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Aufsatz

The Word Made Flesh

Textual Authority and Mnemonic Literacy in Slave Narratives

Tabish Nabi

Institute of English and American Studies
University of Debrecen
Egyetem tér 1. H-4032 Debrecen
tabishnabimalik@gmail.com

Péter Gaál-Szabó

Department of Foreign Languages
Debrecen Reformed Theological University
Kálvin tér 16. H-4026 Debrecen
gaal.szabo.peter@drhe.hu

Abstract

This article argues that the initial engagement with the Bible was a primary site for exercising religious memory and the assertion of ontological authority in the African American Christian slave narrative tradition. For the authors discussed here, authority is hermeneutically produced through a miraculous or transformative engagement with the Bible, a text that is initially alien but that is mastered through divine intervention. Its acquisition thus becomes an act of fidelity to a complex matrix of religious, cultural, and epistemic inheritance. The tradition also employs textual mastery to negotiate a counter-memory that directly challenges the epistemic violence of slavery. However, the process does not simply operate as resistance; it also enables the continuation and internal evolution of religious self-understanding. In doing so, the written word is transformed into not only an arsenal of self-possession, but also a medium by which identity is maintained, adapted, and reconstituted.
Keywords: slave narratives; religious memory; literacy; Bible; counter-memory; Talking Book trope

Introduction: The Textual Battlefield of Memory

The transatlantic slave trade was manoeuvred to be, among its many horrors, a regime of enforced illiteracy and narrative control. Its logic required the reduction of the human being to a commodity—a process that resulted in "social death" (Patterson 5)—severing linguistic, cultural, and genealogical

ties. Social death is a state of natal alienation where the enslaved person exists without a legally recognized past or lineage (5). Within this system, the written word was predominantly the property of the master class. It served as the medium for deeds of ownership, ledgers of account, and legal codes that codified bondage. For the enslaved, literacy was often a criminalized act. It was often viewed as a threat to the epistemic hierarchy that underpinned the racial order. However, in such contested circumstances, the sacred text of the Bible emerged as a potent and paradoxical site of struggle. To engage with Scripture was to enter a battlefield of memory, where the very tools of subjugation could be repurposed for liberation. As Saidiya Hartman has compellingly argued, the archive of slavery is structured by a history of dispossession in which the recognition of slave sentience functioned less as a remedy than as a complement to chattel property. It is also marked by archival silences that render the subjective consciousness of the enslaved accessible only through dominant representations; a condition that necessitates reading "within and against the constraints and silences imposed by the nature of the archive" (6, 11). The violence of the archive was not only in how slavery was later recorded, but also in how enslaved people were made invisible and objectified. In this context, the act of engaging with the Bible—through the miraculous acquisition of biblical literacy—became a profound political and mnemonic act of resistance. At the same time, it functioned as a process of identity formation and maintenance, through which religious selfhood was sustained, affirmed, and continually reconstituted under the conditions of enslavement. It was an attempt to write oneself back into history and to inscribe a self-authored narrative onto the script of denial. Religious memory, defined here as the dynamic, community-sustaining process by which collective identity is anchored in transcendent narratives through ritual, textual reinterpretation, and commemorative practice, found one of its most potent and personal expressions in this fraught relationship between the enslaved individual and the holy book (Assmann 22; Hervieu-Léger 87).

This paper examines how two Black Christian slave narrators from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries constructed spiritual authority and reconstituted their personal identities through their reported interactions with Scripture. John Jea's narrative offers the starkest instance of miraculous literacy—divine illumination without human intermediary, revealing the nature of the African American use of the textual authority of the Scripture in its purest form. James Gronniosaw's 1770 narrative is the earliest extant slave narrative in English and the founding instance of the "Talking Book" trope, crystallizing black exclusion from textuality as ontological crisis. Building on Maurice Halbwachs's foundational premise that all memory is constructed within specific social frameworks, I argue that these autobiographical narratives present audacious, alternative frameworks—sacred, self-

authorized, and counter-cultural—that actively challenge the condition of systematic negation of selfhood and belonging imposed by the plantation regime (43). For the Christian convert, the Biblical stories functioned as malleable mnemonic schemas in which they inserted their own biographies, creating what Albert Raboteau termed a "theology of imminent deliverance," a lived hermeneutic that transformed ancient scripture into a blueprint for present and future freedom (102).

Before proceeding, a working definition of *literacy* as it operates within this article is necessary. Literacy, here, is not reducible to the mechanical skill of decoding and inscribing alphabetic signs—a competency the slave regime criminalized precisely because it threatened the epistemic hierarchy of bondage. Rather, literacy is defined as a performative, memory-saturated practice of textual engagement through which the enslaved subject claims, preserves, or reconstitutes spiritual authority and ontological selfhood in opposition to the logic of social death. This *transformative literacy*, characteristic of the emerging African American Christian tradition, is a miraculous or divinely mediated acquisition of the Bible that enables a hermeneutic of re-invention, allowing the author to overwrite a past marked by alienation with a new, sacred genealogy. In this sense, literacy transcends mere technique; it becomes a mnemonic tool, a public performance of dignity, and an instrument for forging counter-memory[1] within the archive of captivity.

The Christian slave narrative's relationship to the Bible operates within a distinct and powerful tripartite framework that intertwines hermeneutics, cultural practice, and divine intervention. First, and most fundamentally, it exemplifies what Charles H. Long defines as a "hermeneutics of the oppressed." For Long, Black religion emerges from the "cultural aporia" (7) created by the Middle Passage and slavery, a profound rupture that demanded not merely the preservation of old meanings but the creation of new ones. This hermeneutic is a creative, often subversive, act of reassembling the sacred from the fragments of a shattered cosmology, generating new configurations of meaning that explicitly defy the logic of domination (123,7). The biblical text, in this context, is not a static artifact of orthodoxy but a labile medium to be reshaped in the crucible of lived oppression. The enslaved Christian did not simply receive the Bible; they transfigured it, importing their own experiential knowledge of suffering and hope into its narratives.

Furthermore, the hermeneutic remaking frequently employs the unique African American rhetorical strategy as cultural practice that Henry Louis

[1] By "counter-memory" I refer throughout this article to the deliberate construction and transmission of alternative narratives that challenge dominant, oppressive frameworks of historical understanding. Following Michel Foucault's formulation ("counter-memory" as the transformation of history into a form of struggle), I deploy the term to designate the enslaved subject's strategic redeployment of sacred texts, autobiographical testimony, and mnemonic practice to resist the epistemic violence of the slave regime.

Gates, Jr., theorizes as "Signifyin(g)." Signifyin(g) is a form of meta-discourse, a "repetition with a difference," where a received text or trope is revoiced, reinterpreted, and often slyly subverted (xxiv, 51). It is a linguistic and cultural practice of indirection and critique. When an enslaved preacher interpreted the Exodus not as a distant allegory but as a direct promise of their own liberation, they were Signifyin(g) upon the white minister's spiritualized, otherworldly reading. They seized the master's theological tool and turned it to a purpose he never intended, embedding a coded message of resistance and self-construction within an apparently acquiescent form. This practice transformed biblical interpretation into a site of covert intellectual warfare.

Lastly, the very mechanism enabling this hermeneutic of Signifyin(g)—the acquisition of literacy itself—is often framed in these narratives as a miraculous intervention. In a world where laws forbade teaching slaves to read and where the Bible was used to justify servitude, the sudden, unmediated ability to decipher Scripture could only be explained as a divine incursion into the earthly order. This miracle performs a crucial authorizing function. It bypasses all human hierarchies—the slaveholder's authority, the white church's gatekeeping, the racist assumptions of back intellectual incapacity—and establishes a direct line of authority from God to the enslaved individual. This foundational moment, remembered and narrated, creates what Eddie S. Glaude Jr., in his analysis of Black Exodus politics, calls a "sacred contemporaneity." It collapses the distance between biblical time and the present of bondage, making the promise to ancient Israel feel imminently real and personally applicable (47, 89). The miracle of literacy, therefore, is not just about reading words; it is about being inaugurated into a prophetic timeline, becoming a contemporary of Moses and a claimant to his promise.

John Jea: Divine Illumination and Unmediated Authority

The narrative of John Jea, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher (c. 1815)*, stands as the most extreme and spectacular exemplar of this miraculous literacy trope. Jea, born in what is now Nigeria and enslaved in New York, presents his acquisition of literacy not as a learned skill, painstakingly and perilously acquired, but as a supernatural event—a direct, unmediated, and instantaneous bestowal of grace. This moment is the epistemological and theological cornerstone of his entire identity as a preacher. After describing his intense, despairing prayer for the ability to read the Bible for himself, Jea recounts:

> In the midst of my prayer, I felt my heart melt before the Lord, like wax before the fire… and in that same moment, I received strength to read the Bible; every word appeared with divine light…I could now read the Bible, a book which I had never read before, nor ever

> had been taught to read, so that I was able to read the Bible from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelations. (Jea 56–57)

This passage is dense with mnemonic and theological significance. In Jan Assmann's terms, it operates first within the register of communicative memory—the intimate, testimonial mode through which a living witness transmits experience to a proximate community—before being strategically elevated into collective memory, the shared, identity consolidating mode through which singular biographical events are claimed by a community as its own own founding experience, grounding its sense of solidarity, legitimacy and purpose (Assmann 36–40). For Jea, the memory of this moment serves as the origin story of his prophetic authority. It is worth noting that this event is spatially anchored in a room—not a church or a field, but an enclosed private space. In the context of enslavement, the room constituted not the only remaining geography of interiority available to the enslaved subject. The room, illuminated suddenly by divine light, functions in the narrative as a threshold or liminal space in Victor Turner's sense: a site of radical transformation suspended between the social order of bondage and the sacred order about to be claimed (95).

The room in which this occurs is not merely a backdrop; it is the argument's spatial dimension, and it demands more than Turner's liminality can supply alone. Mircea Eliade's concept of the *axis mundi*—the point at which the vertical axis between the divine and the mundane is suddenly opened, transforming profane enclosure into sacred center—describes precisely what Jea's room becomes the moment "every word appeared with divine light" (36–37). For Eliade, "any place can become a center of the world" (43), and the theological scandal of that claim, in the context of American slavery, is that the master's architecture cannot foreclose it. The room intended for surveillance becomes, through hierophany, the most sovereign space in the narrative. This inversion resonates directly with the practice scholars of African American religion have called "stealing away"—the deliberate withdrawal into marginal, hidden, or domestic spaces to conduct worship beyond the master's sight. Albert Raboteau documents how "brush arbors, swamps, and private rooms became the invisible institution's sacred geography, claimed precisely because they were unsanctioned" (212), and Stephanie Camp further argues that such spatial seizures constituted "a rival geography," a systematic counter-mapping of the plantation's architecture of control (7). Jea's room participates in exactly this tradition— "I went by myself" he notes, marking the deliberate, covert withdrawal—but his narrative elevates it further: the secluded room does not merely shelter prayer, it becomes an *axis mundi*, the threshold through which divine address descends, and the enslaved man kneeling within it occupies, at that moment, the center of the universe the racial order had declared him unfit to inhabit.

Furthermore, the formal structure of Jea's encounter (an angelic visitation, the flooding of the room with supernatural light, the direct transmission of literacy through vision rather than instruction) cannot be understood solely within Protestant revivalist frameworks. Jea was born in Old Calabar in the Bight of Biafra in present-day Nigeria, a region with deep-rooted traditions of visionary epistemology in which dreams and spirit mediators function as primary vehicles of spiritual authorization (Olupona, 47–48). The form of his encounter—what he receives, how he receives it, and through whom—bears the structural imprint of the West African traditions of spirit encounter grafted onto the African American grammar of Baptist revivalism. This is not a mere coincidence of form, but what Robert Baird has called a "syncretic negotiation," in which subjugated religious epistemologies survive by inhabiting the sanctioned language of the dominant tradition (142).

The "divine light" is both a powerful metaphor and a claimed phenomenological reality—an illumination that simultaneously reveals the meaning of the text and the truth of his own elected soul. This moment must be situated within the broader religious climate of the late eighteenth century; a period historians identify as the early stirrings of the Second Great Awakening (c. 1795–1835). This period transformed American Protestantism through its emphasis on direct personal encounter with the divine, emotional conversion experience, and the radical democratization of spiritual authority beyond institutional hierarchies (Hatch 9–11). The Baptist and Methodist traditions, which saw explosive growth during this period, were particularly hospitable to visions, dreams, and unmediated divine encounter as markers of genuine conversion—precisely the experiential grammar Jea employs in narrating his literacy miracle. As Nathan Hatch has argued, the religious culture of this moment made "the people" rather than the clergy the primary locus of spiritual authority, a democratization that African American preachers like Jea seized and revolutionized (11). The experience eradicates the need for any human teacher, positioning Jea's understanding as purer, more direct, and therefore more authoritative than that of the formally educated white clergy.

To understand the full scope of his self-positioning, one must situate him within the rapidly transforming landscape of Black religious life in New York, where, by the late eighteenth century, African American parishioners had begun withdrawing from white Methodist congregations in response to systematic discrimination, laying the institutional groundwork for independent Black ecclesiastical life (Hodges, 12–14). It is within this moment of Black denominational self-formation—not after it—that Jea emerges as a preacher, inhabiting the gap left by institutional exclusion and filling it with a self-authorized voice. His autobiography's very title, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher, Compiled and Written by Himself*, performs this authority before a single argument is

made: the phrase "written by himself" is not only a bibliographic detail but a counter-claim, announcing that this subject commands the very tradition of letters that slavery had sought to deny him. The performative dimension extends into the congregative narratives themselves, which are structured less as memoir than as transcribed sermon— testimony, scriptural citation, communal address, and exhortation following one another in the rhythmic call-and-response logic that Evans Crawford has identified as the defining "homiletical musicality" of the Black preaching tradition, itself rooted in West African oral epistemology (Crawford, 20–22). Jea models his itinerant ministry explicitly on the Pauline missionary journeys, using Boston and New York as his Jerusalem and preaching across two continents (Hodges 17)—a typological self-positioning of considerable theological cunning, as Paul is precisely the apostle whose authority derived not from institutional proximity but from a sudden, unmediated visionary encounter on the road to Damascus.

Jea's subsequent deployment of the miraculously acquired literacy is aggressively polemical and constitutes a textbook example of Signifyin(g) reversal. He describes seeking out and challenging white ministers on their own doctrinal ground "I asked them several questions out of the Scriptures, which they could not answer… Thus, the Lord made me instrumental in confounding the wise and the learned, and those that thought themselves wise, and took upon them to teach others" (Jea 62). In this passage, the social and racial hierarchy is overturned through textual mastery. The enslaved African, legally and culturally presumed to be ignorant, becomes the master of the text, "confounding" the white "wise and the learned." His authority is derived entirely from the memory of divine intervention, making him impervious to challenges based on race, status, or formal education.

As Yvonne Sherwood observes in her work on subversive biblical interpretation, such acts constitute a deliberate "revolt against dominant hermeneutics by wresting sacred texts from their oppressors' hands" (156). Jea's narrative memory of the miracle thus becomes the unassailable cornerstone of his identity. He is no longer merely John Jea, enslaved man; he is John Jea, "not an American, but […] a poor black African, a preacher of the gospel" (Jea 90), a vessel chosen by God and authorized by a personal Pentecost of the written word. This self-construction is a powerful rebuke to his legal status as chattel, a mnemonic act that overwrites the master's narrative with a divine one.

The invocation of Pentecost is not rhetorical decoration but theological precision. In Acts 2, the disciples gathered in an enclosed space receive the Holy Spirit as sudden irruption—wind, fire, and the miraculous gift of new tongue, transforming private subjects into public witnesses empowered to speak across every boundary of language and nation (Acts 2:2–4). Jea's room replicates this structure exactly: divine flooding, bodily transformation, and overflow into unprecedented communicative capacity. As Dwight Hopkins has argued, in Black theological tradition the experience of being filled with

the Spirit is constitutively inseparable from the production of prophetic public speech—divine indwelling and communal proclamation are two faces of a single event (96–98). The autobiography is therefore not merely a record of the Spirit's arrival but its ongoing enactment—the written page as the continued performance of being filled that, once started, never concludes.

Yet the spirit-filling Jea describes exceeds the Protestant typological framework that contains it. In West African religious traditions, a spiritually gifted person receives divine knowledge through visionary or intuitive means and interprets it for personal and communal instruction—spirit possession functioning not as ecstatic loss of self but as the reconstitution of the self into a vessel of sacred communal authority (Olupona, 47–48). Jea was born in Old Calabar in the Bight of Biafra, a region saturated with precisely these traditions of visionary epistemology in which divine spirit-filling is itself the mechanism of authorization. Albert Raboteau confirms that such West African structures survived the Middle Passage and continued to animate Black religious experience in the Americas, even when clothed in the grammar of evangelical Christianity (Raboteau 11–16). Jea's melting heart, flooding light, and sudden overflow into literacy are the vocabulary of Baptist revivalism; the deep structure they encode— divine spirit-filling as the communal reauthorization of a self that slavery had sought to reduce to property— is irreducibly West African.

It is at this convergence that Jea's text becomes most theoretically legible. Paul Christopher Johnson has argued that Afro-Atlantic possession events functioned as "ritual events by which the thingification of people was revised"—the very logic by which enslavement reduced persons to fungible property being ontologically overturned through divine indwelling (Johnson 3). Jea's autobiography is the written evidence of precisely this revision: the text does not merely narrate the spirit-filling but performs it, before every new reader, constituting what Vincent Wimbush has called the enslaved subject's radical redeployment of scripture as a "language of self-authorization against the dehumanizing authority of the master" (Wimbush, 8). He is no longer a vessel that slavery can empty and refill at will; he is a vessel already occupied—claimed by a divine authority before whom chattel law is simply without jurisdiction.

James Albert Gronniosaw: The "Talking Book" and the Yearning for Textual Power

An earlier, equally poignant model for the transformative engagement is found in the 1770 narrative of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince*. His story famously encapsulates

what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., identifies as the "Talking Book" trope, a primal scene of the African subject's encounter with Western textuality that symbolizes the immense social and spiritual power embedded in literacy (127–169). As András Tarnóc observes, the trope "refers to an encounter of the subjugated or colonized subject with the religious and cultural artifacts of the Euro-American or European colonizer," in which "a common scene involves the pagan or non-Christian slave or Indian who witnesses a European (Anglo) reading or praying with a Bible in hand" (Tarnóc 61). The force of this encounter, as Tarnóc rightly insists, is not merely cultural but deeply psychological: the slave's inability to make the book talk results in a crisis that is simultaneously epistemic and ontological—by which is meant a crisis not merely of social standing but of being itself, a collapse of the enslaved subject's claim to exist as a person recognized by the divine order that the book embodies.

Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial ontology is instructive here: the slave system did not merely oppress but attempted to define the enslaved subject out of full humanity altogether, producing what Fanon calls "a zone of non-being" from which the colonized person must wrest a self (2). Gronniosaw's encounter with the silent book is precisely such a moment of non-being: the presumed refusal of the text to speak is experienced not as a practical obstacle but as a cosmic confirmation of his exclusion from the order of recognized subjects. The book does not simply fail to talk; it performs a refusal, and that refusal is experienced by Gronniosaw as ratified by the universe itself.

Gronniosaw describes his youthful fascination and confusion upon observing his Dutch master read:

> I was never so surprised in my whole life as when I saw the book talk to my master; for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips.—I wished it would do so to me.—As soon as my master had done reading I follow'd him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I open'd it and put my ear down close upon it, in great hope that it wou'd say something to me; but was very sorry and greatly disappointed when I found it would not speak, this thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing despis'd me because I was black. (Gronniosaw 12)

The passage is the founding instance of the trope, and Gronniosaw's failure to engage the text "results in a psychological crisis and an eclipse of self-esteem," evidenced most sharply in the concluding line (Tarnóc 61). What the line reveals is that to be spoken to by the book is not simply to acquire a skill; it is to be admitted into the community of those whom the book—and by extension the God behind it—recognizes as legitimate interlocutors. Literacy, in this context, is the threshold condition for full cultural and spiritual personhood. To be denied the book's speech is therefore to be denied the possibility of recognition as a subject—a person with interiority, standing, and

a soul addressed by the divine. The crisis Gronniosaw suffers is accordingly ontological in the precise sense: it is a crisis about what kind of being he is permitted to be.

Yet to take "talking" at its most literal is to impoverish what Gates's trope anatomizes. Gates himself is careful to insist that the trope operates on multiple registers simultaneously. At its most fundamental level, he argues, it encodes "the difference that obtains between the oral and the written" as the governing social and racial divide of the slave system, so that possession of the book and the ability to make it speak becomes the master sign of cultural authority (131). But Gates' formulation carries a further implication that critics have extended in productive directions. Houston Baker argues that for the enslaved subject, gaining access to literacy was not merely an intellectual achievement but an act of "self-possession"—a claiming of the self as property of oneself rather than of another (31). This means the book "talking" to its possessor is simultaneously a declaration: I am a subject who owns his own voice. Dwight Conquergood, whose reading Tarnóc draws on, extends this further by noting that the "Talking Book" encodes the eighteenth-century practice of elocution—the oral performance of written text—as a site of social power, so that the master reading the Bible aloud occupies "a domain between the printed and spoken word, or speech and writing," performing authority for a listening slave who is denied participation in that performance (Tarnóc 66, citing Conquergood 147). Keith Byerman adds a third dimension, arguing that in the slave narrative tradition the act of making the text speak is inseparable from the construction of a narrating self: "the ability to read and write becomes the sign of humanity, a proof that the self exists as more than body" (8). Taken together, these critical positions suggest that "talking" in Gates's trope carries at least three distinct but interlocking meanings: the book talks *to* its reciever addressing and singularizing him as a recognized interlocutor; it talks *with* him, sharing a symbolic code and a cultural universe from which the enslaved have been systematically excluded; and it talks *through* a higher instrumentality, functioning as the conduit of divine speech so that to hear the Bible talk is to be directly addressed by God. Each of these senses represents a different register of the same fundamental claim—that the enslaved subject is a being worthy of address, recognition, and inclusion.

This is where the specifically African American stakes of the trope become most visible. To be talked *to* by the book is not only a private spiritual event; it is an act of inclusion into the cultural and hermeneutical community that the book constitutes. Gates's theory of Signifyin(g) is relevant here: the African American literary tradition does not simply absorb the dominant culture's texts but enters a conversation with them, revising and reappropriating their authority (44–88). The slave who finally hears the book speak enters, for the first time, into that conversation—ceases to be a mute observer

of others' literacy and becomes a participant in the discursive community the text founds. The process is therefore one of subjectivation in the fullest sense: not merely the acquisition of a skill but the constitution of a self through being addressed. Gronniosaw is not the same being after the book talks to him as he was before, because his ontological status—his standing as a subject before God, before the text, and before the community the text underwrites—has been irrevocably altered. Furthermore, to understand the book—to make it talk in the third and deepest sense—is to enter into a relation of active interpretation, what Tarnóc, following Bhabha, identifies as the occupation of a Third Space: a position neither fully inside nor fully outside the dominant culture's symbolic order, but actively negotiating the terms of one's own inclusion (67). The slave who reads, hears, and comprehends Scripture has not simply joined the master's culture; he has entered it on his own hermeneutical terms, making the text mean something the master's reading could not exhaust or contain.

Tarnóc draws explicitly on Homi Bhabha's concept of the Third Space to describe what this position involves. For Bhabha, the Third Space is "that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of cultures have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (Bhabha 55). Applied to Gronniosaw's encounter with Scripture, this means that the Bible—a text encoded by and for the dominant culture—is not a fixed, closed system of meaning that the enslaved subject must either accept wholesale or reject entirely. It is rather a site of contested signification, one whose meanings can be entered, inhabited, and redirected. The Third Space is therefore neither the master's reading nor a wholly separate counter-reading; it is the productive in-between where both are put under pressure and something new becomes possible. Tarnóc is precise about the social consequence of this occupation: "the slave attempting to read or interpret the given text or compelling the book to talk is removed from his erstwhile marginality, and occupies a Third Space between the positions of an illiterate representative of an oral culture and that of the Euro-American or Anglo civilization based on writing" (67). What this means for Gronniosaw specifically is that his movement from silent observer to hearing participant—from the slave who puts his ear to the silent page to the convert who tastes the sweetness of the Word—is not a simple assimilation into the master's culture but an entry into a new position that was not available to either party before the encounter. He does not become his master; he becomes a new kind of subject, one who possesses the master's text but reads it from a position the master never occupied. This layered sense of "talking"—address, shared code, divine instrumentality, and the constitution of a new subject through being spoken to—is what early Black Christian narrators would spend their textual lives

claiming as their own entitlement, redeploying the very authority structure of the trope against its original racial gatekeeping.

The process by which that claim was authenticated is inseparable from the mnemonic work of religious memory, and Gronniosaw's own narrative supplies the most intimate record of it. The critical passage is not the famous scene of watching his master read, but what follows when Gronniosaw himself first encounters Scripture directly. He recounts that upon hearing the Gospel preached, "the word of God was sweet to my taste, it was sweeter than honey; and I was convinced that it was the truth" (Gronniosaw 26). The echo of Psalm 119:103—"sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb"—is not incidental; it is the precise mechanism of authentication. Gronniosaw does not merely accept a doctrinal proposition; he absorbs the language of the Psalm so fully that his own spiritual sensation and the biblical text become indistinguishable. The Book has finally talked to him, and the proof is that he can now speak its words from the inside. This is what one might call typological self-inscription—the narrator places himself inside Scripture's speaking structure and thereby acquires the hermeneutical standing to assert: this text speaks *for* me and *to* me, not only to my master. Vincent Wimbush confirms this, arguing that for enslaved Christians, the Bible functioned not as a fixed doctrinal authority but as a "world of signs" that could be reappropriated into a counter-discourse, so that the act of claiming textual comprehension was simultaneously a claim to full human and spiritual standing (8). This deepens further when Gronniosaw describes his conversion experience in terms of direct divine address: "I found my heart very much affected, and I was so overcome that I could not refrain from weeping" (Gronniosaw 27), a response that in the evangelical grammar of the period marks the moment of personal election—the moment God's voice, mediated through Scripture, singles out the individual soul. To be addressed by the text is to be made legible to God, and to be made legible to God is to be made legible to history, which is precisely what Gronniosaw's published narrative performs. Phillis Wheatley's near-contemporary performance of this same move—mobilizing Scripture's address back at those who would deny her its full promise—confirms that Gronniosaw's authentication strategy was not idiosyncratic but the founding gesture of an emergent tradition. The Talking Book, once it talks to you, makes you a witness, and the witness's testimony, properly transcribed, becomes itself a text that talks.

Such memory of textual alienation and yearning establishes a critical before-and-after narrative arc that structures the spiritual autobiography of many early Black Christians. The acquisition of literacy (and the Christian faith it mediates) marks a decisive passage from a state of lack—often rhetorically associated with an African past framed as "heathen"—to a state of grace, comprehension, and inclusion. It is worth pausing here to note what this structure conceals as much as it reveals: the before-state, the African self

who cannot make the book talk, is necessarily constructed retrospectively, shaped by the demands of the conversion narrative genre and its anticipated white readership. The very eloquence with which Gronniosaw renders his scriptural naivete is itself evidence of his full mastery of the textual culture he claims to have been excluded from—a paradox that the narrative both exploits and cannot entirely resolve.

However, as Vincent Brown cautions, we must read such self-presentations with critical nuance. Narrators like Gronniosaw often strategically framed their African backgrounds as spiritual voids to appeal to the expectations of white evangelical audiences and sponsors, a performance of memory that, while potentially compromising, nonetheless served to authorize their new Christian selves (15). Tarnóc similarly notes that Gronniosaw's narrative was "dictated to a literate white woman," committed to paper by what the text itself calls "the elegant Pen of a young LADY," so that the very material conditions of the text's production already embed the mediation of the dominant culture—making Gronniosaw's testimony at once an act of self-authorization and a negotiation with the very power structure the "Talking Book" trope describes (Tarnóc 61, 68). Gronniosaw's later, fervent Christianity and his ability to finally "hear" the Bible speak to him—to have it "talk" to him as it did to his master—completes this transformative arc. His narrative memory thus charts a personal journey of conquest: the silent, alien, and powerful textual object of the master is gradually demystified and ultimately claimed as his own, becoming the speaking voice of his own God. This personal spiritual conquest mirrors the larger, collective project of mnemonic re-worlding undertaken by enslaved Christians, who absorbed the symbolic world of the Bible and remade it in their own image.

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