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CRITIQUE! CRITIQUE! CRITIQUE! BLACK LABOR IN THE EARLY AMERICAN BOOK TRADE

John J. Garcia

Where do we find Black presences in the history of the book in early America outside of the well-studied roles of author, reader, editor, printer, or publisher? Answers to this question amount to a widening of the agents and personnel usually considered in book history and bibliography. I wish to pursue the idea that the edges of print cultural production are the sites of racialized laborers that made white book culture possible in North America and the Caribbean across the long eighteenth century.¹ This foray into critical bibliography offers a manifesto for the emergent field formation as a whole. In recovering Black print labor, I contend that critical bibliography must incorporate elements of critique outlined in the traditions of critical philosophy inaugurated by Immanuel Kant and continued by theorists such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, among others.

From Kant onward, critique has probed the limits of what we can know, do, and hope for. Foucault's later writings continued this line of thinking by revolutionizing the Kantian questions into a reflective "historical-philosophical" practice.² As Foucault put it toward the end of his career, "The game is to try to detect those things which have not yet been talked about, those things that, at the present time, introduce, show, give some more or less vague indications of the fragility of our systems of thought."³ The limits of what we can know are, for Foucault and others, baked into who we are as subjects of knowledge. Such foreclosures can be rectified through critique, albeit with the caveat that critique cannot resolve everything by itself even as it pushes against disciplinary boundaries.⁴ A reflexive project of the kind proposed by Foucault or the Frankfurt School must be a key component of critical bibliography, both because critique is nearly synonymous with open academic inquiry and due to its affiliation with political dissent. *Critical* bibliography—if our edited collection of essays can do justice to an adjective that seeks to distinguish newer bibliographical work from earlier descriptive, enumerative, and analytical

models—must be a critique of bibliography’s own presuppositions, including the ideological formations driving our investments in the field. Otherwise, I fear that we are merely monetizing the critical as an empty signifier without marshaling intellectual resources that could make bibliography a resource for reparative scholarship.⁵ For instance, the Andrew W. Mellon Society of Fellows in Critical Bibliography, an organization of which I am a participating member, makes no explicit mention of critique in its mission statement, asserting instead an alignment with “critical and theoretical insights” that reads vaguely and mutes political dissent.⁶

And so, what is the critique entailed in the recovery of an early American book trade that relied on Black subjects? The first critical reflection below questions why the eighteenth-century British Caribbean has gone missing from early American book history, even though the most authoritative scholarly resource, *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, purported to study early America from a transatlantic perspective.⁷ To organize this topic, a rare book by an unknown white Jamaican author will open and close this manifesto. The Jamaican volume, which survives in just one known copy, pictures an enslaved Black woman in a scene of colonial reading. Working from this illustration, I question why the British West Indies have been largely excluded from histories of the book in colonial North America and the early United States. That foreclosure occludes evidence that could open up largely unexplored sites of book historical research.

A second section, “Paper Trails,” demonstrates what bibliography can do with paperwork to study print racialization. Here I direct attention to the book trade in the early United States to show that critical bibliography can do reparative work, and I do so by turning to financial documents (ledgers, receipts, indentures, etc.). In paperwork, we find enslaved servants and housekeepers, couriers and menial workers, and more glimpses of Black printers. These subjects appear in the vicinity of the book trade, in supporting roles that made books possible by personnel who often lacked literacy but demonstrated extraordinary competency and survival. Although these recoveries necessarily replay racism, violence, and individual tragedy, I also find hope in a recognition that paper—the necessary substrate of every book—retains liberating stories that spiral away from oppression into other scenarios potentially less cruel than what the archive often tells us. Here a few runaway papermakers from the American Revolution stand as emblems for a different life. Even if those other possibilities did not guarantee freedom, they did not foreclose the latter. Revolutionary paper mills were sites of racialized labor, and Black personnel bore visible marks of painful working conditions. However,

the recovery of minoritized participants in the book trade needn't end with violence. My analysis is not an exercise in critical fabulation per se, but rather an orientation to the archive grounded in negativity (which is not the same thing as pessimism). Among many theoretical influences, the version of critical bibliography proposed here takes inspiration from Stephen Best's vision of a historicism "predicated on knowing what withholds itself from the possibility of being known."⁸ In my research, the elusiveness of the Black presence in the vicinity of the book trade brings urgency to an application of negative dialectics to book history, and in this regard the negative bibliography modeled here can be said to triangulate critique, the archive, and antiracism. I return to the possibility of merging bibliography with negative dialectics at the close of this essay. Critical bibliography may mean different things to different people, but here this orientation to the history of the book entails determinate negation, the perpetual inadequacy of concepts and the objects they intend to explain, as Theodor Adorno outlined in his writings on epistemology, aesthetics, and the philosophy of history.

The Caribbean Reader

As Giles Barber demonstrated in a classic article on the transatlantic circulation of print in the eighteenth century, enormous quantities of London books passed through Britain's island colonies in amounts that surpassed New World colonies such as New York and Pennsylvania. Only New England imported more books across the eighteenth century, but even that comparison must be scaled against the fact that the West Indian colonies had a smaller white population that spent more on consumer goods per capita.⁹ From the 1680s onward, British merchants imported books for white island readers. They responded to the wealth generated by sugar plantations and the accompanying leisure of literate enslavers.¹⁰ The first specialized bookstore was established in Barbados around 1715; it offered thousands of freshly imported London titles across the genres of law, theology, science, and imaginative literature.¹¹ Around this time Jamaica secured its first printer, Robert Baldwin. By the 1730s Barbados developed its own local print culture with ties to Benjamin Franklin, especially Samuel Keimer, the bankrupted Philadelphia printer who reinvented himself in Bridgetown as editor and publisher of the *Barbados Gazette*. By midcentury Antigua and other islands had similar print cultures. Newspapers, government proclamations, and job printing comprised the bulk of printing, alongside the occasional pamphlet or book.

Thinking about sites of reading on a West Indian plantation is one way to recover the lost racialized laborers of early American books. White readers in Jamaica and Barbados probably always read books with the enslaved close at hand. We can imagine domestic workers attending a planter's library similar to the moment in Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* when the young narrator waves a fan before a drowsy colonizer who may have thumbed through some books. This was certainly true on Thomas Thistlewood's Jamaican plantation, since Thistlewood remarks many times in his diaries upon enslaved men and women who carried his books and arranged his personal library.¹² An analogous scene is captured in a mysterious book from the Jamaican press. *Excursion into the Interior from the Cape of Good Hope* has no title page, but its date can be surmised from watermark evidence and comments made about British control of the Cape Colony around 1803.¹³ Notably, the author made his own crude woodcuts. *Excursion* may be the first illustrated edition printed in Jamaica as well as one of the first engraved books from the Caribbean press.

One woodcut illustrates a scene of reading and bondage that would have resonated with the men and women kept in bondage at Thomas Thistlewood's plantation. The engraving is curiously entitled "Lo, and behold! the cogitative Reader!" (fig. 1). This and other images by the author of *Excursion* take a deeply pessimistic stance. The white reader is asleep, mouth agape, book falling from the lap. His chair has just two legs, representing "a most alarming parable, or allegory of danger and insecurity!"¹⁴ Here the reading habits of the British planter class are held up as a failure to replicate metropolitan standards of taste and refinement. This nearly lost edition of *Excursion* outlines through its allegorical pictures a corrosive vision of early American reading founded upon slavery. Hence the Black figure at left holds aloft a gigantic chalice of liquor to awaken, and further delude, the lazy colonial mind. It's as if the author/illustrator asserts that there may be many books in the West Indies but not a reading public. The picture shows "the yawning listless state of us miserable inhabitants of the Western Gem." And because it is explicitly a visual "allegory," we can project the entire image onto the book culture of the British Americas, including the mainland colonies. *Excursion* argues that every white colonial reader read on the backs of the enslaved.

Probate inventories tell us that the shadowy figure attending the reader in *Excursion* was no anomaly. The records, which were required by Jamaican law, have been preserved and now digitized; they reveal book ownership within the context of a brutal slaveholding society.¹⁵ However, while some of my writing introduces new research drawn from



Figure 1. Woodcut engraving of a West Indian reader, an enslaved servant, and an enormous cup of liquor. From *Excursion into the Interior from the Cape of Good Hope*. American Antiquarian Society.

inventories and from close inspection of the material text, important findings have been out there for decades. Notably, Roderick Cave conducted an enormous amount of research into the slavery dimension of Caribbean reading cultures and the spread of printing across the islands. His work appeared in a series of short articles that culminated in *Printing and the Book Trade in the West Indies*.¹⁶ However, Cave's scholarship wasn't featured in *Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, nor was it published in the agenda-setting collection *Printing and Society in Early America* sponsored by the American Antiquarian Society.¹⁷ The latter omission is a stunning absence, since Cave presented a lengthy paper titled "The West Indian Planter and his Reading" at the 1980 Worcester conference that preceded *Printing and Society*. This was a path sadly not taken in bibliography. Cave's findings could have encouraged a more connected history of the colonial book in the Atlantic world at the moment when the multivolume *History of the Book in America* was first envisioned. Whether by conscious design or for other reasons, Cave's findings were not synthesized by the

American Antiquarian Society's (AAS's) Program in the History of the Book in America.

Two archival examples add to the enslaved attendant pictured in *Excursion*. Robert Baldwin published the *Weekly Jamaica Courant* from a printing office and bookstore in Kingston. But how did readers spread across Jamaican plantations receive their newspapers? They were delivered by an enslaved man who doubled as a letter carrier.¹⁸ Borrowing from Robert Darnton, we could call this unknown courier one of the forgotten middlemen of literary culture. Flash-forward to the 1790s and we begin to see Black pressmen who were probably there across the eighteenth century. Cave noted that inventories of deceased printers valued some enslaved men and boys at unusually high amounts, a detail indicating they were employed as skilled hands in the printing office. However, what Cave didn't explore was the opportunity to work backwards from a printer's death to earlier publications that would have included these laborers. The printer George Ebrerall of Jamaica died in 1789. The five enslaved workers in his office could have manufactured a lengthy compilation of laws published in 1786.¹⁹ Indeed, compilations of colonial laws were onerous projects that required a substantial workforce to bring an edition to fruition. Jamaican legal proceedings were printed in quarto editions of five hundred pages per volume. Their status as symbols of political authority meant that printers attended to minute details, since a poorly manufactured book of laws reflected poorly on the publisher. Editions were frequently published by subscription, meaning that scores of prominent lawyers, government officials, and wealthy planters pooled resources to offset the outlay in paper and other resources. These patrons expected only the best. All of this is to say that printing the laws was so important that it ended up revealing the dependency of successful printer-publishers on enslaved pressmen. Alexander Aikman, a South Carolina Loyalist who resettled in Jamaica, became the wealthiest West Indian printer of them all. However, by 1794 his next installment of Jamaican laws was stymied by the death of two white compositors. The Jamaican Assembly complained to Aikman that a new volume was long overdue, leading the businessman to state that work was slow because "part of the business [was] being executed here by negroes."²⁰ Reading backward from this 1794 statement means that preceding editions like Aikman's *Laws of Jamaica* (1793) and the botany guide *Hortus Americanus* (1794) probably passed through Black hands. Sadly, this means that Black printers were agents in the production of books promoting government policies that furthered their oppression. Through the backbreaking labor

of pulling the press, enslaved Caribbean printers manufactured and disseminated the Law, and therefore the State itself.²¹

From household attendants to couriers and printers, the West Indian book trade teaches us that early American cultures of reading (including literature and the law) were facilitated by the enslaved. I surmise that we haven't recognized this point because previous generations of bibliographers cordoned off Caribbean book-historical research from an early America bounded by the territory that later became the United States. By adopting a nationalist paradigm, a founding moment in the AAS Program in the History of the Book in America ended up occluding important stories of early Black print work.

Paper Trails

On the Fourth of July 1788, five thousand artisans and laborers paraded under the warm Philadelphia sun to celebrate the ratification of the US Constitution. As with celebrations held in New York City and Charleston, Philadelphia's Grand Federal Procession projected an image of national consensus at a moment when propagandists sought to stamp out opponents to ratification. In the words of Benjamin Rush, the event represented the "triumph of knowledge over ignorance, of virtue over vice, and of liberty over slavery." Observers marveled at an audience that swelled to seventeen thousand people. Cordwainers, clockmakers, saddlers, gunsmiths—all took their turn in the parade, each proclaiming the virtues of their professions.²²

Printers and men of capital, to borrow Rosalind Remer's pithy phrase for the postrevolutionary publishing scene, had a conspicuous place in the federal procession.²³ The book trade commissioned an elaborate "Printer's Float" consisting of a rolling stage mounted with a working press. Philadelphia's biggest players pooled their resources to pay for the occasion. Significantly, Black laborers helped keep the Printer's Float in motion. William Young, the bookseller who kept track of expenses, noted two "Negroes" were paid to assist the horse-drawn stage through Philadelphia's streets.²⁴ Nine shillings were allotted to the men for "attending the carriage," including a one and six (£0.1.6) for a round of drinks once work concluded. Young recorded neither the names of the two men nor their legal status, but their presence manifested the dichotomy of a nationalist trade in books that depended on Black bodies relegated to the margins of print capitalism.

Working outward from the Grand Federal Procession, more recoveries can be made of a racialized foundation to early US print culture. As with the Caribbean examples previously discussed, Black workers in the new nation have thus far escaped systematic analysis, but they were there and were documented. When Mathew Carey reflected on a career in the book trade he recalled a “resolute negro pressman” from the early 1790s.²⁵ This free African American triggered Carey’s memory because the printer refused to work when Carey couldn’t pay his wages. The unnamed man must have been an employee before 1794, the year Carey sold his printing apparatus to focus exclusively on publishing and distribution. Carey chose his words carefully. The printer was *resolute*—determined and unwavering in the face of a white employer. He confronted Carey in a struggle to survive, to feed himself and maybe a family too. It’s tantalizing to imagine the defiant pressman having a hand in Carey’s many English reprints, which ranged from anthologies of famous authors to the costly reprint of William Guthrie’s *A New System of Modern Geography* (1794). The resolute printer would have been around for Philadelphia’s yellow fever epidemic and maybe played a role in printing Carey’s 1793 short essay on that topic. Even more suggestively, the printer could have worked the press for Carey’s *Remarks on the Slave Trade* (1789), a broadside with the infamous engraving of the slave ship Brooks. If so, then Carey’s Black printer would have been participated in the cutting edge of early US anti-slavery print media.

But we can only speculate. Philadelphia may have had a small community of Black pressmen at the end of the eighteenth century. Isaiah Thomas noted an elderly printer named Andrew Cain who, at the time Thomas revised *The History of Printing in America* in 1815, retired after many years in the trade: “He is now ninety-four years old. It is said he has been a good workman.”²⁶ Was Cain the same man who worked for Carey? If these were separate people, did the pair know one another, and were they joined by other Black printers, free or unfree? One thing for certain is that there was a larger cast of nonwhite agents working in early US print cultural production. Most were not printers, but they were part of a print capitalism infrastructure.

The real problem of not getting paid connects to a larger struggle to survive that challenged apprentices, journeymen, and menial laborers alike. Menial workers especially faced the uncertain prospects of the early US economy, a labor regime that required mobility, scraping by, and sometimes sheer luck.²⁷ Many examples of such temporary work, sometimes agreed to by oral contract, occurred in the book trade. Booksellers hired Black wagon drivers to deliver supplies between urban

publishers and country printers. Writing from Harrisburg in 1816, the printer William Greer requested that an unnamed “colored man” deliver reams of paper from a Philadelphia business associate.²⁸ Several years later, the Philadelphia firm McCarty and Davis relied on an African American driver for long-distance travel. Writing to a satellite bookstore in Wheeling, Virginia, the two businessmen worried about letters that had gone missing on a carriage driven by “black jo the waggoner.” McCarty and Davis described Jo as “a trusty fellow but said letters have never come to hand.”²⁹ It was a challenging three-hundred-mile ride from Wheeling to Philadelphia, a geographical fact that testifies to the trust placed in Jo. Such men were part of the communications circuit outlined in Darnton’s famous essay. But even as Darnton acknowledged couriers and wagon drivers as “shippers,” this leading spokesman of book history completely ignored questions of race. Critical bibliography in the mode proposed here would therefore significantly rectify Darnton’s silence on this subject.

The paper trail has thus far included a stray receipt from William Young, a few letters from Philadelphia and outlying regions, and recollections by Mathew Carey and Isaiah Thomas. However, the paperwork in publishers’ archives is never neutral or transparent when it comes to Black employment. Indenture forms are ridden with redactions that depart from the standard contractual language that bound young white men with time-honored protections. Black men and women signing these same forms were ensnared in obfuscating language that concealed unfree labor under the guise of a freely signed contract. Cloe Morgan, “of the age of twelve years a black girl,” signed an apprenticeship with the Philadelphia printer Peter Morgan to perform “housewifery” for eight years. However, the February 9, 1789, agreement with Cloe’s name was immediately transferred from Morgan to a man named Samuel Hayes *on the very same day*. And Hayes proceeded to sell Cloe to a Mary Nicholas on February 7, 1793, just around the time of Philadelphia’s devastating yellow fever epidemic.³⁰ Cloe wasn’t alone. The New York publisher Samuel Campbell also conscripted African Americans through redacted indenture forms. “Charles a negro” contracted to Campbell on November 19, 1793. The manuscript insertions to the agreement are telling here. Charles became “servant to Samuel Campbell of the city of New York to serve him after the manner of a servant.”³¹ This redundancy of servitude obfuscates the fact of the man’s enslavement. As with Cloe, the indenture signed by Charles reeks of coerced sale, not a freely signed agreement. Why else would a thirty-eight-year-old man become an indentured worker, especially as the contract boldly struck out instruction in a trade?

How many Black men and women, free or unfree, were forced to work for printers, publishers, and paper mill owners? Although I have found no other documents naming specific individuals to Campbell, a manuscript plan of his estate included slave quarters on the premises.³²

Paperwork is a long-standing concern of critical theory ever since Max Weber's critique of bureaucratic rationality, but I want to venture a more speculative mode of theorizing from paper's labor relations. Revolutionary-era Boston relied on paper mills at Milton, a town located a few miles outside the port city. This was a troubled site of paper-making activity. Over a dozen workers, both white and Black, took flight from the Milton paper mills between 1770 and 1783, signs that something was amiss. Some runaway papermakers were recaptured, while others seemed to have successfully left for good. One of the escapees is a man named Caesar. Caesar escaped in 1779 with a few white apprentices. The mill owners described him in newspapers as "a Negro-Man named Caesar, belonging to James Boice [*sic*] of Milton . . . he is of small stature, has very crooked shins (which have been lately scalded)." ³³ The mill owners asserted that Caesar was "of great service to the public," framing their demand for reclaimed property into a public declaration that paper relied on racialized labor. Black bodies made white paper to serve the white public, James Boies and Hugh McLean argued. And Caesar's body was on the line with his escape. A crucial detail from the runaway advertisement tells us that Caesar's legs "have been lately scalded." Such an injury could have occurred in a number of scenarios at a paper mill, possibly by a spilled batch of gelatin sizing. This and other work hazards harmed the bodies of papermakers: size required the processing of animal hides that could be diseased and therefore transfer disease. Likewise, cloth and linen rag was already known in the eighteenth century to cause damage to the lungs.³⁴ The burned legs marked Caesar by his labor, making him into a kind of walking text that connected unmarked white paper to marks left on black skin. Caesar's body manifested the toll taken on African Americans in the business of early American paper. He was not alone.³⁵ Maybe Caesar escaped for good? The paper trail stops short of tracking his success or failure in that endeavor.

Another runaway from the same mill, James Moody, was a free Black man of considerable papermaking skill. He escaped from Milton just before Caesar did, and he ended up on the US frigate *Alliance*, fighting in dramatic sea battles. Moody's story is fantastic, revolutionary, and hopeful. It is too complex to narrate in this essay, but the documents are in the business archives of a New England paper mill. The first piece of paper about Moody is a 1778 indenture form with redactions similar to those of Cloe and

Charles; there we learn that Moody was in debt to the mill owners.³⁶ The next document is an undated petition from Hugh McLean to John Hancock requesting that the runaway be removed from the Alliance and returned to Milton. Notably, the petition describes Moody as a skilled craftsman who oversaw the entire papermaking operation.³⁷ Moody's expertise is corroborated by a contemporary advertisement describing him as a professional papermaker.³⁸ The extraordinary thing is that Moody wrote about his sea adventures after returning to Boston in July 1781. He states that he earned prize money while fighting the "Enemies of the United States of America" and paid those funds to Boies and McLean to cancel his indenture.³⁹

Questions of an unsolvable nature surround the fates of Moody and Caesar, but they suggestively point in the direction of freedom from exploitative regimes. There could be other men and women in the vicinity of the early American book trade that moved past suffering into something better. Samuel Johnson was an emancipated man who worked odd jobs for Philadelphia booksellers and printers such as Mason Locke Weems, Mathew Carey, and Lydia Bailey.⁴⁰ He seems to have scraped by for many years, and he may have frequented the same circles as Andrew Cain and Carey's resolute printer. These men appear to have scraped by and perhaps even prospered. Cain lived to the ripe age of ninety-four, suggesting a will to survive despite hardships; Thomas insists that Cain earned respect within a predominantly white industry. Moody may have returned to work at the Milton mill, and possibly faced repercussions. But he was, at least for those six months, and perhaps in later life, free from the place that injured Caesar.

The body of evidence I have gathered from the British West Indies and the early US points to systematic Black oppression within the field of print cultural production. Slavery and coerced "free" labor existed, side-by-side, in printing, bookselling, and papermaking spread across vast early America. These recoveries give glimpses of Black print work that are part of a longer genealogy of cultural production. I add as well that the various figures discussed above practiced their own critiques: refusing to work at the beck and call of a negligent white employer, escaping harsh working conditions by putting bodies on the line, and surviving day to day against numerous odds. After all, running away is also a form of strike that grinds capitalist production to a halt. Caesar and Moody performed a critique of revolutionary ideology by refusing to make paper. If paper equaled liberty and independence, as Boies and McLean argued in American newspapers, then Black refusal struck at the contradiction between a book trade investing in nationalism and its underclass of enslaved and ensnared workers.

Critical Bibliography as Negative Dialectics

I end with a call to action and a return to the illustrated Jamaican book for its self-reflective attack on white scholarship. In the engraving “Criticism in Character,” a white Jamaican reader holds aloft a sword while his head rests on a scale symbolizing critical judgment (fig. 2). On the opposing side of the scale is a colonial book weighed against the enslaver’s head. On the left is an allegorical figure of Justice kept from her critical seat by a black imp. I offer the image as an allegory for why critical bibliography must incorporate the self-reflexivity of critique.



Figure 2. “Criticism in Character.” From *Excursion into the Interior from the Cape of Good Hope*. American Antiquarian Society.

Book historians and bibliographers of the world—cut off your white heads! Critical bibliography is not just a “better” bibliography toward greater knowledge of the histories of books, their makers, or users. And it is through critique that more space can be cleared for inclusive, reparative scholarship. To borrow from Karl Marx, bibliography could be a ruthless critique of every single book in existence by exposing the oppression behind the book. But the undoing of sedimented injustice in the material text must also act reciprocally on the scholar as well. Let’s redeploy an insight from Roland Barthes: a (re)birth of bibliography must come at the

expiration of exclusionary models of white academia that older bibliography benefited from.

The eighteenth-century Jamaican book models this reflexive critique. It was printed in a complex transatlantic system that included London (from which its paper was sourced), colonial America and the early Caribbean. But because the West Indian author was more isolated from literary culture than his North American counterparts, his frustrations ended up articulating a ruthless critique of colonial book culture in general. That critique emerged in the recognition that slavery underwrote early American cultures of reading. At the same time, the engraving contains a telling misrecognition—the darkened figure at left is supposed to be the “Imp of Prejudice,” but his coloring aligns him with the shadow servant from the other image I have discussed. Whether by design or by unconscious motivation, the black imp visualizes a Black man assaulting a white British woman. He manifests the flipside of the enslaved servant with the cup, not a facilitator of reading but rather the ever-present threat of white death. And we can also read the entire image along the lines of the famous Barthes idiom: the death of the author is the birth of the reader. The catch here, of course, is that it is undecidable if the head on the scale belongs to author or reader. Is it the author cutting off his head here? Is decapitation performed to foreclose the emergence of a revolutionary Black society, such as the one happening concurrently in Haiti?

Would driving a wagon loaded with reams of paper constitute Black print labor? Yes. Can paving the entrance to a bookstore, as Samuel Johnson did for the printer Lydia Bailey, be part of a career in the book trade? Yes. Did printers and booksellers capitalize on Black bodies for financial benefit? Yes. Were the contractual terms of indenture forms manipulated by printers and publishers to the detriment of Black women and men? Yes. And, ultimately, does white publishing in early America appear differently when reread through Black presences? Yes. All of these responses amount to a critique of a book history that hasn’t looked closely enough for nonwhite participants. Slavery is hardly mentioned in *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, and, as I have demonstrated, the relatively recent emergence of book history and print culture studies that have shaped American literary and cultural history missed an opportunity to include the British Caribbean within its orbit.

One of critical bibliography’s central questions is, How did this book come to be what it is today? The answer proposed in this essay requires extending the communications circuit to nonwhite participants whose labors surrounded books but did not require literacy in most cases. James Moody and Caesar, as with other figures discussed, lived at the margins

of what bibliography can know. Their liberations were outside of books and not contained in them. In their stories I see Stephen Best's historicism that respects a history always inaccessible and askew from our gaze, which is also a riff on the negative relation between subject and object. Negativity—the persistent undermining of knowledge claims outlined in the work of Theodor Adorno—can be a useful corrective to the empiricist leanings of bibliographic research. The nonidentity of thing and concept, the suspicion of reified belief systems (especially theology and implicit theologies), and the permanent condition of an antagonistic society riven by inequalities are the three ingredients of what Adorno termed negative dialectics.⁴¹ Even if not explicitly formulated or adopted as dogma, I hope critical bibliography can aspire to this kind of theoretical rigor. As one noted bibliographer once said in conversation (I'll withhold the name), book history needs theory, and theory needs book history. The Adorno response to this is the nonidentity of this pairing, a perpetual encounter (and undoing) of bibliography and critique mediated by underlying class struggles.

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NOTES

1. Recent studies of these topics include *Early African American Print Culture*, edited by Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Derrick Spires R. Spires, *The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); Jonathan Senchyne, "Under Pressure: Reading Material Textuality in the Recovery of Early African American Print," *American Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 75, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 109–32; *Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print*, edited by Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press: 2019); Joseph Rezek, "Author," *Early American Studies* 16, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 599–606; Marcy J. Dinius, *The Textual Effects of David Walker's "Appeal": Print Based Activism Against Slavery, Racism, and Discrimination, 1829–1851* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022); and Jordan Wingate, "Enslaved Pressmen in the Southern Press," *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism* 32, no. 1 (2022): 34–52.
2. Michel Foucault, "What Is Critique?," *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 41–81.
3. Michel Foucault, "What Our Present Is," in Lotringer, *Politics of Truth*, 129–43, quotation on 137.
4. Judith Butler, "Critique, Dissent, Disciplinarity," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 773–95.

5. I of course acknowledge that “critical bibliography” was first coined by W. W. Greg in the early twentieth century; see “Bibliography—An Apologia,” *The Library* 13, no. 2 (1932): 113–43. Greg aligned bibliography with a “scientific” analysis of “literary documents.” These and other statements would have been challenged by contemporary writing by the Frankfurt School, even as the latter may have appreciated bibliography’s materialist account of cultural production.
6. See Andrew W. Mellon Society of Scholars in Critical Bibliography, “What Is Critical Bibliography?,” Rare Book School, accessed November 29, 2022, <https://rarebookschool.org/sofcb/>.
7. *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, ed. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
8. Stephen Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2018), 25.
9. Giles Barber, “Books from the Old World and for the New: The British International Trade in Books in the Eighteenth Century,” *Studies in the Booktrade of the European Enlightenment* (London: Pindar Press, 1994).
10. Nuala Zahedieh, “London and the Colonial Consumer in the Late Seventeenth Century” *Economic History Review* 47.2 (1994): 239–61.
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