



Johnson and slavery

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Johnson and Slavery

James G. Basker

DURING A SABBATICAL YEAR IN 1993–94, I noticed for the first time a strange footnote in the first edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) that piqued my interest in the question of Johnson and slavery.¹ When I discussed it with Walter Jackson Bate a few weeks later, he offered energetic encouragement, which helped decide me to pursue the subject in depth.² A few essays followed and evolved into a book-length project on which I am now working, under the title *Samuel Johnson, Abolitionist: The Story Boswell Never Told*.³ The rationale for that subtitle will become self-evident, I hope, in the course of this essay. I propose to illuminate selected moments in Johnson's lifelong opposition to slavery, particularly those that are minimized or missing altogether in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. Ultimately, I want to offer a new angle of vision on Johnson, one that does a couple of things for us as students of his life and work.

The first is to make us aware of the degree to which Boswell, who was active as a pro-slavery advocate in the abolition debates of the times, shaped and delimited our perception of Johnson on this issue. As strange as it may sound, we all need to reread Boswell's *Life* as in part a pro-slavery text, a book that at certain points subordinates Johnson's views on slavery to Boswell's own pro-slavery position. The second is to enable us to see, in an era in which it can seem that everyone supported, or at least acquiesced in, the existence of racial slavery, that an eminent white writer and pillar of the establishment like Johnson could emerge as an ardent and persistent opponent of slavery. As we reassemble and explore the evidence, it becomes remarkable that

1 I am grateful to the Master and Fellows of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, and to the English Department at Harvard for their generous support during that sabbatical year.

2 Like many Johnsonians, including those at the "Johnson at 300" Conference at Harvard's Houghton Library, where an earlier version of this paper was presented, I am forever indebted to Jack Bate for his scholarship and teaching, as well as his personal encouragement.

3 The earlier essays include: "Samuel Johnson and the African-American Reader," *The New Rambler: Journal of the Johnson Society of London* Serial DX (1995): 47–57; "'The Next Insurrection': Johnson, Race, and Rebellion," *The Age of Johnson* 11 (2000): 37–51; "Intimations of Abolitionism in 1759: Johnson, Hawkesworth, and *Oroonoko*," *The Age of Johnson* 12 (2001): 47–66; "Multicultural Perspectives: Johnson, Race, and Gender," in *Johnson Re-Visioned: Looking Before and After*, ed. Philip Smallwood (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2001), 64–79; "Johnson, Boswell, and the Abolition of Slavery," *The New Rambler: Journal of the Johnson Society of London* Serial EV (2002): 36–48.

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Johnson, who had never spent a single moment in Africa or in any of the slave-holding colonies, could nonetheless have had his life and writing touched so deeply by slavery—and yet our inherited image of him, until recently, could exhibit so few signs of that impact.

Let me start by revisiting two episodes that *are* mentioned in Boswell.

One night in 1769, Johnson went to dinner in his college in Oxford—not Pembroke, where he had begun in 1728, but University College, with which he had begun a new and vital relationship in 1761. He walked with his host, the young Vinerian Professor of Law Robert Chambers (1737–1803), from Chambers’s professorial residence at New Inn Hall, where Johnson was staying, down High Street to University College, where Chambers was a Fellow and Johnson had become by the late 1760s a regular guest. Arriving in the College dining hall, they joined the usual cohort of a dozen fellows and one or two guests. The fellows ranged in seniority from the engaging but eccentric John Coulson (1719–1788), a member of the college since 1744, to the brilliant young scholar William Scott, later Lord Stowell (1745–1836), who had been appointed a fellow just four years earlier, at the age of twenty. Dinner at High Table was presided over by the master, Johnson’s good friend Nathan Wetherell (1726–1807), who had also recently begun a four-year term as vice chancellor of Oxford University. Wearing his black academic gown, taking his seat next to the master, conversing familiarly with everyone at the table, Johnson seemed more like a fellow of the college himself than a guest. Indeed, Johnson had been spending a lot of time in the college in recent years: between 1767 and 1769 he made at least seven visits to “Univ,” as it is called by Oxonians, twice staying in residence for more than two months at a stretch.⁴ No wonder that when he was helping the son of his friend William Strahan gain admission to Univ in the 1760s, Johnson assured him of the strength of his connections: “The College is almost filled with my friends.”⁵

That evening, the conversation flowed over everything from college gossip to politics and culture, gaining energy as the wine went round, and rising to yet another level as the group moved to the Senior Common Room for more drinks and dessert.⁶ At some point, the conversation turned to recent news from the colonies: the *Gentleman’s Magazine* (June 1769) carried a report from Jamaica that the black mistress of a white merchant, catching wind “of a conspiracy among the negroes of Kingston,” had tipped off the authorities, enabling the militia to intercept “a force of 300 armed negroes”

4 Johnson visited University College twelve times between 1762 and 1770, including these seven visits in the period 1767–69: March–April 1767, May 1767, October 1767, February–April 1768, December 1768, February 1769, and May–August 1769.

5 Johnson to William Strahan, October 24, 1764, *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford, 5 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 1: 245 (hereafter cited as *Letters of Samuel Johnson*).

6 The Senior Common Room Johnson knew is today called the “Winter Common Room,” where there still hangs (as of July 2009) an engraving of Johnson donated and signed by William Scott in 1785.

whose aim had been to set fire to the city, kill all the whites, and spread rebellion across the whole of the island. The hair-raising tale ended happily, at least from one point of view: the plot had been prevented, and the leaders executed.⁷ But mention of this story prompted others, and there was considerable back-and-forth about various uprisings and plots and bloody reprisals in the news during the past year: in Senegal and Gambia on the African coast (July 1769), in Montserrat (June 1768) and Dutch Guiana (March 1769) in the Caribbean, and even Boston, Massachusetts (October 1769) and Alexandria, Virginia (March 1768) on the North American mainland. Someone remembered a detail of the Virginia insurrection, as reported in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, that the negro rebels had “been executed, their heads cut off, and fixed on the chimnies of the court house [in Alexandria].”⁸ Someone else opined that however barbaric and brutal slavery was overseas, the institution was also corrupting public morality in England itself, citing a story from a few months earlier about a gentleman who came to England and, short of money, sold his seventeen-year-old female slave (described in the press as “a very agreeable negro girl”) for thirty guineas.⁹

This grim discussion was interrupted by Master Wetherell, who called the assemblage to order and raised his glass. Around the room, fellow by fellow, one witty and clever toast followed another, laughter and cheers broke out, and the atmosphere became playful and tipsy, as it normally was on these evenings.¹⁰ At last came Johnson's turn. He rose and, seemingly intent on puncturing the lighthearted mood, thundered out “Here's to the *next* insurrection of the negroes in the West Indies.” After a moment's silence, several in the room responded with a low-voiced “hear, hear.” Conversation resumed, but the evening was winding down and soon ended. Johnson and Chambers took their leave and walked back to New Inn Hall where Frank Barber, a former slave from Jamaica, and now Johnson's beloved servant and surrogate son, helped Johnson prepare for bed. Before going to sleep that night, Johnson and Frank, as was their practice, knelt and prayed together. Perhaps that evening, thinking of Frank and the horrors of Jamaica he had escaped as a child, Johnson prayed with even more fervor than usual.

Students of Johnson and Boswell will recognize that in my rendering of this episode, I have fleshed it out with details—most of them historically accurate, all of them plausible—that dramatize the difference between it and Boswell's version in the

7 *Gentleman's Magazine* 39 (June 1769): 317–318.

8 *Ibid.*, 38 (March 1768): 141.

9 *Ibid.*, 38 (December 1768): 585.

10 For an example of the banter and wit that is known to have characterized a late-night common room drinking session that Johnson was involved in at Cambridge in 1765, see Basker, “Dictionary Johnson Amidst the Dons of Sidney: A Chapter in Eighteenth-Century Cambridge History,” *Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge: Historical Essays in Commemoration of the Quatercentenary*, ed. D. E. D. Beales and H. B. Nisbet (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1996), 134–138.

Life, which consists of a single sentence. Boswell writes: “Upon one occasion, when in company with some very grave men at Oxford, his toast was, ‘Here’s to the next insurrection of the Negroes in the West Indies.’”¹¹ How little Boswell tells us, and how much he might have, if he had investigated and elaborated this intriguing episode with the same thoroughness he usually displayed. Surely he could tell us his source for the story, probably someone who was there? And from that source did he not learn—or did he decide to withhold from his readers?—the name of the college where it took place, the year, the names of others who were present, how they reacted, what else was said, *any* of the other circumstances? Including, for example, how often Johnson had publicly condoned violence by slaves against their masters, from the *Life of Drake* in 1740–1741 to *Taxation No Tyranny* (1775) thirty five years later? Or the fact that slave insurrections were so common in the eighteenth century that in the three dozen years from 1737 to 1773, the *Gentleman’s Magazine* carried fifty-two articles covering forty-three different slave insurrections, insurrections that occurred from the African coast across the Atlantic to the Caribbean, and up and down the Americas? No one in the room, no literate person anywhere, could have been unaware or indifferent to the frequency and bloodiness of slave insurrections.¹² Moreover, in later years Boswell surely knew that Johnson’s Oxford friends Wetherell, Coulson, Scott, and several others were alive and available for questioning throughout the time he was drafting and revising the *Life of Johnson* and, had he wished, he could have gathered every detail of the story behind Johnson’s anti-slavery toast from them.

Or is it possible that Boswell forewent all these avenues because he had no interest in elaborating the scene or explaining Johnson’s toast, preferring instead to present it as an outrageous outburst by a character he was shaping in his narrative: Johnson the volatile contrarian, Johnson the conversational performer? Why else would Boswell add the quasi-comical detail, that Johnson’s audience that night were some “very grave men of Oxford,” when in fact the college fellows were mostly energetic young men in their twenties and more prone to uproarious, drunken behavior, than gravity? If we look at the preceding sentence, we notice that Johnson’s anti-slavery toast is actually presented as an illustrative proof of Boswell’s main contention, that Johnson had always been “very zealous against slavery” but that his was a “zeal without knowledge.”¹³ If we zoom back a bit further, we begin to see that Boswell has embedded Johnson’s slave insurrection toast within a fuller account of another slavery-related story, which, as it turns out, is the second episode I want to discuss.

11 Boswell’s *Life of Johnson, Together with Boswell’s Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides and Johnson’s Diary of a Journal into North Wales*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934–1950, rev. 1971), 3:200. All further citations are to this edition of *Boswell’s Life* unless otherwise noted.

12 For details, see Basker, “‘The Next Insurrection’: Johnson, Race, and Rebellion,” 39–43.

13 *Boswell’s Life*, 3:200.

For this one, Boswell does give us a specific setting and date: Ashbourne, September 23, 1777. Boswell had joined Johnson on a two-week visit to his friend John Taylor's house in Ashbourne and he writes about that visit in the *Life* in considerable detail. On his final night with Johnson, which fell on September 23, Boswell got Johnson to dictate a memo about a court case in Scotland that he wanted to carry back with him to Edinburgh the next day. This case had been going on for three years, involved a large cast of characters connected with Johnson, and was of profound historic significance in settling once and for all the legal status of racial slavery in Scotland. But one gets none of that from Boswell. Instead, even as he begins to tell a story that might *dramatize* Johnson's anti-slavery activism, Boswell contrives to minimize and obscure it. Boswell's pervasive narrative control deserves closer examination.

The first detail to notice is that up until this point in the *Life*, page 174 of the second volume, two-thirds of the way through the biography, with Johnson entering his sixty-ninth year, no mention has been made whatsoever of slavery or of Johnson's views on the subject; nor have the words "slave" or "slavery" been allowed to appear anywhere in the text. Even when introducing Francis Barber hundreds of pages earlier (1: 128, 130), Boswell had avoided using the words "slavery" or "slave" at all, preferring instead the more euphemistic term "servant."¹⁴ (We will turn to Francis Barber's story in a minute.) At this moment in 1777, Johnson is sixty-eight years old, and he is about to dictate a memorandum for a court case that would decide whether a Jamaican slave now living in Scotland was entitled to his freedom. It is here, in a single paragraph of eight sentences, that Boswell first introduces the topic of slavery into the *Life of Johnson*:

After supper I accompanied him to his apartment, and at my request he dictated to me an argument in favour of the negro who was then claiming his liberty, in an action in the Court of Session in Scotland. He had always been very zealous against slavery in every form, in which I with all deference thought that he discovered 'a zeal without knowledge.' Upon one occasion, when in company with some very grave men at Oxford, his toast was, "Here's to the next insurrection of the negroes in the West-Indies." His violent prejudice against our West-Indian and American settlers appeared whenever there was an opportunity. Towards the conclusion of his 'Taxation no Tyranny,' he says, "how is it that we hear the loudest *yelps* for liberty among the drivers of negroes?" and in his conversation with Mr. Wilkes, he asked, "Where did Beckford and Trecothick learn English?" That Trecothick could speak and write good English is well known. I myself was favoured with his correspondence concerning the brave Corsicans. And that Beckford could speak it with a spirit of honest

14 All volume and page references in this paragraph are to the first edition: James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, 2 vols. (London: Charles Dilly, 1791).

resolution even to his Majesty, as his 'faithful Lord-Mayor of London,' is commemorated by the noble monument erected to him in Guildhall.¹⁵

The compression and sequencing are masterful, and Boswell's rhetorical skill here accomplishes a great deal.

The first sentence, for example, reduces a major saga into a few words that tell us almost nothing. The unidentified "negro" is Joseph Knight, whose character and behavior reveal him as an extraordinarily heroic, if forgotten, man. Joseph had fallen in love with a white servant girl, Ann Thomson; she had become pregnant; their master John Wedderburn fired her; Joseph asked for wages or permission to work off the estate so he could support her and the baby; the master denied every request; Joseph ran away but was apprehended and returned; meanwhile, the baby was born but died ten days later; Joseph managed to sneak away to Perth and file a petition for his freedom in the Sheriff's Court which, after two denials, was granted on the third try; he rejoined Ann in Edinburgh, where they married and soon had another baby; meanwhile Wedderburn the master appealed the sheriff's decision all the way to the Court of Session in Edinburgh, where the lawyer John Maclaurin, a friend of both Boswell and Johnson, represented Joseph *gratis* for more than three years.¹⁶ Even this summary is barebones. The larger tapestry of Joseph Knight's story has bits of everything: the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, the ordeal of the middle passage, gothic scenes in Scottish castles and Caribbean plantations, interracial love, illegitimate children, a treacherous master, a kindly priest, escape and recapture, a tense courtroom drama, a thrilling outcome. There were fifteen eminent justices hearing the case, five of them friends or acquaintances of Johnson's, as were several of the lawyers involved. The case had monumental legal significance for Scotland and, potentially, for much of the English-speaking world. Yet none of this gets a whisper or a wink from Boswell: he terms it merely "an action in the Court of Session."

The cryptic opening sentence is in any case immediately subsumed by the second: "He had always been very zealous against slavery in every form, in which I with all deference thought that he discovered 'a zeal without knowledge.'" This is Boswell's thesis sentence for the paragraph, the logic of which retroactively transforms Johnson's dictation of a memo "in favour of the negro" into just the first of several instances that prove Johnson's zealous ignorance about the subject of slavery. Boswell offers four more instances in the next three sentences: Johnson's toast "to the next insurrection of the negroes," his "violent prejudice" against white West-Indians and Americans, his anti-American complaints about hearing "the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes," and his dismissive comments to John Wilkes, who Boswell forgets to mention was also an opponent of slavery, about the poor English spoken by men

15 Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 2:174.

16 See Basker, "Johnson, Boswell, and the Abolition of Slavery," 42–46.

from slave-holding colonies such as William Beckford (who was from such a colony) and Barlow Trecothick (who was not).

All these Boswell presents as pretty obvious proof that on the subject of slavery Johnson was irrational and uninformed. Boswell laces the section with language that subliminally reinforces the sense of Johnson as slightly unhinged: “zealous” and “zeal without knowledge” were terms reserved in the eighteenth century for the lunatic fringe, and “insurrections,” “violent prejudice” and “yelps” only compound the sense of lunacy. By the sixth sentence of the paragraph, the topic of slavery has vanished, as if Johnson’s irrationality on the subject was so firmly proven, really to the point of embarrassment, that Boswell could readily change the subject. He rounds things off with some fulsome compliments to Beckford, shamelessly invoking even the king for support, while slyly allowing the topic of slavery to disappear completely.

As if he had not done enough in that paragraph to undermine and discredit Johnson’s opposition to slavery, Boswell took a further step. Instead of printing the text of Johnson’s “argument in favor of the negro,” Boswell here in the first edition of the *Life* acknowledged its absence and inserted an apologetic footnote: “This being laid up somewhere amidst my multiplicity of papers at Auchinleck, has escaped my search for this work; but, when found, I shall take care that my readers shall have it.”¹⁷ This is the strange and arresting footnote that I mentioned in the beginning. Boswell’s faltering grammar (“but, when found, I shall . . .”) suggests that indeed it is he, as much as the document, that is a bit lost. As I have argued elsewhere, it seems clear that Boswell deliberately left it out. He omitted—or at least conveniently misplaced—the document that contains the most trenchant and forceful argument Johnson ever wrote against slavery, one that helped to win a high court case, gain a slave his freedom, and end forever the institution of slavery in Scotland.¹⁸

The evidence is circumstantial but, I think, persuasive. This is the only place in the entire *Life* where Boswell says that he has a Johnson document but cannot print it because it is lost in his files. Moreover, Boswell had ample opportunity over the years he was drafting and revising the *Life* to go find the Knight document, or send someone to dig it out, or even to obtain the text from others such as his close friend John Maclaurin, who represented Joseph Knight in court throughout the trial and had his own copy of it. Though Boswell’s correspondence shows him in the final months of preparation scurrying around to gather and include new materials, and to check or correct other passages in his magnum opus, there is no evidence he made any effort to recover the Knight brief by any of these means. Meanwhile, in the very months he was proofing the sheets of the *Life*, Boswell had also been writing and arranging to publish his own pamphlet in *defense* of the slave trade, the embarrassing twenty-four-page

17 Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 2:174.

18 Basker, “Johnson, Boswell, and the Abolition of Slavery,” 42–48.

poetic harangue entitled *No Abolition of Slavery*.¹⁹ He timed its publication carefully to influence the long-awaited Parliamentary debate over Wilberforce's abolition bill which had been grinding through Parliament for two years. "I am thinking to curtail my poem on the Slave Trade," he wrote to his friend William Temple on April 2, 1791, "and throw it into the world just before the great question comes on next Wednesday."²⁰ With tactical precision, Boswell's anti-abolition pamphlet was published on April 16, two days before debate on the abolition bill began in Parliament on April 18.²¹

The complexities of that debate and its outcome are beyond the scope of this essay, but a couple of details are noteworthy. First, one of Boswell's earliest and most avid readers was William Wilberforce, who took up the *Life* as soon as it came out in May 1791, reading it every morning over breakfast and becoming so engrossed on some mornings that he was almost late to Parliament during the critical summer of 1791.²² As a result of Boswell's omission, Wilberforce did not, *could* not, read the arguments against slavery that Johnson had expounded successfully in the Joseph Knight case in 1777. Who now can say what Wilberforce and his allies might have accomplished in 1791 if they had been able to enlist Johnson's arguments, his voice and reputation, in their efforts? Who can say if it might in any way have altered or mitigated the outcome of the parliamentary debate, which saw Wilberforce's abolition bill shelved in 1791, then compromised and effectively defeated in 1792, delaying for more than fifteen years the abolition of the slave trade, until January 1, 1808?²³ Who can say whether what we in our literary studies see as textual issues of composition and interpretation, might actually

19 [James Boswell], *No Abolition of Slavery; Or the Universal Empire of Love* (London: Printed for R. Faulder, 1791). Boswell privately distributed copies to his friends and acknowledged his authorship publicly in a biographical sketch of himself that he placed (anonymously) in the *European Magazine and London Review* 19 (May and June 1791): 407. According to a note in the Boswell manuscripts at Yale, his friend John Courtenay contributed six lines to the poem; see Basker, *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems About Slavery 1660–1810* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 239 and note.

20 Boswell to the Reverend William Temple, April 2, 1791, *Letters of James Boswell*, ed. Chauncey Brewster Tinker, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 2: 433.

21 *The Correspondence of James Boswell with Certain Members of the Club*, ed. Charles N. Fifer (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), Appendix 1, 418, notes 1 and 2.

22 See John Pollock, *Wilberforce* (London: Constable, 1977), 43.

23 Historians have estimated that when Wilberforce first introduced his abolition bill in 1789, only about thirty-five MPs were committed to abolishing slavery, and the same number to preserving it at all costs, leaving roughly 488 of the 558 members of Parliament yet to be decided and presumably open to persuasion. See William Hague, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (London: Harcourt, 2007), 169–170, 197–198, and 259–260. Over the years 1791 to 1796 Wilberforce would repeatedly introduce abolition bills and repeatedly lose, by as much as 163–88 in one vote and as little as 74–70 in another.

have had some real impact in the world, might have contributed in some small way to political decisions and events that affected the lives of millions of people?

One person who did regard Johnson's anti-slavery legal brief as potentially influential, and therefore dangerous, was Boswell himself, as we can see from the way he treated the text when he finally published it. Having allowed the second printing of the *Life* to go forward without it in 1793, Boswell included it instead in the "Addenda" that were printed afterwards and then inserted as part of the prefatory material. Even with Johnson's text buried in the "Addenda" to the second edition, which were probably passed over and ignored by the vast majority of readers, Boswell could not resist including his own rebuttal to Johnson's attack on slavery that is almost as long as the original itself—fifty lines of his text, to Johnson's sixty one.²⁴ Boswell could not let it rest. It was only after Boswell's death, with Malone's carefully revised third edition of the *Life* in 1799, that ordinary readers could find and read within the text of the *Life* itself Johnson's long-suppressed anti-slavery legal brief.²⁵

Having urged the need for us to be a bit more skeptical in reading Boswell on the slavery question, I would like now to set Boswell aside, to focus on some moments in Johnson's life itself. Johnson expressed his antipathy to slavery several times between his arrival in London in 1738 and his completion of the *Rambler* in 1752: in his *Life of Drake* (1740–1741), the *Life of Savage* (1744), some lines in the first draft of *Vanity of Human Wishes* which were later deleted (c. 1748–1749), his editorial revisions of William Dodd's poem "The African Prince" (1749) for the *Gentleman's Magazine*, perhaps even in the editorial work of selecting and submitting to the *Gentleman's Magazine* occasional news stories about slave rebellions picked up from newspapers and other sources.²⁶ Johnson's attitude and beliefs were evident from early on, but his sense of slavery changed profoundly in the spring of 1752, when Francis Barber entered his life. From that day, slavery as an idea gave way to the tangible reality of one of its

24 James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D.*, [2nd ed.] 2 vols. (London: Charles Dilly, 1793), 1:ix [misprint for xiv]–xviii.

25 See *Boswell's Life*, 3:201–205. In a later section of the *Life*, Boswell had also written a short report on the outcome of the case, which was a vote of 10–4 in favor of Knight and the end of slavery in Scotland. But his account is convoluted and slanted against Knight, and ends bizarrely with a reaffirmation of the legal and historical justifications for slavery as a legitimate institution, "which," writes Boswell, "has been acknowledged in all ages and countries, and that when freedom flourished, as in old Greece and Rome." See *Boswell's Life*, 3:212–214.

26 Basker, "Johnson, Boswell, and the Abolition of Slavery," 37–44. No serious study has yet been done of the articles in the *Gentleman's Magazine* that deal with slavery, yet such material permeates the magazine, appearing several times a year throughout the eighteenth century.

victims standing in front of him, a little black child from Jamaica who would be part of his family for the next thirty-two years.

The basic elements of Francis Barber's story were first laid out by Aleyn Lyell Reade in his *Johnsonian Gleanings* in 1912 and then augmented and retold in various accounts, including Lyle Larsen's *Dr. Johnson's Household* (1985) and Gretchen Gerzina's *Black London: Life Before Emancipation* (1995).²⁷ But the inclination to ignore Barber and his place in Johnson's life, or to efface him altogether, persisted as well. In the 1950s, the same decade in which Ralph Ellison's revolutionary novel *Invisible Man* appeared, the eminent Johnsonian Bertrand Bronson published a one-volume collection of Johnson's works in which he included a two-page chronology of Johnson's life and writings, and an original eight-page introductory essay on Johnson. In neither the chronology nor the introduction is Francis Barber even mentioned, and because this volume, twice revised, remained a staple of college course book sales through the 1960s and 1970s, many thousands of college graduates would be forgiven for not knowing that Francis Barber even existed, or that a black man figured centrally in Johnson's consciousness for more than thirty years.²⁸ For a time, Francis was in danger of becoming the invisible man in Johnson's life. There still remains a great deal to do before we recover a full sense of Francis Barber the person and his relationship with Johnson, a gap that fiction writers and playwrights have discerned and attempted to remedy, with varying degrees of success.²⁹ I want to focus here on questions arising from three periods in Frank's life, for which we might begin to formulate new and more satisfactory answers than we have had so far.

The first concern his childhood and his former life in Jamaica, and they touch on the most fundamental questions about any person's life: What are his origins? Who were his parents? Why was he brought to England in the first place? Hawkins, Boswell, and the other early biographers, and Francis himself, in some carefully worded statements he made to Boswell a few years after Johnson's death, give the basic account. He came with Colonel Richard Bathurst, father of Johnson's close friend the physician Richard Bathurst, from Jamaica to England as a young boy aged seven or eight at the end of 1749, arriving in England in early 1750. Colonel Bathurst took Francis to Lincoln, where

27 Aleyn Lyell Reade, "Francis Barber: The Doctor's Servant," *Johnsonian Gleanings*, Part 2 (1912, repr. New York: Octagon, 1968); Lyle Larsen, *Dr. Johnson's Household* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1985); Gretchen Gerzina, *Black London: Life Before Emancipation* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995).

28 Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas, Poems & Selected Prose*, ed. Bertrand H. Bronson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958), vii–xiv and xvii–xviii. The same holds true of the revised editions of 1966 and 1971.

29 See, for example, John Wain, *Frank* (Oxford: Amber Lane Press, 1984); Darryl Pinckney, *High Cotton* (New York: Penguin, 1992); Dave Randle, *A Troublesome Disorder* (New Romney: Bank House Books, 2002); and Caryl Phillips, *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

the Bathurst family had roots and Bathurst's son Richard was practicing medicine. Bathurst immediately placed Francis in a boarding school about thirty miles away in south Yorkshire, where he remained for most of two years. During this period Colonel Bathurst also inserted a clause in his will by which Francis would be freed upon his death. In 1752, just as Johnson suffered the death of his beloved Tetty, the Bathursts brought Francis to Johnson and, apparently moved by a mixture of concern for the grieving Johnson and solicitude for Francis's future, placed him in Johnson's custody forever.³⁰

No one seems ever to have asked the most important though potentially embarrassing question: Why would Bathurst have brought Francis to England in the first place? The traditional account suggests he brought him as a servant. But a seven-year-old child is more of a dependent than a servant, and one does not bring a servant on a long and expensive transoceanic voyage only to place him in boarding school for two years. In the eighteenth century, colonial plantation owners brought individual slaves with them to Europe for various reasons: certainly they brought their favorite servants, their valets, their cooks, their children's nannies, their mistresses, sometimes even their elderly loyal retainers to be rewarded with emancipation, or an easier life. But Francis did not fit any of these categories. Besides, records show that in 1749 Colonel Bathurst had almost 150 slaves of all ages on his estate, the Orange River Plantation, on the north central coast of Jamaica.³¹ Why take little Francis instead of any of them? In the post-Sally Hemings era of slavery studies, another answer suggests itself: Francis was very likely Colonel Bathurst's blood relative—his nephew, or grandson, or, most probably, his own son. Only a DNA test that links descendants of Bathurst and Barber will ever prove this for sure, but it is the answer that would explain so many of the pieces: the selection of one little boy to be salvaged from hundreds of slaves on a bankrupt plantation, which Bathurst had to sell in August 1749, the trouble taken to transport Francis to England and to educate him privately, the codicil in Bathurst's will to free him, even the care to place him with a guardian like Johnson who hated slavery and would protect him from ever being subjected to it again.

If Johnson guessed or knew this family secret, it would explain much more: Johnson's devotion to Frank, his generosity (some called it folly) in paying for Frank's education, his patience and forgiveness as Frank acted out his adolescence by repeatedly running away, his solicitude for Frank and his white wife and their children,

30 See *The Correspondence and Other Papers of James Boswell Relating to the Making of the Life of Johnson*, ed. Marshall Waingrow, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 127, and Sir John Hawkins, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. O M Brack Jr. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 197–198.

31 Larsen, *Dr. Johnson's Household*, 25 and notes 7–9. Larsen's research raises the possibility that Francis's name before coming to England was Quashey, and that his mother may have been a slave woman named Grace, if his inferences from various Jamaican records are correct.

his passionate concern about Frank's religious education, his largess in bequeathing to Frank and his family the bulk of his estate when he died. A transfer of affection from his close friend Richard Bathurst to Frank would have intensified the attachment. In the years after Bathurst died, Johnson, according to those who knew him best, "hardly ever spoke of him without tears in his eyes."³² Mrs. Piozzi quoted Johnson as calling him "my dear dear Bathurst, whom I loved better than ever I loved any human creature."³³ One of the reasons Johnson loved him is that Bathurst hated slavery too. According to Langton, Johnson remembered with "warm approbation" Bathurst saying "he was glad that his father . . . had left his affairs in total ruin, because having no estate, he was not under the temptation of having slaves."³⁴

When little Francis came into Johnson's life in April 1752, he was not only the personification of the neglected and pitiable "negro child" that poets would make into a staple of sentimental literature in the second half of the eighteenth century. He was also, for Johnson, something of a surrogate for the child he and Tetty never had in their eighteen years of marriage, *and* the little brother or cousin of his dearest friend Richard Bathurst, bereft of family and entrusted to him for protection. Francis Barber embodied moral and familial obligation, supercharged with the emotions of loyalty, grief, love and pity—an overwhelmingly powerful combination for anyone, and especially for Johnson.

The next period of particular interest is Frank's adolescence, with the added strains it put on his relationship with Johnson and what has so long been overlooked, its connection with Johnson's writing. Modern scholarship has established that Frank ran away from home in the fall of 1756 and probably did not return to live in Johnson's house fulltime until August of 1760, though in the interim there were intervals of reconnection and warm relations.

The story falls into two segments, because Frank effectively ran away twice. The first time was in September 1756 when Frank, aged fourteen, full of the restlessness of apprentice-age boys, and upset over what in later life he described as "some difference" with Johnson, ran away without a trace. Johnson was understandably distressed. "My boy is run away," he wrote to his friend Lewis Paul in late September 1756.³⁵ Four months passed and Johnson had no idea where Frank was until in early 1757 he heard that Frank had been seen in Wapping, a waterfront area of London. Tellingly, Johnson's response was kindness, not anger. Rather than write him off or play the stern parent ("he'll be back when he realizes how good he had it"), Johnson placed this gently encouraging notice in the *Daily Advertiser* for February 14, 1757:

32 *Boswell's Life* 1:190, note 2.

33 *Ibid.*

34 *Ibid.*, 4:28.

35 Johnson to Lewis Paul, Autumn [September] 1756, *Letters of Samuel Johnson*, 1:145.

Whereas Francis Barber, a black Boy, has been for some Months absent from his Master, and has been said to have lived lately in Wapping, or near it: This is to give him Notice, that if he will come to his Master, or apply to any of his Master's friends, he will be kindly received.³⁶

Johnson was keen to bring Frank home again and, though he may have been mistaken about the Wapping location, his tactics seem to have succeeded. He and Frank were soon reconnected. As Frank himself reported to Boswell many years later, during his time away he had begun an apprenticeship with “a Mr. Farren Apothecary in Cheapside for about two years during which time he called some times on his Master [i.e., Johnson] and was well received.”³⁷

Relations between Johnson and Frank were much improved, and Frank told Boswell that soon he “was to return to” Johnson’s service. At the last moment, Frank changed his mind. Instead, as Boswell reports Frank’s explanation, “having an inclination to go to sea, he went accordingly.” Here begins the second segment of Frank’s time away, and a series of events that upset Johnson even more than the first time around. Frank disappeared and, unbeknownst to Johnson, joined the navy during the first week of June 1758. Johnson was distraught. For a long while he heard nothing. When he eventually learned that Frank had not been killed or kidnapped, but had enlisted in the navy, he was still so concerned that he appealed to a variety of people to help get Frank discharged, including his rival and sometime enemy Tobias Smollett, who had connections at the Admiralty Office. Responding to Johnson’s pleas, Smollett wrote more than once to his contacts, including, on March 16, 1759, to John Wilkes. Although it would turn out otherwise, Smollett assumed, probably based on what Johnson told him, that Frank had been pressed into the navy. “I am again your Petitioner in behalf of that great Cham of Literature, Samuel Johnson,” wrote Smollett. “His Black Servant, whose name is Francis Barber, has been pressed on board the Stag Frigate, Capt. Angel, and our Lexicographer is in great Distress.”³⁸ Johnson’s efforts continued for almost two years, with letters and appeals, until finally he succeeded in the summer of 1760, when Frank was discharged from the navy on August 8, after two years and two months of military service.

Looming in the background of both these episodes was the shadow of slavery. As Johnson knew, there were many things that could happen to a young black man in the streets of London in the 1750s—including at least one kind of danger that did not apply to white boys, that of being kidnapped or press-ganged, taken abroad, and sold as a slave.

36 Printed in Betty Rizzo, “The Elopement of Francis Barber,” *English Language Notes* 23, no. 1 (1985):

36. As Professor Rizzo notes, Johnson’s ad ran a second time on February 15.

37 *Correspondence of Boswell Relating to the Making of the Life*, 127.

38 Smollett to Wilkes, March 16, 1759, *The Letters of Tobias Smollett*, ed. Lewis M. Knapp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 75.

At a time when slavery was legal everywhere in the English-speaking world (indeed, almost all the world), slaves had no civil rights and free blacks could scarcely count on the protection of the law either, whether in London or aboard a ship in the Royal Navy. In the 1760s, it would be a ruthless kidnapping that left a badly beaten fugitive slave to die in the streets that moved Granville Sharp to take up the cause, pursuing legal action on the slave's behalf that eventually resulted in the Somerset decision of 1772, which recognized limited rights of black slaves upon arrival in England and marked a turning point in the emerging fight against slavery.³⁹ Had Frank been kidnapped or beaten or sold abroad between 1758 and 1760, it might well have been Samuel Johnson rather than Granville Sharp who first pursued the legal protections for black people in England. It was this danger that Olaudah Equiano narrowly avoided for himself and witnessed others experiencing on several occasions in the 1760s and 1770s, aboard both commercial and naval ships, when free blacks were kidnapped and, beyond the reach of the law, sold into slavery.⁴⁰ It also was this danger, along with the ordinary peril of serving aboard a naval ship during wartime, that moved Johnson to persevere with parental intensity in getting Frank discharged from the navy, even if Frank didn't wish it.

What we have never done is to connect Johnson's experiences raising Frank with his life as a writer. It is exactly during this period 1756 to 1760 that the topic of slavery surfaces most frequently in his writings, often in brief eruptions that suggest anger welling up from within. Thus in 1756, in the first issue of the *Literary Magazine*, amidst a long critique of European colonialism and the Seven Years' War, Johnson interjects his memorable denunciation of Jamaica as "a place of great wealth and dreadful wickedness, a den of tyrants and a dungeon of slaves."⁴¹ The same year, in what one would expect to be a routine preface he was hired to write for Richard Rolt's *A New Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*, we find Johnson suddenly flaring up and citing "the Traffick for Negroes" as the supreme example in all the world of a trade that, rather than being outlawed by statute, is "unlawful in itself."⁴²

A couple of years later, when asked to write the introduction to a collection of voyages and discovery narratives called *The World Displayed*, Johnson devoted his thirty-page essay to a denunciation of the Portuguese conquest of Africa and especially of their development of the slave trade. Again, Johnson seems at times to boil over with

39 See Gerzina, *Black London*, 1–2.

40 Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin, 1995), 96–98 and 158–160.

41 "An Introduction to the Political State of Great Britain," *The Literary Magazine, or Universal Review*, 1 ([15 May], 1756): 4.

42 Preface to Richard Rolt, *A New Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* (London, 1756), quoted here from *Miscellaneous and Fugitive Pieces*, compiled and published by Thomas Davies, 3 vols. (London: Printed for T. Davies, 1774), 3:270.

personal anger about the subject. In one section, he becomes particularly incensed that the Portuguese seemed to regard the Africans as not even human. Though Johnson is discussing a period 200 years before the British involvement began, he contrives to connect this evil attitude of fifteenth-century Portuguese marauders with British slave owners of his own day. The Portuguese had no scruples about the cruel way they treated the Africans, he writes, “because they scarcely considered them as distinct from beasts; and indeed the practice of *all* the European nations, among others of the *English* barbarians that cultivate the southern islands of America proves, that this opinion, however absurd and foolish, however wicked and injurious, still continues to prevail.”⁴³

Throughout the essay, history fuels impassioned editorial comment as Johnson denounces European cruelty, treachery, and immorality toward the Africans, as part of a larger pattern of European imperialism: “The Europeans,” Johnson concludes, “have scarcely visited any coast, but to gratify avarice, and extend corruption; to arrogate dominion without right, and practice cruelty without incentive.” What does it say about our understanding of Johnson, that in the 225 years since his death, this thirty-page exposition of the origins of the slave trade has never appeared in any collected edition of Johnson’s works? One hopes that the editors of the definitive Yale Edition of the Works of Johnson, begun in 1958 and still underway today, will decide to include it in a future volume.

A few months after the *World Displayed* appeared in mid-1759, slavery and racial issues surfaced in three different *Idler* essays. In the first, no. 81 (November 3, 1759), Johnson uses the monologue of a fictionalized American Indian to condemn the European conquest of America, in the course of which he inserts a protest against the slave trade: “When the sword and the mines have destroyed the natives, they [the Europeans] supply their place by human beings of another colour, brought from some distant country to perish here under toil and torture.”⁴⁴ The following week, and surely not by chance, Johnson’s friend Joshua Reynolds devoted part of his guest essay in *Idler* 82 to a discussion of how black people are as beautiful as whites because the aesthetics of human attraction are essentially subjective.⁴⁵ It seems likely that Reynolds, who would in the late 1780s support the abolitionist movement and who would paint more than one portrait of a black man during his career, shared Johnson’s views and was prompted

43 “Introduction” to the *World Displayed*, printed in Alfred Hazen, ed., *Samuel Johnson’s Prefaces and Dedications* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), 227.

44 Samuel Johnson, *Idler* 81 (November 3, 1759), in *The Idler and The Adventurer*, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. John M. Bullitt, W. J. Bate, and L. F. Powell, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 253.

45 *Idler* 82 (November 10, 1759), in *The Idler and The Adventurer*, 257, where Reynolds says: “It is custom alone determines our preference of the colour of the Europeans to the Aethiopians, and they, for the same reason, prefer their own colour to ours.”

to write on this topic by Johnson's essay the week before, reinforcing Johnson's effort to show Native Americans and Africans as fully human and equal to Europeans.⁴⁶

A month later, in an otherwise lighthearted *Idler* essay, the ugliness of slavery again pushes into Johnson's writing. Noting that earlier in history Europeans might never have believed in the existence of Africans "had only a single traveler related that many nations of the earth were black," Johnson concludes sardonically that by the mid-eighteenth century, thanks to the slave trade, such ignorance or denial is no longer possible because "of black men the numbers are too great who are now repining under English cruelty."⁴⁷ That same December, in reviewing John Hawkesworth's adaptation of Southerne's *Oroonoko* for the *Critical Review*, Johnson focused his six-page article on the most pointedly anti-slavery scenes and speeches that Hawkesworth had added to the play.⁴⁸ As Johnson produced these writings in 1759, Frank was somewhere at sea, his fate unknown, while Johnson fretted and wrote letters and pleaded with officials to find him and get him released from the navy. I suggest that we cannot continue to ignore the connections between Johnson's anxieties about Frank and the anti-slavery, anti-racism content of his writings during the same period.

There was one other major Johnson text of 1759 that, like Hawkesworth's *Oroonoko*, took as its hero an African prince: I refer of course to *Rasselas*. Written as his mother lay dying and he faced a life crisis, this powerful novella has been subjected to many kinds of psychological and biographical interpretation over the years. Imlac has been seen as representing Johnson himself, Imlac's foibles and utterances as Johnson's own, the mummies in the Egyptian catacombs as Johnson confronting his mother's imminent death, and so forth. Perhaps we can now add another biographical gloss. Are there not parallels between the young black man Rasselas, blessed with every protection and comfort, advised by his philosopher mentor to shun the dangers of the world and content himself with the safe domestic life he enjoys, nonetheless insisting on plunging

46 One of Reynolds's paintings, of a young black man, was long thought to be a portrait of Francis Barber himself, but scholars have recently questioned that attribution; see Michael Bundock, "From Slave to Heir: The Strange Journey of Francis Barber," *The New Rambler: Journal of the Johnson Society of London* Serial E VII (2003–2004): 23. Reynolds was one of six men who joined a dinner at Bennet Langton's London house in May 1787 to organize a legislative campaign against the slave trade and enlist Wilberforce to lead it. See Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1808), 1:219–220 and 253.

47 *Idler* 87 (December 15, 1759), in *The Idler and The Adventurer*, 270.

48 *Critical Review* 7 (December 1759), 480–486. For details, see Basker, "Intimations of Abolitionism," 47–66.

out into the world to find himself, explore the world in all its variety, and necessarily subject himself to its difficulties and disasters, on the one hand, and, on the other, the young black man in Johnson's family who, despite his wise guardian's best efforts to guide and protect him, to provide education and comfort, nonetheless runs away from home to join the navy during wartime, sail the world in a battle ship, and drive his poor protector to distraction? Could young Rasselas not be, at least at the outset of the novel, a projection of the restless young Francis Barber, and might that not explain why the novel lingers so long in the Happy Valley, devoting the first fourteen chapters and some thirty percent of the text, to scenes of Rasselas chafing against confinement and pondering his own restlessness, before the action really begins? Could Frank's adolescent crisis have contributed to a crisis for Johnson himself, and helped prompt one of Johnson's richest meditations on the "hunger of the imagination" and the futility of trying to satisfy it with the occupations and gratifications of this world?

Frank's naval service marked a turning point in Johnson's life. Having been stirred into action on behalf of Frank over the two years he was away, Johnson began to take a more active role on behalf of black people in various contexts. In the spring of 1760, with Frank still at sea, Johnson made his first commitment to what might be called a black cause: he became a member of Dr. Bray's Associates. Originally founded in the 1730s, Dr. Thomas Bray's Associates was a Christian charity that in 1759 began redirecting its energies to founding and supporting schools for black children, both free and enslaved, in the British colonies. The Associates were elected members who donated their own money (a minimum of one guinea annually from each member), solicited from others, organized an annual sermon and dinner in London, hired and paid for missionary teachers abroad, sent books and other materials to the schools, and generally promoted an agenda of educating and Christianizing black children wherever schools could be organized. Nominated by Dr. John Burton of Eton and unanimously elected on March 6, 1760, Johnson was initiated at the meeting of May 1, 1760—a meeting at which he met and dined with Benjamin Franklin, himself recently elected and in the midst of helping to organize schools in Pennsylvania and other American colonies. Johnson remained a member of Bray's Associates for the rest of his life, donating every year, arranging for friends to join, such as George Strahan in the 1760s and Bennet Langton in the early 1780s, and at his death leaving them a legacy of cash and the rights to proceeds from his posthumously published *Prayers and Meditations*.⁴⁹ Other Johnson friends such as James Oglethorpe and the physician William Heberden, who attended Johnson on his deathbed, were also members. Although their official statements denied any intention of stirring up dissatisfaction or disobedience among slaves, their activities inevitably aroused the suspicions and resistance of slave owners, and placed Bray's Associates,

49 For details, see Maurice J. Quinlan, "Dr. Franklin Meets Dr. Johnson," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 73 (1949): 42–43.

with their insistence that slaves were human, educable, and equal in God's eyes, in the position of proto-abolitionists in England and abroad.

Meanwhile, by the mid-1760s Johnson was allowing Frank to host gatherings of his black friends in his house, as witnessed by one startled visitor in 1765 who reported that when Frank opened the door, "a group of his African countrymen were sitting round a fire in the gloomy anti-room; and on their all turning their sooty faces at once to stare at me, they presented a curious spectacle."⁵⁰ More important than the visitor's casual racism is that at a time when in most of the British colonies gatherings of black people were suspect and forbidden by law, in London Johnson was opening his house to them. Were these gatherings purely social? Perhaps they had educational purposes? Were they organized to pursue literary or political discussion? Religious study? Literacy practice?

We may never know, but some light may be shed by the next of Johnson's decisive actions. In 1767, Johnson paid for Frank to enroll in a boarding school in Bishop's Stortford, where he was to continue studying for five years, until early 1772, at a total expense to Johnson of some 300 pounds. Despite the criticisms of Anna Williams and Sir John Hawkins, who saw it as a waste of money, most people have taken this, rightly, as a sign of Johnson's generosity toward Frank and faith in his ability to learn. How many men in the eighteenth century sent their servants—never mind *black* servants—to boarding school? But there is another question no one has asked. Why would Johnson send Frank away to school at the age of twenty-five and keep him there until age thirty? What purpose could attending a school that normally prepared teenage boys for university and the professions serve for Frank at his age? At this stage, we can only speculate, based on the little information we have. Perhaps in those sessions round the fire with his fellow black Londoners, Frank displayed a gift for teaching or for preaching, and Johnson thought to help Frank train for such a career? Or perhaps the model of the various overseas teachers hired by Bray's Associates to teach in the colonies inspired Johnson to envision Frank in that role? Or perhaps Johnson and Frank had been inspired by the example of Philip Quaque, a black African who had come to England from what is now Ghana in 1754, been educated and trained as a missionary, and then, with much fanfare in the press, been sent back to Cape Coast as a minister and teacher in 1766?⁵¹ Whatever the reason that nothing came of Frank's boarding school education—did he fail to measure up? have a change of heart? fall in love?—Johnson showed no signs of disappointment. Instead, he continued to support and protect him with the ardor of a parent, as all the signs suggest, from the time in 1775 he closed a letter from Paris to housemate Robert Levet with the revealing phrase

50 Rev. Baptist Noel Turner, quoted in Reade, *Johnsonian Gleanings*, Part 2:15.

51 See *The Life and Letters of Philip Quaque, the First African Anglican Missionary*, ed. Vincent Carretta and Ty M. Reese (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

“Give my love to Francis,” to the day a few years later when, to relieve their exigencies, he took Francis and his wife Elizabeth into his house to live with him.⁵²

Isolated encounters show Johnson always treating black people with respect and humanity. In 1773 on the Scottish tour with Boswell, after traveling a day guided by Lord Monboddo’s black servant Gory, Johnson was happy to see Gory getting along very amiably with Boswell’s servant Joseph from Germany. “Those two fellows,” said Johnson of the black and white servants riding together, “one from Africa, the other from Bohemia, seem quite at home.” According to Boswell: “When Gory was about to part from us, Dr. Johnson called to him, ‘Mr. Gory, give me leave to ask you a question! Are you baptized?’ Gory told him he was,—and confirmed by the Bishop of Durham.” Obviously pleased, Johnson “gave him a shilling.”⁵³ In December 1780, when Ignatius Sancho died, leaving a widow and several children without support, Johnson offered to write the prefatory biography to a volume of Sancho’s writings that was being gathered for publication by subscription, to raise funds for them. Sadly, Johnson never accomplished this task, which would have been the first biography of a black writer by a major English author in the history of literature. It was prevented only by another catastrophe, the sudden death in April of someone closer than family to him, his beloved friend and benefactor Henry Thrale.⁵⁴ Another episode from the 1770s shows how deeply Johnson empathized with and internalized the emotional suffering of those who had endured the slave trade. On March 25, 1776 he was having breakfast with Boswell at Lucy Porter’s house in Lichfield. Suddenly a letter arrived announcing the death of the Thrales’ only son, Harry, at the age of eleven. Johnson’s sense of the devastating effect on the Thrales is conveyed in the metaphor that in the emotion of the moment he blurted out: “This is a total extinction of their family,” he told Boswell, “as much as if they were sold into captivity.”⁵⁵

In the last decade of his life, Johnson attacked slavery in very public ways on at least two occasions. The first was in *Taxation No Tyranny* in 1775 which—despite its famous sound bite “How is it we hear the loudest *yelps* for liberty among the drivers of negroes?”—is more important for a proposal that Johnson endorsed elsewhere in the pamphlet: “It has been proposed,” wrote Johnson, “that the slaves be set free, an act which surely the lovers of liberty cannot but commend. If they are furnished with the

52 Letter to Robert Levet, October 22, 1775, *Letters of Samuel Johnson*, 2:273.

53 *Boswell’s Life*, 5:82–83.

54 *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African*, Vincent Carretta, ed. (New York: Penguin, 1998), Introduction, ix and 248, note 1. See also Johnson to Joshua Reynolds, April 4, 1781, *Letters of Samuel Johnson*, 3:329: “Mr. Thrale died this morning.”

55 *Boswell’s Life*, 2:468–469.

arms for defence, and utensils for husbandry, and settled in some form of government within the country, they may be more grateful and honest than their masters.”⁵⁶

Americans and their sympathizers read this as a call for slave insurrections, and were horrified and outraged. Typical is the anonymous magazine writer who attacked Johnson for inciting rebellions that would “expose these devoted men [ie, the Americans] to the brutality of their own slaves.” In July 1775, Benjamin Franklin wrote with indignation to a friend in London that Johnson’s *Taxation No Tyranny* called for American slaves to rise up and “cut their Master’s throats” and that he had heard “all the ministerial People recommended” Johnson’s pamphlet, including Lord Dunmore, Royal Governor of Virginia, who had recently “taken some Steps towards carrying one part of [Johnson’s] Project into Execution, by exciting an Insurrection among the Blacks.”⁵⁷

Even had Johnson been in a position to deny such accusations, it would have been pointless in the face of events. In November 1775 Lord Dunmore took matters a crucial step further, issuing a proclamation that offered freedom to American slaves who came over and fought on the British side. As many as 2,000 did, fighting as Dunmore’s Ethiopian Regiment.⁵⁸ In July 1776 Thomas Jefferson included the incitement of insurrections among the grievances listed in his first draft of the Declaration of Independence. For the rest of the war British commanders encouraged and received runaway slaves into their ranks. Johnson had plunged himself into rancorous policy debates that seemed to many, including his former acquaintance and fellow Bray’s Associate Benjamin Franklin, to have affected the course of the war in bloody ways, with reverberations for Americans and the slavery issue that would continue all the way down to John Brown’s failed insurrection (1859) and Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation (1863).

The second major occasion of Johnson’s activism is the Joseph Knight trial, another story far too big and dramatic to be covered here. Two points about it will have to suffice. One is the eagerness with which Johnson involved himself, beginning the moment he heard about it from Boswell in June 1776. Johnson immediately wrote back to offer advice, to recommend precedents, and to donate money for legal expenses. “How is the suit carried on?” he asked Boswell, “If by subscription, I commission you to contribute, in my name, what is proper. Let nothing be wanting in such a case.”⁵⁹

56 Samuel Johnson, *Taxation No Tyranny*, in *Political Writings*, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Donald Greene, vol. 10 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), 452. For detailed discussion of this pamphlet and American reaction, see Basker, “‘The Next Insurrection’: Johnson, Race, and Rebellion,” 47–51.

57 Franklin to Jonathan Shipley, July 7, 1775, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Laboree et al., 39 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959–), 22:97.

58 Basker, “‘The Next Insurrection’: Johnson, Race, and Rebellion,” 48–49.

59 To Boswell, July 2 and July 6, 1776, *Letters of Samuel Johnson*, 2: 348–350.

One can hear Johnson stressing that word *nothing*. By the end, Johnson would help edit Maclaurin's legal brief on behalf of Knight, compose and contribute his own anti-slavery legal argument for the case, and be invited by Lord Hailes, one of the justices who voted for Knight's freedom in January 1778, to edit the summary of the decision that Hailes was writing afterwards.⁶⁰ The most important point, finally, is the historic significance of the Joseph Knight decision: the case that Johnson so vigorously supported was to effectively abolish slavery in Scotland as of January 1778, making it the first country in Europe to achieve this distinction.⁶¹

One final piece of writing by Johnson may also qualify as part of his public campaign against slavery. That is his last will and testament, which, contrary to the advice of some, left the bulk of his estate, more than 1,500 pounds, to Francis Barber. Johnson's friend and biographer, the lawyer Sir John Hawkins, bitterly disapproved of Johnson's decision to leave his estate to Frank, criticizing it as "ostentatious bounty [and] favour to negroes."⁶² Hawkins was on to something. He was concerned that Johnson's will—which was published and discussed in more than fifteen London newspapers within a week of his death⁶³—appeared to be conscious display behavior, conveying a larger message to the public about the virtue of benefactions to former slaves. Much as George Washington would do fifteen years later when he freed his slaves in his will, Johnson was making a public statement through a private act. Johnson was suggesting, a bit like the reparationists today, that even when slavery had been abolished—which many people in the 1770s and 1780s mistakenly saw as a rapidly approaching inevitability—there was still much more that was due to its victims.⁶⁴

I began this essay by saying I hoped to place Johnson in a new angle of vision, one that would help us to see him in a new way with regard to slavery and the history of race. I would like to close by giving the final word to one of Johnson's most intimate friends, someone who did see him at least partly in this light: Hester Thrale. Writing from Bath to a friend in London on December 7, 1789, just days before the fifth anniversary of Johnson's death, Hester Thrale Piozzi, as she was from 1784, relays all the news and gossip but devotes most of her letter to describing an extraordinary man who is the subject of all the attention and wonder in Bath:

60 *Boswell's Life*, 3:219.

61 In America, the state of Vermont prohibited slavery in its constitution when established in 1777. France would abolish slavery in 1794, but it would be reinstated by Napoleon in 1802 and persist until its final abolition in 1848.

62 Hawkins, *Life of Johnson*, 366.

63 See Helen Louise McGuffie, *Samuel Johnson and the British Press: A Chronological Checklist* (New York: Garland, 1976), 330–336.

64 Basker, "Johnson, Boswell, and the Abolition of Slavery," 43–44.

Bridge Tower the African Negro is that Subject, whose Son plays so enchantingly upon the Violin as to extort Applause from the first Professors—while his Father amazes me a hundred Times more by the showy Elegance of his Address—the polished Brilliancy of his Language, the Accumulation and Variety of his Knowledge, and the interesting Situation in which he stands towards an Absent Wife; who born a Polish Woman of high Rank in her own country, has been forcibly separated from him, who seems to run round the Globe with an Arrow in his Heart, and this astonishing Son by his Side.

She gushes that Bridgetower “would make a beautiful figure at the Bar of the House of Commons” and predicts that the poet Helen Maria Williams “will make such sweet verses about him when they meet.”⁶⁵ She wishes that her friends might have a chance to meet Bridgetower, “to see what a Man may come to, tho’ born a slave, and educated for no higher purpose” and she asks the rhetorical question that any thoughtful person of the time might have: “Was he sent hither by Providence to prove the Equality of Blacks to Whites?”

All her ruminations on Bridgetower come down, in the end, to a connection with Johnson. At the close of her letter, she offers this final observation on the impressive black man: “he is so very flashy a Talker, and has a Manner so distinguished for lofty Gayety, and universality of conversation I can but think all Day how Dr. Johnson would have adored that Man!”⁶⁶ The intensity of her sudden association of Bridgetower with Johnson is striking and powerful, and, given her closing exclamation point, I imagine her inner voice rising and stressing key words for dramatic emphasis: “I can but think *all Day* how Dr. Johnson would have *adored* that Man!” Like Hester Thrale Piozzi, I think we might do well to spend more of our days thinking about Johnson in connection with black people, their presence in his life and work, and in the collective consciousness of his time.

65 As Hester knew, Helen Maria Williams had already written in support of the anti-slavery movement: see her poem “On the Bill Which Was Passed in England for Regulating the Slave-Trade; A Short Time Before Its Abolition” (1788), in Basker, *Amazing Grace*, 371–372.

66 Hester Thrale Piozzi to Reverend Leonard Chappelow, December 7, 1789, *The Piozzi Letters*, ed. Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, 6 vols. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989–2002), 1:330–331. Elsewhere, however, HTP recalled at least two occasions on which Johnson in conversation made negative comments about “negroes,” even when defending Frank Barber: see Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D. During the Last Twenty Years of His Life* (London: T. Cadell, 1786), 153, 212–213.

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