Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing by Christopher Hager (review)

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African American Review, Volume 46, Numbers 2-3, Summer/Fall 2013, pp. 546-547 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/afa.2013.0066

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discovery of the conspiracy. In a slave-based society, order is maintained only when authority is preserved, but the kind of response that the state makes in such a situation has very real costs, and genuine, long-term implications for the social order. Both sides in this struggle had to negotiate within their respective arsenal of possibilities, and plan a course of action that would be most effective in their particular cause; yet both sides would also fall victim to the problems and consequences of overreach in this endeavor.

Anyone who wishes to learn more about Gabriel’s Conspiracy should read *Whispers of Rebellion*, as this work is destined to be the definitive text for this incident. Nicholls, as narrator of this historic episode, presents a detailed argument that allows the reader to draw individual conclusions and interpretations with respect to what transpired and why. Students of slave resistance will be mining this work for years to come, in order to draw parallels with other incidents of conspiracy and insurrection. These incidents are already chronicled, but their firm analyses in comparative studies are yet to be written.


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The complex history of enslaved Americans of African descent having achieved literacy but not necessarily a published body of letters is overlooked in the canon of African American studies. Unlike the bellettistic tradition, in which numerous African and African American authors wrote themselves into existence, the unheralded efforts of unlettered slaves have generally eluded significant scholarly attention. One example is the story of Thomas Duckett, a marginally literate man, “who had been sold away from his family in Louisiana.” Missing also is the story of a Virginia slave named Maria Perkins, who struggled to “come to terms with the destruction of her family.” Adam Plummer’s narrative is ignored, yet he kept a “log of his daily life” (8). These are but a few discounted voices that come to light in Christopher Hager’s *Word by Word*.

In combing through a number of letters, diary entries, archived records, and other sources of writing, Hager reveals compelling accounts of enslaved and newly emancipated African Americans achieving literacy though not letters. In *Word by Word*, Hager examined the complex terrain of the African American literacy tradition, highlighting what he calls the “enslaved narrative.” Unlike the escaped-slave narratives of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and others who used their life stories to advance abolition, protest slavery, and achieve humanity through the act of writing, the enslaved narrative celebrated everyday life and the mundane; documented personhood and accomplishment on the parts of those who had learned to read and write; and established what Hager calls a complex “epistolary underground,” in which slaves and free African Americans conversed with one another. “Such rare texts,” he writes, “belong in a category apart from the published, retrospective autobiographies known as fugitive slave narratives” (82). Unlike those who wrote the slave narratives, these African American authors did not seek the light of print; they rather appear preoccupied with maintaining their families and communities.

By Hager’s account, perhaps the best example of this uncelebrated genre can be found in the example of John M. Washington. Born a slave in 1838 in Fredericksburg, Virginia, Washington was taught to read by his mother, Sarah Tucker. In his early
teens, he taught himself to write. In Douglass-like fashion, the Virginia-born man
learned first by convincing “two young white men” to act as his teachers, and second
by way of his literate uncle, George. While Douglass’s narrative stressed the
importance of literacy as a way of achieving manhood and freedom, Washington used
literacy to realize different ends. “Not only,” Hagar explains, “is communication with
his family Washington’s principle motivation to learn to write; it is his connection
with an extended family and a broader social network that enables him to learn” (84).
Using wallpaper as parchment, the slave struggled to master his letters. By age twenty,
he kept a diary. Taking up his pen, he “chronicled parties, gossip, whispers outside
church, and walks through the streets of town with his friends.” When not recording
such everyday things, Washington wrote love letters and flirtatious notes to Annie
Gordon—“a free black girl four years his junior.” Contrary to the form, style, and
the composition of the escaped-slave narrative, the Virginia-born man’s enslaved
narrative “never mentioned forced labor, punishment, separation from his mother,
or any plans for escape” (87), and neither had he mentioned his race or legal status.
Instead, what emerges from Hagar’s Word by Word are a number of compelling
accounts of enslaved and free African Americans achieving literacy and defining their
lives not so much in terms of publication, resistance and agency, but in persevering
from one day to the next.

There does remain a question, however, in Hagar’s discussion of the epistolary
underground, in which slaves and later free African Americans not far removed from
the Civil War corresponded with one another. On October 8, 1852, for example,
a Virginia slave woman named Maria Perkins wrote to her husband Richard, lamenting
the sale of their children. Written in the literary conventions of her day, the fifty-year-
old woman wrote not to protest the institution of slavery, but to grieve with her
beloved the loss of their family. Indeed, “for Perkins, the act of writing provoked
and sharpened that tension” (57). In his analysis of the bereft woman’s hand, diction,
and syntax, Hagar is an inspiration. But in his assumption that slaves were able to
take advantage of the postal system, he appears to overreach a bit. Although the
“dramatic reductions in postage rates encouraged Americans to send letters at
unprecedented rates,” the “volume carried by the U.S. Post Office nearly quadrupled
between 1840 and 1860,” and that Americans of all backgrounds, whether educated
or not, wrote to both relations and acquaintances (58-59), it is doubtful that slaves
and even early free men and women participated in large numbers in the manuscript
culture described. It is perhaps even more doubtful whether these letters actually
reached their intended reader or readers, as many of the letters authored within this
epistolary underground were “poorly written, barely intelligible, [and] mistakenly
addressed” (140). Moreover, by Hagar’s own admission, the expanding tide of literacy
among African Americans following the Civil War was witnessed largely secondhand,
captured either in the pages black newspapers or “described in the more numerous
letters, and especially the published writings, of fellow northerners who had gone
south” (140, 183, 222).

Nevertheless, this fascinating study makes a significant contribution to scholarship
by revealing a broadly neglected aspect of the black experience in the United States.
Word by Word provides that missing part of a larger narrative in which Americans of
African descent achieved literacy and used it to accomplished multiple goals. In other
words, by complicating the trope of the talking book, a tradition of early African
American literature in which slaves made the Western book talk back by writing them-

selfs into existence, Hager’s study unearths the foundation of the black bellettristic
tradition. Word by Word also reveals the very source of the antebellum or slave
narrative. Finally, it uncovers the foundation of the postbellum narrative (perhaps the
most famous being Booker T. Washington’s autobiography, Up from Slavery) as well.
Deft in its analysis, Word by Word is a must-read for those scholars interested in
African American studies and the history of the book in America.