confluence of writers and artists, immigrants and entrepreneurs who flocked to the upper west side at the beginning of the century formed a new community remembered for its immeasurable contributions to black culture. Like the American city of the nineteenth century, however, Harlem had its challenges. Predictably, the rapid concentration of strangers in the new "Negro metropolis" attracted not only those longing for greater freedom and opportunity but also those eager to the fleece those dreamers and line their own pockets. The black confidence man was alive and well in Harlem, and unsurprisingly he thrived in this new "world of strangers." Illegal lotteries and those who ran them enjoyed unparalleled success, "confidencing" entered the everyday lexicon of city sharps, and stories of infamous confidence men like Paul Hall, the "great man" of Harlem, circulated freely.[144] Nor did the presence of these confidence men in the city go unnoticed by the writers of the day. Readers will recognize black confidence men in George S. Schuyler's play *The Yellow Peril* (1925), Countee Cullen's novel *One Way to Heaven* (1932), Rudolph Fisher's murder mystery *The Conjure Man Dies: A Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem* (1932), and Zora Neale Hurston's short stories "The Six Gilded Bits" (1933) and "Story in Harlem Slang" (1942), among others.

[144] For a detailed examination of the real-life confidence men and women of Harlem, see Shane White, Stephen Garton, Stephen Robertson, and Graham White's "The Envelope, Please" in *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, and Future* (2008).

Racial discourse in the United States experienced dramatic change over the course of the twentieth century, and naturally not every element of that discourse as it functioned in the nineteenth century has survived; the confidence man, however, continued to play a role, though he often appeared in new and sometimes unexpected guises. What follows is an attempt to identify a small selection of the appearances of the black confidence man in twentieth and twenty-first-century fiction, film, and fact. More suggestive than definitive, this brief survey brings to light only a few examples of a figure put to wide and exceptionally varied use in the period. In the Harlem Renaissance works mentioned above, for instance, the black confidence man features chiefly as a reference to popular city types; he appears less as a symbol than as a "slice of life" akin to those trouble-makers and corrupters of youth that Karen Halttunen studies in *Confidence Men and Painted Women* (1982). In the wake of the Great Depression and World War II, however, Ralph Ellison used black confidence-man figures directly inspired by Melville's "original character" to challenge the ingrained racism of the Jim Crow era. He was in turn succeeded by a generation of post-Civil Rights filmmakers who used the black confidence-man figure to challenge powerful American institutions and even to question the nature of black identity itself. For black writers of the twentieth century, the confidence man of the nineteenth cast a long and persistent shadow.

In the fifteenth chapter of Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), the nameless narrator meets Black Guinea: "near the door I saw something which I'd never noticed there before: the cast-iron figure of a very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro, whose white eyes stared up at me from the floor, his face an enormous grin, his single large black hand held palm up before his chest" (319). The figure is a mechanized piggy bank, a "piece of early Americana" cleverly designed to flip a coin placed on the outstretched hand into the waiting mouth. Such banks were

popular in the nineteenth century, but Ellison drew upon more than historical artifact in his creation; in a letter to his friend and fellow author Albert Murray he claimed that Melville's Black Guinea, "[t]hat son of a bitch with his mouth full of pennies," had been his inspiration ("To Albert Murray" 79). Ellison's version of Black Guinea proves somewhat more straightforward than Melville's, however. In *Invisible Man*, the active pitch-penny game Black Guinea plays with the passengers aboard the *Fidèle* becomes the passive expectation of charity, the open hand and mouth; his clever dialect becomes the mute demand, "FEED ME" (Ellison *Invisible Man* 321). Ellison transforms Melville's Black Guinea from protean flesh to solid cast iron, then freights that already-laden body with the weight of nearly one hundred additional years of racism and degradation.

In the cast iron bank, the Invisible Man sees only the "self-mocking" mask, the blackface of the minstrel, worn for the benefit of whites, but when he is later mistaken, repeatedly, for the shifty confidence man Rinehart he becomes privy to the limitless possibilities available to blacks who, like Melville's Confidence-Man, are willing to don not one mask but many (319):

> [C]ould he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend? Could he himself be both rind and heart? What is real anyway? But how could I doubt it? He was a broad man, a man of parts who got around. Rinehart the rounder. It was true as I was true. His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps *only* Rine the rascal was at home in it. It was unbelievable, but perhaps only the unbelievable could be believed. Perhaps the truth was always a

> lie. … In the South everyone knew you, but coming North was a jump into the unknown. How many days could you walk the streets of the big city without encountering anyone who knew you, and how many nights? You could actually make yourself anew. The notion was frightening, for now the world seemed to flow before my eyes. All boundaries down, freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility. (498-99)

In 1955, in an interview for the *Paris Review*, Ellison suggested that the "confidencing sonofabitch" Rinehart might also trace his roots back to Melville's "original character" (488): "Rinehart is … intended to represent America and change. He has lived so long with chaos that he knows how to manipulate it. It is the old theme of *The Confidence Man*. He is a figure in a country with no solid past or stable class lines; therefore he is able to move about easily from one to the other" ("Ralph Ellison"). Like Melville's Confidence-Man, Rinehart plays many roles — he is a bookie, a pimp, a minister, a lover — but he lacks a core identity, and that lack enables him to negotiate the ever-shifting environment of the modern city. Though Ellison's narrator will ultimately reject Rinehart just as he rejects the grinning mask of the bank, the black confidence man was clearly alive and well at the midcentury.

What happened next, however, had as much to do with the shifting emphases of literary criticism as it did with literature itself. Growing interest in the folk inheritance of African-American writers lead to the examination of black works for traces of the trickster figure, the literary descendant of High John de Conquer and Brer Rabbit. Rinehart's name, like those of many black confidence men in literature, would be invoked as that of a trickster, another example of an African-American writer's use of an archetype coded as specifically African or African-American in origin. Stanley Edgar Hyman's assertion to that effect, however, famously

met with Ellison's disapprobation in "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke"; the "archetype-hunting" of critics like Hyman "ignores the specificity of literary works" while simultaneously labeling as "Negro" patterns of expression that may be "more 'Yankee' than anything else … a strategy common to the culture" of America as a whole (46, 54). Rinehart, like Melville's confidence man, is an American type who may be black or white or any shade in between; he is defined not by folkloric tradition, but rather by the ways in which he interacts with the environment he inhabits. As I have argued throughout, the confidence man generates trust in that environment *as it is* — in its culture, standards, hierarchies, and expectations — then exploits that trust for his own benefit. He is not a demi-god or a universal figure, but a man operating within the specific context of a particular culture at a particular time.[145]

Ellison's protests notwithstanding, critics continued to examine African-American literary products in the terms of their African folkloric inheritance, and that examination could not but have an effect on new literature, particularly in the wake of the Civil Rights movement. While authors and anthropologists had been demonstrating interest in African and African-American folklore since at least 1880 (when Joel Chandler Harris published his first collection of Uncle Remus tales), the 1970s saw a rapid increase in the number of black authors familiar with literary and anthropological research on the trickster type who began self-consciously drawing upon that familiarity in their own compositions, modeling characters upon folk tricksters of African or Native American origins. Amongst these works we might include John Oliver

[145] *Invisible Man* stands as a significant testament to the survival of the confidence-man figure in the twentieth century, but it is not alone. As Phyllis Klotman argues, we can find the black confidence man in William Melvin Kelley *dem* (1967) and John A. Williams *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967); we might also detect his machinations in Langston Hughes' "Who's Passing for Who?" (1952), Lorraine Hansbury's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), or Robert Deane Pharr's *Book of Numbers* (1969). Likewise, the confidence game runs as a current beneath texts that consider racial passing, like James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), and John Howard Griffin's *Black Like* Me (1961). Naturally these texts do not comprise a comprehensive list; like the rest of this afterword, it is suggestive rather than definitive.

Killen's *The Cotillion, or, One Good Bull Is Half the Herd* (1971), Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), Charles R. Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and *Middle Passage* (1990), or, more recently, Toni Morrison's *Love* (2006). Thus works like Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s seminal *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988) both responded to an already growing interest in African-American folklore and created a kind of feedback loop that ensured the continuance of the black trickster figure in African-American fiction.

These tricksters are tricksters (and *not* confidence men) by design, but at the same time that novelists were moving toward the deliberate use of trickster figures modeled upon folk heroes, the black confidence man was appearing more and more frequently on the stage and, especially, in film. In part, this rise of the black confidence man in visual media in the latter half of the twentieth century can be explained by the "enduring appeal of the confidence man in film" regardless of race; as Lloyd Michaels has argued, "film narrative depends on the audience's temporary confidence in the presences of projected images and that remain inherently deceptive" (49). Thus effective films share a basic precondition with the successful confidence game: a "willing suspension of disbelief." From the Meredith Wilson's *The Music Man* (1957), Irvin Kershner's *The Flim-Flam Man* (1967), and George Roy Hill's *The Sting* (1973) to Frank Oz's *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* (1988), David Mamet's *House of Games* (1987) and *The Spanish Prisoner* (1997), and Steven Spielberg's *Catch Me If You* Can (2002), the white confidence man has scarcely left the public eye in the last six decades.[146]

The black confidence man must have had a special appeal, however, given the specifically visual nature of his confidence game. Like disability cons, race-based confidence games rely upon appearances, and in film audiences could experience those appearances for

[146] For more on the popularity of the (white) confidence man in film, see Lloyd Michaels' *The Phantom of the Cinema: Character in Modern Film* (1998).

themselves, much as they would in real life. For instance, Paul Bogart's *Skin Game* (1971) features Lou Gossett, Jr. as a black confidence man working with a white partner (James Garner) to fleece slaveholders in the antebellum Southwest amidst the turmoil of Bleeding Kansas (and in 1857, the year of Melville's *The Confidence-Man*). The "skin game" of the title is, of course, a confidence game, but based, like Black Guinea's, on skin.[147] As the partners travel from town to town, Jason O'Rourke, a free black man born in New Jersey, poses as the ignorant and submissive slave of his partner, Quincy Drew; when, with great apparent reluctance, Drew offers to sell his loyal servant to the highest bidder, buyers leap at the chance to own this seemingly perfect combination of power and passivity. Once money has changed hands, however, Drew assists O'Rourke in escaping from his new owner, and they split the profits of the sale before proceeding to the next town to run the game again. Interestingly, the sell-steal confidence game they play bears an uncanny resemblance both to the one Henry Bibb describes playing in his *Narrative* and the more malevolent plot of which the notorious "Land Pirate" John Murrell was accused.[148]

The success of their scheme, like those of their real-life predecessors, depends upon the racial assumptions of the bidders. O'Rourke appears to be the perfect slave; indeed, much of the humor of the film lies in Gossett's able performance as a clever and educated black man successfully aping the obsequious behavior and ungrammatical speech expected of an ignorant slave. The laughs of the audience are had at the expense of the whites in the film who cheerfully accept O'Rourke's performance as reality and thus become the dupes not so much of the two crafty confidence men as of their own preconceived notions of innate racial characteristics. Like

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[147] The term "skin game" for a confidence game is anachronistic for 1857; at the time it would merely have suggested a rigged card game.
[148] For more on the role of deception in Henry Bibb's bid for freedom, see chapter three of this work. For more on the infamous John Murrell, see chapter two.

the writings of Charles W. Chesnutt or Paul Laurence Dunbar, the film seems intended to lead the audience on to greater skepticism regarding appearances; they must be wary of their own preconceived notions of black capability, lest they too fall victim to the black confidence man. In *Skin Game* race is revealed as the ultimate confidence game, the performance that masks reality and which can be used, repeatedly and successfully, to manipulate others for personal profit.

Compared to the films that would follow, *Skin Game* feels a bit nostalgic, an interracial buddy flick that projects contemporary concerns regarding racial identity onto a turbulent past. Wendell B. Harris, Jr.'s independent film *Chameleon Street* (1989), on the other hand, considers the difficulty in establishing a personal identity and achieving financial and social success as a black man in 1980s Detroit. It takes as its subject the "notorious negro" William Douglas Street, an actual black confidence man who posed successfully as a Yale University student, a surgeon, and a lawyer despite having never finished high school. In Harris' film, Street's original history becomes a meditation on the difficulties faced by black men trying to achieve financial success in a culture hostile to their efforts. For Street, finding that success means becoming whatever other people want him to be, reading their expectations and transforming himself to fulfill them. Unlike the black confidence man of *Skin Game*, however, Street cons his way upward, mimicking the dress, speech, and habits of the ascendant blacks he has met.

Towards the end of *Chameleon Street*, the title character, having conned his way into a job as a lawyer, reflects contentedly upon his self-making abilities and wonders just how far his talents might take him: "Born in a log cabin in the backwoods of Kentucky, William Douglass soon elevated himself from field hand to [Detroit] Tiger. From Tiger to reporter, from reporter to doctor, from doctor to co-ed, from co-ed to attorney. From attorney to congressman. From congressman to president. I could play president" (*Chameleon Street*). In a moment of reflection,

Street writes himself into a kind of American legend, locating his origins in Abraham Lincoln's Kentucky (rather than his own Michigan) and in the fields of the Southern plantation. His is the story of the would-be self-made man forced instead to play the confidence man. Like the fugitive slaves whose escapes fascinated antislavery whites in the nineteenth century, he has managed to find an avenue of escape from oppression, but not without the use of deception and not without embracing the confidence game. While his success stands as a tribute to his own ingenuity, it simultaneously indicts a culture that prevents African Americans from enjoying that success legitimately. Street could not *be* president, but merely "play" one.

John Guare's play *Six Degrees of Separation* (1990), likewise based on the life of a real black confidence man, asks audiences to consider the connections that bind humanity together in the "world of strangers." The plot centers on the interactions between a wealthy white couple, Flan and Ousia Kittredge, and a young black confidence man named Paul who claims to be the son of acclaimed actor Sidney Poitier. Stumbling wounded into their upper west side apartment, Paul charms the Kittredge's with his knowledge of art, his passion for literature, and his connections with the rich and famous. By playing upon the couple's desires, by turns both sentimental and mercenary, Paul succeeds, not so much monetarily (he earns little more than fifty dollars and a bed for the night) as emotionally, gaining the trust and even the love of his marks. To the Kittredges, Paul initially offers the promise of a knowable world, one in which appearances can be trusted and social structures are stable, but for the audience Paul lights up the real confidence games that run their lives: the gambling at the heart of Flan's art deals, the falsity of the class distinctions around which they structure their desires, the hollowness of racial hierarchy, and the arbitrary, even meaningless, connections that unite them to other members of the human community.

In the monologue that gives the play its title, Ouisa, whose relationship with Paul deepens as the play goes on despite her growing recognition of his deceit, begins to grasp not only that promise of connection but also the ultimate impossibility of an escape from the "world of strangers":

> Six degrees of separation. Between us and everybody else on this planet. The president of the United States. A gondolier in Venice. fill in the names. I find that A) tremendously comforting that we're so close and B) like Chinese water torture that we're so close. Because you have to find the right six people to make the connection … I am bound to everyone on this planet by a trail of six people. It's a profound thought. How Paul found us. How to find the man whose son he pretends to be. Or perhaps is his son, although I doubt it. How every person is a new door, opening up into other worlds. Six degrees of separation between me and everyone else on this planet. But to find the right six people. (*Six Degrees*)

Paul disappears irretrievably into the New York City legal system at the conclusion of the play, but before he does he offers the tantalizing glimpse of a world of connections, always just out of reach for those living in the world of strangers.

John Guare must yield to Eddie Murphy the title of creator of the best-known black confidence men of the twentieth century, however. Eddie Murphy's performances in both *Trading Places* (1983) and *The Distinguished Gentleman* (1992), while less deliberately profound than the black confidence men we find in *Chameleon Street* or *Six Degrees*, nonetheless put the figure to familiar use, critiquing American institutions (the stock market and the Washington political scene respectively), by demonstrating the extent to which each functions like a confidence game. *Trading Places* trains the spotlight on the parallels between

high finance and the confidence game by suggesting that Murphy's character, a black confidence man hustling on the streets disguised as a disabled Vietnam veteran, might easily "trade places" with a high-performing commodities broker without missing a beat; both are really just confidence men, the "legitimate" and "illegitimate" sides of the same coin. The success of Murphy's character in both roles redraws the parallel, already recognized in the nineteenth century, between the stock market and the confidence game; both rely upon the sustained confidence of their participants, and both are vulnerable to the machinations of the confidence man.

In *Distinguished Gentleman*, Murphy plays a Florida confidence man who leaves a profitable racket entrapping local politicians with a phone-sex line to explore the greater opportunities for manipulation and financial gain offered by a position in Washington politics. The profits from the blackmail and extortion racket pale in comparison with the possibilities open to the confidence man in congress. Having succeeded in getting elected by practicing upon the voters' confidence in his name (which happens to be the same as their recently deceased representative), Murphy's character learns the congressional ropes from a white senior member with the improbably Victorian name of Dick Dodge. Dodge, an expert in political confidence games, knows how turn political power into big profit by playing Washington lobbyists against one another. The film suggests that congress is full of politicians like Dodge, men on the make who dupe the American people out of just representation. As in *Trading Places*, Murphy's character has a change of heart that necessitates his playing one last confidence game to expose the corruption at the heart of American politics.

In both *Trading Places* and *Distinguished Gentleman* the confidence man functions as we have seen him do time and again in this dissertation. He turns a bright light on the fragile

structures that govern American life, and once again race is not incidental to that function. In both films much of the humor and tension derives from the fact that Murphy's character has taken the place of a white man. In *Trading Places* he plays an unwitting role in a Pygmalion wager between two rich men who remove a white stockbroker from his position in their company in order to replace him with Murphy, and in *Distinguished Gentleman* he manages to win a seat in congress by appropriating for himself the voters' trust in the previous (white) office holder. The suggestion in both cases is that his position is one he could not have earned under normal circumstances. Like Harris' Street, these black men can only "play" at being stock market moguls and political power brokers; with the doors to legitimate power closed to them, these films seem to say, black men are forced to play the confidence game. That both characters are basically successful in these positions once they have gained them casts in high relief the inherent unfairness of a racist system.

The troubling reverse of this critique is the implication, present to a greater or lesser extent in all the films I have described here, that blacks in positions of power have "traded places" with whites — that any education, expertise, wealth, or power they possess must have been gained illegitimately and at the expense of whites. Accusations of this nature have a long history in American life, from the first doubts expressed regarding the authenticity of individual slave narratives to the ongoing debates regarding race in college admissions. Perhaps the most egregious modern example of this phenomenon has been the infamous "birther" movement that seeks to discredit the legitimacy of President Barack Obama's election by questioning his American citizenship and thus his right to run for the presidency in the first place. At their most extreme, birthers imagine Obama at the heart of a massive conspiracy, a "long con" designed to

win the presidency for a person they perceive as a black confidence man.[149] Despite their obvious absurdity, these accusations go beyond the usual suggestion that all politicians are confidence men to cut to the heart of a contentious conversation about race that Americans have been having for centuries.

In 1996, Stanley Crouch suggested that race was the greatest confidence game at work in the United States, and, indeed, the confidence man and the games he has played in fiction and in fact throughout the history of the United States are, and always have been, intimately connected with our discourse on the subject of race (Crouch, "All-American"). Writers and thinkers from every part of the political and social spectrum have turned to the confidence-man figure to articulate their hopes and anxieties about racial difference in the "world of strangers" and to expose the inherent hypocrisies of American culture. By returning the confidence man to his rightful place at the heart of American racial discourse we move towards a scholarship in which black and white literature and culture are recognized as always already intertwined. The confidence man — black, white, and every shade in between — played and continues to play a vital role in American discourse on the subject of race. Over 150 years have passed since Melville first published *The Confidence-Man*, and yet the problems of race and racial identity we encounter in that work continue to haunt us in our novels, our plays, our films, and our politics. The question remains, how much more will follow of this masquerade?

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[149] Indeed, numerous conservative blogs draw a direct line between the rhetorical tactics used by Murphy's character in *Distinguished Gentleman* and the speeches of the president, forgetting, of course, that Murphy's performance is a parody of actual political discourse and thus bears a natural resemblance to the real thing.

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