

Henry “Box” Brown, Charles Stearns, and Classics as White Voice in the Freedom Narratives of
Formerly Enslaved Black People in 19th Century America

In August of 1848, Henry Brown (ca. 1815-1897) had resolved to escape his enslavement in a tobacco factory after his pregnant wife Nancy and their three children were sold to distant plantations, never to be seen again. Seven months later, Brown nearly died when his friends shipped him to freedom from Richmond to Philadelphia in a box three feet long, two feet wide, and two and a half feet deep. After twenty-seven hours in the mail by wagon, railroad, steamboat, and ferry, Brown emerged out of the box and soon became a transatlantic celebrity. Dubbed Henry “Box” Brown, he published two editions of his freedom narrative and traveled the United States and Europe for more than forty-five years sharing his story. The first edition of his narrative was written by the White abolitionist and businessman Charles Stearns (1809-1867) and includes numerous Classics references. Two years later, Brown wrote a second edition himself. While some of the word choice and content remains the same in the later edition, the Classics references are all but gone.

Although there is scholarship on Classics references in the works of Black authors in the 18th century (Lamore 2011) and of Black classicists in the late 19th/early 20th century (Ronnick 2007), little has been done on Classics in the freedom narratives during the era between. This paper extends John Sekora’s (1987) literary criticism in *Black Message/White Envelope*, a seminal work in Africana studies, to the Classics and expands it by considering its implications for pedagogy. Focusing on the case of Henry “Box” Brown, I analyze Classics references inserted by White abolitionists into the printed freedom narratives of formerly enslaved Black people. I will present to the audience passages from both editions of Brown’s narrative (Brown

& Stearns 1849; Brown 1851) as well as images used in Brown's traveling panorama, "Henry Box Brown's Mirror of Slavery." Using critical discourse analysis, I will illustrate how an intertextual examination of 19th century freedom narratives reveals an understudied literary context of Classics as White voice.

Like many formerly enslaved Black people, Brown was mandatorily illiterate at the time of his escape. For that reason, his first narrative was written by a White male abolitionist. And like many White males, Stearns was educated in Classics. Stearns' edition has poems, imbedded narratives, and metaphors involving Spartans, the goddess Libertas, the assassination of Caesar, and other Classics references. For example, writing in the first person as if he is Brown himself, Stearns uses Homeric imagery and engages ancient history in stating, "...rich streams of blood, flowing from the mangled corpses strewn upon its surface, by the fiendish barbarity of a Sennacherib, a Cyrus, a Xerxes, and an Alexander" (Stearns 1849 p. 72). When Brown then wrote his own narrative, he aptly titled it, "The Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself." While both editions have numerous references to Christianity and even share some of the same language, Brown's later narrative includes only one minor reference to classical literature. I argue that this change in content reflects the racist gatekeeping of the American education system then and illustrates the depth to which Classics references have represented the embodiment of White thought and White voice.

In an era of resurging public presence of White supremacists emblazoned with Classics phrases and imagery (Bond 2018), if we are to rebuke the notion of Classics as White voice, it is essential that scholars continue to investigate and deconstruct how Greek and Latin literature became so intertwined with White identity. This paper is an effort to continue addressing these

difficult realities for Classics in America, contribute to scholarship on race and ethnicity as well as classical reception, and amplify Black voices.

Bibliography

- Bond, Sarah E. "The Misuse of an Ancient Roman Acronym by White Nationalist Groups." *Hyperallergic*. August 30, 2018. <https://hyperallergic.com/457510/the-misuse-of-an-ancient-roman-acronym-by-white-nationalist-groups/>.
- Brown, Henry. 1851. *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*. Manchester, England: Self-published.
- Brown, Henry and Charles Stearns. 1849. *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery, Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide. Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery by Charles Stearns*. Boston: Self-published.
- Lamore, Eric D. and John C. Shields, eds. 2011. *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*. Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press.
- Ronnick, Michele V. "Black Classicism: 'Tell Them We are Rising!'" *Classical Journal* 106, no. 3 (2011): 359-70.
- Sekora, John. "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative." *Callaloo: A Journal of African American and African Arts and Letters* 32 (1987): 482-515.