
Where did it all begin? Or, more precisely, where did the history of the enslavement of Africans in North America begin? According to the historical record, 1619 marks the year Africans set foot on North American soil for the first time. Which words adequately describe this moment in the new Virginia colony? They “landed” on the Virginian shores? They “arrived”? They “were landed” in the English colony? The record—a letter by a John Rolf to a Sir Edwin Sandys, then treasurer of the Royal Virginia Company of London—reads as follows:

> About the latter end of August, a Dutch man of Warr of the burden of a 160 tunnes arriued at Point-Comfort […] He brought not any thing but 20. and odd Negroes, w ch the Governo’ and Cape Marchant bought for victualls (whereof he was in greate need as he pretended) at the best and easiest rates they could. (“John Rolf Reports”)

The letter, documenting the initial presence of Africans in Virginia, frames these human beings as fungible things, traded for food or other provisions for the colonists. They are turned into objects bought and sold in a large, complex scheme of transatlantic mobility and commercial exchange involving various geographical points in Europe, West Africa, the Caribbean, and North America. While the records of the historical archive are scant, to say the least, it gives a glimpse into the fact that some people acted as agents while others were assigned positions completely divesting them of any such agency. Four hundred years on, in the year 2019, the work of museum curators, journalists, educators, and scholars who have been following the traces of 1619 is fueling debates around the repercussions and meaning of this moment for the United States and elsewhere. The “1619 Project,” a thoroughly researched and finely choreographed undertaking by the *New York Times* that includes various genres and media and serves as an excellent teaching resource, is perhaps the most publicly visible endeavor to recast the record, not only specifically in terms of the question posed above—when does the history of enslavement of Africans begin in North America—but more generally in terms of the founding moments of the nation. The stakes are high, as this feat of journalistic strength seeks to replace symbolically charged points in the national narrative, such as the year 1776, with 1619:

> The 1619 Project is a major initiative from The New York Times observing the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery. It aims to reframe the country’s history, understanding 1619 as our true founding, and placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are. (“The 1619 Project”)

While this debate takes center stage as I am writing these lines, the book under review here, Brian Yothers’s *Reading Abolition*, examines another, closely related debate that asks what seems to be the opposite question: how have scholars assessed the legacy of those who contributed to bringing the apparatus of enslavement in the United States to its de jure end in 1865? When and how did enslavement end?

Yothers’s two principal agents in bringing about abolition are figures who straddle fine lines between the spheres of literary accomplishment and political
activism. First, Harriet Beecher Stowe, the white female writer whose novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) made her white readers feel for the suffering of the enslaved to the extent that contemporaries suggested her mobilization of sentimental feelings contributed decisively to the abolitionist movement. Abraham Lincoln is famously, if only allegedly, quoted for commenting on Stowe in 1862 as “the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war!” (Weinstein 1). And second, Frederick Douglass, the formerly enslaved author and abolitionist campaigner, whose autobiographical *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) is among the best-known texts that fueled the movement partly because it related the terrors of enslavement to its readers from the authoritative position of someone who had been enslaved himself. Both figures are of course best-known for their monumental works, but Yothers does not stop short of reclaiming them as authors of oeuvres that extend far beyond these two signature texts. While it is Yothers’s central objective to trace how Stowe’s and Douglass’s bodies of writings “have been interpreted and reinterpreted over time [... and] have helped to create and enable modes of literary production in other authors that have likewise been reimagined and reinterpreted” (2), he in effect expands the base on which they both stand as two towering figures of nineteenth-century American literary and cultural history. His discourse-analytical approach to the history of the critical reception of both authors’ works results in a recasting of Stowe as a significant poet and non-fiction writer, the value of whose texts he locates in their treatment of nineteenth-century American religious culture, and in an argument for reestablishing Douglass as a major orator and journalist as well as a literary figure.

What Yothers lays out to his own readers, in brief, is a teleological narrative of scholarship, according to which reading publics and academic communities moved from revering or despising the works of Stowe and Douglass as politically fraught but lacking in literary merit to showing nuance by juxtaposing and synthesizing questions of political efficacy and aesthetic value. The individual chapters provide concise summaries of relevant scholarship and thus provide a helpful addition to anyone working in abolitionist literature and its status in American literature more broadly. Yothers, to be sure, draws out differences in the reception of his protagonists’ material. Dedicating four chapters to Stowe and only two to Douglass, however, leads Yothers to clearly privilege the former. This is largely due to the manifold controversies surrounding *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the questions the novel raises about how assessments of literary significance can be related to those of sociopolitical impact. The discussion of the novel’s fluctuating criticism thus takes up half of Yothers’s study. He traces the book’s early moments of success and praise, its dismissal as either too unapologetically anti-enslavist or too white supremacist, and its recent canonical status as an important piece of social reform literature and object of Gender and Critical Race Studies as well as Cultural History. The recovery of Douglass as a writer, whose entire body of work should be studied, Yothers claims, for combining “political genius” with a “gift for narrative and metaphor” (4-5), is more straightforward. Overall and most importantly, Yothers reenacts the nineteenth-century disciplinary formation of bibliography in the best sense of the term, providing a systematic description of the scholarly works’ arguments.

The book left me thinking about a number of points. One is methodological and concerns the possibilities of discourse analysis: how does a study that seeks to review historical trajectories of critical reception grapple with its own standards of judgment? This question already arises in the introduction to the book. The reception of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, according to Yothers, does not do
justice to Uncle Tom as a “physically imposing, intellectually agile, and spiritually profound man” and an “intelligent, Christ-like autodidact who modeled dignified, nonviolent resistance” (2). This passage suggests that there is a ‘correct’ reading of the title-giving character of Stowe’s book, and taking this position necessitates that Yothers ultimately give up the standpoint of a descriptive discourse-analytical reconstruction in favor of setting standards of interpretation himself—standards with which many of those critics whose “misperceptions” (2) he analyzes might in turn fervently disagree.

Another point concerns the effects of Yothers’s decision to weigh two distinct authors, and here I am not only referring to what could be read as an unequal distribution of attention to two foci that are ultimately merged into a single monograph which is conceptualized as a dual yet unitary study. The problem inherent in such a choice is made so eloquently by Black feminist scholars such as Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbary Smith, whose injunction lent their 1982 edited volume its title: *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave*. As a published study of the reception of two authors—which is a study primarily of the dynamics that facilitated their canonization as two significant members of American cultural history—Yothers’s monograph contributes to canonizing these authors, leaving others out of the equation. The book is a result of choosing certain authors over others. To name only the most famous of Black women’s slave narratives: what about Harriet Ann Jacobs and her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861)? Her name as well as Jacobs scholar Jean Fagan Yellin’s are mentioned only in passing in Yothers’s book. Jacobs did not even make it into the index of the book reviewed here. Yothers’s statement that “critical attention to women as authors of slave narratives was practically nonexistent” (167) is corroborated through his own narrative.

My third and most critical point concerns how Yothers sees himself as reclaiming both Stowe and Douglass as “writers of genius” (168). As much as his intention to “recover this term from its connections with white male supremacy” (186) deserves approbation, I take issue with this agenda. Framing these authors as geniuses leaves the basic assumptions expressed in the term intact—that they are isolated from their discursive surroundings, that they are solitary author figures, autonomous in creating their works. But that is precisely what they are not; numerous scholars would object to casting them this way (Yothers included, I assume). Stowe and Douglass were situated in webs of social relations, active among diverse and shifting groups of contemporaries. And during their lifetimes and after, their public personae were made in relation to their collaborators, critics, and communities. Yothers himself stresses this point: “Like Stowe, Douglass must ultimately be viewed as part of a network of wider movements in order to be understood accurately” (164). By claiming them as geniuses, Yothers ultimately undermines his own agenda of situating them as nodal points of critical reception that turn them into the figures which served and still serve their critics’ own interests so well.

A key lesson to take away from Yothers’s study involves the conclusions he draws from reviewing scholarship regarding Douglass: “once Douglass starts to be considered at length as an orator and journalist as well as an autobiographer, the disciplinary borderline between literary studies and history, political science, philosophy, religious studies, and African American and American Studies broadly construed becomes increasingly porous” (167). To me, this conclusion sounds a passionate call for interdisciplinary research. Only scholarship done at the interface of different fields can adequately acknowledge the complexity of the material at hand.
While Stowe and Douglass worked toward a world that would put an end to the enslavement of human beings, Yothers acknowledges that “our own reality runs behind the highest of their moral and aesthetic aspirations” (169). Others might go yet a step further to argue that the apparatus of enslavement never ended but only morphed into the Jim Crow laws of the post-Reconstruction era and from there on to today, translated in the United States into race-regulating and race-generating spheres, such as the current criminal justice system, the educational system, and the topography of American towns and cities. When and how did de jure enslavement end? Yes. But also—to return to the “1619 Project”—where did it all begin, and what is its legacy after 1865? Yothers, in his exploration of this legacy, paradoxically reifies some of the stereotypes that he aims to counter, which illustrates the need for interdisciplinary work that embraces complexity. Crossing disciplinary borders, however, not only adds nuance; it can also make new limitations, such as those of the concept of genius, visible.

**Works Cited**


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