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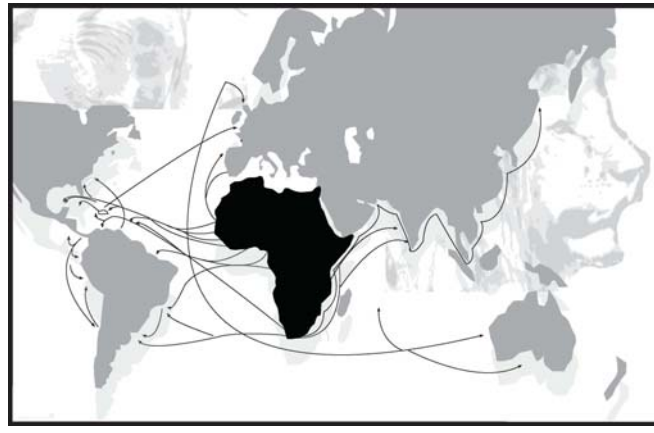
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The Deliverance of Henry “Box” Brown

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Abstract

“The Deliverance of Henry ‘Box’ Brown”

While *The Narrative of Henry “Box” Brown* has enjoyed a renewed interest in African American studies, few scholars have focused on the particular method of Brown’s escape from slavery to freedom—his overnight shipment by Adams Express from Richmond to Philadelphia—or the humor of his story. This paper argues that Brown’s initial celebrity is inextricably intertwined with public enthusiasm for rapid, reliable, and inexpensive mail delivery in antebellum America (notably in the abolitionist community) and with the daily comedy of the postman’s blindness to the contents of the mail.

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Introduction

On March 29 1849, in Richmond, Virginia, a 34-year old, 200-pound slave named Henry Brown asked two acquaintances to pack him in a box, “three feet one inch long, two feet six inches deep, and two feet wide,” carry it to the Express office, and ship it to Philadelphia. They did and he arrived alive 27 hours later with a new name and a marketable story. The response to “Box” Brown’s *Narrative of the Life of Henry “Box” Brown*, published months later (with the help of ghostwriter Charles Stearns), can be characterized as overwhelming but short-lived. Brown immediately set out on a speaking tour, describing his escape and jumping out of his famous box. In 1850 Brown and a partner added a spectacular moving panorama, “The Mirror of Slavery,” depicting the horrors of slavery and the slave trade. The panorama became increasingly extravagant through a two-year tour in England, but still featured a skit of Brown emerging from his box. After an ugly split with his partner in 1851, Brown also parted ways with many of his anti-slavery supporters. Audiences dropped off. By 1855, Brown’s story was largely forgotten.

Discussion

In the last dozen years, “Box” Brown has re-emerged to enjoy a kind of academic second act in African American Studies. Recent books and articles by, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Richard Newman, John Ernest, Jeffrey Ruggles, Daphne Brooks, Marcus Wood, and Cynthia Griffin Wolff celebrate the rich symbolism of deliverance in “Box” Brown’s story. As Gates writes in his forward to a recent edition of Brown’s *Narrative*, the appeal of the tale

“stems, in part, from the fact that Brown made literal much that was implicit in the symbolism of enslavement....Brown *names* this symbolic relation between death and life by having himself confined in a virtual casket. He ‘descends’ in what must have been a hellacious passage of the train ride—sweltering, suffocating, claustrophobic, unsanitary, devoid of light, food, and water—only to be resurrected twenty-seven hours later in the heavenly city of freedom and brotherly love that Philadelphia represented.” (1851 ix-x)¹

Richard Newman states that the “second major trope in Brown’s confinement and emergence,” this one “transformed to the point of reversal,” is the Middle Passage: “[u]nmercifully packed together in sailing ships, Africans were pressed into enclosures little more than living tombs...nonhuman products for the commodity market, they were crammed into spaces designed only to maximize numbers and profits. The result was hell” (1851, xxx). Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues that Brown chose his small box “with as keen an eye for the economies of space as the most mercenary slave captain” (27). Marcus Wood states that Brown’s “imprisonment” was “a symbolic entombment of the soul of every slave, in a state of bondage,” while his emergence was “the American spirit emerging from the moral entombment of slavery (110). Daphne Brooks suggests that Brown “exemplifies the role of the alienated and dislocated black fugitive subject” in the antebellum era (67). Brooks and Wood (and to some extent Ernest) read Brown’s confinement as a metaphor for the rigid roles and categories that white abolitionists imposed on fugitive black slaves and their narratives.

To be sure, Brown’s tale has always invited grandiloquent allegorizing—he is a Lazarus, a Houdini, a jack-in-the-box, “a large black man unfolding from a little wooden crate like some genie from a bottle” (Wolff 27). Yet, the Middle Passage was not evoked in the contemporary record, even while news articles describe the halls that he initially played to in America and England as “tightly packed almost to suffocation” (Fisch, 119).² To state the obvious, confinement is not the same thing as slavery, as the audiences that came to see Brown jump out of his box surely recognized. The initial burst of enthusiasm for his story was not sustained by the high-tech (for its time) moving panorama.³ Scholars have accounted for his loss of Brown’s popularity by surmising that the iconoclastic visuals too bluntly challenged the banality of tepid white abolitionist rhetoric and that Brown, a well-dressed showman, wore too much jewelry for his pious supporters’ taste. These theories do not explain Brown’s initial appeal, however, which is the fact that his story is *funny*, or at least highly entertaining. It is “the potent slapstick of the triumphant underdog” Wood admits (109).

Humor does not always sit well in the midst of an anti-slavery discourse designed to provoke sympathy and outrage. The appeal of an escape narrative lies in the

description of stealth, close calls, daring risks, and shows of bravery. The appeal of a story about jumping out of a box is a matter of someone being surprised, moving from unawareness to seeing the obvious. *The Narrative of Henry “Box” Brown* may be written as an escape drama but it can’t escape the comedy. Brown’s addition of potent visuals of slave suffering to his show—“an expansive spectacle that unmasked America’s self-serving hypocrisies,” as Wolf puts it⁴—clearly works against the humor of the tale. The express shipping scenes take place largely outside the slaveholding South: the story could be about any person traveling anywhere in a box and still be entertaining. Further still, the dupes in Brown’s story—the Express workers—are not his real adversaries; they are essentially just mailmen doing their job.

In the mid-nineteenth-century, Americans wanted reliable and confidential mail and parcel systems. During the Gold Rush era especially, prospectors and merchants wanted carriers who were not curious about the heavy boxes they were loading. Brown credits divine inspiration for his escape, but his survival depended upon dupes—or, more precisely, upon a swift transportation system that rewarded efficient workers over curious ones. It is not quite accurate to say that Brown mailed himself to freedom: not even mailmen deliver their own letters. Rather, in 1849 a complex system was in place by which a 250-pound crate could be transported from Richmond to Philadelphia in a little more than twenty-four hours.⁵ The system functioned as it should; the crate arrived in Philadelphia in twenty-seven hours. Brown’s audiences most likely came partly to gape at an auspicious marvel: an overnight package.

The balance of this paper will resituate “Box” Brown’s narrative in the context of affordable and confidential mail and parcel delivery in antebellum America, particularly in the South. I argue that staking claims for Brown’s long (and perhaps deserved) obscurity on abolitionist piety or indifference to slavery is not merely a matter of viewing the story of his decline through a glass darkly, but also indicative of the general tendency in critical studies to read texts through lenses rather than to see the obvious. Too often literary critics privilege ideological and superstructural causation over mundane, material agency. The Adams Express mail workers are both the suckers and the unsung stars of Brown’s narrative. Neither Wood nor Wolff mentions Adams Express more than once in discussing Brown’s story; Wood does not list Adams Express in his index. Brooks

mistakenly ascribes Brown's delivery to the U.S. Postal Service, which did not enter the parcel business until 1912. The scholarly marginalization of the express companies in the effort to resurrect "Box" Brown is all the more ironic because these firms played such an important (and still largely unsung) role in the antislavery movement, delivering newspapers, pamphlets, and abolitionist materials throughout the south, for anyone, of any gender or color, who would pay the freight.

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A brief history of mail and parcel delivery service in America: the United States Post Office was created in 1789; following the British model, the postal service (which included the creation and maintenance of roads and routes) was part of the Department of the Treasury. Mail was expensive: under the 1792 Act, rates were set at six cents for sending a single-sheet letter less than 30 miles; 25 cents for any distance over 450 miles; double or triple prices for two or three sheets (Cullinan 38). Under Jefferson and Madison, Congress invested heavily in roads and transportation; mail volume grew from 1.2 million pieces carried annually in 1801 to over five million pieces in 1814 (Cullinan 44). Rates were raised by 50 percent in 1815 to help defray the costs of the War of 1812. In 1835 Andrew Jackson's Postmaster General Amos Kendall reorganized the post office to increase reliability and promote nationwide dependence on the postal system; he reformed accounting systems and contracting procedures but did not substantially lower rates.⁶ Kendall brought in postal inspectors whose duties were to "enforce the keeping of postmasters' registers of the arrival and departure of the mails; to note all failures by contractors and prepare the cases for action by the Postmaster General; to check on the postmasters' quarterly reports; and to do 'all other things which may be necessary to secure a faithful and exact performance' [in the words of the 24th Congress] on the part of contractors and postmaster." In other words, they were to ensure that letters arrive at their destination. (White, 277).

Prior to the 1840s, postage was paid by the receiver of mail, not the sender; a letter from Baltimore to Boston could cost the recipient 30 cents to collect from the post office. Most American wage workers earned only five to fifteen dollars per month and could not afford to receive mail on a regular basis. In 1839 England, postal reformer Rowland Hill urged the British Parliament to consider a radical change in postal policy:

instituting prepaid postage (the stamp) that would cost the same amount (one penny) regardless of the distance traveled. Proponents argued that so many more people would use the mail that the government would not lose money.⁷ Parliament adopted the Penny Postage Act in 1840; routes and volume expanded rapidly. The total number of letters carried by the British Post Office doubled to 168 million in 1840, and doubled again to 322 million in 1847 (Robinson 323).

In America, anti-slavery advocates followed the British postal reform debates closely. On September 28, 1839, the *Colored American* carried news of the debates:

If Great Britain with her enormous debt and large yearly expenditures, can venture upon the experiment of reducing postage to this minimum rate, a similar trial in this country, we think, need not occasion any very great apprehensions. It is believed by many judicious persons who have looked into the subject, that there will be, in fact, no diminution of revenue at all, but that the great increase of correspondence encouraged by the lowness of the rate will make up the full amount of postages usually received.

In response to the successful reforms in Britain postal service, Congress created the United States Postal Commission in 1844 to recommend changes, reaffirming the post office's mandate of promoting "enlightenment and social improvement and national fellowship" (Cullinan, 66). The Reform Acts of 1845 and 1847 followed the British model of standard, low-priced, pre-paid postage: from 1845 to 1850 letter volume increased by 66% to 69 million (Cullinan, 73).

Pre-paid, inexpensive postage immediately increased the quantity, intensity, and quality of communication in America. Routes expanded, new modes of delivery developed. Moreover, though the sanctity of personal correspondence was nominally an essential aspect of both the British and US postal service already, in practice, the new policy vastly increased privacy. Pre-paid, weight-based postage would obviate the routine close inspection of individual letters to determine fees based on distance traveled. Now nearly all letters would be treated equally, which meant postmarked, processed, and all but ignored by postal clerks.

The possibility of cheaper postage delighted the increasingly middle-class and commercial-minded North but worried the slave-holding South.⁸ Lowered costs would increase the possibility of another influx of anti-slavery propaganda in the mails. Several years earlier, in 1835, Northern abolitionists began sending anti-slavery literature to prominent Southerners—ministers, elected officials, newspaper editors—in an aggressive campaign to revolutionize public sentiment. Literally tons of anti-slavery writings began arriving in Southern post offices. In one year alone, from May 1836 to May 1837, hundreds of thousands of copies of *The Anti-Slavery Magazine*, *The Slave's Friend*, *The Anti-Slavery Record*, *Human Rights*, and the *Emancipator* crossed the Mason Dixon line, along with countless miscellaneous pamphlets, tracts, and bound volumes. In Charleston, South Carolina, a mob led by a former governor entered a post office intent on destroying the mailbags (White, 516, Eaton 267).

President Andrew Jackson recommended federal laws prohibiting “incendiary publications intended to instigate the slaves to insurrection” (quoted in Eaton 270), but none had enough votes to pass. An 1836 U.S. Post Office regulation simply restated that postmasters were prohibited by law from detaining or refusing to deliver any letter or publication for any reason. In desperation, Virginia passed a law in 1836 requiring postmasters in the state to confiscate all “incendiary” (that is, anti-slavery) publications. In 1841 a Maryland act required postmasters to come before grand juries on a regular basis and testify to any inflammatory publications received in the mail. In 1849, another mob seized the mails in Pendleton, South Carolina because abolitionist publications were sent to the post office there.⁹ Emerson noted in 1844, on the anniversary of emancipation in the British West Indies, “slavery...does not love the whistle of the railroad; it does not love the newspaper [or] the mail-bag.”¹⁰

Yet even some Southern leaders opposed government intrusion into the content of the mails on principle, arguing that neither the President nor the Cabinet had the power to withhold a private letter. The *Raleigh* [N.C.] *Register*, argued in 1849:

For the sake of turning the excitable sensibilities of the Southern people to political account, it is boldly maintained to be the duty of the head of the Post Office Department to authorize his subordinates to open letters and packages supposed to contain objectionable matter. This principle being

once established, the liberty of the Press becomes a nullity, and the dominant party is invested with full powers to suppress the promulgation through the mails of any opinions which they disapprove. If the Post Master General can prohibit the delivery of Abolition newspapers and letters, and authorize them to be opened, there is nothing to prevent him from exercising the same censorial power over his political opponents.¹¹

(The same editorial, it should be said, dismissed any concern about slave correspondence by claiming that slaves are unable to read and owners have a right to “forbid any sort of intercourse with them.” Moreover, they are not citizens, the writer continues; “in fact, they have no surname, by which one may be distinguished from another; and a Post-master is not bound to know one slave from another, they being in the eye of law, not persons, but property—such is the estimation in which they are held by the State laws.”)

Quite clearly, national postal policy was split in the United States in the 1840s: on the one hand, a person’s right of free expression and free use of the mails could not be curtailed. On the other hand, if the Federal Government were going to remain in the mail business, how far would it go to guarantee the radically egalitarian (and potentially disruptive) policy that anyone, anywhere, had the right to post a letter to whomever he or she wanted? Fans of the new pre-paid postage policy understood the importance of affordability and anonymity. The Free-Soil *National Era* wrote in 1847 of the obligation their readers were under to the post office for the issuance of stamps, so that letters and subscription fees could be sent with little risk of exposure:

A farmer, with a supply of stamps in his secretary, if he has no change, or a person wishing to drop a letter, postage paid, into the letter-box, when the office is closed, will find them a great convenience. Subscribers to newspapers, desiring to send fractions of subscription, can enclose in a letter a set of stamps, to any amount they please, say twenty, twenty-five, or eighty cents.¹²

Cheap postage, Frederick Douglass observed in *The North Star*, had an “immense moral bearing.”¹³

In short, the infectious power of the new postal policy did not go unnoticed by either slaveholders or abolitionists. Private mail and express firms offered a practical solution to the specter of political postal intrusion. In 1844, radical abolitionist Lysander Spooner founded the private American Letter Mail Company, arguing that there was nothing in the constitution that prohibited competition with the U.S. Post Office.¹⁴ New package express and private mail companies, faster and cheaper than the post office, became wildly popular up and down the east coast. Their success competing with the post office was another factor influencing Congress' postal reforms of 1845.¹⁵ Unlike the British Post Office, which had always offered package delivery service, the United States Postal Service did not enter the parcel post business until 1913, leaving the role to private carrier companies whose standards for privacy and efficiency exceeded the government post.

The Adams & Co. Express, a parcel express founded in 1840, was one of the more successful new firms, proving almost immediately that confidentiality combined with dependability were marketable business assets. By 1843, Adams had routes in Virginia, and in a matter of a few years, according to Edward Everett, "mountain piles of newspapers" as well as magazines and other journals were being delivered by Express companies "to the cities of the South and West, as far as St. Louis and New Orleans" (251-2).¹⁶ In just a few years, Adams Express become the shipper of choice for abolitionist publications, as this April 5, 1855 letter in the *National Era*, entitled "First Gun," indicates:

To the Editor of the *National Era*:

In reply to your circular, received this morning, we enclose a check for twenty dollars. Send us fifty copies of "Facts for the People," per Adams's Express, and fifty into some dark corner, where there is any prospect of light arising from their distribution. You shall hear from us again respecting the balance of the money. Our Baltimore friends, who send this, are always prompt. Living in a slave State, they fully realize the great importance of maintaining vigorously the position we have gained at Washington.

Adams Express capitalized on its reputation for reliability and confidentiality by safely shipping heavy crate-loads of gold dust from California mines to East Coast banks after 1849. The company was successful in part because it promised never to look inside. The abolitionists championed exactly the features of express mail companies—and Adams Express in particular—that made it possible for “Box” Brown to reach his destination unmolested and without delay.

*

Henry “Box” Brown published two versions of his narrative, the first in 1849, the second in 1851. The 1849 version, published a few short months after Brown’s escape, was ghostwritten by white abolitionist Charles Stearns; a preface argues that Brown survived because of God’s blessing on those who love liberty. It reproduces the “Hymn of Thanksgiving” that Brown sang after his box was crowbarred open in Philadelphia:

I waited patiently, I waited patiently for the Lord, for the Lord,
And he inclined unto me, and heard my calling;
I waited patiently, I waited patiently for the Lord,
And he inclined unto me, and heard my calling;
And he hath put a new song in my mouth,
Ev’n a thanksgiving, Ev’n a thanksgiving, Ev’n a thanksgiving unto our God.

The 1849 version thus conforms to the emerging expectations of the slave narrative genre: it was pious, respectful, dramatic, and targeted to sentimental, abolitionist readers.¹⁷ Brown warns his readers that they should not expect tales of the “untold horrors” of slavery—not the “horrid inflictions of the lash upon my naked body; of cruel starvings and of insolent treatment”—but rather “the beautiful side of the picture of slavery” and the “partial kindness” of a master:

I did not receive but one whipping. I never suffered from lack of food, or on account of too extreme labor; nor for want of sufficient clothing to cover my person....Far beyond, in terrible suffering, all outward cruelties of the foul system, are those inner pangs which rend the heart of fond affection, when the “bone of your bone, and the flesh of your flesh” is separated from your embrace, by the ruthless hand of the merciless tyrant,

as he plucks from your heart of love, the one whom God hath given you for a “help-meet” through the journey of life; and more fearful by far than all the blows of the bloody lash, or the pangs of cruel hunger are those lashings of the *heart*. (1849, 12-13)

After an uneventful childhood on a Virginia farm, Brown is sent to Richmond to work in a tobacco factory owned by the master’s son. Over the span of twelve years he is able to earn money enough to marry a fellow slave, rent a house, and live with her and their three children.¹⁸ One fateful day, however, he returns home from work to find that his family had been sold away. Out of his mind from despair, he prays, and, “as if from above, there darted into my mind these words, ‘Go and get a box, and put yourself in it’” (1849, 59).

Jeffrey Ruggles’s indispensable biography of Brown fleshes out the details left out of Brown’s two narratives: how Adams Express was chosen, how the box was made, how the destination address was selected.¹⁹ Brown simply writes, in both his 1849 and 1851 narratives, that he confides in a friend who writes to an acquaintance in Philadelphia and arranges for the box to be sent north by Express mail. The drama begins when Brown gets in, with a bladder of water and a gimlet to bore additional breathing holes if needed:

I laid me down in my darkened home of three feet by two, and like one about to be guillotined, resigned myself to my fate. My friend was to accompany me, but he failed to do so; and contented himself with sending a telegraph message to his correspondent in Philadelphia, that such a box was on its way to his care. (60)

The various legs of the journey are described in painful detail: Brown is first carried to the express office, head downward (although the box is labeled “this side up with care”); he is then carried to the depot, “tumbled roughly into the baggage car,” though he is now “right side up;” he is put aboard a steamboat on his head again, then providentially tipped on his side after an hour and a half. “Soon after this fortunate event,” Brown writes,

...we arrived at Washington, where I was thrown from the wagon, and again as my luck would have it, fell on my head. I was then rolled down a declivity, until I reached the platform from which the cars were to start. During this short but rapid journey, my neck came very near being dislocated, as I felt it crack, as if it had snapped asunder. Pretty soon, I heard some one say, "there is no room for this box, it will have to remain behind." I then again applied to the Lord, my help in all my difficulties, and in a few minutes I heard a gentleman direct the hands to place it aboard, as "it came with the mail and must go on with it." (61-62)

Brown is tumbled into a car, briefly head downward, then righted and brought to the depot in Philadelphia at three o'clock in the morning. Three hours later, Brown is brought to the home of the abolitionist acquaintances who open the box. Though weak, he stands and sings a hymn.

Charles Stearns's editorial hand—thickly laying on the "True Abolitionist Style," as Olney puts it (71)—is clearly evident in such phrases as "applied to the Lord" and "snapped asunder." Daphne Brooks argues that this rhetoric serves to repress and confine Brown's voice: "Stearns's editorial body multiplies in size while Brown's figure gradually dwarfs and collapses into the very box of his escape" (71).²⁰ Brown is present, she continues, "yet discursively entombed, forced underground into a manhole of his own making once again as Stearns's overbearing and "ghostly" editorial hand threatens to place a stranglehold on the text" (75-76). Undoubtedly the sense that Brown's own account of events was more accurate than Stearns's record led Newman and Gates to republish the 1851 version, *Narrative of the life of Henry "Box" Brown, Written by Himself*, published in England, where Brown had fled after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. [John Ernest too has chosen the 1851 version for his forthcoming 2008 annotated version of Brown's *Narrative*.²¹] The 1851 narrative differs in some small but important ways from the 1849 version; one notable addition is the following commemorative song:

Here you see a man by the name of Henry Brown,
Run away from the South to the North;

Which he would not have done but they stole all his rights,
But they'll never do the like again.

Chorus – Brown laid down the shovel and the hoe,
Down in the box he did go;
No more Slave work for Henry Box Brown,
In the box *by Express* he did go...

When they packed the baggage on, they turned him on his head,
There poor Brown liked to have died...

When they got to the cars they threw the box off,
And down upon his head he did fall,
Then he heard his neck crack, and he thought it was broke,
But they never threw him off any more.

...

The friends gathered round and asked if all was right,
As down on the box they did rap,
Brown answered them, saying “yes all is right!”
He was then set free from his pain.

Brown sang this song publicly (and published it in broadside) soon after his escape, but Wood suggests that it was “not considered appropriate for printing in the 1849 American edition (109). A jaded critic could conclude that the song (with its emphasis on pain) was added in 1851 to compensate for the relative absence of physical suffering as a slave. Oddly, none of the recent Brown scholars have focused on the vaudevillian song, which reduces the evil of slavery to the single line, “they stole all his rights,” while the Express handlers are the star persecutors, who cruelly “threw the box off” as if they knew there was a man inside. Brown’s emphasis on the pain of his journey also undermines the central point of the narrative—that emotional trauma is as injurious to slaves as physical. In the context of his larger narrative, the song trivializes the role of those who knew that

he was a person but treated him as an object in order to criticize those who treated him as an object when he was, in fact, an object.²²

The song may have irked pro-mail abolitionists to a small extent, especially fans of the private express services. In the 1850s, the abolitionist press continued to report on mail delivery services, both government and private. Adams Express is praised by name in the *Provincial Freeman* in 1859 for its “faithfulness, integrity, promptness, and enterprise.”²³ Because the song is indeed funny and we tend not to notice that it also belittles the labor of workingmen, the very ranks Brown might be expected to join upon achieving his freedom. After escaping and moving to Massachusetts, for example, Frederick Douglass wrote of his willingness to “saw wood, shovel coal, carry the hod, sweep the chimney, or roll oil casks” (95). Brown’s 250-pound box is a heavy load. Though Wood calls the Express system advanced industrial technology (84), Brown himself acknowledges the sweat labor of hefting the box onto (and off of) a wagon, railroad cars, a steamboat, and a horse cart. Free wage laborers, already wary of the wage effects of slave labor, might have appreciated the comedy, had it been warmhearted.²⁴

Ironically, Brown’s second narrative praises the carriers’ efficiency even as it criticizes their roughness:

I had no sooner arrived at the office than I was turned heels up, while some person nailed something on the end of the box. I was then put upon a wagon and driven off to the depôt with my head down, and I had no sooner arrived at the depôt, than the man who drove the wagon tumbled me roughly into the baggage car, where, however, I happened to fall on my right side....The next place we arrived at was Potomac Creek, where the baggage had to be removed from the cars, to be put on board the steamer. (1851, 59-60)

“No sooner” had he arrived that they made sure that the address was secured to the box; “no sooner” had he arrived at the depot than they put the box in the baggage car; next, the box was taken off the car and put on the steamer. One can imagine how even 21st century express services would admire the lack of delay between the stages of his journey.²⁵ Perhaps partly because of Brown’s heavy use of passive voice (“I was placed,” “I was

carried,” “I was taken,” “I was tumbled”), most recent critics do not notice the workers who are doing the placing and carrying. “Crouched in the fetal position with the box tossed upside down three or four times, Brown traveled three hundred and fifty miles—having only a flask of water and a few biscuits as sustenance,” Wolff writes, as if the traveling was magic (27).²⁶

Curiously, in his 1851 narrative, Brown added details to make the express carriers appear less comic and more cold-blooded than they were in the first version:

The next place at which we arrived was the city of Washington, where I was taken from the steam boat, and again placed upon a wagon and carried to the depôt right side up with care; but when the driver arrived at the depôt I heard him call for some person to help to take the box off the wagon, and someone answered him to the effect that he might throw it off; but, says the driver, it is marked ‘this side up with care’; so if I throw it off I might break something the other answered him that it did not matter if he broke all that was in it, the railway company were able enough to pay for it. No sooner were these words spoken than I began to tumble from the wagon, and falling on the end where my head was, I could hear my neck give a crack, as if it had been snapped asunder and I was knocked completely insensible. (61)

The remark about liability and railroad wealth did not appear in the 1849 version nor could it have. American railroads were struggling or losing money in 1849; it was not until the first federal land grant of 2.6 million acres to Illinois Central in 1850 that anyone thought that the railroad companies would become profitable. It was not until 1851 that the public began to perceive railroads as wealthy.²⁷ Furthermore, the remark about liability for breakage is anachronistic: the case law was anything but settled, but the responsibility for the safe delivery was certainly with Adams Express and the workers would have known it.²⁸

Does it matter that Henry “Box” Brown embellished his story in his 1851 retelling? Probably not. These things happen—particularly when the author is a showman. However, Brown’s decision to undermine his story’s comic appeal is

bewildering. Brown could have characterized the mail workers as ignorant but highly functional clowns, which would have reinforced the public view of mail service. Charles Stearns acknowledges the humor in the 1849 version, when he warns readers in a footnote not to enjoy Brown's plan to ship himself North in a box: "Reader, smile not at the above idea, for if there is a God of love, we must believe that he suggests steps to those who apply to him in times of trouble, by which they can be delivered from their difficulty" (1849, 59). Wood acknowledges that the tale contains "a certain element of low comedy" (108), describing the 1850 lithograph [image to come]: "The audience are presented as amused—their expressions exist somewhere between smirking incredulity and laughter" (111).²⁹ How can one not grin? Brown's plan sets up some Chaplinesque moments, such as his report (in both versions) of eavesdropping on this conversation:

I could now listen to the men talking, and heard one of them asking the other what he supposed *the box contained*; his companion replied he guessed it was 'THE MAIL.' I too thought it was a mail but not such a mail as he supposed it to be. (60)

The joke resides both in the pun and in the fact that the men are oblivious; there is somebody alive inside. It is classic music-hall farce.

But what is the place of comedy in a slave narrative? Certainly part of the power of both William Wells Brown's and Harriet Wilson's narratives is the leavening of humor, particularly scenes of hoodwinking the master or making the mistress look ridiculous. Inherently, the role of Slaveowner is both cruel and comic: both elements are a matter of being blind to the slave's humanity. Masters, mistresses, and overseers must assume that the person in front of him or her is a laboring machine. In the hands of a deft author, the roles are reversed: the dehumanizing master (or mistress) is revealed as the true automaton and the suffering slave is fully human. As the philosopher Henri Bergson has theorized, mechanical rigidity of character is funny as well as frightening. "What life and society require of each of us," Bergson observes, "is a constant alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation, together with a certain elasticity of mind and body that enable us to adapt ourselves in consequence" (22). In Henry "Box" Brown's narrative, the mail carriers' blindness to contents of the box humanizes the uncomfortable

man inside, but they were not involved with the initial project of dehumanization. The mailman's blindness is funny, not cruel.

When the humor of Brown's escape is acknowledged at all by scholars it is typically characterized as a bitter irony. Cynthia Griffin Wolff writes for example that Brown, "devised a suitably ironic mode of escape....by converting the very stringencies of an African slave ship into a blueprint for freedom. If his forebears had been transported from freedom into bondage as merchandise; as merchandise HE could be transported into freedom" (26-27). Yet, we ought not to need reminding that tightly packed containers are not always akin to slave ships: anywhere from several dozen to several thousand men were said to have endured the long wait inside the Trojan Horse; Pandora's box was said to be tightly packed with the world's evils bursting to escape. Shipping companies have long advised customers to pack crates tightly and securely so that the contents do not shift and break in transit.

Henry "Box" Brown's narrative was embraced by his contemporary fans as good, clean Biblical fun. He was seen as a modern-day Lazarus, a Noah emerging from the Ark, even the Resurrection of Christ, all examples of Divine intervention in daily life on behalf of the good and worthy.³⁰ Brown claims that the hand that delivers him is in fact God *via* the Adams Express Company has a certain appeal:

The first thing I heard, after that, was some person saying "there is no room for the box, it will have to remain and be sent through to-morrow with the luggage train"; but the Lord had not quite forsaken me, for in answer to my earnest prayer. He so ordered affairs that I should not be left behind; and I now heard a man say that the box had come with the express, and it must be sent on. (61)

Stories of postal deliverance have always shared some of the supernatural spirit of religious deliverance. As Edward Everett mused, just before the Civil War, "when I contemplate the extent to which the moral sentiment, the intelligence, the affections of so many millions of people,—sealed up by a sacred charm within the cover of a letter,—daily circulate through a country, I am compelled to regard the Post-office, next to Christianity, as the right arm of our modern civilization" (257). While Marcus Wood

writes that Brown's box was "womb and tomb, object of torture and vessel of liberation.... a paradox [and] a holy abolition relic" (91), the more clear-eyed view is that it was 250 lbs of freight (contents plus container) that Adams Express carried 300-plus miles in one day without mishap.

The historical record suggests that by choosing Adams Express, Brown picked the most reputable company to ship him. W.F. Harnden, the first Express business in the U.S. (established in 1839), had let its domestic express package business lapse in the early 1840s when it had gotten into the human transport business, ironically enough, bringing thousands of German and Irish immigrants to America; Adams Express grew by snapping up customers fed up with Harnden's unreliability. Too often, that is, Harnden's packages sat on doorsteps delayed for days.³¹

Conclusion

Why didn't Brown—or his initial ghostwriter, Charles Stearns—give the carriers some credit for a safe delivery? In Brown's case it may have been a function of anger; twenty-seven hours of being cooped up, banged about, thrown off a baggage truck, and twice placed upside down cannot have been fun. In Stearns case, it may have been a marketing decision: since Brown didn't experience torture, the drama of the narrative had to reside in the manner of escape and it had to be gripping. If Brown's story was not "one of horrid inflictions of the lash upon [his] naked body; of cruel starvings and of insolent treatment" (1849, 12), he still needed some way to demonstrate his emotional anguish. A traumatic journey proves the lengths he was willing to go to escape.

But the publishers and promoters of "Box" Brown's story were in a difficult position. In the first place, as Frederick Douglass lamented in 1855, "had not Henry Box Brown and his friends attracted slaveholding attention to the manner of his escape, we might have had a thousand Box Browns per annum" (339).³² In the second place, neither Adams Express nor their anti-slavery customers wanted adverse publicity at the same time that they were mailing crates full of anti-slavery newspapers, journals, broadsheets, pamphlets, posters, sermons, and tracts to the South. After 1840, both government and private mail systems were indifferent to gender, class, and race, as long as the postage or carrying fees were paid. The fugitive slave Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent), hiding from her

master in an attic, describes throwing her pursuers off her trail with an official post office postmark from a Northern city:

I had directed that my letters should be put into the New York post office on the 20th of the month. On the evening of the 24th my aunt came to say that Dr. Flint and his wife had been talking in a low voice about a letter he had received...He seated himself in the chair that was placed for him, and said, 'Well, Martha, I've brought you a letter from Linda. She has sent me a letter, also. I know exactly where to find her.' (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 195)

The irony here is that the post office delivers a black slave woman's letter just as it would any other. The postal and express system's indifference to the particulars of any parcel or letter (the system sees neither sender nor recipient as an individual but as a structural position) guarantees a certain amount of freedom to communicate. Like Brown, Jacobs wedges herself into a prison—she is painfully confined for months at a time in a tiny crawl space—and depends on the mail system to deliver her out of danger. The postman who delivers the letter and the master who receives it may be equally comically blind, but our laughter is solely directed at the master.

Modern critics, living in an age when “going postal” means exploding in a violent rampage, can perhaps be forgiven for not celebrating the role that the express system played in bringing Brown to freedom, even if, as Brooks puts it, “Brown's crate creates a conclusion which forces the reader into a suspended state of historical meditation and contemplation” (76). Let us contemplate, then, historically: in the 1840s and 50s, the availability of affordable, reliable mail and parcel delivery—particularly its availability to the growing class of wage laborers—was a very big deal to the general public, regardless of abolitionist sentiments. Moreover, given that the two most famous post office employees are sitcom buffoons (Cliff Clavin on *Cheers* and Newman on *Seinfeld*) the humor of Brown's tale should be even more apparent to the modern reader than to the contemporary one. The fleeting popularity of *The Narrative of Henry “Box” Brown* is inextricably intertwined not only with the sacred status of rapid, reliable, and inexpensive

communication, but also with the pleasure of receiving and opening boxes and with the daily comedy of the postman not knowing what he is delivering.

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Notes

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¹There are two versions of Henry “Box” Brown’s Narrative: the first, published in 1849, was ghostwritten by Charles Stearns; the second, *Narrative of the Life of Henry “Box” Brown, Written by Himself*, was published in London in 1851. This is the version recently republished by Oxford University Press in 2002. References to this version (the 1851 version) will be cited parenthetically as *1851*. References to the 1849 version will be cited parenthetically as *1849*. See John Ernest for a comprehensive exploration of the differences between the two versions.

²Fisch quotes this line from an article in the *Bradford Observer*. Further references to *American Slaves in Victorian England* will be cited parenthetically as *American Slaves*.

³*The Wolverhampton and Staffordshire Herald* attacked Brown’s panorama, calling it “a jumbled mass of contradictions and absurdities, assertions without proof, geography without boundary and horrors without parallel” March 17, 1852 (Quoted in Fisch, *American Slaves*, 74.). Brown sued and won

⁴ See Wolf, Wood, Brooks, or Ruggles for a thorough description of Brown’s panorama

⁵ See Ruggles for details on Adams’s claims of swift transport.

⁶Kendall brought in postal inspectors whose duties were to “enforce the keeping of postmasters’ registers of the arrival and departure of the mails; to note all failures by contractors and prepare the cases for action by the Postmaster General; to check on the postmasters’ quarterly reports; and to do ‘all other things which may be necessary to secure a faithful and exact performance’ [in the words of the 24th Congress] on the part of contractors and postmaster.” In other words, they were to ensure that letters arrive at their destination. (White, 277).

⁷ Letters, according to Hill, “were constantly refused on account of the heavy postage demanded, or remained many weeks in the postmaster’s hands, when the persons to whom they were addressed were poor – mothers sometimes even pawning their clothes to pay for letters from their children, or having to wait till, little by little, they could save up the money necessary for that purpose” (Robinson, 8) “In those days, the visit of the postman, so far from being welcomed, was, as a rule, dreaded. Letters were almost always sent unpaid, and the heavy postage demanded for what might sometimes turn out to be merely trade circulars was a serious tax grudgingly paid, or, amongst the poorer classes, the letter had to be refused as too expensive a luxury” (Robinson, 3). Farrugia suggests that the letter box may have descended from the *tamburi* of Florence, the little boxes in which the church would receive anonymous denunciations of local officials or other suspicious persons (3).

⁸ Postmaster General Kendall was widely criticized for dragging his feet in instituting a policy similar to Britain’s. There had been a time when slaves had actually carried the mail in parts of the South, but in 1802, when the Department raised fears that knowledge of regional geography and citizenry could be used for reasons other than carrying letters, Congress decreed that only

free whites could carry the mail (Cullinan 45). Southern political interests had always kept a close eye on U.S. mail policy.

⁹ The *North Star* reprinted the following item entitled “Incendiary Publications by Mail” (from “a S.C. Paper”) on July 6, 1849: “The South is now being flooded with abolition documents and newspapers. Whilst the Anti-slavery *Standard* continues its offensive visits, we observe another of the same sort – the *Pennsylvania Freeman* - has commenced to be circulated in the Southern States. We respectfully invite the attention of President Taylor, “the man of the South,” to the management of the Post Office Department. These documents are Treasonable. The *Freeman* denounces the Constitution of the United States as “an infamous and wicked covenant.” These publications are not only insulting to the people of the South, but are intended to overthrow our institutions and plunge the country into the direst evils. The Government, under the Constitution, we believe, has the entire control of the Post Office Department, and also the power to regulate what matters shall be carried through the mail. In the absence of legislative enactment then - for we believe no law exists on the subject, Mr. Calhoun’s bill in 1836 having been lost at its final reading in the Senate – we conceive it to be the duty of the Executive - a duty which he owes to the people of the South - that he should endeavour to fill the Post Office Department with men who will not, by virtue of their office, aid in circulating these documents in the Southern States where they are prohibited by law.” In 1855 several men in New Orleans were arrested for opening mail. As a *National Era* article editorialized: “One of these men testified before the Court, that the opening of letters by mail agents, employed to ferret out rascality, is a common practice, not formally authorized by the Department, but winked at! This is a revelation for which we were not prepared. We had supposed the correspondence of the People sacred; but it seems that our letters, containing money, or on the most confidential matters, are at any moment liable to be opened and examined by rogue detectors, who themselves may be as unscrupulous as the scoundrels they are after, and who besides have peculiar facilities for the commission of crime. The Department ought never to have winked at a practice so abominable, and we hope the Judicial Power will now so vindicate the Law, as to put a stop forthwith to such an abuse”(June 14, 1855).

¹⁰ “Address Delivered in Concord on the Anniversary of the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies, August 1, 1844.”

¹¹ *The Raleigh Register*, reprinted in the *North Star*, October 5, 1849.

¹² July 29, 1847. The post-office and express mail’s promise of confidentiality was particularly appealing for abolitionist publishers who needed to send mail and newspapers to the South. In 1840, *The Colored American* reprinted the following article from the *Emancipator* entitled “How to Forward Money Through a Post Master: “The rules of the General Post Office, are very strict, and every honest citizen ought to realize the obligation of conforming as far as possible to all rules of all public offices; as those who manage these departments have a plenty of unavoidable trouble from the stupid and fraudulent. Now when you wish your Post Master to send money for you to the *Emancipator*, first appeal to him, respectfully, that you are one of those who always conform to rules, and try to make public business easy. Then ask him to do you the favor you desire. If he is a man of business, he may feel that it is too much of tax upon his time, to write a letter concerning necessary directions about the money, and other information connected therewith: so, to obviate this, have a letter already written for him, (not a letter from yourself,) that he can sign, just as if it had been prepared by a clerk of his own; there will then be nothing for him to do, but just to put his name at the bottom, close to the letter, (already directed by yourself,) and put his frank on the back. Very few Post Masters will refuse to do as much as this for any neighbor, if properly applied to - only, do not overload the letter with other things. The

letter may read thus: "SIR - Mr. A.B. (your own name) wishes me to forward to you the sum of \$-- for payment for your paper, to be applied to the following subscriptions. (Here give all the names, sums, Post Office address, STATE, and other directions and explanations necessary, and then it is ready for him to sign) "C.D. - P.M" (December 19, 1840). Frederick Douglass, as noted above, regularly kept readers of *The North Star* apprised of changes in Post Office regulations: "The new post office bill for newspapers, which passed the House of Representatives recently, has restored to publishers of papers the right to forward them free of postage to subscribers residing in the county, or within 30 miles of where the paper is printed. Papers sent a hundred miles pay half a cent, and over one hundred miles one cent postage - if of no greater size than nineteen hundred square inches. Papers of greater size, with pamphlets, magazines, &c., will pay two cents an ounce, and one cent for each additional ounce" (October 6, 1848).

¹³November 17, 1848. Not surprisingly, because of its rural and agricultural (rather than urban, mercantile, and financial) economy and lower literacy rates, mail volume remained lower in the South than the North throughout the century. In 1849, *The National Era* carried an article entitled "Who Supports the Post Office!" accompanied by a table showing that the profits from mail delivery in free states was subsidizing the mail in slave states: "According to the foregoing table, the net postage paid by the free States, in the fiscal year 1847, was \$1,659,412; and the expense of transporting the mails in the same States, for the same year, was \$1,088,308 - leaving a clear surplus to the Department of 571,104. From the slave States, (exclusive of the District of Columbia, where the postage is mostly paid by the Government itself, on franked matter,) the postage received, during the same time, was but \$664,079; while the expense of transporting the mails therein was \$1,318,541 - leaving a deficit of \$654,462, to be made up by the surplus paid by the free States, and from the Treasury" (November 29, 1849)

¹⁴ Spooner's Mail Company was similar to the several other private mails at the time, but he went about his business more openly. On January 11, 1844, he informed the Postmaster General of his plans to establish a letter mail company from Boston to Baltimore and sent a copy of his famous treatise, "The Unconstitutionality of the Laws of Congress Prohibiting Private Mails." Two weeks later he was open for business, and advertised in all the major newspapers. The American Letter Mail Company had its own stamps, its own agents, and in a few months, was doing a brisk business between Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.

¹⁵In the 1840s, the U.S. government competed for the delivery of letters with the new express businesses - Adams & Co, Wells & Co, (soon to be Wells, Fargo as well as American Express) and others. See also *The National Era* of November 29, 1849: "It has been ascertained that nearly two hundred expresses daily leave the city of Boston. Who will use the Post Office with his letters, when he can send them cheaper, quicker, and safer, by private expresses?"

¹⁶ In the 1843 case of *United States vs. Adams & Company* the judge ruled that under federal postal regulations it was illegal for anyone to set up a company to carry and deliver the mail, but not illegal for passengers to carry mail. The Adams Express Company helped Loyal Publication Society in 1864 by sending out hundreds of thousands of pro-Union publications and pamphlets to Union military hospitals and Union forces in the South.

¹⁷Both the 1849 and the 1851 editions include prefaces and attestations that describe divine deliverance and that equate the mail-handler with the slave-holder. Stearns writes in the Preface to the 1849 edition that the box is a "portable prison," and that Brown is another Lazarus. Abolitionist J. McKim's letter of authentication in the 1851 edition attests to the "resurrection" from Brown's "living tomb" (iv).

¹⁸ “Mr. Allen was a thorough going Yankee in his mode of doing business. He was by no means one of your indolent, do-nothing Southerners, so effeminate as to be hardly able to wield his hands to administer to his own necessities, but he was a savage-looking, dare-devil sort of a man, ready apparently for any emergency to which Beelzebub might call him, a real servant of the bottomless pit. He understood how to turn a penny as well as any Yankee pedlar who ever visited our city. Whether he derived his skill from associating with that class of individuals, or whether it was the natural production of his own cunning mind, I know not.” (42). John Ernest notes that Brown’s 1849 Narrative mentions Nat Turner’s uprising three times while the 1851 Narrative only mentions Turner once; the reasons for this, Ernest suggests, are unclear. (14).

¹⁹ After painstakingly corroborating names, places, and events, Jeffrey Ruggles states that the 1849 narrative is generally reliable, though some of the dialogue is probably reconstructed (63).

²⁰ Blassingame, John W. “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems.” *Journal of Southern History*, Vol 41 No. 4 (November 1975), pp. 473-492. Blassingame writes that, “many of the more reliable narratives contain elements which cannot be attributed to blacks. Certain literary devices which appear in the accounts were clearly beyond the ken of unlettered slaves” 478. See also Olney, who concludes that the pen that wrote the first narrative “was held not by Box Brown but by Charles Stearns (58); and that Brown’s narrative is “dressed up in the exotic rhetorical garments provided by Charles Stearns” (58). Written in the “True Abolitionist Style” (Olney 71). Newman: “unable to read or write and with little access to printers or publishers, Box Brown was not free from saying what other people wanted him to say. Only in England did he experience the freedom to express himself in his own way. The Manchester edition is obviously closer to Brown’s own telling of his own story” (xii). Ernest: “the 1851 narrative constitutes a motivated departure from the 1849 version” (2)

²¹ University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.

²² “Brown’s display of endurance crouching in his crate converts the slave’s body into an elastic tool capable of transgressing and transcending extreme corporeal limitations” (Brooks 120). “If the iconography of the slave in St. John de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) typifies the image of the trapped and decrepit, [h]alf dead and half-alive...rotting corpse’ hanging in a cage, (Brooks 12).

²³ See for example this article entitled “Adam’s Express” carried in the *Provincial Freeman*, April 22, 1854: “On a certain day in the year 1839, a man with a carpet bag might have been seen...embarking on board the Norwich steamboat for Boston. The man was a Boston Yankee, Alvin Adams by name; the carpet bag contained a few parcels which individuals had entrusted him, to be delivered promptly in the city of his destination; his capital was in his business; his reputation was his personal acquaintance; he was nothing in short but a man with a carpet bag or is what is now called Express Messenger on the smallest scale. Faithfulness, integrity, promptness, and enterprise, brought wonderful things out of that carpet bag; a richer treasury than Fortunatus’s purse, and a more magical beauty agency than Aladdin’s lamp. The possessor is now, after the lapse of fifteen years, the head of a house which carries to and fro in its “carpet bags,” for the accommodation of the public, an amount of treasure, in the shape of merchandize, gold and silver, notes and valuables, not less than one million of dollars every day, or \$365,000,000 per annum. Their offices are in every city or commercial depot from New York to San Francisco and Australia - not to mention the Japan office, for which Commodore Perry has gone to pave the way. Their agents and assistants number about three hundred. Their capital is, of course immense, and the circumstances of the Gold market of California, their connection with it as forwarders, and the extraordinary share of public confidence earned by their honorable career,

have lately constrained them to act in San Francisco as Bankers, on a large scale, where they have just sustained a “run” (occasioned by an accidental rumor) to the amount of \$500,000, in a manner which has added largely to the confidence and popularity which they before enjoyed. Such is one of the features of the wonderful age in which we live. - *New York Courier and Enquirer*.”

²⁴ The question of wage labor and its relationship to slavery was a constant topic among abolitionists in the 1840s and 50s. According to an 1848 article in *The North Star*, wages for labor in New England, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New ranged from twelve to fifteen dollars a month; in Maryland, from eight to ten; in North Carolina from seven to eight; and in South Carolina and Virginia, five dollars per month. “It is well for the laboring man, for those everywhere who work for wages, to ponder these facts. They have often been told that slavery is their worst enemy – that it dishonors labor, and drives them out of employment – but here are facts stated which demonstrate to what extent, in a pecuniary sense, the system of slave labor injures them. It cuts down their wages” (June 30, 1848). Brown’s fans then and now endorse his passivity (he “was entombed”), effectively disposing of the idea that the Adams workers did any work at all. The “portable prison,” as Charles Stearns put it, in which Brown “pursued his fearful journey,” becomes a site of suffering, not a weight to be carried.

²⁵ Even so, Wolff argues that the journey was *not* swift—that Brown’s “dazzling triumph” was surviving the “harrowing ordeal” (28). “The emphasis on the pain he endured during this form of prolonged and self-willed torture in order to obtain freedom sheds strategic light on Brown’s skillful abilities and his depth of endurance in claiming control and ownership over his body,” Brooks adds (122).

²⁶ For Brooks, “Brown’s boxing spectacle reaffirmed an African American appropriation of the black body, making that body ‘vanish’ in the midst of the panoptic culture of slavery and under the peculiar institution’s diligent and watchful eye” (121).

²⁷ From 1850 to 1871 the Illinois Central received grants of over two and a half million acres, most of which was subsequently sold at \$11 to \$12 an acre, with receipts estimated at thirty million dollars. Opposition to the giving away of public land came from President Franklin Pierce, who spoke out four years later against further land grants. Too much of the most valuable land was passing into private and railroad ownership. Another prominent voice against the land grants was Horace Greeley: “Settle the lands compactly and railroads will be constructed through them rapidly and abundantly. Establish the principle that improved land is a free gift of God, to be dispensed as air and water, to all who need, and as they need, and ample capital will be released from land speculators to construct any number of railroads.”

²⁸ See Levy, Leonard W. “Chief Justice Shaw and the Formative Period of American Railroad Law: II” *Columbia Law Review*, Vol 51, No. 7, p. See also: *A Selection of Leading Cases, on Various Branches of the Law: With Notes by John William Smith, John Innes Clark Hare, Horace Binney Wallace, John William Wallace* Published 1855 T. & J. W. Johnson (pp. 313-314); and Porter, William Wagener, *A Treatise on the Law of Bills of Lading*, Philadelphia: Kay and Brother, 1891, p. 92.

²⁹ Marcus Wood: “In the very process of retelling his story he provided it with the comic and folkloric elements which were to typify it popular assimilation. After all, Brown had the confidence to embrace the bathetic elements of the tale. A man shipped in a box, turned on his head, tumbling out ruefully having tricked the entire force of the slaveholding south, is, at one level, the stuff of slapstick. But it is the potent slapstick of the triumphant underdog” (109). “By law, no more than a piece of property, he would become a piece of “portable” property, recreating

himself as "free" by shipment from Baltimore to Philadelphia in a "Middle Passage" to independence--courtesy of the Adams Express" (Wolff, 26-27).

³⁰ (Wood 110). Wood points out that Brown selected his thanksgiving hymn because it emphasized the theme of resurrection: "I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock" (80).

³¹ See Harlow for details on Herndon.

³² The review of Box Brown's book in Douglass's paper *The North Star* (September 28, 1849) spends most time on Brown's sufferings before his Express journey and downplays the particulars of the journey. Later (in his 1893 *Life and Times*), Douglass would note the importance of mail to other escape schemes: "Many slaves could escape by personating the one of one set of [free colored person] papers; and this was often done as follows: A slave nearly or sufficiently answering the description set forth in the papers, would borrow or hire them till he could by their means escape to a free state, and then, by mail or otherwise, return them to the owner" (643).