



**Engraving of the Box in which HENRY BOX
BROWN escaped from slavery in Rich-
mond, Va.**

S O N G,

Sung by Mr. Brown on being removed from the box.

I waited patiently for the Lord ;—
And he, in kindness to me, heard my calling—
And he hath put a new song into my mouth—
Even thanksgiving—even thanksgiving—
Unto our God !

Blessed—blessed is the man
That has set his hope, his hope in the Lord !
O Lord ! my God ! great, great is the wondrous work
Which thou hast done !

If I should declare them—and speak of them—
They would be more than I am able to express.
I have not kept back thy love, and kindness, and truth,
From the great congregation !

Withdraw not thou thy mercies from me,
Let thy love, and kindness, and thy truth, always preserve me—
Let all those that seek thee be joyful and glad !
Be joyful and glad !

And let such as love thy salvation—
Say always—say always—
The Lord be praised !
The Lord be praised !

Latins's Steam Press, 1 1-2 Water Street, Boston.

5. Song, Sung by Mr. Brown on being removed from the box.
Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

with a biblical “cliffhanger” of sorts, Psalm 40 does not progress like other texts of its kind, and thus, in its original state, it is perhaps an inappropriate accompaniment for Brown’s emergence from the box. Brown must, for his own pressing purposes, figure out a way to make the passage move differently.¹³⁹

Just as Stearns’s constricting editorial maneuvers erected high walls for the fugitive narrator to scale, so too does Psalm 40 appear to offer no exit outside the sphere of lamentation. Yet in spite of these hurdles and using the raw material of the original scripture, Brown successfully creates “a new song” to resolve the turmoil that plagues the primary text. While others in the antislavery movement had tackled revising and transforming

this verse, Brown's version manifests the most complex and interlocking musical traditions shaping fugitive culture.¹⁴⁰ Brown not only performs the deliverance of the desired passage but also, with religious faith as his steerage, he delivers himself. He imports the specific structure and content of African American divinity forms to improvise and open up the language of this particular Psalter scripture as a means to create a safe passage to freedom via his hymn. In this way, song operates as yet another form of wily escape for a fugitive known for his resourceful innovations.

Turning biblical verse into celebratory lyric, Brown's hymn buoyantly leaps over its dark valleys and into the repeated expression of exuberance and praise for the speaker's Lord:

Even a thanksgiving, even a thanksgiving, even a thanksgiving unto
 Our God
 Blessed, Blessed, Blessed, Blessed is the man,
 Blessed is the man that has set his hope, his hope in the Lord;
 Oh Lord my God, Great, Great, Great, Great,
 Great are the wondrous works which thou hast done.
 Great are the wondrous works which thou hast done,
 Which thou has done . . .
 Let thy loving kindness and thy truth always preserve me,
 Let all those that seek thee be joyful and glad,
 Let all those that seek thee be joyful and glad, be joyful,
 And glad, be joyful, be joyful, be joyful, be joyful, be joyful
 And glad—be glad in thee. . . .
 The Lord be praised, The Lord be praised. Let all those that
 seek thee be joyful and glad,
 And let such as love thy salvation, say always,
 The Lord be praised,
 The Lord be praised,
 The Lord be praised.¹⁴¹

The jubilation in Brown's "Hymn" marks it as a distinct and separate entity from that of the psalm, and its ecstasies are more than an oversimplified black folk cultural gesture. The hymn operates as an additional contribution to the abolitionist's burgeoning aesthetics of escapology, a kind of performance that Brown would continue to cultivate during his public sojourns in the U.K.¹⁴²

Although Brown's "Hymn of Thanksgiving" does not appear to resonate as black vernacular expression, it did run parallel to and at times stylistically overlap with key elements of the Negro spiritual repertoire. The complex and storied tradition of the Negro spiritual reflects a dedication to rigorous aesthetic innovation and an almost ritualistic investment in revision and improvisation. Religious music scholar Mellonee Burnim contends, for instance, that the "craftsmanship of the song leader was broadly recognized and highly applauded in the slave community. The desire and ability to re-create, rather than merely imitate, was nurtured and reflected a value which lies at the heart of African American cultural expression."¹⁴³ Like the evolving Negro spiritual form of the period, Brown's sacred song depended on the simultaneous repetition and transformation of scripture. Spirituals relied on creative borrowing, revising, and suturing, building new texts by quilting the old together. But as Eileen Southern maintains, it "must be remembered that in every instance, the spiritual is a refashioning of verses and motives from the parent hymn or hymns and *not* simply a different version of the hymn."¹⁴⁴ We might then read Brown's composition as a sacred song indebted to multiple nineteenth-century black religious musical forms of expression and as having evolved out of various folk practices that demonstrate African American efforts not merely to express but to *transform* the condition of textuality and the tex-tuality of one's condition.

As a sacred song which proclaims deliverance, "Hymn of Thanksgiving" reflects and fulfills what John Lovell, in his influential work on spirituals, contends is the "fundamental theme of the genre," the "need for a change in the existing order." As a translation of Psalm 40, Brown's song then stands as evidence of the phantasmagoric promise of black religious musical performance. Brown's "sacred ballad" extends the hallowed tradition of deliverance hymns such as "Steal Away to Jesus," "Children, We Shall Be Free," and "Go Down, Moses," by creating an entirely new musical structure built almost exclusively around expressing the ecstasy of deliverance itself.¹⁴⁵ A dual expression and an enactment of transformation, Brown's song midwifes the humanity of its performer as it articulates and constitutes the movement from putative "thingdom" to personhood. In this regard, Brown followed the tradition of captives who made functional use of sacred song and who sought to create, as Lawrence Levine asserts, "a new world by transcending the narrow confines of the one in which they were forced to live. They extended the boundaries of their restrictive universe backward until it fused with the world of the Old Testament,

and upward until it became one with the world beyond . . . they creat[ed] an expanded universe, by literally willing themselves reborn.”¹⁴⁶

Performance in this context becomes constitutive of Brown’s deliverance from enslavement and his subsequent “rebirth.” Not only does Brown’s lyrical revision fulfill the original scripture’s “prophecy” but also the act of song occurs at a critical moment in Brown’s odyssey. Arising from the crate and “bursting” into his hymn, Brown further signifies on the condition of enslavement by willfully and publicly embracing the embodied act of performance. To perform, to add movement to his previously still and cargoed flesh, the song completes Brown’s journey into subjectivity and marks a necessary rupture from his putative abject state. His insurgent musical performance demonstrates the ways that, as Lindon Barrett has shown, the black singing voice “provides a means by which African Americans may exchange an expended, valueless self in the New World for a productive, recognized self.” If, then, as theologian Thomas Briendenthal has eloquently observed, divine “faith” has the power to “return one to oneself,” then Brown’s hymn, a musical proclamation of faith, was a way in which the fugitive might return (value) to himself, by using song to cut through the bonds of captivity.¹⁴⁷

Brown arrived singing in an antislavery world very much accustomed to yoking sacred song with political resistance. The 1840s and 1850s saw the explosion of popularity in publishing antislavery songbooks as well as the composition of abolition hymns performed in Northern churches for individuals who had withdrawn from proslavery congregations. However, only a small group of African American activists composed and performed these songs for public antislavery audiences.¹⁴⁸ During the compressed period between his 1849 entrance into abolitionist circles and his rushed exit to England in 1850, Box Brown seems to have capitalized on his singing abilities, appearing at antislavery organized gatherings such as the 1850 Syracuse, New York, abolitionist convention and extending his use of his song into the secular and satirical realm to rewrite minstrel melodies from a radical black abolitionist perspective. An “old tune” set to “new words,” Brown’s and James “Boxer” Smith’s revamped rendition of “Uncle Ned” calls further attention to the bold compositional and performative abilities of the former and makes plain the extent to which song played a central role in Box Brown’s abolitionist career.¹⁴⁹

A deft and signifying rumination on labor, the “Uncle Ned” of Brown’s performances revised the original 1848 Stephen Foster

text, a standard feature of many minstrel show revues of the period, in order to once again deliver Brown, and more broadly the black laboring figure, from the condition of enslavement. While Foster's chorus laments the passing of "Old Ned," who "lay down de shubble and de hoe" to die, having weathered the severe punishment of unchecked labor with fingers "long like de cane in de brake" and "no teeth for to eat de corn cake," Brown would recast himself in his version of the song as having "laid down the shovel and the hoe / Down in the box he did go / No more Slave work for Henry Box Brown / In the box by express he did go." Brown's composition labored, so to speak, so as to displace the grotesquely corroded corpus of the slave in Foster's racial romanticist vision (not unlike Longfellow's slave in the swamp) in order to insert his own willfully vanishing body into the text. As would be the case in his subsequent panorama exhibitions and in his 1851 *Narrative*, Brown would repeatedly return to the question of black labor, and aesthetically he would seek to resituate his own body to labor in resistance to the peculiar institution through the poetics of spectacular performance. An old box would prove his greatest prop in this endeavor.¹⁵⁰

The box that had initially set Brown free would in fact play a central role in his continuing efforts to publicize his own metamorphosis from "slave into man." Like black song, Brown's crate of liberation would serve as a portal to the sphere of subjectivity, transforming the Middle Passage narrative "into its opposite by converting the very stringencies of an African slave ship into a blueprint for freedom." But in a complicated twist, Brown's post-boxing efforts would move him far beyond the symbolic gesture of "translating" black captive cargo into humanity. Rather, Brown's spectacular re-boxing act recognized the benefits of converting his own commodity as a slave into that of cultural commodification.¹⁵¹ An inverted magic act of sorts, Brown's recycled boxing altered what would eventually become the "classic" magic trick of metamorphosis which hinged on dramatic substitutions of one person or thing for another. He instead used the spectacle of his own entrapment to stage publicly Frederick Douglass's legendary and demonstrative proclamation in his own autobiography: "you have seen how a man was made a slave,



6. The Resurrection of Henry Box Brown at Philadelphia. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

now you shall see how a slave was made a man.”¹⁵² In the United Kingdom, where fascination with fugitive slave celebrity remained high throughout the 1850s, Brown marketed the sight of his own conversion, once again imagining new ways of dually utilizing his body as a source of his own capital and political propaganda.

In the midst of Box Brown’s high-profile tour of English townships, the *Leeds Mercury* gave the most detailed description of Brown’s May 1851 “boxing” appearance. The report describes how, with the assistance of J. C. A. Smith, he had mailed himself from Bradford to Leeds, “packed in the identical box” in which “he first made his escape from slavery.” The article announces that Brown’s exhibition at the local Music Hall

offers for inspection a representation of the horrors of slavery in America. He was packed up in the box at Bradford about half-past five o’clock, and forwarded to Leeds by the six o’clock train. On arriving at the Wellington station, the box was placed in a coach and, preceded by a band of music and banners, representing the stars and stripes of America, paraded through the principal streets of the town. The procession was attended by an immense concourse of spectators. Mr. C.A. Smith [*sic*], a coloured friend of Mr. Brown’s rode in the coach with the box, and afterwards opened it at the Music Hall. The box is 3 feet 1 inch long, 2 feet 6 inches high, and 2 feet wide.

Mr. Brown's last "resurrection" (as he calls it) from the box took place at a quarter past eight o'clock, so that he had been confined in the space above indicated for two hours and three-quarters. He was very well received by the small audience who attended, and after a short but interesting account of his adventures, he proceeded to exhibit his panorama.¹⁵³

In a clear and dauntless gesture that signifies on the American abolitionist Henry Wright's call for the public to see Brown's box, "look into it, and there behold American Republicanism and American religion," Brown's Leeds appearance unveils a grossly sardonic contrast in images. The pomp and circumstance of "stars and stripes" and the music of the band are offset by the dissonant sight of a fugitive of the States made to seek safe harbor in a box.¹⁵⁴ Brown and Smith's act redeploys the nationalist pageantry of coach-drawn processions and street parades toward abolitionist ends, skillfully segueing this scene into Brown's self-engineered "resurrection" before an audience. The structure of this program again makes plain the ways that Brown perhaps envisioned his diverse cultural work as concatenate parts of a whole. Boxing spills into lecturing which creates a bridge into the *Mirror*.¹⁵⁵ The boxing event serves as a critical introduction to the evening as it underscores Brown's control over both his body and his narrative, which he makes available for public consumption.

For nearly three hours on a spring evening in Leeds, Brown's box trick announced to a "small audience" of onlookers that excruciating confinement could be recycled into a symbol of corporeal subversion. Brown's resourceful performative labor appropriates still more Gothic tropes—entrapment and abjection—converting them into spectacular and cyclical methods of escape. If the iconography of the slave in St. John de Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) typifies the image of the trapped and decrepit, "[h]alf dead and half-alive . . . rotting corpse" hanging in a cage, Brown's display of endurance crouching in his crate converts the slave's body into an elastic tool capable of transgressing and transcending extreme corporeal limitations.¹⁵⁶ Theatrically prescient and forward-looking, Brown's work is both directly and figuratively tied to the imbricated fields of Victorian magic culture and transatlantic spiritualism, both of which were practices gradually beginning to flourish in the England he encountered in the early 1850s.

Known for its imperialist and misogynist ideological underpinnings, mid-nineteenth-century magic culture nonetheless might have inspired Box Brown as he cultivated his boxing

routine. Karen Beckman astutely reminds us that magic “transforms the emerging political voices of women and other ‘others’ into bodies that move with apparent ease from the realm of the corporeal to the realm of fantasy. In short, magic tries to convince us that ‘surplus’ bodies can be evaporated harmlessly and without trace.”¹⁵⁷ Conversely, however, Brown appears to have reanimated magic’s illusory play of the body in order to harness its functionality for African American liberation tactics. Working at the borders of spectacular and “nineteenth-century high theatrical realism [which] prided itself on challenging the viewer . . . by seeming to have nothing to hide, by seeming to show it all . . . ‘right before your very eyes,’ in the magician’s traditional phrase,” Brown’s reconstructions of escape used the black body as a tool of defiance, as a site of illusion, theatrical mastery, and reinvention.¹⁵⁸ Less a vanishing act and more an antecedent to early-twentieth-century magic show “escapology,” Brown’s boxing spectacle reaffirmed an African American appropriation of the black body, making that body “vanish” in the midst of the panoptic culture of slavery and under the peculiar institution’s diligent and watchful eye.¹⁵⁹

Brown’s reenactments of boxing would seemingly anticipate Victorian magic’s increasing use of cabinets, crates, and trunks as critical stage devices. Although box escapes which featured a performer’s self-liberation from sealed receptacles and nailed packing cases did not gain popularity until the early twentieth century and in the wake of Harry Houdini’s dominating success as a magician, confinement imagery nonetheless played a central role in the burgeoning magic culture of the mid-Victorian era.¹⁶⁰ The famous cabinet act of teams such as the American Davenport brothers in the 1850s and 1860s and the infamous “box Trick” of Englishman J. N. Maskelyne in the 1860s and 1870s contributed to a lively show culture intrigued with the mysteries of entombment. Bound and tied in a cabinet with instruments which were made to seem as though they were played by mesmeric forces, the Davenports engaged in “profitable seances” in the States and England, where the two men were “invited to prove the wonders that invisible spirits could perform when mediums were enclosed in a dark cabinet.”¹⁶¹ Unlike the brothers’ act, Brown’s was no hoax, and his use of confinement as performance made corporeal agency as opposed to passivity the central focus of his appearance. Brown’s boxing reenactments stressed the powers of his body to withstand the torture of slavery.

The art of escapology served as a way for Brown to comment on his relationship to the corporeal, to reassert his triumphant

defeat of subjugation. Like Houdini, who would perfect a version of boxing for his own theatrical purposes, Brown perhaps realized that “the knowledge that he could always rely on his body was essential to the control of his mind,” and he used boxing as a way in which to assert the ultimate power and sovereignty which he heroically claimed over his own flesh.¹⁶² Settling into the box “for two hours and three-quarters,” Brown willed his body to endure the suffocating restrictions of the crate as defiant spectacle and as a potential affirmation of his ultimate autonomy. This sort of appearance aided Brown in overturning the terrible abjection of his imprisonment, which he relates at length in both versions of his narrative, how the confinement caused him to break into a “cold sweat,” how his eyes began to “swel[l] as if they would burst from their sockets,” and how “the veins on [his] temples were dreadfully distended with pressure of blood upon [his] head.”¹⁶³ The emphasis on the pain he endured during this form of prolonged and self-willed torture in order to obtain freedom sheds strategic light on Brown’s skillful abilities and his depth of endurance in claiming control and ownership over his body.

Brown’s greatest feat as an escape artist, however, may have been his uncanny ability to cheat (social) death in slavery. Repeatedly compared to a “Lazarus” figure with the power to “rise again” from his entrapping box, Box Brown reinvented the traditional role of the resurrected biblical figure, “the surrogate] detailed to investigate, experience and if possible exorcise, on behalf of the rest of us, the great mystery” of death.¹⁶⁴ Faced with ubiquitous images of live burial in slavery and Victorian popular culture alike, Brown’s boxing followed abolitionist discourse in a bid to reappropriate the harrowing iconography of Crevecoeur’s “slave in the cage” imagery for resistant purposes.¹⁶⁵ As “the essential Gothick situation,” the theatrical box escape subsequently provided Brown with the opportunity to revisit the question of mortality and to signify on the symbolic uses of the box as a metaphysical “threshold, that point of elision between life and death.”¹⁶⁶ Perhaps Brown recognized, like Houdini, that “his life was tolerable only if he could assure himself, time after time, that he could defeat [death],” that he could defeat the peculiar institution at its own game of transforming people into things.¹⁶⁷

Transcending the limits of the body which slavery sought to place on him, Brown’s boxing act gave the activist a public forum to performatively interrogate the politics of death and resurrection and thus seems closely aligned as well to the evolving spiritualist movements of the period on both sides of the

Atlantic. Not surprisingly, spiritualism seems to have contributed to the graduated theatricality of Brown's work late in his public U.K. career when the magic of his boxing seems to have transmogrified into full-blown spiritualist demonstration. The road from nineteenth-century magic to that of spiritualism was not a long one. Midcentury spiritualism mediums "became the first 'escape artists'" as they increasingly relied on cages and contraptions to heighten their putative connection to the netherworld.¹⁶⁸ Brown's work tapped into the evolving art of escapology, but the very presence of his cabinet-like crate may have imbued his act with a timely spiritualist currency as well.

Functioning as the messenger of "survival" for his audience, the figure who had traveled to the dark "underworld" of slavery and lived to tell about it, Brown eventually imagined a way to engage with the spiritualist elements of his escape, transforming that interrelated symbolism into a gesture that would combine multiple theatrical strategies to create yet another new and multifaceted spectacle. In 1859, eight years after his initial U.K. tour, the activist resurfaced with a second wife to mount a revised version of his initial panorama production which reportedly brought the spiritualist politics of his cultural production to the fore. Spiritualism, it seemed, was literally the final frontier for Brown to traverse as an abolitionist reformer.¹⁶⁹ The return of the *Mirror* to England in 1859 was hailed, according to the *West London Observer*, "with breathless interest and loudly applauded" at Town Hall in Brentford.¹⁷⁰ Yet Brown had noticeably altered his "grand original panorama of African and American Slavery" in significant ways. The article marvels over the exhibition's alterations, noting that Brown

has since added to his entertainment some dioramic views from the Holy Land, which are excellently painted, and ably described by Mrs. Henry Box Brown. Since the sad revolt in our Eastern Empire has occurred, Mr. Brown has had a panorama of the great Indian Mutiny painted, which he now exhibits alternately with his great American panorama, either of which affords a most excellent evening's entertainment. . . . To conclude the evening's entertainment on Wednesday, Mr. Brown, together with Professor Chadwick . . . introduced several experiments on mesmerism, human magnetism, and electrobiology, which proved most successful, and afforded the crowded audience much pleasure and amusement.¹⁷¹

A maddening elixir of panoramic grandeur, abolitionist visual display, neo-imperialist propaganda, spiritualist and magic spectacle show, Brown's last recorded *Mirror* appears to present

more questions than answers about the political and cultural direction his work was taking a decade after his fabled flight. The geohistorical scope of Brown's exhibition has here stretched to include "dioramic views from the Holy Land." Even more puzzling still, the mysterious Mrs. Brown strikes a startling role. A lone female voice on the stage who reportedly "introduced the panorama of the great Indian Mutiny" on some nights as well, this Mrs. Brown accompanies the panoramic tourist on a journey that shifts from night to night between holy location and colonial conflict.¹⁷² Joined by Chadwick on the stage, Brown adds mesmeric stunts to a variety-show repertoire in what were reported to be "his first experiments in public."¹⁷³

The sheer excess and overload of these lesser known Box Brown-helmed programs has led some scholars to question the extent to which these later exhibitions were more opportunistic events than politically minded affairs. In particular, Audrey Fisch speculates that Brown's representations of the mutiny and his experiments with "popular science" may have been driven by economic pressures to appeal to an English public whose interest in American abolition had "wan[ed] by 1859." Fisch points to the favorable notices of Brown's exhibition, despite its introduction of material on the Indian Mutiny, as evidence in part of the fugitive's complicity with English imperialist propaganda. In the midst of post-mutiny English hysteria and xenophobic paranoia, no oppositional discourse on the British army's defeat at the hands of Indian rebels would have been tolerated by a public still licking its wounds from defeat. Thus Fisch concludes that the Box Brown of 1859 London was, in all likelihood, pandering to imperialist sentiment with his inclusion of this additional panorama in his act. She reflects on whether "'Box' Brown's 'entertainment' " is "very different from the thousands of exhibitions of exotic spectacle which crowded Victorian popular culture?"¹⁷⁴

Fisch's observations raise a string of concerns about the credibility of this Box Brown of late 1850s London, concerns that have haunted his body of work in the years since he climbed out of the box.¹⁷⁵ At best, the Brown of this exhibit was a busy entrepreneur capable of yoking multiple forms of entertainment into a challenging and conflicting cultural exhibit; at worst he was, as Fisch suggests, a venal pawn of British popular culture and "a supporting actor in a larger drama about the state of the English nation."¹⁷⁶ To counter this latter claim with any certainty at all by suggesting that, for instance, Brown was in fact staging a "mutiny" of his own on the English stage by placing his *Mirror* in a dialectic with dissonant images of a

crippled English empire would be a difficult endeavor. I would, however, like to offer an alternate reading of this exhibit based, in part, on its sheer heterogeneity. For despite the fact that British spectators may have found “pleasure” and “amusement” by looking in the *Mirror* once again, I would urge us to consider the historical and political blind spots that these viewers may have encountered in the display, opaque connections that leave open ways of reading for the signifying elements of the exhibition. In short, I would argue that the incorporation of historical mutiny and mesmerism at this late juncture in the public display of his panorama suggests that Box Brown may have exploited these juxtapositions so as to yoke his visions of millennial reform with the spiritualist elements of his boxing.¹⁷⁷

At the very least, the connections which Brown made in his 1859 *Mirror* between spiritualism and abolitionism were most likely not as incidental as one might initially presume. As R. Laurence Moore reveals, the links between mesmerism and reform developed over the course of the 1840s and 1850s, attracting the likes of influential abolitionists such as Garrison and Gerrit Smith and others, who found “something in spiritualist teachings to bolster their own particular ideal of free association.”¹⁷⁸ While Garrison appeared with Brown on several occasions during the early weeks of his New England lecture tour in 1849 and early 1850, it is Gerrit Smith who perhaps was a critical figure to Brown in formulating his public career as an abolitionist and in forging his interests in spiritualism. Smith, who distinguished himself as a radical abolitionist in his career, attempting at one point to “establish a black agricultural settlement” and later “conspiring] with John Brown to incite a slave insurrection at Harper’s Ferry,” was in fact believed to have been one of the key financiers of the original *Mirror of Slavery*.¹⁷⁹

With the abolitionist connections to spiritualism politically and professionally close to him, Box Brown manifested in this new version of his panorama what were already the suggestively latent elements of his act. The chaotic images of mutiny combined with the sensational spectacles of “human magnetism” and “electrobiology” to create a disparate landscape of black abolitionist escape art. Following the fascination of “many of America’s millennialist reformers [who] saw the raps as signs of a prophecy heralding the beginnings of an age of perfect human brotherhood,” Brown perhaps deployed mesmerism as the natural evolution of his millennial visions which he had hatched in his original exhibition.¹⁸⁰ Spiritualism’s foregrounding of the turn of the body from the material to the nether world lent to the popular perception that mesmeric acts were

ultimately a precursor to millennial change; hence, the “seance manifestations” were believed to have had “portentous significance for modern times.”¹⁸¹

The Fourierist township image, which provided an ominous closing frame to the early 1850s *Mirror*, works, then, as something of an ultimate precursor of its own in Brown’s political and performative career. His production’s emphasis on Fourierism again reflects the extent to which Box Brown’s work asserted itself at the crossroads of reformist ideologies. In a sense, his panorama built on the “poetic and vigorous vision, apocalyptic themes, indignation at the unjust state of the world and desire for its betterment” which spiritualist leaders such as Andrew Jackson Davis fostered and embraced in the late 1840s and early 1850s.¹⁸² Brown would seemingly build on these kinds of confluences of political reform and spiritualism, transforming them into black abolitionist cultural expression. His moving panorama withstood the test of time in reflecting the imminent and turbulent change that the United States’ national body was itself on the threshold of confronting in 1859. Read in this context, this *Mirror* reflected the turbulent events ahead and affirmed a spiritualist vision that would serve as a bridge for the fugitive slave to revolve himself out of social death and into a future unknown.

Coda: The Trap Door Narrative and the Return of the Mack

Henry Box Brown was well into his first U.K. lecture and panorama tour when the “first English edition” of his *Narrative* was released in August 1851.¹⁸³ This “new” narrative differentiated itself from the 1849 text with its very title, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*. Gone were the suffocating details of the dimensions of Brown’s box, as well as any mention of Charles Stearns. Yet this alternate text poses (and perhaps exacerbates) its own set of complicated questions regarding the authenticity and existence of an “original” Henry Box Brown narrative. James Olney observes that the differences in the 1851 edition suggest that Stearns had worked from a version of the manuscript for this English publication, “or from some ur-text lying behind both.” He suggests that Stearns’s editorial work is “very much in play in this text”—whether the fugitive literally authored the work or not. Olney concludes that if it was “really written by Brown,” then the text reveals the ways in which “the abolitionist style insinuates itself into the text and takes over the style of the writing even when that is actually done by an ex-slave.”¹⁸⁴ But the 1851 version of

Brown's *Narrative*, whether literally authored by the activist or not, distinguishes itself as an intertextual cultural production, a narrative which finally and emphatically affirms Brown's use of performative strategies to transcend the corporeal as well as the discursive restrictions laid upon him as a fugitive slave.

The prefatory material and documents appended to the 1851 narrative alone set up a direct relationship with the previous edition of Brown's autobiography, while also immediately suggesting a representational transcendence of that text. As a significant juxtaposition to the title's descriptive reductions, the Manchester-issued edition includes on its first page the popular 1850 lithograph of Brown's "unboxing" from slavery, entitled the "Resurrection of Henry Box Brown, at Philadelphia."¹⁸⁵ The positioning of the lithograph on the initial page serves as a concatenate image to that of the final representation of the box from 1849. With head and shoulders carefully emerging from the crate, Brown is placed at the center of this illustration, fully dressed and staring forward with even aplomb while three white and one black abolitionist onlookers ponder the scene. The image foreshadows the ways in which this *Narrative* might expose rather than cloister Brown's body (of work), how it might extend the cultural productions which he has thus far staged within his career as an activist.

This attendance to intertextuality permeates the structure of the 1851 edition of the *Narrative*. Although it lacks the sophisticated literary style of William Wells Brown's subsequent travel writings, which were often laced with panoramic imagery and a roving, vigorously descriptive narrative eye, the English edition of Henry Box Brown's *Narrative* creates a direct and fundamental dialogue with the *Mirror of Slavery*.¹⁸⁶ A new preface displaces Stearns's "self-conscious, self-gratifying, self-congratulatory philosophizing" in favor of opening remarks which present a generic problem that Brown's cultural work will consistently address: how to negotiate the void between the experience of slavery and its representation.¹⁸⁷ Presumably the narrator of this new preface, Box Brown speculates that the ordeals which he has endured at the "lash of the whip" will "never be related, because, language is inadequate to express" such events (Brown, *Narrative of the Life*, 1851, ii). This comment establishes an initial crisis in mounting visual proof of the fugitive slave's experiences which the subsequent introduction to the *Narrative* will attempt to resolve through an intertextual engagement with Brown's celebrated boxing (re)appearance and his panorama.

This introduction includes multiple letters from those who

serve as “witnesses” to either the initial scene of unboxing or to the touring English exhibition of the panorama, and speaks back in multiple ways to the problem of linguistic “inadequacy” in the representation of slavery. The remarks of the famed abolitionist James Miller McKim, one of the primary Philadelphia activists canonized in the scene of Brown’s “resurrection,” extend the narrator’s initial points concerning visual corroboration. In one of the opening letters, McKim “confess[es]” that “if I had not myself been present at the opening of the box on its arrival, and had [I] not witnessed with my own eyes, your resurrection from your living tomb, I should have been strongly disposed to question the truth of the story” (iv).¹⁸⁸ The latter “testimonials,” as they are introduced, provide a kind of response to this problem of visual representation by foregrounding the claims of those who witnessed the panorama. British Reverend Justin Spaulding’s effusive letter describes the panorama as “almost, if not quite, a perfect fac simile of the workings of that horrible and fiendish system. The real life-like scenes presented in this Panorama, are admirably calculated to make an unfading impression upon the heart and memory” (iv).¹⁸⁹

The introduction’s sustained referencing of the panorama production, in particular, complicates the conventional structure of the slave narrative genre. Although the narrative’s compilation of appending documents appears to follow the rudimentary structure of Stepto’s “eclectic” narrative format with its letters of authentication, the intertextuality of these documents suggests that each of Box Brown’s cultural productions act as “authenticating narratives” for the other.¹⁹⁰ The 1851 *Narrative* is meant to corroborate and further contextualize his panorama exhibitions, his boxing reenactments, and vice-versa.

This imbricated interplay of cultural work which the 1851 version of Box Brown’s *Narrative* brings to fruition diverges from the content of the 1849 text most critically in its revised incorporation of performance as a strategy of renewal, transformation, and liberation for the fugitive. Performance figures early as a sign of both passive and aggressive objectification in enslavement. In this new version of the narrative, Brown describes the instance in which one of his “kinder” overseers, Henry Bedman, “was very fond of sacred music and used to ask me and some of the other slaves . . . to sing for him something ‘smart’ . . . which we were generally as well pleased to do” (21). In contrast to this coerced singing to which Brown confesses, he later renarrates “the revolting case of a coloured man, who was frequently in the habit of singing” and who is later tortured for this transgression which reportedly “consumed too much

time” according to the especially tyrannical overseer John F. Allen (24). The text problematizes the limits of performance in slavery, how it threatens to operate as a whim of the master’s will and as a catalyst for enacting power over the enslaved.

Yet die *Narrative* also allows for a significant shift and a strategic reapropriation of performance from the bonds of the slaveholder. Situated as the eighth chapter in the 1851 text, a new portion of material presents a detailed account of Brown’s involvement as “a member of the choir in the Affeviar church” in Richmond, Virginia (47). His experiences in the choir foster several transformations in Brown’s life; as a result of this activity, he develops an increasing resistance to white supremacist Christianity and an awareness of the hypocrisy of “slave-dealing christians” (48). He also gradually comes to recognize the ways in which the performance of sacred music might also enact altruistic awakenings within individuals. The chapter’s description of a choir performance in which Brown participates emerges as a crucial turning point in the text which ultimately alters the spiritual condition of choir partner J. C. A. Smith. Moreover, Brown himself professedly resolves after the Christmas choir concert of 1848 to “no longer [be] guilty of assisting those bloody dealers in the bodies of souls of men” by “singing” or “taking part in the services of a pro-slavery church” (49). The performance of sacred song here paradoxically perpetuates the regime of slavery and potentially aids in its dismantling by psychologically and emotionally freeing Brown from complicity with the system. From this incident of sacred performance, the narrative segues into Brown’s resolution to conspire with the aforementioned Smith to box himself to the free states, finally redeploing performance toward overtly liberatory ends.¹⁹¹

In yet another twist of narrative fluidity in the many “acts” of Henry Box Brown, the fugitive slave in the climax of this text is allowed full rein to emerge from the box of his escape singing, thus exiting the crate in similar fashion to the way in which he entered it. The English edition of the *Narrative* returns Box Brown’s “him [*sic*] of thanksgiving” to its originating context, on his emergence from the box in Philadelphia. Having previously been situated in the bowels of Stearns’s 1849 preface, the hymn is positioned, as Wood points out, “in its proper context” in the 1851 text, where Brown is able to “replac[e] the earlier linguistically sanitized account of his experience with his own language and cultural form” (Wood, “All Right!” 81). Stretching itself from the exuberance of Brown’s final, repetitious exclamations in hymn that “The Lord be praised,” the *Narrative* rides this legendary performative spectacle as a bridge into the pol-

iticization of Brown's performances on the lecture circuit. This act elasticizes even further in the final pages of the text, where it evolves into the original "Uncle Ned" composition which manifests the confluence of autobiography, performance, and political critique which Brown would embrace throughout his career as an abolitionist activist.

The final shift in this transmogrifying, "authenticating narrative" turns out to be his introduction of "Uncle Ned." Transforming literary labor into the labor of performance in song, Brown's second *Narrative* offers yet another surprisingly "dark" and parting gesture as this chapter of his adventures comes to a close. Even in this most joyful moment of liberation, the spectators of Box Brown's many varied acts may never fully come to terms with either the terror or the horror of slavery and the box of both entrapment and freedom. This final song functions, like so many that came before and after it, as "a veiled articulation of the extreme and paradoxical conditions of slavery."¹⁹² Brown reminds us of the visible darkness of captivity which he has both remanufactured and simultaneously obscured and eluded. The song, in this way, operates as yet another sensational trap door for Box Brown to both construct and pass through on the road to freedom.

He was called, according to Jeffrey Ruggles, the "African Prince," the "King of All Mesmerisers." The Henry Box Brown who made his way across Great Britain in the mid-1850s was apparently every bit the showman he had intimated himself to be when he first unveiled his *Mirror of Slavery* in America. From "march[ing] through the streets in front of a brass band, clad in a highly-colored and fantastic garb"¹⁹³ to pursuing a full-fledged career in mesmerism and magic, the phantasmagoric Box Brown reappeared on the transatlantic scene with several more acts up his sleeve in the latter half of the century. Ruggles is the first historian to recover the late adventures of the fugitive artist, and he has provocatively suggested the ways in which these particularly eccentric career moves on Brown's part may have pushed him to the margins of abolitionist circles which often privileged conventional methods of agitation and dissent. Simply put, in the end, Brown's brash and spectacular public acts may have indeed proved too excessive, too performative, too "glam" to register as legible acts of social and political resistance to slavery.¹⁹⁴

We may speculate as to whether Brown was, by the time he resurfaced in 1864 Wales as "the character of an African King, richly dressed, and accompanied by a footman,"¹⁹⁵ performing

for his own mischievous pleasure and profit or whether he was actively producing political protest, boldly dancing in the streets and signifying on the imminent reconstruction of black selfhood and sovereignty on the eve of the Civil War's demise. Whatever his agenda, as Ruggles contends, "he was who he made himself to be,"¹⁹⁶ and by the time he re-materialized with his wife and daughter Annie in 1875 New England, he had become the ultimate conjurer: Prof. H. Box Brown, professional magician, a master "blindfolded 'seer,'" a "sleight of hand performer," a drawing-room entertainment spiritualist of the postbellum era. Like the wily, late-twentieth-century underworld heroes of picaresque black urban narratives, like the title character of the underground blaxploitation classic *The Mack* (1973), Box Brown harnessed the "dark arts" of illusion, manipulation, and the spectacularly expedient ruse to "crossover" into his own singular realm of freedom.¹⁹⁷