

# “Death or Liberty”: Henry Box Brown “Personificating” Himself in Edward Gascoigne Burton’s *The Fugitive Free* and *The Nubian Captive*

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In 1857, Henry Box Brown starred in Edward Gascoigne Burton’s *The Fugitive Free* and *The Nubian Captive*, two “slave dramas” based on his life. His performance inevitably infused both with an antislavery message: in a radical departure from conventional black abolitionist strategies of resistance in the British Isles, the plays change our understanding of British anti-slavery, of Brown, and of black British performance in general. Despite his short acting career, Brown should be placed alongside fellow African American actors like Ira Aldridge for his integral role in challenging the white racial schema on the Victorian stage.

In the Manchester edition of his 1851 slave narrative, Henry Box Brown wrote the following preface:

However much has been written, however much has been said, and however much has been done, I feel impelled by the voice of my own conscience ... to add yet one other testimony of, and protest against, the foul blot on the state of morals, of religion, and of cultivation in the American republic. For I feel convinced that enough has not been written, enough has not been said, enough has not been done, while nearly four millions of human beings, possessing immortal souls, are, in chains, dragging out their existence in the southern states ... Having, myself, been in that same position, but by the blessing of God having been enabled to snap my chains and escape to a land of liberty – I owe it as a sacred duty to the cause of humanity, that I should devote my life to the redemption of my fellow men.<sup>1</sup>

Brown regarded it as his personal mission to add further written, oratorical and visual testimony to the archive of abolition. A virtuoso on the Victorian stage, he reinvented himself not only for his own personal and financial security but

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* (Manchester: Lee and Glynn, 1851), i–ii.

also because he could never tire of informing the transatlantic public about slavery's brutalities. Like other black abolitionists, his mission and message were urgent: he had been lucky enough to escape but knew that at the time of writing and performing, four million enslaved women, men and children were suffering and dying in slavery. It was his duty to fight for the cause and everything he did – as a survivor – was thus imbued with some form of abolitionist sentiment.

Brown's infamous escape from slavery became the foundation of his celebrity. Confined in a small box which was posted from Richmond to Philadelphia, he was prepared to die in his desperate attempt for liberation. In the wake of his survival, he recognized that his ingenious escape lent itself very well to the entertainment stage and after exhibiting the infamous box in the US, he travelled to the British Isles in 1850 to seek fame and fortune.<sup>2</sup> Brown lectured, orchestrated a gigantic panorama with ever-changing scenes, employed local musical talent as he toured from place to place, and in 1857 even starred in dramatic productions, including *The Fugitive Free*, *The Nubian Captive* and *Pocahontas* (two of which were "slave dramas"). All were written by Edward Gascoigne Burton and first performed in Margate, Kent.<sup>3</sup> A flexible and malleable entertainer, Brown once again relies on a new medium of performance *together* with his identity as a survivor to reach non-abolitionist audiences and raise awareness of American slavery. Burton – the playwright – adapts scenes, phrases and real-life figures from Brown's own slave narrative to create *The Fugitive Free* in particular: while it is a typical Victorian anti-slavery melodrama, it inevitably served as an educative piece about the realities of slavery *because* of Brown's testimony and role performing as himself.

In her recent seminal article, Martha J. Cutter – one of the leading experts on Brown's career – examines his dramatic roles in *The Fugitive Free*, *The Nubian Captive*, *Pocahontas* and *The Secret*, all performed throughout 1857 in Margate, Liverpool, Wigan and Hanley. Cutter argues that through these performances, "we can see Brown's evolution into a black hero, one who

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Gascoigne Burton, *The Fugitive Free, A Drama in Three Acts*, licence awarded 15 June 1857, Lord Chamberlain's Plays collection, British Library, Add MS 52966 Y; Burton, *The Nubian Captive; or The Royal Slave, Eastern Drama in Three Acts*, licence awarded 14 June 1857, Lord Chamberlain's Plays collection, British Library, Add MS 52966 W; Burton, *Pocahontas; or The English Tar and the Indian Princess, Original Drama in Three Acts*, licence awarded 15 June 1857, Lord Chamberlain's Plays collection, British Library, Add MS 52966 X. See also Martha J. Cutter, "Performing Fugitivity: Henry Box Brown on the Nineteenth-Century British Stage," *Slavery & Abolition*, published online at [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0144039X.2020.1843969?src=](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0144039X.2020.1843969?src=) (2020), 1–21.

has agency and power, which is somewhat unusual on the British stage in this era.” She examines Burton’s plays within the world of Victorian drama, particularly how Burton tried to “craft heroic (fully) black figures,” and how Brown himself remained a “multivalent trickster who foils the audience’s ability to capture him in their gaze, in contradistinction to plays from this era in which radical black characters are flattened, controlled, or contained.”<sup>4</sup> She further analyses Brown’s “subversive mode of performative fugitivity” and questions how we can understand or see the “real” Brown as a survivor, as an entertainer *and* as a free remarried man living in Britain.<sup>5</sup>

Building on Cutter’s brilliant analysis, and my PhD thesis, I argue here that Brown’s acting career signalled his exceptionality within the broader anti-slavery movement. Using a different lens to Cutter, I ground this article within the larger context of transatlantic abolition and posit a site-specific analysis of Brown’s acting career in the three aforementioned plays, as well as examining his radicalism on the Victorian stage in relation to British audiences and other black actors during the period. From 1856 in America, William Wells Brown wrote and performed in two plays, *Experience; or, How to Give a Northern Man a Backbone* and *The Escape, or, A Leap for Freedom*. Although the former was never published, Wells Brown travelled around the eastern United States and performed the play occasionally on successive nights. It was an immediate success, particularly when he combined his recital with an anti-slavery lecture either side of it.<sup>6</sup> Aside from the survivors who performed in numerous renditions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in Britain later in the century, Box Brown is the only known African American activist to pursue an acting career on the Victorian stage, especially in regard to plays based on their own lives. Although written by Burton, I concur with Cutter that the plays act as a vehicle for Brown’s radical virtuosity on the transatlantic stage and his performances offer a rare angle for scholars studying Victorian theatre, anti-slavery drama and, most importantly, black visual performance. I thus make the case here that Brown deserves to be recognized alongside fellow African American actors Ira Aldridge and Samuel Morgan Smith who found success in Britain. While both men experienced deep-set racisms,

<sup>4</sup> Cutter, 2–3. See also Martha J. Cutter, “Will the Real Henry ‘Box’ Brown Please Stand Up?,” *Journal of Early American Life*, 16, 1 (Fall 2015), at <http://common-place.org/book/will-the-real-henry-box-brown-please-stand-up/>; and Cutter, *The Illustrated Slave: Empathy, Graphic Narrative, and the Visual Culture of the Transatlantic Abolition Movement 1800–1852* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017), 252–54. Kathleen Chater’s *Henry Box Brown: From Slavery to Show Business* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2020) also examines the plays.

<sup>5</sup> Cutter, “Performing Fugitivity,” 2–3, 9–10.

<sup>6</sup> Ezra Greenspan, *William Wells Brown: An African American Life* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2014), 346–55.

felt most acutely in London, they managed to craft antiracist narratives throughout their performances with iconic “black” roles like Othello and Oroonoko and a limited number of traditional “white” roles. While both of Burton’s plays borrowed heavily from the very small repertoire of black fictional characters like the ones mentioned above, Brown relied on his own fame and life story to kick-start his acting career, awaken interest and encourage abolitionist support outside the anti-slavery lecturing circuit.

In turn, Brown’s position as a survivor inevitably infused Burton’s *The Fugitive Free* and *The Nubian Captive* with anti-slavery sentiment: as *The Era* phrased it, *The Nubian Captive* in particular was “written expressly for him, and its chief interest is the illustration of the evils of slavery, which are most vividly and painfully depicted.”<sup>7</sup> Burton had designed both plays to highlight the sin of slavery and Brown’s role as the hero in both pieces would have had a powerful impact on his audiences. When he spoke of slavery or freedom, or performed the separation between himself and his family, his largely white audiences were witnessing an act not of mere pretence or fiction but of genuine feeling and authenticity *because* he was a survivor.

Lastly, I argue that the site of performance in Margate is significant. Its proximity to London suggests that Brown was savvy about its geographical location and position as a tourist destination for influential Londoners who might have had links to the theatrical world. The site-specificity of the performance extends beyond Margate as an immediate location, though, and is crucial to understanding anti-slavery sentiment and Brown’s integral role in the plays. Both *The Fugitive Free* and *The Nubian Captive* feature a heroic enslaved character who makes a grand escape for liberty; in both, the enslaved character defends his wife or sister from sexual assault, in one instance actually killing the would-be rapists. Due to the physical site of West Indian slavery thousands of miles away and Britain’s deliberate crafting of an abolitionist narrative that erased Britain itself as a site of enslavement and racism, it was safe to direct attention towards slavery in the United States and portray acts of vengeful violence by a black heroic figure against white enslavers since there was little risk of such an incident occurring on British soil. Linked to this, the distinct British provenance stems from an anti-slavery sentiment that cannot be uncoupled from British moral superiority with regard to abolition. The slave trade was abolished in 1807 and slavery in the British Empire legally ended in 1838. Both events were championed in popular culture as the benevolent act of a freedom-loving government, and patriotism and anti-slavery became inevitably tied together. In both plays, it is no accident that British characters (including

<sup>7</sup> *The Era*, 4 Oct. 1857, 11.

representatives from the British Navy) are integral to the plot’s direction and are chiefly responsible for delivering the black hero to freedom.

Brown was part of the black transatlantic anti-slavery movement, where numerous African Americans travelled to Britain and Ireland to raise awareness of American slavery. Some wanted donations to free themselves or enslaved family members, or for a particular anti-slavery society, while others sought to write and publish their narratives.<sup>8</sup> Box Brown was unique, however, and in Alan Rice’s words he “used his black bodily presence as a weapon against slavery but with an eye to entertainment value that establishes him as the showman par excellence.” Adverts and placards distributed in local towns provided a chance for audiences to witness his performances (especially those who were illiterate or did not have access to slave narratives) and he managed to intervene in a white-supremacist landscape to challenge traditional forms of abolitionism.<sup>9</sup> Brown aimed to do this with his plays and adapted to the surge in popularity of anti-slavery productions in the wake of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to provide something new and, ultimately, radical.

In a similar vein, Daphne Brooks has stated that Brown “manipulates the corporeal to produce a renegade form of ‘escape artistry,’” and his constant use of the box in his performances “symbolically communicated a decision to re-move himself from the visible world while *still moving through it*.”<sup>10</sup> For example, during his performances the box would be publicly displayed and one Liverpool newspaper from 1850 described that at the end of each performance “the box in which he was forwarded from Richmond to Philadelphia ... may be seen after each exhibition.”<sup>11</sup> The box makes its

<sup>8</sup> See Hannah-Rose Murray, *Advocates of Freedom: African American Transatlantic Abolitionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Audrey Fisch, *American Slaves in Victorian England: Abolitionist Politics in Popular Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); R. J. M. Blackett, *Building an Antislavery Wall* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983); Peter Ripley, *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, Volume I, *The British Isles 1830–1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1985); and Clare Taylor, *British and American Abolitionists: An Episode in Transatlantic Understanding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1974).

<sup>9</sup> Alan Rice, “Henry Box Brown, African Atlantic Artists and Radical Interventions,” in Celeste-Marie Bernier and Hannah Durkin, eds., *Visualising Slavery: Art across the African Diaspora* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 104–19, 115–17. See also Fisch; Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780–1865* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); and Britt Rusert, “The Science of Freedom: Counterarchives of Racial Science on the Antebellum Stage,” *African American Review*, 45, 3 (Fall 2012), 291–308.

<sup>10</sup> Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom 1850–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 11, 66–68.

<sup>11</sup> *Liverpool Mercury*, 8 Nov. 1850, 6.

delayed appearance at the end of *The Fugitive Free*, but ironically it was Brown's celebrated escape in the box itself that allowed him to ignite an acting career in the first place.

Following Cutter's groundbreaking analyses, together with those of Rice and Brooks, this article begins by outlining the context behind Victorian theatre, with Brown's position on the dramatic stage alongside men like Aldridge and Smith. Brown's acting is a radical departure from conventional abolitionist methods but the decision to act in the play raises the question whether Brown owned his performance or wilfully participated in the cultural commodification of his corporeal self. Placing his performance alongside Aldridge and Smith allows us to consider a number of key contexts: Victorian theatre, the limited roles for black actors, and how they played to, negotiated and undermined racialized stereotypes. The second section will explore the plots of *The Fugitive Free* and *The Nubian Captive* and how they were received by critics. The final section will analyse one of the central themes in both plays, anti-slavery and British moral superiority. Regardless of the many compromises he may have had to make onstage, Brown succeeded in reimagining his life story as a radical visual performance that celebrated his own heroism and fugitive identity.

#### “THE AFRICAN PRINCE”: BROWN, ABOLITION AND THE VICTORIAN STAGE

Born near Richmond, Virginia in 1816, Henry Brown was desperate to escape slavery after his family was sold and used a trusted carpenter to make him a box within which he might flee. In what is now known as one of the most miraculous escapes from slavery, Brown then posted himself from Richmond to Philadelphia.<sup>12</sup> Brown described the escape in the first publication of his slave narrative in 1849, followed by an English edition published in

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *Narrative*, 1, 42–59. There is a wealth of writing on Brown's legacy: Alan Rice, *Creating Memorials, Building Identities: The Politics of Memory in the Black Atlantic* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010); Rice, “Dramatising the Black Atlantic: Live Action Projects in Classrooms,” in Linda K. Hughes and Sarah R. Robbins, eds., *Teaching Transatlanticism: Resources for Teaching Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Print Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); Kathleen Chater, *Henry Box Brown: From Slavery to Show Business* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2020); Cutter, *The Illustrated Slave*; Brooks; Rusert; Janet Neary, *Fugitive Testimony: On the Visual Logic of Slave Narratives* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 5–25; Cynthia Griffin Wolf, “Passing beyond the Middle Passage: Henry ‘Box’ Brown's Translations of Slavery,” *Massachusetts Review*, 37, 1 (1996), 23–45; Teresa A. Goddu, “Antislavery's Panoramic Perspectives,” *MELUS*, 39, 2 (Summer 2014), 12–41; Jeffrey Ruggles, *The Unboxing of Henry Brown* (Richmond: University of Virginia Press, 2003); Kennell Jackson, “Introduction: Travelling Whilst Black,” in Harry J. Elam and Kennell

Manchester in 1851. Despite the agonies he suffered during his escape, his resolute determination “to conquer or die” in the “battle of liberty” proved a distinctive and radical moment in transatlantic anti-slavery history.<sup>13</sup>

After his escape, Brown successfully toured around the US and then travelled to Liverpool, England in 1850. According to the local press, he was “almost penniless” and could not afford to retrieve his “Panorama or Mirror of American Slavery” from the ship’s storage. The Panorama depicted “appalling scenes” of slavery, including the separation of families on the auction block; when he eventually retrieved it, Brown lectured and sang alongside the Panorama and exhibited his infamous box afterwards.<sup>14</sup> The Panorama was central to anti-slavery visual culture and attracted numerous audiences across the northern states of America as well as in the British landscape. Scenes focussed on the violence of slavery, the auction block and the torture of the enslaved, images that were familiar and were designed to encourage sympathy from British audiences.<sup>15</sup>

With his Panorama and the story of thrilling escape, Brown created an entertaining spectacle. On both sides of the Atlantic, Brown exploited the press and enlisted the growing mass media market to produce posters, adverts and copies of his narrative to promote his unique performances. He turned his story into a commodity, capitalizing on its thrills, twists and turns, and became famous based on his escape, not necessarily for his oratory or account of slavery.<sup>16</sup> Brown’s story excited the public, especially when he described or reenacted his escape and forced himself into a small box “amid perils so great, that the mind shudders when they are contemplated.”<sup>17</sup>

Brown continued to rely on his savvy business flair, and in some locations rearranged his performances to include contemporary influences and dressed flamboyantly to attract public attention. He constantly changed his Panorama to entice new audiences, exploited the transatlantic success of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and added new scenes to allude to the main characters. He also included black performers onstage and in cities such as Nottingham invited local performers to perform alongside him.<sup>18</sup>

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Jackson, eds., *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 1–39, 2–4.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, 54.

<sup>14</sup> *Liverpool Mercury*, 5 Nov. 1850, 8, and 8 Nov. 1850, 1, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Goddu, 23–24.

<sup>16</sup> Wolff, 23–24, 28–29.

<sup>17</sup> *Bradford Observer*, 9 Aug. 1849, 7; *Blackburn Standard*, 15 Aug. 1849, 4; *Preston Chronicle*, 18 Aug. 1849, 3. Some of these reports were originally published in Boston newspapers.

Brown's decision to reenact his escape in Bradford was another attempt at drawing in new audiences: he boxed himself up and was ceremoniously carried through the streets to the train station, which was surrounded by American flags. The box was placed on a train and reopened in Leeds to more fanfare and waving of flags to celebrate his heroic sacrifice and passage to liberty. Brown's performances became even more lavish and dramatic: he labelled himself the "African Prince," dressed himself in elaborate clothing and jewelry, and introduced mesmerism and hypnotism into his performances.<sup>19</sup> Between 1858 and 1862, Brown changed the structure of his performances yet further: when he travelled with his new English wife Jane, the duo lectured alongside each other and exhibited various panoramas about Africa and India on alternate nights.<sup>20</sup>

Brown's role as a performer and actor cannot be separated from the history of black theatrical performance. Any dramatic production revealed how the Victorian theatrical world replicated stereotypical representations of black figures and the ways in which that world responded to political events or cultural phenomena. Plays across the country were constantly written in conjunction with and in answer to contemporary issues. For example, numerous performances centered on the gold rush in Ballarat, Australia in 1850 and the Indian Rebellion in 1857, and Burton was clearly heavily influenced by anti-slavery melodramas based on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The long legacy of multiple *Tom* performances illustrated an obsession and fascination with American slavery that could not be extinguished from the dramatic stage. After its publication, any anti-slavery lecture had to mention the novel or be framed around its major themes, and it became the "go-to" resource for understanding US slavery.<sup>21</sup>

Aside from the roles of Othello or Oroonoko, there were few "black" characters on the Victorian stage for actors to play. Brown's decision to adapt his own life story as a form of melodrama speaks to the myriad challenges black actors faced in a market controlled along a white racist schema which had certain expectations of black characters and black people. As an institution, the theatre was a defining vehicle of cultural production that could influence the masses in varied ways that rendered significant the few

<sup>18</sup> *Bristol Mercury*, 21 April 1855, 5; *Hull Packet and East Riding Times*, 26 Nov. 1852, 1; *Manchester Times*, 22 Oct. 1853, 12; *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 1 June 1854, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Rusert, 299–301.

<sup>20</sup> *Isle of Wight Observer*, 25 Dec. 1858, 2; *Hampshire Chronicle*, 12 June 1858, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Marty Gould, *Nineteenth-Century Theatre and the Imperial Encounter* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2. See also Denise Kohn, Sarah Meer and Emily B. Todd, eds., *Transatlantic Stowe: Harriet Beecher Stowe and European Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006); and Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy & Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 134–35, 163.

representations of black characters and slavery itself.<sup>22</sup> While limited, black characters such as Oroonoko and Othello had the potential to influence their audiences’ perception with regard to race, while others could directly enforce abolitionist thought. George Colman Jr.’s *Inkle and Yarico* (first performed in 1787) was credited with stirring anti-slavery sentiment in London and was described by one contemporary as “the bright forerunner of the alleviations of the hardships of slavery.” Such narratives were downplayed when the play was performed in the US, and this demonstrated simultaneously the danger for white American audiences to witness particular strands of anti-slavery thought, and how that same sentiment had already begun to weave itself into British patriotism even before the abolition of slavery. This was proven through the restaging of the Mansfield ruling of *Somerset v. Stewart* in 1772 three years earlier in John O’Keefe’s 1784 play *The Young Quaker*. The geographical distance of Britain from slavery in the West Indies ensured that portrayals of its inhumanity could be met with nothing short of abhorrence. Portrayals of legal cases or specific black characters were popular because they did not offer a challenge to the white and colonial status quo.<sup>23</sup>

Plays such as *Oroonoko* were equally influential. First published as a novel by Aphra Behn, it was adapted by Thomas Southerne in 1695 and was performed continuously for nearly two centuries.<sup>24</sup> The titular character, an African prince, is sold into slavery by Europeans and eventually reunites with Imoinda, the lover he thought dead. Oroonoko leads a failed slave revolt

<sup>22</sup> Cutter, “Performing Fugitivity,” 1–21; Hazel Waters, *Racism on the Victorian Stage: Representation of Slavery and the Black Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5–7. See also Jenna Gibbs, *Performing the Temple of Liberty: Slavery, Theater, and Popular Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 7; Vanessa Toulmin, “Black Circus Performers in Victorian Britain,” *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 16, 3 (2018), 267–89; Juliet John, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literary Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Atedesde Makonnen, “‘Our Blackamoor or Negro Othello’: Rejecting the Affective Power of Blackness,” *European Romantic Review*, 29, 3 (2018), 347–55; Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Douglas A. Jones Jr., *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

<sup>23</sup> Gibbs, 1–3, 58–59, 64–65.

<sup>24</sup> Deirdre Osborne, “Writing Black Back: An Overview of Black Theatre and Performance in Britain”, *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 26, 1 (2006), 16. See also discussions about *The Octoroon*, a play performed in the early 1860s, after Brown’s debut but central to the transatlantic narrative surrounding race, slavery and performance: Sarah Meer, “Boucicault’s Misdirections: Race, Transatlantic Theatre and Social Position in *The Octoroon*,” *Atlantic Studies*, 6, 1 (2009), 81–95; Mia L. Bagneris, “Miscegenation in Marble: John Bell’s *Octoroon*,” *Art Bulletin*, 102, 2 (2020), 64–90.

and then the couple decide to commit suicide to escape further enslavement.<sup>25</sup> Despite its damaging stereotypes, the play did have some impact on anti-slavery thought. In 1759, John Hawkesworth's *Oroonoko* declared distinct anti-slavery sentiments and included the lines "yes Love and Joy must both be free, / Must both be free, for both disdain, / The sounding scourge, and galling Chain."<sup>26</sup> Audiences were fascinated too, when an African prince and survivor of slavery William Unsah Sessarakoo, watched a performance of *Oroonoko*, eager to voyeuristically gaze upon his emotional reaction to the events in the play.<sup>27</sup> As Hazel Waters notes, this "was a rare and instantaneous fusion of life and art. For the audience, it combined the theatrical experience of Southerne's highly popular play with the theatrical spectacle of the two real-life abductees." One can imagine a similar eagerness from Brown's audiences in Margate.<sup>28</sup>

Thus Brown and other black actors before him could not escape their audiences' obsession with race or blackness. US-born Ira Aldridge travelled to London and, in 1825, was the first black actor to perform as Othello. Many London theatre critics were horrified at the prospect of a black man onstage and their racist vitriol drove Aldridge from the capital. In 1833, he returned to the Covent Garden Theatre to perform the same role but the performance ceased after two nights due to the backlash against him.<sup>29</sup> Aldridge's roles were defined and constrained by racism on the Victorian stage, particularly as he performed a set of characters grounded in racialized stereotypes and written prior to the nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup> He referred to himself as the "African Roscius" and was thus cognizant of how newspapers, critics and audiences would view him through a white racist schema and frame his performances through a lens of race. He knew that he was performing to varied audiences but used his stage roles to present an alternative form of abolitionist sentiment.<sup>31</sup> For example, he performed as the leader of a slave revolt, Dred, in productions inspired by Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel of the same name. One

<sup>25</sup> Gregory Pierrot, *The Black Avenger in Atlantic Culture* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019), 19.

<sup>26</sup> J. R. Oldfield, "The 'Ties of Soft Humanity': Slavery and Race in British Drama, 1760–1800," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 56, 1 (1993), 1–14, 2–3.

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649–1849* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 54–55.

<sup>28</sup> Waters, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Bernth Lindfors, "Ira Aldridge's Africanness," *English Academy Review*, 23, 1 (2006), 102–6; Hazel Waters, "Ira Aldridge's Fight for Equality," in Bernth Lindfors, ed., *Ira Aldridge: African Roscius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 97–125, 98–101. See also Cutter, "Performing Fugitivity," 1–21.

<sup>30</sup> Waters, "Ira Aldridge's Fight for Equality", 98–101.

<sup>31</sup> Theresa Saxon, "Ira Aldridge in the North of England: Provincial Theatre and the Politics of Abolition," in Gretchen H. Gerzina, ed., *Britain's Black Past* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 275–95, 285, 292–93.

critic wrote that it was “one of the most successful dramas on the stage for the promotion of liberty and justice,” and Aldridge appeared “*endued with an enthusiasm even uncommon with himself.*”<sup>32</sup>

Partly due to the constraints of Victorian theatre and racial dynamics, Aldridge also performed as Mungo, an enslaved servant in *The Padlock*, first written in 1768 by Isaac Bickerstaff and Charles Dibdin. While Mungo was often interpreted and performed as a comic character (dancing, singing and appearing drunk in certain scenes), the performance also pointed to the inhumanity of slavery.<sup>33</sup> Recognizing the character’s complex representations on the Victorian stage, Aldridge performed in comic roles like Mungo only after he had acted in a dramatic role such as Othello to illustrate the silliness and fictitious stereotype of a minstrel-type black character and to remove any notion that he or other black people should be figures of mockery.<sup>34</sup>

In an attempt to replicate Aldridge’s fame, African American actor Samuel Morgan Smith travelled to Britain in 1866 to pursue a dramatic career. Within a few short weeks, he had played stereotypical roles like Oroonoko but found great success at portraying “white” characters like Richard III too. As Aldridge and Brown had done with their titles of “African Roscius” and the “African Prince” respectively, Smith reinvented himself and called himself the “Coloured American Tragedian”; he performed in numerous roles, including Shakespearean favourites Romeo and Othello, as well as George Harris from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.<sup>35</sup> Within this context, Brown might have wanted to avoid staple Shakespearean roles and use his celebrity to fashion *alternative* characters onstage. Alternatively, in Burton’s third play, *Pocahontas*, Brown performed as the indigenous chief Powhatan, which may have been a form of compromise similar to that Aldridge and Smith had to make with characters like Mungo *because* of the limited roles available for black actors on the Victorian stage.<sup>36</sup>

Both Aldridge and Smith struggled to achieve widespread fame in London despite great support in the provinces. Margate, a short distance from London and the site where Burton’s plays were performed, is therefore significant.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Waters, *Racism*, 68–69, emphasis in the original.

<sup>33</sup> Dorothy Couchman, “‘Mungo Everywhere’: How Anglophones Heard Chattel Slavery,” *Slavery & Abolition*, 36, 4 (2015), 704–20, 705–6, 715–16.

<sup>34</sup> Bernth Lindfors, ed., *Ira Aldridge: Performing Shakespeare in Europe 1852–1855* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3–4.

<sup>35</sup> Errol Hill, “S. Morgan Smith: Successor to Ira Aldridge”, *Black American Literature Forum*, 16, 4 (1982), 132–35, 132–33.

<sup>36</sup> Burton, *Pocahontas*.

<sup>37</sup> For a definition of site-specific theatre see Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks in Joanna Tompkins, “The ‘Place’ and Practice of Site-Specific Theatre and Performance,” in Anna Birch and Joanna Tompkins, eds., *Performing Site-Specific Theatre: Politics, Place, Practice* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 1–17, 2.

Since the mid-eighteenth century, the seaside had become a growing attraction. The aristocracy began to travel to sites like Margate after doctors recommended the health benefits of sea air, which inspired the construction of theatres, assembly rooms, libraries and ballrooms for additional entertainment, together with resorts and bathing hospitals. The arrival of the railway only enhanced this process, and travel guidebooks recommended Margate for its sandy beaches, bathing and social entertainment.<sup>38</sup>

Seeking to capitalize on Margate's success as a tourist destination, Burton himself published a guidebook for the Kent coastline that focussed on Ramsgate, Margate, Broadstairs and Kingsgate. For each town, Burton highlighted the main tourist destinations, bathing spots, hotels, transport information (including stagecoaches and trains), churches and the daily excursions one could make.<sup>39</sup> Considering his position as a playwright, Burton could not fail to mention the Theatre Royal, built in 1787 and home to a small company which travelled along the Kent coast. Burton noted that "some of the brightest stars of the dramatic hemisphere have fretted their hour on these boards, and some of the brightest geniuses that ever adored the English stage have made their debut in the Margate Theatre."<sup>40</sup> Thus acting in Margate during the summer would have exposed Brown to numerous Londoners on holiday from the capital and his residence at a key accommodation site, the Royal Hotel, would have no doubt enhanced his respectability and association with the theatre, as well as providing ample opportunities to advertise his performances.<sup>41</sup>

Considering Brown's versatile career, it is unsurprising he should turn to acting to attract audiences who, as William Wells Brown phrased it, "would

<sup>38</sup> Lee Jackson, *Palaces of Pleasure: From Music Halls to the Seaside to Football, How the Victorians Invented Mass Entertainment* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 184–7. As early as 1825, one tourist manual wrote, "these luxuries, comforts, and blessings invite, To the Margate Steam-Packets then haste with delight; You may stay out a week, taste the pleasures all round, And carry home change from a Note of Five Pound." See Allan Brodie, "The Brown Family Adventure: Seaside Holidays in Kent in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Tourism History*, 5, 1 (2013), 1–2; Howard Hughes and Danielle Benn, "Tourism and Cultural Policy: The Case of Seaside Entertainment in Britain", *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 3, 2 (1997), 235–55; Nigel Barker et al., "Margate's Seaside Heritage," *English Heritage* (2007), at <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/margates-seaside-heritage/margates-seaside-heritage>, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Edward Gascoigne Burton, *A Hand Book and Companion to Ramsgate, Margate, Broadstairs, Kingsgate, Minster &c. And Guide to the Places of Public Resort, Rural Walks, and Select Routes for Excursionists and Visitors to the Isle of Thanet*. G. Griggs, Ramsgate (Ramsgate, 1859), 4–6.

<sup>40</sup> Jackson, *Palaces of Pleasure*, 186–87; Burton, *A Hand Book and Companion*, 37. See also the Theatres Trust website at <https://database.theatrust.org.uk/resources/theatres/show/2300-theatre-royal-margate>.

<sup>41</sup> *The Era*, 28 June 1857, 1.

not give a cent” to attend an anti-slavery meeting.<sup>42</sup> It appears that Box Brown first performed as an actor on the Victorian stage as early as 1853. In Sheffield, he was employed by the manager of the Adelphi Casino to “give an entertainment” entitled ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ for nearly two weeks at the end of May. Although the “entertainment did not take,” Brown continued his engagement, and eventually sued the theatre company when they refused to pay him.<sup>43</sup> He was acutely attuned to his unique position: by portraying a formerly enslaved individual he was able to authenticate the play and manipulate audience fascination with his corporeal self.

Burton, too, must have understood the attraction of working with Brown. As demonstrated by his own guidebook, he was fully aware of Margate’s importance in the entertainment and theatrical world and, given Brown’s celebrity, it must have appeared a lucrative prospect to attract tourists during the theatrical season. Burton himself wrote that the growing popularity of the theatre was “sufficient proof that people will come to the theatre if you give them *something worth their money* when they do come.”<sup>44</sup> Hence he wrote *Pocahontas, or, The English Tar and the Indian Princess; The Nubian Captive*, and *The Fugitive Free* in February 1857 and sent them to the Lord Chamberlain for licensing; they were received on 12 June 1857 and licenses were granted between two and three days later in time for the summer.<sup>45</sup>

As Helen Freshwater notes, the Lord Chamberlain’s archive of plays reveals the panic and suspicion behind theatrical performances since there was a firm belief that the “theatre possessed performative influence.”<sup>46</sup> While this was always framed in a negative sense as the Lord Chamberlain dismissed all plays which he thought were inappropriate, the belief that plays could shape an audience’s morals or sentiments is meaningful. Two of Burton’s plays contained such a strong anti-slavery message that both playwright and star would have known how powerful an impression Brown’s performance could make on the minds of the audience. Brown at least could achieve his resolute and unchanging aim to inform a variety of audiences about slavery, and perhaps challenge preconceptions of those who were ignorant of its reality. The plays offered Brown a chance to convey the authenticity and realism of his life story in an entirely different medium, and potentially to those of the elite whom he struggled to reach with his panoramas and lectures.

<sup>42</sup> Jones, *The Captive Stage*, 138–40, 163–64.

<sup>43</sup> *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, 30 July 1853, 6. See also Cutter, *The Illustrated Slave*; and Chater, *Henry Box Brown*.

<sup>44</sup> Burton, *A Hand Book and Companion*, 37–38, emphasis in original.

<sup>45</sup> Burton, *The Fugitive Free*; Burton, *The Nubian Captive*; and Burton, *Pocahontas*.

<sup>46</sup> Helen Freshwater, “Anti-theatrical Prejudice and the Persistence of Performance: The Lord Chamberlain’s Plays and Correspondence Archive”, *Performance Research*, 7, 4 (2002), 50–57, 51.

## “ONE OF THE WONDERS OF THE AGE”: THE PLAYS

*The Fugitive Free* begins on a Richmond plantation with a white enslaver named the Captain discussing his daughter Amelia’s birthday plans. Every year since she was born, the Captain frees an enslaved man or woman, but this time his daughter asks him to free her “favourite slave,” Henry Brown, together with his sister Jane and mother Betsey. Allen, his adviser, promises his money is safe in the local bank, but, unbeknownst to the Captain, Allen has been scheming behind the scenes to ensure his downfall. Henry learns he is to be free, stating, “I am all joy, joy that knows no bounds,” and sings a song of liberty. He looks for his sister Jane and heroically saves her from the unwanted advances of Allen, who threatens that his freedom will be an “artificial” one. The Captain discovers that the local bank has collapsed and he is financially ruined, and Allen seizes control of the property, including the enslaved. The scene moves to an auction block where Henry and Jane are sold, but at the last minute a stranger intervenes and declares that both are free because of the manumission papers the Captain had drawn up before the transfer of property to Allen. However, Henry’s wife Nancy, who is owned by another enslaver named Cottrell, is placed upon the auction block and sold away from him. In the next act, Henry is imprisoned and flogged onstage by two cruel guards, but in a deliberate attempt to tap into racialized stereotypes of British characters delivering black figures to freedom, a white Englishman named David offers to paint his face and take Henry’s place in prison, thus allowing him to escape. Henry is placed in the infamous box that is sent to the Captain as part of his luggage. The final scene opens with the Captain and his daughter in Philadelphia, who receive a telegram to say they are being sent a box, and that they must “open it immediately ... [the] contents are precious.” The stranger who delivers the box invites his friends to witness the monumental occasion, as “should [Henry] live this will be one of the wonders of the age.” The stranger taps upon the box, whispering “are you well?” Henry replies, “I am thank God” (a direct adaptation from Brown’s narrative). The box is opened, and Henry is lifted out, and the play ends with Henry rejoicing that he can finally “breathe the pure air of freedom ... [and] may all here smile on the good fortune that has made *The Fugitive Free*.”<sup>47</sup>

*The Fugitive Free* is based on Brown’s life and, despite a few additional dramatic scenes, it heavily borrows tropes and even lines from Brown’s narrative. Jane and Nancy (Brown’s sister and first wife respectively) have central roles in the play, as does Nancy’s enslaver, Cottrell, and the overseer, Allen. In the

<sup>47</sup> Burton, *The Fugitive Free*.

narrative, Brown describes Allen as "one of the meanest and cruelest men that I ever knew ... a thorough-going villain in all his modes of doing business." He "excelled all I had ever seen in low mean trickery and artifice" and used "to rob his master and the poor slaves that were under his control."<sup>48</sup> Borrowing from Brown's real-life experience, Burton reimagines Allen as the central villain in the play and exposes his violence to an international audience.

At the same time, *The Fugitive Free* has some themes in common with "mortgage melodrama," which involved the dramatization of largely aristocratic or wealthy families desperate to own or reclaim their homes after the threat of deprivation or financial loss. Burton taps into these themes but uses a plantation as the foundation for the drama, with Allen's villainous scheming driving the plot, as the estate and the enslaved are sold under collusion with the auctioneer who sells everything to Allen. Although a "Stranger" interrupts the sale, declaring it unlawful, this is almost a subplot as the central focus of the scene and other subsequent dialogue rests on Henry and Nancy's relationship.<sup>49</sup>

According to the Victorian press, notwithstanding the "great expence" (*sic*) to which the local theatre manager had gone "in catering for the amusement of the patrons of the drama in Margate, by the production of the slave drama of 'the Fugitive Free,'" Burton and the theatre manager reengaged Brown for *The Nubian Captive*.<sup>50</sup> Brown stars as his namesake, an "African Prince" named Hameh who is usurped by his traitorous enemy Konae.<sup>51</sup> Both Hameh and his wife Medona are detained and sold into slavery; as slave hunters seize Medona, Hameh cries in a heart-shattering line that would have resonated with the audience, "monsters tear me not from her she is my wife."<sup>52</sup> Hameh is sold into slavery in Havana, where he remains for three years until he learns Medona has also been sold and is only a few miles away. Reunited, they resolve to escape and are guided by the North Star through the swamps. The couple are rescued by a white Dutchman named Von Clatz in an elaborate subplot: Von Clatz begins the play consumed by greed, but by the play's end he recognizes his previous folly after he was betrayed by one of the main villains of the piece and turns his life around to help Hameh and Medona return home. As soon as the three board a slaver to travel back to the African continent, Hameh discovers a deception

<sup>48</sup> Brown, *Narrative*, 22–25.

<sup>49</sup> Adrienne Brown, "The Disenchanted Literature of Homeownership 1922–1968," in Cody Marris and Christopher Hager, eds., *Timelines of American Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 37–53, 37–39.

<sup>50</sup> *South Eastern Gazette*, 4 Aug. 1857, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Burton, *The Nubian Captive* (1857), Act 1, scene i, 16.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, Act 1, scene III, 32.

that threatens the Dutchman's life and saves him from impending death. The British Navy take over the slaver and it "blows up with a terrific explosion." With the help of the navy, Hamah and his wife arrive at the palace and eventually he reveals himself as the true heir to the throne.<sup>53</sup>

A third play, *Pocahontas; or, The English Tar and the Indian Princess*, is set in Jamestown. It opens with English colonists settling in the New World and how one Englishman's romance with Pocahontas causes inevitable friction between the Native Americans and the colonists. Brown stars as Powhatan, and at least one review advertises singing and dancing as a central part of the play. As the African American, the exotic "other" in the troupe, it is of no surprise that Brown is given this role instead of the Englishman. His racialized characterization is in juxtaposition with stereotypical language along a white racial schema; local indigenous people are at one point referred to as "pig-minded baboons," and during one battle a settler remarks how he will "blow you all to the Devil" with an "English bullet."<sup>54</sup> Given that Pocahontas's grave is in Kent, the site-specific nature of this melodrama was tonally significant, as well as a specific opportunity to uphold racialized and xenophobic narratives surrounding British colonialism. Performances of the colonial world served to reinvent and reflect racialized stereotypes of indigenous peoples and the New World frontier, visualizing how Britain saw itself and its role within the world. While such dramatizations had no basis in fact, they were designed to reassure audiences that such worlds – in the Americas or in the East – could be managed, controlled, influenced or even eradicated.<sup>55</sup>

Considering how Aldridge and Smith had to adapt their abilities and roles to the prejudices of their audiences, Brown's performance in *Pocahontas* seems like an inevitable decision to satisfy his white audience's expectations. There was no overt anti-slavery agenda in *Pocahontas*, but, given what we know of Brown's virtuosity, he was willing to adapt and be flexible. His Panorama changed to reflect contemporary events such as the Indian Rebellion, and while there are parallels and connections to slavery and the rebellion through imperialism, the slave trade, and white violence, the surface message of such performances does not appear to challenge the status quo. Brown might have had less control over the shape of the story and the dialogue but perhaps he found it necessary to vary his performances from typical slave dramas. The fact that he continued to perform in *Pocahontas* long after he left Margate implies that he saw the plays as a package and a foundation

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, Act 3, scene vi, 73–80.

<sup>54</sup> Burton, *Pocahontas*; *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 31 Oct. 1857, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Rebecca Ann Bach, *Colonial Transformations: The Cultural Production of the New Atlantic World 1580–1640* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 146.

upon which to build future performances or new roles. Indeed, Cutter posits that “Brown’s acting was a possible venue for his psychic liberation from enslavement, particularly given that he continued to perform and stage them for several months after [Margate] ... outside the theatre, Brown was defined by his box ... on stage, however, we see an eventual evolution away from Brown’s definition via this symbol.”<sup>56</sup>

Unfortunately, one of the plays – possibly *Pocahontas* – was received very poorly in Margate in comparison to *The Fugitive Free* and *The Nubian Captive*. Due to the “loss upon each performance after the first two nights,” Brown claimed that the theater manager had “refused to hand him over any portion of the proceeds of either night” and sued him for a loss of income. The manager stated, “his agreement with the plaintiff was for six nights’ performances, and that he was to deduct £36 for expenses, and not £6 per night” as Brown claimed. Burton “swore that plaintiff had told him that £36 was to be deducted for house expenses” and the judge ruled in the manager’s favour. This incident very likely soured relations between actor, writer and manager, which explained the very abrupt halt to Brown’s budding theatrical career in Margate.

Undeterred, Brown took the plays elsewhere. He was engaged first at the Royal Park Theatre in Liverpool, where a local correspondent wrote that Brown “will make his first essay on these boards as an actor, in a piece written expressly for the introduction of the most stirring scenes in his eventful life. We shall thus have the rare occurrence of a hero Personificating himself.”<sup>57</sup> Brown even organized a “dramatic entertainment, consisting of the Dramatic readings of his American drama, *The Nubian Captive* and the *Fugitive Free*” for “one night only,” presumably with Brown playing all the theatrical roles.<sup>58</sup> He then travelled to nearby Preston and performed for six nights in “three of his original Dramas”<sup>59</sup> before heading to Hanley, where he secured another six-night engagement at the Royal Pottery Theatre to perform the three plays. In late October, the *Staffordshire Advertiser* wrote of the “EXTRAORDINARY NOVELTY” of a man “whose wonderful escape from the horrors of slavery have excited the greatest curiosity.”<sup>60</sup> According to another critic, he had “great success” there and wanted to alert fellow theatre managers he was “at liberty to negotiate with any of the Provincial or London managers.”<sup>61</sup> The stratagem seems not to have

<sup>56</sup> Cutter, “Performing Fugitivity,” 2–3.

<sup>57</sup> *The Era*, 27 Sept. 1857, 11.

<sup>58</sup> *South Eastern Gazette*, 22 Sept. 1857, 5; *The Era*, 4 Oct. 1857, 11–12; *Wigan Observer and District Advertiser*, 16 Oct. 1857, 1.

<sup>59</sup> *The Era*, 18 Oct. 1857, 1.

<sup>60</sup> *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 31 Oct. 1857, 1.

<sup>61</sup> *The Era*, 18 Oct. 1857, 1; *The Era*, 8 Nov. 1857, 1.

worked, however, as Brown does not appear to perform in the plays the following year, or indeed in London.

Brown might have suffered from the same vitriolic racism that drove Ira Aldridge from the capital and some of the provincial theatres. Audiences were fascinated with Aldridge portraying roles traditionally performed by white men in blackface, but this presented problems to racist white audiences when he was expected to embrace white female actresses onstage.<sup>62</sup> Considering that Brown was acting (and embracing) white women, it is possible he faced similar criticism. Alternatively, the outcry from the Indian Rebellion in 1857 might have harmed Brown's future performances of heroic black characters. Changing perceptions of people of colour hardened due to the rebellion, together with the growing interest in scientific racism; this led in some degree to an apathy for anti-slavery efforts.<sup>63</sup>

Regardless, critics were impressed with Brown's acting and almost always made reference to his career as an entertainer and his identity as a survivor of slavery. Brown was "favourably received" in Liverpool,<sup>64</sup> and a correspondent for the *South Eastern Gazette* wrote that Brown's "powerful acting in this piece is really worthy of the highest commendation."<sup>65</sup> As stated above, one reviewer marvelled at Brown "Personificating" his heroic life onstage for audiences to witness. While Brown was a good actor, it was the knowledge that he had actually experienced the torture and suffering one saw onstage. It was a unique event, a "novelty," wrote another critic, that an actor who had experienced slavery would have a drama "written expressly" for him and could entertain audiences with the "most stirring scenes" of his life. In an overwhelmingly unique performance, Brown's "romantic" life was acted by the hero himself: his daring and thrilling tale, fraught with danger, enhanced the power behind starring in such a play and how Brown could reach non-abolitionist audiences as a result. At least two of the three plays demonstrated an anti-slavery message and his position as a fugitive with the central characters from his life starring in the play (including his wife Nancy) would no doubt have resonated with his audience. No other actor could perform the same role: acting involves an element of fiction, pretending to be someone else or feeling their emotions. Witnessing Brown in the flesh meant everything as his performance was based on truth rather than drama or fantasy; he did not have to imagine that sorrow as he had himself experienced it. While Aldridge and Morgan could shape their roles to an antiracist agenda, they were often limited in their range as their

<sup>62</sup> Joyce Green MacDonald, "Acting Black, Othello, Othello Burlesques and the Performance of Blackness", *Early Modern Reenactments*, 46, 2 (1994), 135–56, 139, 146.

<sup>63</sup> Waters, *Racism*, 186–87.

<sup>64</sup> *The Era*, 4 Oct. 1857, 11.

<sup>65</sup> *South Eastern Gazette*, 4 Aug. 1857, 5.

sole career focussed on acting: Brown, however, used his celebrity as a travelling entertainer to move one step beyond them and use his experience as a basis for his acting. He could present himself as openly anti-slavery in his career because of the content of his plays and his fugitive identity. Brown – as he had done throughout his life – stepped out of the boxed confines of Victorian theatrical society and performed not as Othello and Oroonoko, but for roles specifically written about his life or inspired by it. As one US critic summarized in relation to William Wells Brown’s performances, “no ordinary man is swaying the feelings of the deeply interested and breathless auditory” and this was evidently the case for Box Brown too.<sup>66</sup>

Critics had a similar reaction watching Aldridge perform. One correspondent wrote, “he performs in a manner which practically contradicts the argument of the advocates of slavery, that the sable races are deficient in intellect.”<sup>67</sup> In his portrayal of the Jewish character Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice*, one Russian critic noted that Aldridge’s powerful performance was due to him “drawing on the experience of his own life for the picture of the tragedy of a Jew who is downtrodden and powerless to take revenge.”<sup>68</sup> Finally, in Edward Young’s *The Revenge*, Aldridge performed as Prince Zanga, a character who becomes motivated by vengeance after a period of enslavement. One critic wrote it was “interesting to witness the acting of Mr. Ira Aldridge, a native of Africa, giving utterance to the wrongs of his race in his assumed character, and standing in an attitude of triumph over the body of one of its oppressors.” To solidify this association, at the Surrey Theatre in 1848 Aldridge followed a performance as Zanga with a short speech and stated that

the twenty years’ struggle he had made, was amply repaid by the reception he had that night received, and hoped the prejudice was fast dying away, when one man should be deprived of a hearing on the stage, because his face was of another colour, seeing the black man and the white were both the work of the same Creator.<sup>69</sup>

While there is no evidence as yet to suggest that Brown made a similar declaration, audiences could not fail to realize the significance of Brown’s dialogue in

<sup>66</sup> Heather Nathans, *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787–1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 8–15; Jones, *The Captive Stage*, 138–40, 163–64, original emphasis. See also Harry J. Elam Jr, “The Black Performer and the Performance of Blackness: The Escape; or, A Leap to Freedom by William Wells Brown and No Place to Be Somebody by Charles Gordone,” in Harry J. Elam Jr. and David Krasner, eds., *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 288–306, 291–93.

<sup>67</sup> Bernth Lindfors, “Ira Aldridge’s Africanness,” *English Academy Review*, 23, 1 (2006), 106–8.

<sup>68</sup> Bernth Lindfors, “‘Mislike Me Not for My Complexion ...’: Ira Aldridge in Whiteface,” *African American Review*, 33, 2 (1999), 352–54.

<sup>69</sup> Lindfors, “Ira Aldridge’s Africanness,” 102–6; Waters, “Ira Aldridge’s Fight for Equality,” 101, 113.

both plays, his ability to convey the brutality of slavery, nor his decision to follow Aldridge and rechristen himself the “African Prince” and star as his namesake in *The Nubian Captive*. Such connections are reinforced yet further when Brown—as Henry or Hameh—described the notion of freedom. When Henry is released from the box at the end of *The Fugitive Free*, he declares,

Free in the land of liberty – do I then breathe the pure air of freedom ... Blow sweetly ye winds of Heaven and let me feel the free invigorating air, rush through my swelling breast – be still my fluttering heart that rises in my heaving bosom as though it would fly from earth to natures God.<sup>70</sup>

Furthermore, Burton adapts one of the most famous lines from Brown’s narrative: in *The Nubian Captive*, after his rescue of Medona, Hameh declares, “I have dared death yes Medona – Death or Liberty,” which is repeated several times throughout the play.<sup>71</sup> Spoken by Brown, such lines would have had extra realism and pathos that no other actor could portray. Brown had actually *experienced* the kind of unfreedom Hameh describes that only enhanced the validity and necessity of abolition, as well as the drama of the performance.

Conversely, the separation scenes in *The Fugitive Free* prove more emotional *because* Brown had experienced this himself. In her landmark research on Brown, Cutter raises the question of Brown’s psyche and whether his repetitive performances would have “pulled [him] back into the trauma that was enslavement,” and posits that he might have become “inured’ to the trauma of discussing his Panorama in particular, “something that (as an eventual actor) he could put on and take off with some degree of ease.”<sup>72</sup> Perhaps, though, Brown’s constantly changing career was a means to take “control of the traumatic legacy of slavery,” and in doing so he sought to “turn slavery itself into a type of spectacle – but a spectacle that he can control and manipulate through magic acts and the proliferation of visual and sensory modes of performance.”<sup>73</sup> Although Brown might have had limited control over the script or dialogue, his decision to take and perform the plays outside Margate demonstrates his willingness to adapt them and work within a theatrical medium to portray his life onstage.

As Cutter highlights, Brown’s performances of his embodied trauma to mainly white audiences for several nights in a row are important. In his

<sup>70</sup> Burton, *The Fugitive Free*, Act 3, scene iv, 80–81. See also a similar description of freedom in *The Nubian Captive*, Act 2, scene i, 37–38.

<sup>71</sup> Burton, *The Nubian Captive*, Act 2, scene iii, 50, and scene iv, 60.

<sup>72</sup> Cutter, *The Illustrated Slave*, 248–50.

<sup>73</sup> Cutter, “Will the Real Henry ‘Box’ Brown Please Stand Up?,” n.p.; Cutter, “Performing Fugitivity,” 17–18.

slave narrative, Brown describes the pain of family separation and experienced a heart-wrenching loss that “lacerated” his soul with painful memories, never to be erased. While scars from the whip may heal, the scars of the soul are invisible to others and are etched deeper into mind and body as time makes such marks “deeper and more piercing.”<sup>74</sup> It is impossible not to consider how, in Aida Levy-Hussen’s phrase, trauma remains a “profound disruption” in “a person’s sense of self,” who can become “haunted and claimed by a past,” particularly in relation to Brown’s case.<sup>75</sup>

As Cutter notes, too, it is impossible to know Brown’s motives or feelings about performing the separation from his first wife Nancy onstage. In 1855, Brown wrote to the *Sunderland News* that

there is no man, I care not who he be, black or white, has felt the loss of his wife and children more than I. I have borne the galling chains, the tyrants threats and more than that, I have seen my wife sold and bartered from one villain to another, and still clung to her and my children as long as they remained in Richmond.

While Brown’s friend and collaborator tried to secure the purchase of Nancy’s legal freedom, Brown might have regarded the separation as the end of the marriage, fuelled, perhaps, by the knowledge she had borne a child to her enslaver. When he married Englishwoman Jane Floyd in 1855, the marriage certificate stated he was a widower. Brown might have believed his first wife dead or pretended as much for his own emotional well-being. Perhaps, too, given the short amount of time he acted out this separation, the performance itself might have become too much to bear, or a strain on his new relationship.<sup>76</sup>

Nevertheless, Burton adapted such key scenes from Brown’s narrative but made significant changes to enhance dramatic flair. In his landmark study *Plagiarism! William Wells Brown and the Aesthetic of Attractions*, Geoffrey Sanborn examines how Wells Brown plagiarized over 87,000 words or phrases from nearly three hundred sources. To attract or entice his white audiences and “to make an impact, through his writing, on the abolitionist movement, Brown had to know how to turn out basic literary products, recognizable, market-tested genre pieces.”<sup>77</sup> Burton adapted Box Brown’s

<sup>74</sup> Brown, *Narrative*, 16–17. See also Cutter, “Performing Fugitivity,” 10–21; Janet Neary, *Fugitive Testimony: On the Visual Logic of Slave Narratives* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 143–44; and Greenspan, *William Wells Brown*, 346–55.

<sup>75</sup> Aida Levy-Hussen, “Trauma and the Historical Turn in Black Literary Discourse,” in Soyica Diggs Colbert, Robert J. Patterson and Aida Levy-Hussen, eds., *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in Expressive Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 195–211, 196.

<sup>76</sup> Chater, *Henry Box Brown*, 91–93, 112–13.

<sup>77</sup> Geoffrey Sanborn, *Plagiarism! William Wells Brown and the Aesthetic of Attractions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 5–10.

narrative and fictionalized scenes in a similar “recognizable, market-tested” approach. For example, in *The Fugitive Free*, Burton places Box Brown centre stage in the auction scene and watches Nancy being sold, a traumatic scene that was denied to him in real life but was a recognizable visualization of slavery’s cruelty for his audiences.<sup>78</sup> Having the character Brown watch the cruel separation made the scene more heartbreaking and forced an empathetic response from the audience, who knew that Brown had experienced such depression in reality. Burton engages with sentimental motifs to illustrate the hypocrisy and cruelty of slavery, as well as to demonstrate Brown’s own rationality and humanity in comparison to the sadism of southern men. Brown is inconsolable, and his exclamation “I am lost – fate has done its worst – all hope is gone and I am desolate” mirrors his desperation in his own narrative.<sup>79</sup>

In the play, Brown watches from a forest as his wife and children are led away. Burton adapts this key scene from his narrative and deliberately chooses a forest for the setting, given how Brown’s own mother used to point to the trees “which were then being stripped of their foliage by the winds of autumn” and compared it to how “the children of the slaves [were] swept away from them by the hands of cruel tyrants.”<sup>80</sup> While in the narrative Brown can say nothing to his wife as their parting is beyond words, the dramatic nature of the play demands a dialogue. Brown and Nancy’s parting was a private horror that could not translate onstage, particularly through the reimaginings of Burton, who had little idea of the pain Brown had previously felt. Brown’s desperation and hopelessness evoked in the narrative are transmitted here, but are extended *because* he had experienced it in reality. While his decision to act in such a play shows remarkable versatility and an almost insatiable desire to use different mediums to exploit his own life story (and Nancy’s) for profit, as illustrated above it is worth contemplating how much this would have cost Brown to reimagine on a regular basis.

## “THE LAND OF LIBERTY”: ANTI-SLAVERY AND BRITISH MORAL SUPERIORITY

Performances that invoked slavery, abolition and British moral superiority were thus a hallmark of the Victorian stage.<sup>81</sup> Adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were constantly tailored to the theatre:

<sup>78</sup> Burton, *The Fugitive Free*, Act 2, scene iv, 45–51. See also Cutter, “Performing Fugitivity,” 1–21. <sup>79</sup> Brown, *Narrative*, 33–46. <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 2–3.

<sup>81</sup> For discussions on anti-slavery and patriotism see Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery* (London: Routledge, 1991); Wood, *Blind Memory*; and Gibbs, *Performing the Temple of Liberty*.

playwrights varied the plot, introduced new characters, promoted British abolitionist narratives, and even included slave rebellions and the end of US slavery, the inherent violence of which meant that such iterations could never have been staged on the other side of the Atlantic. It was far easier for British audiences to imagine American abolition than to confront the legacies of the empire’s imperialism and cruelty in the West Indies, or at home. Indeed, melodramas that contained elements of anti-slavery patriotism or naval pride were frequently applauded and cheered by audiences; in productions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, British flags were flown when fugitives reached Canada and speeches that praised British freedom were highly demonstrative of what Sarah Meer describes as a spectacle of “national symbolism.” Throughout the decade, “audiences wept for stage slaves, cheered at their rebellions, reflected smugly on the superiority of British laws and attitudes, and also laughed at images of dim, deceitful and inherently comical blacks.”<sup>82</sup>

The celebration of empire became entwined with the “triumph” of anti-slavery and British moral superiority, and institutions like the theatre perpetuated patriotic visions of a benevolent and supremacist realm.<sup>83</sup> For example, in the first scene of *The Fugitive Free*, when Amelia asks for Henry’s freedom, she plays into notions of British superiority when she remarks, “don’t think I’m going to ask you to present any slave on the estate with a poney [*sic*] to ride about on, or to give them all a 12 months holiday to go to England to see Queen Victoria.” Audiences would know that enslaved people are “free” when they touch British soil, and this would have induced a comic affect; the Captain all but repeats this sentiment immediately afterwards.<sup>84</sup>

Most notably, though, it is the white character of David who literally embodies British liberality and is a metaphorical representation of white abolitionists. He acts as a narrator and in some scenes the chief character who drives the plot. He is suspicious of Allen’s “whispering and winking from the start” and is determined to uncover whatever is “wrong at the bottom of this.”<sup>85</sup> In another scene, he makes a distinct criticism over America’s racial divisions in an almost identical section to George Colman Jr.’s 1787 production of *Inkle and Yarico*. In this play, one white character declares that there is nothing to be ashamed of in his love for a black woman: “rot her complexion! I’ll tell you

<sup>82</sup> Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*, 133–42, 158. See also Marcus Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 36–7, 95–96; Fisch, *American Slaves in Victorian England*, 83–84.

<sup>83</sup> Marty Gould, *Nineteenth-Century Theatre and the Imperial Encounter* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2. See also Edward Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3, 8–12; Gibbs, *Performing the Temple of Liberty*, 117.

<sup>84</sup> Burton, *The Fugitive Free*, Act 1, scene 1, 4–5.  
<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, Act 2, scene 1, 33–34. See also Cutter, “Performing Fugitivity,” 10–12.

what, Mr Fair Trader, if your head and heart were to change places, I've a notion you'd be as black in the face as an ink bottle."<sup>86</sup> In *The Fugitive Free*, during one exchange with the Captain's clerk, David admits he has feelings for Brown's sister Jane. The clerk is astonished and asks him, "why you wouldn't marry a coloured woman would you?" David retorts with a poem composed by the clerk about a white woman the previous year:

Her cheeks are like the Blooming Rose  
Her teeth like ivory white  
Her lips are like the coral hue  
Her eyes are dark and bright.

"Then," replies David, "you would ha married a coloured woman." He even advocates an interracial marriage between himself and Jane, and states, "I would marry Jane Brown for all Jane Brown be Black, there be many a good and a pure heart beats under a black skin, same as there be many a Black heart under a white one."<sup>87</sup> While several African Americans married white Englishwomen during their European travels, racial science hardened the public's attitude on race and Britons did not actively encourage or celebrate interracial marriage. As we have seen, the criticism Aldridge faced is indicative of this. In theory, however, this was an opportunity for a white English character to mock America's supposed backward views of race and tolerance, despite the nation's own inherent racism, hatred of interracial relationships, and miscegenation.

Furthermore, during the auction scene David appears onstage and features as the British voice behind this narrative. Several enslaved people are sold, including a young man who can "work 22 hours out of the 24 with the whip above twice." Noticeably, the women who are placed on the block and sold fetch far higher prices, which implied their helpless roles as victims of sexual assault. This is very much a *British* interpretation of a slave auction and together with David's commentary it offers an anti-slavery narrative that is refracted through the lens of British moral superiority.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, it is David's sacrifice for Brown that saves the day. He switches places with Brown in prison, which allows him to escape and even suggests the idea of posting Brown in the box in the first place. While this narrative completely erases Brown's heroic ingenuity, it provides evidence of the compromises performers such as Brown and Aldridge had to make onstage. In a line demonstrative of Victorian racialized attitudes, David has no intention of staying "black washed," as "I'm a free born English Yorkshireman if they offer to Keep me Ill bring an action again[st] them in the country court."<sup>89</sup> While blackface was

<sup>86</sup> Waters, *Racism*, 35.

<sup>87</sup> Burton, *The Fugitive Free*, Act 1, scene iv, 25.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, Act 2, scene iv, 41–50.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, Act 2, scene v, 70–71.

used as a joke or theatrical device in plays such as *The Fugitive Free*, white audiences would have well understood that David – as a white man – while expressing terms of equality with his black brethren, did not seriously commit to *becoming* or *living as* a black citizen. As a white character who makes clear his white privilege, David can exploit the patriotic narrative within society that no Briton should ever be left to die or be enslaved, but it is in reality a fabrication, particularly with regard to black British citizens. African Americans such as Samuel Ward attacked the British government for refusing to help black men like John Glasgow who were sold into slavery since this severely undermined the nation's commitment to liberty.<sup>90</sup>

In *The Nubian Captive*, there are numerous overt references to the cruelty and inhumanity of slavery. Act 2 opens with Hameh in Cuba after three years in enslavement. He is shocked to learn that Medona has also been sold into slavery; instead of being told this directly by other white characters, he recognizes her description from a bill at an upcoming slave auction. Burton deliberately wrote this as an anti-slavery narrative, for the bill contains references to "strong young fellows branded with the letter 'R'" who ran away from their respective plantations and were subsequently chased by hunting dogs.<sup>91</sup> In the same scene, one of the enslavers in Havana describes in vivid detail a friend who organized "a slave hunt" for an escaped fugitive, and he enjoyed it so much, "I should like to get one up every day in my life." The detailed description simultaneously confirms the play's "Britishness" and reinforces the cruelty of slavery in the Americas thousands of miles away.<sup>92</sup>

Much like *The Fugitive Free*, it is the white British characters in *The Nubian Captive* which drive the plot to its conclusion and are directly responsible for the play's happy ending. In Act 2, an English naval crew led by Captain Dallas and fellow sailor Tom are introduced and appear as the literal representation of British ships that intercept enslavers and return kidnapped Africans to the continent. The ship plays a central role in the rescue of Hameh and Medona and returns them to the palace. Removing the agency of black characters and instead refocussing the narrative on British superiority on the seas, Burton champions abolition rather than seriously engaging with the consequences of empire.<sup>93</sup> In one scene, the English ship approaches the deck of a slaver amid the sound of guns, and Tom explains to the crew how slavers are usually captured. He describes the ship as the "real thorough English terriers

<sup>90</sup> *York Herald*, 28 Oct. 1854, 6. See also Edlie Wong, "Anti-slavery Cosmopolitanism in the Black Atlantic," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 38, 2 (2010), 451–66; Audrey Fisch, "Repetitious Accounts So Piteous and So Harrowing": The Ideological Work of American Slave Narratives in England", *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 1, 1, (1996), 16–34, 26–28.

<sup>91</sup> Burton, *The Nubian Captive*, Act 1, scene iii, 35–36.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, Act 2, scene i, 42.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, Act 2, scene ii, 45–47.

that make the mousers squeak” and explains, “we shall not only save a number of poor creatures from being torn from their home and families but we can pepper away at her ribs without fear of hurting the poor things that would have been in her if she got a live cargo on board.”<sup>94</sup> When Hameh and Medona are rescued, Hameh falls to his knees on the deck of the English ship and declares, “Hail blessed moment – beneath the ample folds of the glorious flag of mighty alblion we are indeed safe.”<sup>95</sup> Akin to the famous moment when George Harris seeks liberty in Canada in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Hameh and Medona are safe under British protection; Burton celebrates the superiority of the navy and the triumph of returning Africans to their home. The English crew even aid Hameh in taking back the throne, for it is Dallas who exposes the depth of betrayal the prince has experienced, which leads Hameh to reveal himself.<sup>96</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Throughout his life, Brown used a variety of mediums to visually reenact his experiences. It is impossible to know how much control Brown had over the final script for both dramas but his willingness to perform the plays outside Margate indicates his desire to perform them for any audience who was interested. In the context of the broader transatlantic anti-slavery movement, his visual performances deserve more recognition given their unique positioning in theatre history and within the archive of abolition. A radical departure from traditional anti-slavery lecturing tours, Brown was the only activist in Britain to star in plays based on his own life, and in doing so he exploited the opportunity to politicize and revolutionize the typical “slave drama.” Despite his relatively short acting career, Brown should be placed alongside fellow African American actors Ira Aldridge and Samuel Morgan Smith for their integral and important roles in challenging the white racial schema and achieving fame on the acting circuit. Indeed, Brown was exceptional in that he managed to circumvent the expected roles for a black actor (namely Othello and Oroonoko) and instead relied on his own life story to spark fame, interest and anti-slavery sentiment.

By acting and performing in Burton’s plays, Brown imbued both *The Fugitive Free* and *The Nubian Captive* with an anti-slavery message. As a survivor of slavery, no other actor could perform the roles of Henry and Hameh with the same pathos or realism. In doing so, his actions had a powerful impact on audiences, who were encouraged to first go and watch the plays but second

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, Act 3, scene iii, 68–69.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, Act 3, scene vi, 73.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, Act 3, scene viii, 88–90.

to imagine that the emotions Brown performed were no acts of pretension. While a strong anti-slavery sentiment runs throughout both (and was identified by critics), such representation and symbolism were further enhanced by the site-specificity of the plays: the heroic and sometimes violent enslaved figure could never have been performed in the US because of its proximity to slavery, and its closeness to London suggested Brown and Burton’s hope to eventually stage the dramas in London. By default, though, *The Fugitive Free* and *The Nubian Captive* are infused with a deep sense of British moral superiority with regard to slavery since British *anti-slavery* cannot be uncoupled from patriotic narratives surrounding abolition. David in *The Fugitive Free* literally embodies the spirit of white abolitionists, and the appearance of the British Navy in *The Nubian Captive* was designed to play into, satisfy and promote British and colonial supremacy.

Nevertheless, years of lecturing, exhibiting his Panorama, and travelling across the country ensured that Brown’s life story was well known to British audiences. Albeit in unconventional ways and unable to fully control the performative process, Brown adhered to his powerful statement in 1851 that he felt compelled to add as much varied and performative testimony as possible to challenge American slavery. In Margate and some of the other provincial theatres, he did just that.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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