2. THE ESCAPE ARTIST

Henry Box Brown, Black Abolitionist Performance, and Moving Panoramas of Slavery

Nearly as unimaginable as the thought of the bondsman Henry Brown crouching in a crate and mailing himself to freedom is the idea of a fugitive Brown rehearsing this act in the years following his heralded flight from slavery. But in the 1850s, the "age of anxious escape," the enslaved Brown's repetition of his boxing act evoked an imaginative commentary on the ambiguities of liberty and bondage for African Americans in the decade preceding the Civil War. Although he had succeeded in fleeing a Richmond, Virginia, plantation in 1849 via the U.S. postal service, the pro-slaveholder concessions of the Compromise of 1850 made even the most high-profile fugitives such as Brown spectacularly vulnerable. With the advent of the Fugitive Slave Act and a subsequent brush with slave catchers in August 1850, Brown's second escape—this time to England—set the stage for an encore demonstration of his wondrous feat. Packed in a replica of his original box and accompanied by his co-conspirator, J. C. A. Smith, a free black Virginian, Brown agreed to ship himself "from Bradford to Leeds" where "he was taken out in the presence of spectators."[1]

Through the Looking Glass

Part shrewd publicity stunt and part abolitionist propaganda, Brown's living reproduction of his claustrophobic escape route illuminates the complex and cyclical patterns of performative resistance which fugitive slaves mounted as a response to the reactionary federal legislation of the 1850s. Traveling throughout New England and later transgressing the geographical borders of other countries, a number of black abolitionist activists such as Brown, William and Ellen Craft, and William Wells Brown agreed to revisit their often unique and spectacular methods of liberation for curious audiences who paid to see and hear the "horrors" of that peculiar institution.[2] By returning with vividness and a putative authenticity to the "scene of the crime" in their pulpit addresses and exhibitions, these activists contributed to the movement to "erec[t] a moral cordon around America that would isolate her from the international community." They at once removed themselves from U.S. soil and used the abolitionist lecture circuit abroad to mount a critical and argumentative path back into the American social and political landscape.[3]

Brown's return to the box that paradoxically freed him thus came in the midst of a wave of black transatlantic mobility and aesthetically innovative political dissent in the years between 1848 and 1854. If, in the wake of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave* (1845), the 1840s construction of the fugitive slave revolved around his transformation into the "American hero" and into an agent of his own destiny, that agent became an 1850s peripatetic icon whose migrant travels were put forth precisely to expose the ironies of U.S. domestic enslavement.[4] Responding to Thomas Carlyle's condemnation of abolitionism and widespread theories of racial hierarchies, black Atlantic abolitionists repositioned themselves as international figures called on to exemplify the essential humanity of African Americans and to body forth the atrocities of the slave trade on a global stage.[5]

Motion, migration, and flight worked as operative tropes in the black abolitionist cultural production of the slave's narrative from this tumultuous period. The geographical sojourns and manipulation of borders in works such as Henry Bibb's *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* (1849) and Solomon Northrup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) literally and figuratively suggested that there was no (safe) place for black bodies in America. Stripped of his freedom as was Northrup, or perpetually nomadic as was Bibb, fugitive authors produced a number of narratives from this period that foreground the transient positions of protagonists who are repeatedly and often willfully displaced and set to roaming.[6] Box Brown would make this kind of generic black (male) experience painfully clear with his restaged, mobile imprisonment. Affirming the trope of the "outsider manque" and bringing such a status literally and figuratively to life, his use of the legendary box symbolically communicated a decision to re-move himself from the visible world while *still moving through it*. In doing so, his traveling entrapment offered a signifying metaphor of physical resistance to the antebellum period's rigorous literal and figurative colonization of black bodies.[7]

Brown exemplifies the role of the alienated and dislocated black fugitive subject, and the repetition of his escape "act" before audiences abroad provided a heightened and alternate expression of conditional and fleeting liberty "on the run" in the 1850s. Perhaps emboldened by a sharp increase in northeastern black militancy, particularly in Boston, where hostile federal legislation generated passionate public protests, Brown and his traveling comrades sought increasingly spectacular and creative means to attack slavery.[8] The (r)evolutions of various antislavery exhibitions which incorporated lectures, slave spirituals, and aesthetic displays established aggressive and performative responses to the juridical surveillance and circumscription of captive bodies. These public events often built on the initial content of the written slave narrative testimonials by attempting to visually translate representations of slavery for Northern and transatlantic audiences. In this context, Henry Brown's grand re-emergence from the box was part of a continuum of public events designed to sustain an elaborate and serialized critique of the Southern slave labor system. Having published a U.S. version of his memoirs in 1849 with the significant aid of amanuensis and Anglo abolitionist Charles Stearns, Brown decided to erect a "moving panorama" of slavery in 1850. On the eve of his intensified status as a fugitive, his decision suggests that the resourceful activist was seeking alternative forms of intertextual expression in the battle to end slavery which might, in turn, continue to (aesthetically) free him in multiple ways as well.

In an elaborate appropriation of the popular panoramic form for antislavery purposes, Brown employed the visual and theatrical innovations of that genre to imagine reentering the American landscape on his own terms, in turn developing a fugitive form of political expression that was collaborative and multigeneric in its execution and vision. This reinvention of the representation of geographical, social, and cultural space allowed for a formalistically challenging abolitionist project which extended the bounds of Brown's radical passage out of slavery and disrupted the politics of the discursive slave narrative genre as well. A kind of escape from his previous textual "autobiography," in a sense, this panorama offered another way of "signify[ing] and interpre[ting] the borders of other-consciousness" by creating a resistant and yet oft-overlooked bridge into the later edition of Brown's written text.[9] Relying on Gothic metaphor, revisionist landscape art, and corporeal dissent, this panoramic exhibition event would yield a crucial intervention in the cultural construction of black body, narrative voice, and nation building in the transatlantic antislavery movement.

This chapter traces Henry Brown's insurgent movements from his "boxing" journey to his use of the moving panorama and his own body in reenactments of his famed escape. Boldly experimental and iconoclastic, Brown effectively transcended the discursive restrictions of the slave narrative and redirected the uses of the transatlantic body toward politically insurgent ends.

In this regard, Brown engineered multiple ruptures in the cultural arm of midcentury transatlantic abolitionism. His 1849 U.S. slave narrative manufactures a number of conventional editorial constrictions placed on the slave narrative genre. The discussion below traces the critical tensions between this text and Brown's subsequent cultural work. The core of the chapter explores the far-reaching impact of Brown's ambitious decision in 1850 to erect a moving panorama exhibition, the *Mirror of Slavery*, on both sides of the Atlantic. Significant continuities of strategy and tactic exist between Brown's discursive and visual slave narratives. Brown's aesthetic innovations helped forge and perfect new methods of "escape artistry" among fugitive slave activists. Like that of his contemporary William Wells Brown, Box Brown's performative activism dynamically illuminates how, as Paul Jefferson contends, "the act of fleeing is an existential act of self-creation."[10]

The latter half of this chapter interrogates the poetics of Brown's "self-creation" outside the panorama and in the later edition of his slave narrative. Reading Brown's "boxing" re-enactments as a kind of politically subversive "escapology," at once referencing Victorian magic and spiritualist culture and prefiguring the work of turn-of-the-century escape artists such as Harry Houdini, this chapter limns the sociopolitical and aesthetic complexity of Henry Box Brown and his renegade cultural work. In sum, it seeks to make plain Brown's significant contributions to nineteenth-century transatlantic culture. Through the looking glass of new technologies available to him in both the northeastern United States and the United Kingdom, and through an invocation of nineteenth-century spectacular theatre and spiritualism in his intertextual cultural productions, Brown negotiated alternative forms of self-representation and, in turn, expanded the terms of black abolitionist activism. His (auto)biographies, panorama, and public exhibitions must be considered, then, as concatenate parts that create a sprawling, epic text, one which Brown the author, artist, and performer might leap through, escaping from one art form into the next in his quest for emancipation.

Boxing the Text

Like the "3 feet long, by 2 feet wide, and two feet deep" wooden crate in which the future abolitionist smuggled himself to freedom, *The Narrative of Henry Box Brown* is noticeably slim in size. This version of Brown's life story positions him as a self-proclaimed survivor of "that dreadful system of unhallowed bondage" (11) who, on his birth into slavery in 1816, holds the unusual opportunity to spend most of his youth in the immediate care of his parents and his younger brother.[11] The first portion of the text eschews the graphic descriptions of torture, abjection, and dislocation present in the canonical slave narratives of the 1840s and 1850s such as William Wells Brown's and Solomon Northrup's popular autobiographies. Rather, Box Brown's narrative illustrates how the most putatively benign forms of bondage remain unbearable.[12] His text is not a tale of "horrid inflictions of the lash upon [his] naked body" but it claims to be "the very best representation of slavery which can be given" (12).

This sardonically "humane" experience in bondage eventually gives way to a confrontation with the fateful machinery of the slave system. Although Brown develops a limited degree of financial and social autonomy while working in a "tobacco manufactory," he is forced to confront his status as a pawn of the Southern plantation market economy. No degree of financial freedom on Brown's part can protect his wife Nancy and their newborn infant from the whims of the slave trade. The systemic abuse of Brown's wife and child by various masters announces a critical crisis that culminates in Brown's inability to purchase his family's freedom and results in their subsequent sale to a North Carolina Methodist minister. Professing rage and devastation, Brown acknowledges that for him, "slavery now had no mitigating circumstances, to lessen the bitterness of its cup of woe" (56). In 1848, this severance from family, the text suggests, provides him with the final impetus to begin plotting his escape. In hatching his plan, Brown enlists the assistance of Samuel Smith, a white Massachusetts native, and James Caesar Smith, a free black dentist and merchant.[13]

From the explicit proclamations of its title page, *The Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a* Box *3 Feet Long and 2 Wide. Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery. By Charles Stearns*. moves rapidly toward the moment of escape. Mired in numerous enclosures, it is a text that has, in effect, already ended even before its introduction. The length of its title alone binds the narrative to the spectacular point of liberation and casts its own form of textual entrapment onto the subsequent body of the narrative. Even as the *Narrative* reveals the physical ordeals and vicissitudes of enslavement, Brown's "autobiography" consistently assures its readers that the point of escape is imminent.[14] Repeatedly the text acknowledges its audience's "eager[ness] to learn the particulars of [Brown's] journey from freedom to liberty" (56), and it reminds the reader that "the heart-rending scenes which give the principal interest" (40) are close at hand. The work pivots on the reader's (as well as the editor's) presumption that the slave's body will ultimately and literally disappear from view. Looming large in this tightly wound vanishing act is none other than Brown's amanuensis, the industrious Charles Stearns. Passionate in his concern for the enslaved, Stearns's editorial body multiplies in size while Brown's figure gradually dwarfs and collapses into the very box of his escape. Little surprise that Brown's infamous crate resurfaces imagistically at the climax of the narrative. The "boxing" episode (coined by Brown and Smith during their initial lecture tour) shapes and manifests the *Narrative*'s discursively claustrophobic tone and form.

The image of entombment reverberates throughout the "autobiography" in multiple instances, of which the escape plan is the most well known. The tightly oppressive contours of the box, for instance, impress upon the language of Brown's *Narrative*, an account of slavery which Bernard F. Reilly argues is "filled with images of death and burial."[15] Crouched in a fetal position for twenty-seven hours, armed with a beef bladder "filled with water," and provided with "three small gimlet holes" drilled for "fresh air," a boxed Brown operates as the major shifting ideological and representational trope in the text. Similar to the "linguistic narrow spaces" which Harriet Jacobs must negotiate in her own narrative of bondage, the suffocating restrictions of "this dreadful position" in a "narrow prison" (60) permeate the structural patterns of Brown's text as well.[16] Beginning with a series of negations, the narrator waxes repressive with the opening proclamation that "I am not about to harrow the feelings of my readers by a terrific representation of the untold horrors of that fearful system of oppression. . . . It is not my purpose to descend deeply into the dark and noisome caverns of the hell of slavery" (11). The text affirms a representational lack, a thematic absence in the context of the male slave narrative genre which depends on exposure and graphic detail. With its professed resistance to the articulation of violence, Brown's narrative erects a cordon of its own around slavery's explicit abjection, purposefully muting the horrors of captivity in order to reaffirm for readers the ironies of this the more palatable side of the system (11-12). Echoing the denial of white abolitionist Charles Stearns's preface, which assures that Brown's *Narrative* exists "not for the purpose of administering to a prurient desire to 'hear and see some new thing' " (v), the *Narrative*'s opening paragraph assures that it will restrict the audience's vision to the presentation of a "simple and touching narrative" (v). The remnants of the "hell of slavery" are assuredly extinguished from this narrative of Brown's life.

This sort of structural elision and elusion comes to bear on the 1849 edition of the *Narrative of Henry Box Brown* in numerous ways. The text oscillates between narrative imprecision —the narrator's confession that he "cannot correctly describe" the anticipation of liberty (32) and a repeated visual occlusion in which Brown as narrator is removed from the position of witnessing the violence inflicted on fellow slaves. In an early passage from the text, Brown and his brother encounter captives from a neighboring plantation who are subjected to chronic whippings. Yet he and his sibling only hear the "screams of these creatures, suffering under the blows of the hard-headed overseer" (24). These cries of agony which "sounded in [their] ears for some time" (24) are emblematic of the text's emphasis on visually distancing the physical abuses of slavery.[17] Only the residual *sound* of torture is representationally available for the narrative's readers at this stage. These moments of syntactical negation, descriptive imprecision, and ocular impairment have much to do with the heavy-handed influence of Charles Stearns, Brown's ubiquitous ghostwriter and author of both the preface and a document entitled "Cure for the Evil of Slavery" which immediately follows the body of the *Narrative*.

Stearns's somewhat controversial and well-analyzed role as amanuensis and his two editorial documents work perhaps most critically to confine Brown's account of slavery, entrapping Henry Box Brown's "autobiographical" experience in the hyperbolic prose of (white) abolitionist propaganda. James Olney argues persuasively, in fact, that Stearns "dress[es] up" Brown's story in "exotic rhetorical garments" so that "for every fact there are pages of self-conscious, self-gratifying, self-congratulatory philosophizing" by the editor. " [I]f there is any life here at all," Olney concludes, "it is the life of" Stearns who "expresse[s] in his very own overheated and foolish prose."[18] Stearns's appended documents extend and amplify this discourse of entrapment. A kind of barricade to the central text, the preface lavishly appropriates images of enclosure for its own purposes. Here Stearns prepares his readers for Brown's journey in "a portable prison," while simultaneously reimagining his audience as victims of a kind of (emotional) suffocation as well. Through a deft rhetorical transposition on the part of Stearns, Brown's ordeal serves as the catalyst for the resuscitation of his audience.

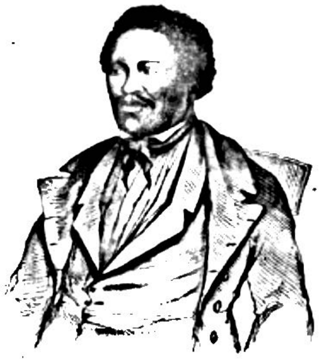
Stearns coaxes his readers into heightened sentience, exhorting them to "let the deep fountains of human feeling, which God has implanted in the breast of every son and daughter of Adam, burst forth from their enclosure" (v). The text is put forth to release "human feeling" in the audience, to free them from their own emotional entombment. Metaphorically manipulating the growing nineteenth-century anxiety of live burial and confinement, Stearns's preface efficiently shifts the fear of entrapment and the quest for liberation to the (white) reader.[19]

This act of displacement recurs in Stearns's attempts to compare the risks of William and Ellen Crafts' famous masquerade and flight out of slavery to that of Brown's. Stearns enacts a clear and reckless slippage between audience and narrative subject, making this sort of conflation vigorously apparent. Initially referring to the Crafts, Stearns asserts that "they were not entirely helpless; enclosed in a moving tomb, and as utterly destitute of power to control *your* movements as if death had fastened its icy arm upon *you* . . . as was the case with our friend" (vii, emphasis added).[20] Stearns's oscillation from the third person to the second and back to the third person positions Brown at the center of a confounding disappearing act. Momentarily, the reader, rather than Brown, is tucked in this cramped and hazardous place of hiding and faces mortality as the fugitive slave is forced out of the text's frame. Stearns's insistence on evoking the brutal specifics of this harrowing escape depends on the habitual and often strategic gestures made by white abolitionists to transform the "horrors of slavery" into an experience which the Northern reader might ultimately own and inhabit at the expense of the ex-slave.[21] With a lengthy closing essay in which Stearns lobbies for "a new government at the North" to uphold antislavery ideologies in the free states, the *Narrative of Henry Box Brown* thus seems subject to its own rather familiar discursive incarceration. These "testimonial," corroborating voices are meant to legitimize the experiences of the author and to assist in building a putatively empathic bridge between the reader and the fugitive slave. However, the tradition of framing that Stearns exploits threatens to box Brown's (narrative) body from beginning to end.[22]

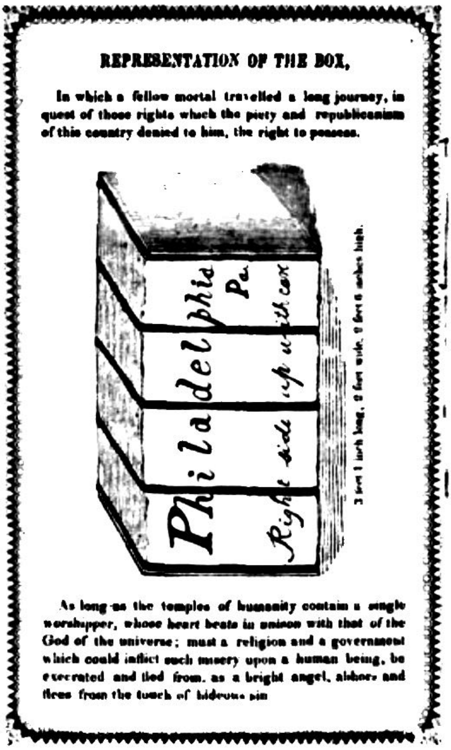
The eclipsing language and structural whims of Stearns's editorial vision follow the trajectory of form which Robert Stepto outlines in his influential work on the slave narrative tradition. Identifying the varying degrees of authorial control and representation in the genre, he asserts that at the most basic of levels, the slave narrative assumes an "eclectic" form which is characterized by a multiplicity of "authenticating documents and strategies" designed to corroborate the voice of the author. Prefaces, letters of support, and epilogues are appended to the texts to confirm the "authenticity" of the author's accounts; yet "there is no exchange, no verbal bond," indeed no dialogue established between the documents which frame the narrative. Rather, the myriad textual appendices operate in discursive isolation, separated by a gulf of social and cultural difference as well as the organizational vision of the "publisher or editor" who ultimately "assembles and manipulates the authenticating machinery" of the text as a whole.[23] Indeed, critics often allude to Brown's 1849 narrative as a casebook study of the erasure of black subjectivity in the fugitive slave narrative genre. It is a text in which the slave's body is, in effect, buried and displaced by the voice of a white editor. By appending his own lengthy "authenticating machinery," Stearns sustains a dialogue "with white America across the text and figurative body of a silent former slave."[24] The general understanding of the 1849 text, then, is one in which, as Olney emphatically concludes, "there is precious little of Box Brown (other than the representation of the box itself)" that remains in the narrative.

Nevertheless, I would argue that we might consider rethinking the significance of this image of the legendary box, if we are to understand the anti-slavery activism of Henry Box Brown more fully. Although Stearns's excessive appendices threaten to eclipse the central Brown text, the 1849 *Narrative*'s concluding page with its illustrated "representation of the box," an image of a lone crate, strapped with five hoops and marked for Philadelphia transit, offers the most critical point of reversal in the *Narrative of Henry Box Brown*. Far from eroding the body and subjectivity of the fugitive, this image operates suggestively as an act of narrative combat, as a means toward defensively "boxing," the editors and readers enacting control over his (textual) body. From this standpoint, Brown's spectacularly present absence inside of this "portable prison" executes its own dueling authority with Charles Stearns's narrative control. The image of Brown's self-engineered captivity provides a paradoxical and open-ended critique of the white abolitionist impulse to "remov[e] the slave from view as pain is brought close" through a displacement of black flesh for white (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 20).

A parting, ambivalent riddle of sorts, a symbolic and corporeal refusal, the spectacle of Brown's self-engineered captivity signifies on the implicit suggestion inherent in the slave narrative genre that the text will operate as a transparent looking glass, free of artifice and exposing the ordeal of bondage. Such a notion gets turned on its head here as the deployment of the box enacts a final gesture of spectacular opacity to (en)close the text. Disrupting the "prevailing metaphor" of "invisibility and translucence" in Afro-American letters, Brown's crate announces a staged resistance to the gaze and presumed spectatorial authority of his readership.[25] An enigmatic representation of enclosure perched at the end of the narrative, the illustration of the box starkly contrasts with the opening portrait of Brown that sits opposite Stearns's preface. While this sketch of Brown in formal dress contributes to the system of putative "truthfulness" and self-exposure manufactured by the slave narrative genre in order to lend veracity to the ex-slave's existence, the "representation of the box" potentially unseats this initial "existential claim" of absolute material presence.[26] The "boxing" image poses a philosophical query regarding the tenuous position of the fugitive slave in both his own narrative and more broadly in American culture. Brown is present and yet discursively entombed, forced underground into a manhole of his own making once again



3. Portrait of Henry Box Brown. From *Narrative of Henry Box Brown* (1849). Courtesy of Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.



REPRESENTATION OF THE BOX,

In which a fellow mortal travelled a long journey, in quest of those rights which the piety and republicanism of this country denied to him, the right to possess.

3 feet 1 inch long, 2 feet wide, 2 feet 6 inches high.

As long as the temples of humanity contain a single worshipper, whose heart beats in unison with that of the God of the universe; must a religion and a government which could inflict such misery upon a human being, be execrated and fled from, as a bright angel, abhors and flees from the touch of hideous sin

4. 1849 illustration of the box in which Henry Box Brown escaped to freedom. Taken from the last page of the *Narrative of Henry Box Brown*. Courtesy of General Research and Reference Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

as Stearns's overbearing and "ghostly" editorial hand threatens to place a stranglehold on the text. The box resurfaces at the conclusion as an abolitionist rhetorical device meant to reinforce the "piety and republicanism of this country denied" Box Brown, and it also doubles as a figurative break on Brown's part from Stearns's narrative surveillance.[27]

The placement of this image of the box forces us to consider its economy more rigorously in relation to both the *Narrative of Henry Box Brown* and, more broadly, to the cultural work of Henry Box Brown. An object which potentially conjures what Stephen Greenblatt might read as both "resonance" and "wonder," this illustrated box is both arresting and restlessly in conversation with a dense network of social, cultural, and political signs. According to Greenblatt, resonance and wonder operate as two distinct strategies of exhibiting and viewing art objects; the power of the object on display either promises to evoke "wonder" by steering the viewer's imagination toward the magnetic pull of the object and that object alone, or to encourage a "resonance" that forces the viewer to shift contemplation outward and into the thick field of historicity engulfing the display. Wonder generates an "enchanted" form of looking at an object which "draws a circle around itself from which everything but the object is excluded." Conversely, a "resonant exhibition often pulls the viewer away from the celebration of isolated objects and toward a series of only half-visible relationships and questions"; this resonance draws attention to the "permeability" of the object and its volatile circulation in and across multiple contexts.[28] An object that resists the silencing ahistorical powers of the wondrous, the image of Brown's crate potentially mutes Stearns's loud histrionics. Pulling the reader away from the voice of the editor, the "representation of the box" redirects the viewer's gaze toward Brown's flight and redelivers the loaded trope of hidden human cargo and treacherous (middle) passages which serve to fundamentally haunt the text. A box of metonymic resonance, Brown's crate creates a conclusion which forces the reader into a suspended state of historical meditation and contemplation.[29]

This narrative ends, then, with a representation of (en)closure that, in turn, yields a fundamental lack of closure. The return of the box here establishes a shift in narrative authority from Stearns to Brown and opens up an extended escape route for the fugitive slave. Its image generates what Hortense Spillers might read as an "*intervening, intruding* tale . . . as a *metaphor* of social and cultural management" for the enslaved in flight.[30] With its appended documents which at once contradict and articulate Brown's captivity and liberation, Box Brown's 1849 *Narrative* manifests *in form* the discourse of escape which propels the slave narrative genre. A discordant image of both circumscription and liberation, the box offers a critical climax of resistance and emancipation. If, as Andrews asserts, in the slave narrative "freedom becomes the crucial properly and quality *of* a text —not just *what* it refers to, but *how* it signifies" it, then Box Brown's narrative must be read as a living document *in struggle* and one which is (willfully) trapped in a repeating negotiation of confinement and bold flight. It is a text that foreshadows Brown's volatile re-enactments of his escape artistry in the years following the *Narrative*'s publication.[31]

In this sense, Brown's work literally and figuratively heightens Raymond Hedin's claim that "the narratives which are so emphatic in closing off the narrator's escape story are equally emphatic in emphasizing that the real story, slavery continues."[32] The central aim of the slave narrative is in fact not to close but to urge for a transformation of circumstances which comes about through the reader's indignation over a *lack* of closure in the national narrative of slavery. By "refusing to assimilate to his literary landscape," a (re)boxed Henry Brown at text's end overturns the critical notion that "once the protagonist achieves his freedom, the nineteenth-century slave narrative terminates."[33] Although the discursive text concludes, this box of wondrous resonance creates a fitting bridge to a "third" narrative space between abolitionist pulpit and the literary slave narrative. Brown's moving panorama exhibition provides an intervention in white abolitionist editorial constrictions on black authorship and strategies of fugitive slave cultural and political expression. The popular cultural form of the panorama delivers an alternative method for reading and reinterpreting the slave narrative genre. By mounting a moving panorama of slavery, Henry Box Brown embraced a freedom of representational form which, in turn, allowed him to reenter the text of his own narrative and, in so doing, make new the landscape of fugitive slave autobiography.[34]

Peristrephic Revolutions

> [E]very people should be the originators of their own designs, the projector of their own schemes, and creators of the events that lead to their destiny.
> —Martin Delany, *Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*

Some time between 1849 and 1850 and within a year of both Henry Box Brown's and William Wells Brown's respective traveling exhibitions, the latter Brown visited a newly refurbished building in London which was believed to have epitomized the grand aesthetic and technological "progress" of English spectacular entertainment. Like many fellow London spectators and theatregoers, Brown was mesmerized by his trip to the heralded reopening of the Colosseum, an imposing cylindrical structure that featured a lushly oversized landscape panorama. Originally completed in 1832, the Colosseum had housed the most ambitiously mounted, cyclical, painted canvas in the U.K. With a change in ownership and a series of renovations, the Colosseum of the late 1840s regained its prominence, first by complicating its original panorama of London by day with a display of London by night, and second by presenting *Paris by Night* to packed audiences who were fascinated by the brewing French Revolution of 1848.[35]

Like the many spectators who would attend the *Paris by Night* exhibition at the Colosseum, abolitionist, fugitive slave, and elected International Peace Congress delegate William

Wells Brown gushed over how he and his party "found [themselves] . . . upon the summit of some high building in the centre of the French metropolis, and there, all brilliant with gaslights, and favored by the shining moon, Paris lay spread far out beneath [them], though the canvas on which the scene was painted was but half a dozen feet from where [they] gazed in wonder." Brown's total immersion in this scene which "seemed natural, from the twinkling of the stars above" him perhaps provided him with an opportunity to experience the grandeur of social and political upheaval within the "wide topographical sweep" of the panoramic form (Altick, *Shows of London*, 129).[36] Roughly one year later and possibly riding the momentum from his Colosseum experience, Wells Brown and his transatlantic black abolitionist colleagues would exhibit their own "panoramic views" of U.S. slavery, a kind of moving revolution in space, time, form, and content.[37]

Internal schisms within the transatlantic abolitionist movement made the concept of mounting an antislavery panorama especially appealing to African American antislavery activists. While Anglo abolitionists had weathered a number of conflicting ideals and "crippling division(s)" resulting in the lack of any "unified abolitionist movement" after 1840, black antislavery activists harbored their own discontent with white reform power structures throughout the decade and chafed at being forced to operate on the peripheries of the antislavery movement in relation to their white colleagues.[38] Frederick Douglass's decision to break with the mentorship and political ideologies of William Lloyd Garrison in 1847 represents just one of the more famous examples of those black activists who began working autonomously in a bid to develop alternative abolitionist agendas. These conflicts which manifested the dissension between pacificist Garrisonian followers and radical abolitionists more willing to consider violent tactics helped usher in a new era of urgency, direction, and "endorsed violence" in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Act.[39] After 1840 and well into the 1850s, African American antislavery activists sought to strengthen their agency and collective voice by organizing and participating heavily in national conventions and social projects designed to redirect and rigorously articulate the terms of black reform in the antebellum era.[40]

A provocative space to mine the politics of freedom, travel, and representational agency, the genre of the moving panorama experienced a resurgence in popularity at precisely the moment when larger numbers of black abolitionists began to fan outward and into transatlantic culture in their battles to end slavery. Created in 1790s England and consisting of a large, still, painted canvas which was mounted inside specially designed, circular buildings, stationary panoramas were, for the most part, hybrids of landscape art and evolving theatre culture. Often featuring grandiose representations of geographical space and historical battle scenes, these full-scale displays evoked a sense of visual impressiveness by virtue of their size and their ability to "convey the illusion of reality" (Altick, *Shows of London*, 188). Still panoramas could span up to 360 degrees, filling the walls of buildings where they were exhibited from a distance by spectators who paid an admission to view the scene from platforms within the central "rotunda" area and on staircases where they were perched.[41]

Although there was "no 'performance'—no spatial or temporal beginning or end" to these epic scenes, viewers were "held in the panorama's frozen moment, a fold in time."[42] The forceful grandeur of these early panoramas—a term derived from Greek and meaning "all-embracing view" (Altick, *Shows of London*, 132)—led to the popular perception in the early nineteenth century that they were educational and entertaining, a kind of large-scale "pictorial journalism" capable of recording and registering "history" as it would unfold in grandly "oversized" terms.[43] Although panoramas were marketed as "a respectable alternative to the theatre," theatre culture quickly adapted the form as versatile stage background and scenery.[44]

Moving panoramas took this concept of spectacularly rendered representation a step further. Dubbed "peristrephic" in 1819, an invented term meant to suggest "turning round, revolving, or rotatory" (Altick, *Shows of London*, 201), these "motion pictures" literally altered the landscape of English and later U.S. show culture and negotiated a radical reconceptualization of time and space in the context of theatre.[45] Developing primarily in the late 1840s and early 1850s, moving panoramas were devices comprising "a lengthy series of related scenes painted oh a single cloth" (Altick, *Shows of London*, 199) which was harnessed at each end of the stage by two large cylinders where stage hands were called on to roll the cloth across the stage from one end to the other in order to evoke the sense of large-scale spatial movement. These "changing panoramas," which in their earliest form had kindled an interest in "arm chair" travel with the opening of the imperialist spectacle *Aegyptania* in 1802 London, achieved the pinnacle of their popularity in mid-nineteenth-century England and America (A. Miller, "Panorama," 41). Flourishing in the midst of increasingly visible black abolitionist agitation, the moving panorama phenomenon would ironically popularize a reactionary rendering of the Mississippi River journey as an idyllic and peaceful trope of national uniformity and expansionism.[46]

New York painter John Banvard's enormously successful 1848 exhibition of the Mississippi River, which boasted "no fewer than 36 scenes" of that body of water "from the mouth of the Missouri River to New Orleans" (Altick, *Shows of London*, 204), announced the marketable transformation of the moving panorama from primarily novel show culture scenery into a folksy regionalist excursion and revived the popularity of the form in both England and America. The English and American publics, however, harbored divergent reasons for their fascination with the spectacle of local color. Altick speculates that in the United Kingdom, "apart from the novelty of so gigantic a panorama, Banvard's success owed something to the fact that American subjects were more or less unhackneyed as far as panoramas were concerned" (205). As was the case with Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* a decade later, the virgin "newness" of the American landscape offered a nonthreatening space where the English spectator might mine his imagination and satisfy his pastoral nostalgia in the midst of industrialization. In contrast, midcentury American culture's overwhelming fascination with the river panoramas had everything to do with a national interest in expansion and a kind of conquering of domestic territory. As Angela Miller points out, "the development of the round into the moving panorama satisfied the optical (and geographical) hunger of American audiences by artificially compressing space in a manner anticipating mechanized travel, unrolling the American landscape before the eyes of audiences" ("Panorama," 38). These river panoramas "represented an unfolding temporal process, showing the regional part in relation to the national whole" and heralded "an unfolding vista of national progress and western settlement" (46). In these exhibitions of the 1840s and 1850s, then, "America" as a nation presumably followed the "natural" currents of its most imposing body of water, moving forward, outward and into an industrial future of progress and efficiency.

Absent from the moving panorama's "trips" down the river were any signs that it was a route of terror in the culture of slavery where it perpetually operated as an iconographic symbol of rupture and disintegration for slave families forced to watch their relatives "sold down" its treacherous watery path. A mammoth geographical minefield, the Mississippi River remained a literal as well as a figurative obstacle which the Southern fugitive was forced to confront and traverse on the road to freedom.[47]

In their search for alternative spaces in which to express themselves and to assert their agency, several key abolitionists such as William Wells Brown and Henry Box Brown embraced the moving panorama despite its conspicuous erasure of national conflict and what was apparently the blind spot of slavery in some corners of popular consciousness. Indeed, Wells Brown proclaims in the pamphlet description of his own exhibition that part of the impetus behind his decision to create his own visual display was to counter the "very mild manner in which the 'Peculiar Institution' of the Southern States was represented" in the 1847 "Panorama of the River Mississippi" which he attended in Boston.[48] Black abolitionists such as Wells Brown fixated on the moving panorama as a site whose narratives of the nation and narratives of slavery needed urgent revision. The rejuvenated and reorganized black activist resistance to slavery in the mid-nineteenth century propelled African American abolitionists to seize on this form of narration dependent on movement and visual convertibility. By reinserting the brutal histories of slavery into these popular exhibitions, the panoramas became a communicative medium and a terrain on which to interrogate what critic Cynthia Wolff reads as "the multiple 'passages' and 'transformations' that constituted the escaped slave's unique version of an American heritage." Black abolitionists became invested in the panorama as well for the formal and representational opportunities it provided. A rolling, potentially radical unframing of the genre of the (circumscribed) slave narrative, the landscape panorama offered a critical point of possibility for fugitive slave narration.

Reworking the content of these river panoramas and extending many of the formal peculiarities latent in this new cultural technology, black abolitionists saw heretofore unrecognized representational and narrative possibilities in this pop cultural genre. The renewed activist resistance to slavery in the late 1840s and early 1850s perhaps propelled black abolitionists to adopt and adapt a public forum fundamentally built with the passion of (r)evolution and representational revolt. A terrain that literally moves and (r)evolves, the moving or "peristrephic" panorama provides a representational space which perpetually enacts a kind of escape in its visual translation of the slave narrative.

Each scene functions as a passage, a collapsing into contiguous parts so that the exhibition manifests in its very form a continuous possibility of exiting, a way out. Its sheer spectacular size alone suggests an excessiveness, a mechanistic unframing which potentially spills the representational scene over and out of its original containment. Richard Altick argues, for instance, that by "its very nature, the circular panorama enjoyed . . . a great advantage over conventional art as well as theatrical scene painting" because "*it had no frame*." (Altick, *Shows of London*, 188; emphasis added). The form of the panorama alone, then, manifests an unbridled spirit that provides for the possibility of transgressing fixed and constrictive representational boundaries. Whereas the "testimonials" of others in discursive slave narratives threaten to "enclose" the black abolitionist text "by the very act of providing a formal framework" (Hedin, "Strategies of Form," 25), the panorama contests narrative borders.

Yet simultaneously, in spite of its extravagant, superabundant structure, the panorama posits a kind of spectacular veracity onto a scene, offering the fugitive slave a most unorthodox and paradoxical way in which to affirm the "truthfulness" of what s/he has seen/scene in slavery. This majestic "realness" which the panorama captured, its insistent effort to "convey the illusion of reality," proved useful to black abolitionists who attempted to disseminate their own voices through cultural forms that didn't rely on white "authenticators" to enforce the legitimacy of their narrative. The moving panorama's treatment of historical process "as a spectacle whose truthfulness was authorized by its striking illusionism" (A. Miller, "Panorama," 46) could, in turn, pose its own alternative space for crafting a renegade narrative agency.[49] Thus, while much scholarship reveals how the panorama has served imperialist impulses on both sides of the Atlantic with its renderings of "the newly colonized regions of the world," the black abolitionist appropriation of the panoramic genre has yet to be fully considered as its own unique "escape" route and as a generic form of narrative authority for African Americans in the international antislavery movement.[50]

No doubt, black abolitionist panoramas were clearly subject to co-optation for nationalist and global imperialist agendas, as Audrey Fisch reveals in her study of the complexities facing black antislavery activists in the United Kingdom. In regard to Henry Box Brown's exhibitions in England, Fisch contends that "the spectacle of 'Box' Brown himself, displaying his personal life experiences and commodifying his suffering for display in front of British strangers" strategically functions on a continuum of public "spectacles of America and of American inferiority" which affirm and secure the strength of British national identity and dominance.[51] Others have rightly insisted that Box Brown squarely places the American South "on trial" in his

1850 moving panorama the "*Mirror of Slavery*," making plain the "transformation of Americans into savages by the horrors of slavery."[52]

Yet the *Mirror of Slavery*'s power resides in its ability to unseat and transcend competing English and Anglo-American political agendas. African American abolitionist moving panoramas such as Brown's, in fact, often operated as evidence of oppositional and autonomous black political expression that established conversations with American slavery and English imperialism. Like the discursive slave narratives, these panoramas were "constructed as a transatlantic product" and refocused attention on the narrative powers of the black abolitionists who mounted them.[53] Brown's *Mirror* creates and commodifies a self-consciously disruptive space, a chaotic zone that foregrounds the creative agency of the African American activist-turned-artist. The exhibition's emphasis on social dystopia, fugitive escape, and Gothic apocalypse enacts a visual and performative insurrection which Brown deployed as an abolitionist activist and cultural producer. Brown's moving panorama interrupted the solipsism of other visual displays by placing black performative and representational revolt at the center of his exhibition. His project was perhaps just as committed to renegotiating the heroic fugitive's agency through performative and multimedia means as it was insistent on directing self-reflexive images back at British and Anglo-American audiences. What his exhibition finally makes plain, then, is that the national American body politic is itself subject to dissolution in the fugitive slave's pursuit of freedom. And in this sense, the *Mirror of Slavery* contributes to the growing abolitionist move to claim a kind of "Americanness" which comes precisely as a result of its rebellious ideology. "American" nationhood is here ultimately and purposefully at odds with itself and in a perpetual state of (r)evolution.[54]

Black abolitionists such as Henry Box Brown, then, put the moving panorama's "subversive possibilities" (A. Miller, "Panorama," 59) to politically revisionist ends. By relating visual technology directly to a fundamental quest for narrative agency, early African American panoramas aimed to circumvent British and Anglo-American nationalist impulses and the largely colonialist and industrialist manipulations of mid-nineteenth-century visual entertainment in transatlantic culture.[55] With its espousal of "illusive realism," the panorama provided a launching point for channeling black nationalist Martin Delany's vision of African American autonomous, self-designed emancipation, an event of their own creation which might, in real time, help to actively foresee "their own destiny." At the forefront of this artistic and political movement, Henry Box Brown's panorama led the way toward aesthetic and representational emancipation by producing a mobile "revolution" within the revolving panorama, wherein the black body is cloistered, (re)captured, and finally reinserted into an epic topography of dissemblance. Mounted in music halls and concert stages, first in Boston and later throughout Britain in cities such as London, Leeds, and Manchester, Brown's unique exhibition ambitiously sought to controvert systems of U.S. geographical expansionism and presumptions of historical progress.

The Escape Artist

In the immediate aftermath of his grand escape, Henry Box Brown reportedly made use of a "considerable theatrical flair" which would serve him well as he embarked on the antislavery lecture circuit towing his famous box.[56] Having arrived by mail on March 24, 1849, in Philadelphia, Brown quickly made his way to New York and on to the "fugitive 'depot'" of New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he resided for much of the month of April in the home of staunch white abolitionist Joseph Ricketson Jr.[57] By the early 1850s, Box Brown gathered together a circle of free African American comrades in struggle, including his co-conspirator J. C. A. Smith, and Benjamin F. Roberts, the black Boston printer responsible for "print[ing] speeches, reports, pamphlets, and other items for antislavery and black organizations." From public appearances at conventions where Brown and Smith "entertained the assemblage with a song they had written about Henry Brown's 'boxing' " to more elaborate presentations of Brown's autobiographical anecdotes, the act flourished into a sophisticated performance where Brown became "a living exhibit, telling stories of his slavery days and singing spirituals." With Roberts's initial managerial efforts, this traveling event evolved into the *Mirror of Slavery*, an exhibition first presented at Boston's Washingtonian Hall in April 1850.[58]

Where Box Brown gained inspiration for his exhibition remains the subject of scholarly conjecture. Jeffrey Ruggles has, for instance, uncovered the striking similarities between Brown's panorama script and the artist and author Charles C. Green's illustrated poem *The Nubian Slave*, published in Boston in 1845. Ruggles's brilliant research outlines the numerous overlapping themes in Brown's script and Green's text, and he has retrieved corresponding images from the original volume, which, he speculates, may have been used as a template for the *Mirror of Slavery*.[59] In addition, we might consider the cultural and political influences shaping Brown's aesthetic vision in this project. Certainly his subsequent association with Wells Brown, who had completed a panorama script in 1847, would have proved a formative professional experience for him. Likewise, the increasing visibility of black artist-activists such as James Presley Ball and Robert Duncanson indicates the maturing vision of African American art that may have registered as an influence on Brown's work. The renegade entrepreneur Ball had by 1847 opened his Great Daguerrean Gallery of the West in Cincinnati, Ohio, the largest exhibiting space of its kind in the region.[60] Both Wells Brown's and Ball's activities provide evidence of the black abolitionist aesthetic network in which Box Brown's creative efforts may have fermented. In addition, historians Kathryn Grover and Nancy Osgood have argued that Box Brown's stay in the bustling New England seaport of New Bedford may have informed his work. Artists Benjamin Russell and Caleb Purrington debuted their *Panorama of a Whaling Voyage* in that city in December of 1848 before moving the display to Boston in April of 1849, thus coinciding with a significant period in the activist's decision to create his own panoramic display.[61] From this standpoint, it is clear that Brown cultivated his project in the convergent context of a dynamic and experimental period of popular visual production and black antislavery cultural innovation.

Brown's ambition and resourcefulness enabled him to enlist the painterly skills of reformist Josiah Wolcott. Details of this collaboration are scarce, but an April 1850 advertisement in *The Liberator* provides an account of Wolcott's involvement in the endeavor as well as the extent of pre-production labor and preparation for the exhibition.[62] Wolcott was a "passionate and determined artist, deeply involved in some of the key social movements of his time"; his New England reformist visions met head on with Box Brown's fugitive escape tactics in the vast span of the panorama's eye. An Associationist at heart, Wolcott embraced that movement's promotion of communitarian values and cooperative communities in lieu of capitalist industry. The artist appears to have had a particular hand in shaping the panorama's concluding regional polemics. The initial *Liberator* announcement regarding the *Mirror*'s debut specifically points out that the "last scene . . . is a view of a township, according to a plan of Charles Fourier, and given by the artist to indicate his idea of the fruition of emancipation." The iconography of New England reform looms large in the panorama and remains the parting image in Box Brown's exhibition.[63] Multiple and intersecting aesthetic and political ideologies thus shaped the *Mirror of Slavery*. For the most part during this period in abolitionism, "antislavery orators rose in prominence as the movement grew" and visual artists of the movement "tended to occupy a . . . more tangential position." In contrast, Brown's panorama enacted a critical merging of "art" and political oratory by placing both on equal footing.[64] The basic structure and content of Box Brown's exhibition yokes the politics of Anglo reform, black abolitionism, and new popular and aesthetic technologies. Advancing beyond the confines of contemporary visual art and popular theatre culture, Brown's *Mirror* unites the elegant grandeur of landscape artistry with the dynamic performance theatrics of Brown and his "associates" as rotating impresarios. Brown appears to have co-opted Banvard's performative nourishes from his own panorama exhibition in order to create an alternative form of revisionist abolitionist activism. Banvard had made a fortune from combining the exotic and sprawling views of early stationary panoramas with popular elements of minstrelsy endmen repertoires, which consisted of joking banter, transforming his exhibition into a hybridized form of performance and visual spectacle. Brown's project shows signs of having apparently eviscerated Banvard's popular production of its folksy elements, divorcing the panoramic spectacle from its minstrel and variety show aberrations and, in their place, wedding the form with antislavery performance propaganda. The earliest New England presentations of the *Mirror of Slavery* offered audiences a multimedia experience of a moving diorama painting, an "enterprise" all the "more interesting" according to one observer for "the whole is conducted by colored men." As one of the narrators of the panorama, Box Brown traded off lecturing duties with his colored comrades. The *London Times* describes the synchronicity of this performance, how "[a]s the different views of the panorama presented themselves in succession," Brown "explained them in a kind of lecture, in which he enlarged upon the horrors of slavery, and the cruelties to which the slaves were subjected."[65] Brown's event would then reanimate Banvard's act to highlight the vocal prowess of the fugitive narrativist who stands adjacent to—and quite crucially, not merely inside—the gruesome world of slavery depicted in the panorama. In a spectacular act of recovery, Brown, like a deft spiritualist in his exhibition, presumably crosses over to the other side of the *Mirror*, to witness his own ingenuous escape on canvas and to provide an ending in the flesh for his audiences.

Unlike other black antislavery panorama exhibitions, no accompanying pamphlets, pictorial reproductions, or theatrical documents such as programs or posters remain from Box Brown's exhibition.[66] Hence, the bulk of the information on the *Mirror of Slavery* has been culled from surviving newspaper advertisements, articles, reviews, and descriptions of the exhibition which surface in abolitionist epistolary exchanges. On May 3, 1850, *The Liberator* ran one of the earliest descriptions of the scenes: "NEW AND ORIGINAL PANORAMA! HENRY BOX BROWN'S *MIRROR OF SLAVERY*, designed and painted from the best and most authentic sources of information."

The following are the scenes:

PART I.

The African Slave Trade.
The Nubian Family in Freedom.
The Seizure of Slaves.
Religious Sacrifice.
Beautiful Lake and Mountain Scenery in Africa.
March to the Coast.
View of the Cape of Good Hope.
Slave Felucca.
Interior of a Slave Ship.
Chase of a Slaver by an English Steam Frigate.
Spanish Slaver at Havana.
Landing Slaves.
Interior of a Slave Mart.
Gorgeous Scenery of the West India Islands.
View of Charleston, South Carolina.
The Nubian Family at Auction.
March of Chain Gang.
Modes of Confinement and Punishment.
Brand and Scourge.
Interior View of Charleston Workhouse, with Treadmill in full operation.

PART II.

Sunday among the Slave Population.
Monday Morning, with Sugar Plantation and Mill.
Women at Work.
Cotton Plantation.

View of the Lake of the Dismal Swamp.
Nubians, escaping by Night.
Ellen Crafts, Escaping.
Whipping Post and Gallows at Richmond, Va.
View of Richmond, Va.
Henry Box Brown, Escaping.
View of the Natural Bridge and Jefferson's Rock.
City of Washington, D.C.
Slave Prisons at Washington.
Washington's Tomb, at Mount Vernon.
Fairmount Water Works.
Henry Box Brown Released at Philadelphia.
Distant View of the City of Philadelphia.
Henry Bibb, Escaping.
Nubian Slaves Retaken.
Tarring and feathering in South Carolina.
The Slaveholder's Dream.
Burning Alive.
Promise of Freedom.
West India Emancipation.
Grand Industrial Palace.
Grand Tableau Finale—UNIVERSAL EMANCIPATION.[67]

Box Brown's panorama divides into two major narrative arcs. Part I appears to deploy a loosely structured series of events which represent the initial points in the circum-Atlantic slave trade odyssey, beginning somewhere amid the "beautiful lake and mountain scenery in Africa," passing through the "gorgeous" landscape of the West Indies, and descending into the deep interiors of the U.S. South's multiple "Modes of Confinement and Punishment." The opening image of the "African Slave Trade" and the exiting shot of a Charleston Workhouse "Treadmill in full operation" establish the relentless movement of slavery's persistent commerce, while the internal scenes oscillate between charting the localized ordeal of a "free" "Nubian Family's" fall into captivity and the globalized progressions of a "Spanish Slaver's" seaward journey to the Americas. Part II utilizes the trope of community as its thematic bookends. The introductory "Sunday among the Slave Population" is visually matched with the reported communitarian finale. In turn, Part

II's internal structure conveys a grand visual struggle between captive labor and the labor of escape; the panels in this second half appear to mount and mete out the tensions between gross subjugation and heroic flight in the fugitive slave's experience. Various forms of imprisonment and torture are juxtaposed with images of the "heroic" slave in flight. Part I's visions of pastoral elegance are here replaced with the cartography of U.S. liberty; the manifest iconography of "Jefferson's Rock" and "Washington's Tomb" unfurls along the fugitive's path to freedom. Escape is presumably rewarded in the Grand Tableau Finale where the vision of "Universal Emancipation" affirms the revisionist reflection that this *Mirror* attempts to effect and re-flect.

With the iconography of the river conspicuously absent here, Brown's exhibition eschews the dominant conventions of the panoramic genre. The significant chronotopic symbolism of the river panorama alone, its ability to represent "an unfolding temporal process, showing the regional part in relation to the national whole" (A. Miller, "Panorama," 46), is bypassed in the *Mirror of Slavery* completely in favor of a repetition of scenes which evokes the fundamental regressiveness of the nation, its overarching lack of national progress. Brown's exhibition suggests that, in spite of its industrial aspirations embodied in the developing city scenes of "Richmond, Va." and the "City of Washington, D.C.," slavery nonetheless ensnares the nation in whirling stasis, causing it to repeatedly fall backward into the nightmare of bondage, forcing it to succumb to the undertow of its gruesome specter. Foreshadowing Walter Benjamin's extensive criticism of mid-nineteenth-century ornate urban displays and "the myth of automatic historical progress," Box Brown's exhibition stages an elaborate reversal of the popular panorama's functionality as a tool of what he identifies as "mythic history."[68] Just as Benjamin's criticism recognizes the ways in which such mythologizing enacts a critical and spectacular method of "forgetting," Brown's panoramic rebus attempts to "expose 'progress' as the fetishization of modern temporality" and thereby challenges the spectator to resolve slavery's conundrum.[69]

With the allure of progress embedded in its very structure, the *Mirror* conspicuously feigns epic movement through space and time. By opening with an image of the "African Slave Trade" as its constructed etiological core and by pushing toward a climax with the forecast of a future-perfect utopian culture, the exhibition imagines a kind of complicated linearity. Epic in theme as much as in size, the *Mirror of Slavery* represents one of a handful of attempts in black abolitionist cultural production to articulate a trajectory of experience from African "freedom" to the point of enslavement and finally to a futurist view of a land wherein slavery has been effectively eradicated. At the same time, the panorama's narrative movement repeatedly stalls and disrupts. That is, rather than allowing his panorama to operate purely in a developmental historical arc, Brown dismantles the progressive temporality of the form in order to "*de*mythify the present" state of the Union.[70] Time itself is a property subject to transmogrification in this dystopian scene of slavery. The viewer is chronotopically entrapped, forced to submit to the rehearsed slippage between (emancipated) space and the tightly fixed walls of captivity. Shifting rapidly from the prelapsarian imaginary of a "Nubian Family in Freedom" to the "Seizure of Slaves," from the pastoral scene of West African landscape to the confinement of the "Slave Felucca," and the lush image of the West Indian Islands to the "Interior View of the Workhouse," Part I of the *Mirror* oscillates between a past idealized wide, open, spatial freedom and an urgently present imprisonment; for instance, it couples the incarceration of captives with a roving view of Caribbean topography. This particular "rhythm of history," this "pulse of events in which the audience was allowed vicarious participation" (A. Miller, "Panorama," 55), sustains a vertiginous movement in time and space between liberation and enslavement.

By reaching back to the topography of Africa and stretching itself into what Wolff calls a "pastiche that combined actuality and visionary possibility" in the future (36), Box Brown's *Mirror* yokes together images of slaves' experiences with the volatile social and political landscape of slavery, as well as the very make of the land in its "all-embracing view" of the peculiar institution.[71] The capture, removal, and commodification of an entire African family is set in relation to "mountainous" scenery; images of fleeing Nubians are coupled with the ironically noble grandeur of monuments and "water works." As one English critic observed, the tableaux included "representations strikingly illustrative of American institutions and inconsistencies. The noble House of Congress stands at the top of one picture, and in the foreground is to be seen a slave auction; also General Taylor (as president) driving in state into the city of Washington, whilst his four grey steeds are frightened by the cries and groans of a gang of slaves."[72] These visual juxtapositions aspire toward critically rehistoricizing and re-placing the black body in the fabric of nations, indeed in the landscape of African and American scenery altogether.

This strategy is particularly apparent in Part II, where a similarly complex and repetitious narrative pattern resurfaces in the depiction of four fugitive slave escape scenes which play out in five separate junctures of the exhibition. In a section that we might imagine as a kind of escape suite, "Nubians, Escaping by Night" cut a path to freedom for the "Ellen Crafts" (as they are referred to in the script), Henry Bibb, and Henry Box Brown, but in a reversion of movement recalling that found in Part I, the unnamed "Nubians" are eventually "retaken" in a later scene which closes this series of flights in the panorama. Time and again, the spectator watches the replay of escape and return to slavery, as if to witness the plucking of individuals out of the hands of the tyrannical South one by one. Even as Brown's panorama moves toward imminent escape, the belated scenes of slaves "recaptured" and tortured delay spectatorial desires for resolution and stability. The structural dislocation of the conventional slave narrative which, Raymond Hedin argues, is meant to suggest "the disconnectedness of slave life" itself, mutates and intensifies in this black abolitionist panorama.[73] By inserting a conventional narrative arc into the frame of the display and focusing on the perpetual reenactment of fleeing slavery, Brown's *Mirror* revises the panorama's emphasis on "portrayals of scenes rather than of actions" (Altick, *Shows of London*, 178). The action and agency of the fugitive slave assume dominating and contravening features in the panorama's circular narrative fluidity.

Brown's *Mirror* revised the conventional panorama's insistence on providing an "expedited, edited, and misleadingly simple passage through a simulated reality" (A. Miller, "Panorama," 40). The illusion of movement, which is embedded in the genre, comes undone in the exhibition.[74] The *Mirror* punctures the quietude of the spectator's gaze by insisting on a return to the problem of slavery. If the general "panorama experience rested on the conviction that whatever else happened, the scene would change, by the very necessity of the device itself" (A. Miller, "Panorama," 49), Brown's work paradoxically inverted this concept by delivering a treacherous replay of the same event in its varying forms. Whether it surveyed the cramped "Interior of a Slave Ship" or of a "Slave Mart," or whether it traveled with "the Ellen Crafts" in their beguiling cross-dressing plot, or whether it made the perilous journey in the box with Brown to his "release" in Philadelphia, the panorama's investment in deploying the scene of escape interrupts the comforting stability in the traditional genre. Unlike its mainstream predecessors, the exhibition's refusal to easily "furnis[h] . . . a steady, constant flow of images" reveals the ways in which the black abolitionist panorama revised the form, employing its "vicarious visual experience of the real" (A. Miller, "Panorama," 49) for disruptive ends.[75]

Through a manipulation of the panoramic form, the *Mirror of Slavery* works both to make the slave's odyssey a historical subject worthy of heroic representation and to use that form as a tool for enacting historical change. If, as Marcus Wood maintains, midcentury aesthetic representations of fugitive slaves inevitably scripted these men and women as passive and unheroic, as suffering and powerless, then Box Brown's exhibition rewrites that iconography in grandly overt terms.[76] Situating African American subjugation and resistance in a charged historical context, the panorama aimed to re-represent slavery. The span of the *Mirror*, with its move between continents and its telescoping of scenery and mass social struggle, catapults the fugitive experience into the historical imaginary and presses for a present and forward-reaching "realization" of historical transformation.[77] The exhibition reversed the popular French and English panorama's steam roll of "spatial extension" meant to signify "the passage of time and the grand sweep" of an imperialist and eclipsing history (A. Miller, "Panorama," 36). Rather, it reflected its potent rays of hope and horror in a rapidly unfolding series of events leading up to emancipation, and its "Promise of Freedom" assured by the splash of a fiery "Grand Tableau Finale."

This intervention in history, this radical looking glass, a prism of resistant and restorative agency in the movement(s) of the fugitive slave, cuts an opaque ray of light across the landscape panoramas of the 1850s circum-Atlantic imaginary. Brown's display reversed the roll of Banvard's Mississippi panoramas which had effectively erased the black figure from the American landscape. Having notoriously vacated American landscape of African Americans, Banvard's *Panorama of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers* had left behind only traces of (violent) African American experience in slavery. His exhibition's script charts, for instance, a sterilized river journey, at one point targeting "an old dead tree scathed by the fire, where three negroes were burnt alive."[78] The *Mirror* used black bodies of evidence to point out the myopic elisions of the dominant panorama and contemporary landscape art of the period. The tranquil roll of the Mississippi in Banvard's panorama is replaced in Box Brown's *Mirror* by a turbulent path out of the unbearably "peculiar" situation of slavery. As if to signify on the erasure of black corporeal waste, Box Brown's visual project fills in the gaps of Banvard's artificially pastoral odyssey. It is a road paved to hell