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_Eighteenth-Century Studies_ is currently published by The Johns Hopkins University Press.
Circumstantial Accounts, Dangerous Art: Recognizing African-American Culture in Travelers’ Narratives

FRANK SHUFFELTON

BEGINNING IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, African Americans created a culture of their own in the New World, a lively bricolage using elements of their west and central African heritages as well as of the new cultures they encountered. They articulated this culture in terms of the new institutional forms that dominated their lives, most notably slavery, but their creation of culture and community in turn transformed the European culture that had swallowed them up. The most important contribution to American culture by the children of the African diaspora was not, after all, the production of specific artifacts or achievements in the European mode, not Wheatley’s poems, not George Washington Carver’s science, not Ralph Bunche at the United Nations, but the creation of a sophisticated and vibrant cultural life of their own. Working from within, in secret as it were, African-American culture changed European culture into “American” culture both by enlarging its imaginative repertoire and by triggering its anxieties about itself and others.

Although many scholars have documented “the world the slaves made” (to use Eugene D. Genovese’s phrase), the actual emergence of an African-American community in the colonies of British North America and the later United States is less clear than its eventual presence.¹ The work of the strongest historical researchers, John W.

¹ For the dynamics of African-American acculturation, see Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*
Blassingame and Genovese for example, relies far more heavily on nineteenth-century than upon eighteenth-century sources. Using the many oral histories of ex-slaves, the numerous freedom narratives of escaped slaves, and the far more extensive archival resources and legal records of nineteenth-century America, they have been able to construct a rich picture of African-American cultural life in the decades immediately before the Civil War. For the eighteenth century the records are sparser, oral histories are lost, literacy is less common, and the view of African-American culture is consequently more shadowy in its specific features.

Moreover, the emergence of African-American culture was almost unobserved as it began because the European colonizers, anxious about their credentials as Europeans, played off their own cultural attainments against the supposed failures of the Africans. Also, as uneasy and often outnumbered masters of an African labor force, they sought to deny a cultural authority to their slaves that might force them to take their humanity seriously into account. Although Christian baptism might counter the tendencies of Africans' "barbarous and stubborn Natures," John Brickell observed that "The Planters call these Negroes thus Baptized, by any whimsical Name their Fancy suggests, as Jupiter, Mars, Venus, Diana, Strawberry, Violet, Drunkard, Readdy Money, Piper, Fidler, &c." Writing about African-American material culture in eighteenth-century Virginia, Vlach comments, "We have, for the most part, only the traveler's accounts, the tax assessor's records, and the slave


owner’s diaries to aid us.”3 Yet if we read a substantial number of the travelers’ accounts, we discover that they reveal a cultural presence that they fail to describe in much detail. Although we might be ready to privilege most travelers as outside observers less implicated in the system of slavery than were European colonists, they typically construct problematic texts curiously unresponsive to the African-American culture whose existence they document, consciously or unwittingly. The blindness of the travelers mattered for their contemporaries because, as Jack P. Greene has recently pointed out, travelers’ narratives were largely influential in shaping their understanding of American (or Southern or Virginian) identity.4 Why this blindness should be, how it changes during the century, and what it reveals despite itself is the concern of this essay.

I

When Pehr Kalm left Gravesend on the Mary Gally in the early evening of 5 August 1748, this professor of natural history and economy at the University of Åbo in Finland took with him both a charge from the Swedish Royal Academy of Sciences and the personal blessing of Carl Linné, his instructor of natural history at the University of Uppsala. The Academy expected him to search out botanical specimens that might thrive and be useful in his native northern climate, and Linnaeus hoped that Kalm’s natural historical descriptions would assist him in revising and extending his ground-breaking Systema Naturae (1735). Kalm’s journey was one of the earliest of the expeditions taken by many other students and friends of Linnaeus, who sought to bring the chaos of the natural world under the order of scientific classification. In a letter of 1771 Linnaeus could envision how far this project had come, sounding “as if he were speaking of ambassadors and empire,” says Mary Louise Pratt:

My pupil Sparrman has just sailed for the Cape of Good Hope, and another of my pupils, Thunberg, is to accompany a Dutch embassy to Japan; both

3 Vlach, 68.
4 Jack P. Greene, “The Intellectual Reconstruction of Virginia in the Age of Jefferson,” in Jeffersonian Legacies, ed. Peter Onuf (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1993), 227–28. For the purposes of this paper I have stretched the notion of a travel narrative to include accounts of American conditions written by visitors or occasional residents and not strictly limited it to narratives that conform to an author’s course of travel.
of them are competent naturalists. The younger Gmelin is still in Persia, and my friend Falck is in Tartary. Mutis is making splendid botanical discoveries in Mexico. Koenig has found a lot of new things in Tranquebar. Professor Friis Rottboll of Copenhagen is publishing the plants found in Surinam by Rolander. The Arabian discoveries of Forsskal will soon be sent to press in Copenhagen.⁵

Kalm’s focal project of collecting natural history specimens for the Swedish Academy generated a narrative in which the categories of science purported to subordinate discourses of economy, religion, politics, and history. Yet, as Pratt suggests about Linnaeus, the relationships between the discourse of science and those of the civil, ecclesiastical, and commercial spheres are always more dialectical and problematic than the enlightened codes of the philosophes would pretend.

Two years after his return from the New World, Kalm published in Stockholm three volumes entitled simply En Resa til Norra America (1753), but the title page of John Reinhold Forster’s 1770 English translation more grandiosely announces Travels into North America; Containing Its Natural History, and A circumstantial Account of its Plantations and Agriculture in general, With the Civil, Ecclesiastical, and Commercial State of the Country, The Manners of the Inhabitants, and several curious and Important Remarks on various Subjects.⁶ Although the detail of Forster’s title-page is hardly unusual in the eighteenth century, it nevertheless demonstrates the range of commissions Kalm carried with him on his journey, from the Linnaean project of natural history to the Academy’s request for a “circumstantial account” of plantations and agriculture. Forster’s title page suggestion that “the manners of the inhabitants” is the least important concern here attempts to impose a Linnaean, scientific form on Kalm’s travel project, but the Swedish Academy’s interest in human use of plants in northern climes figures at least as importantly for the “Professor of Oeconomy in the University of Aabo” as does the object of natural history. Kalm’s decision to title his book Resa or Travels thus

⁵ Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (New York: Routledge, 1992), 27.
attempts to accommodate different kinds of attention under the most potentially capacious generic label, to include an "objective" scientific description along with the descriptions of human difference that travel narratives have traditionally offered. The traditional genre of the travel narrative provides a shifty and unstable platform for Kalm's scientific discourse, because travelers and liars were often regarded as nearly synonymous.7

The contention between "objective" scientific discourse and "interested" cultural, political, and economic discourses is clearest in the diverse ways he treats the "manners of the inhabitants." Kalm's journal, kept while traveling, gives the basic form to his narrative, thus in effect turning it into an index for his collection of natural history specimens. He describes the manners of European settlers incidentally as he comes across them in the course of his journey; already familiar because of their Europeanness to European readers, these North American inhabitants and their cultures become normalized as the object of a conventional travel narrative. Native Americans, more exotic but by 1750 relatively familiar to European readers, are for the most part treated similarly.8 Kalm's account of the "Esquimaux" is limited because he never met them and had to rely on the "unanimous accounts" of "many Frenchmen who have seen them and had them on board their own vessels," but, more important, his assessment of the Esquimaux in terms of European cultural paradigms of language, bodily appearance, diet, clothing, artifacts, and openness to commerce blinds him to possible cultural differences outside these paradigms.9 His single description of African Americans offers a more striking example of the discursive blindness that results both from the traveler's necessary reliance upon information from the locals and also from his investment in his own cultural paradigms.

8 Noting the 1710 visit by five Iroquois chiefs to Queen Anne in England, Kalm states, "Their names, dress, reception at court, speeches to the Queen, opinion of England and of the European manners and several other particulars about them are sufficiently known from other writings; it would therefore be unnecessary to enlarge upon them here" (141).
9 Kalm, 500; see Pratt's account of Peter Kolb's description of the Khoikhoi of the Cape of Good Hope, Imperial Eyes, 44.
Prompted by a discussion of servants employed in Philadelphia, Kalm describes blacks from the outset as subjected bodies. They are the subjects of laws regulating their condition and behavior, and they are equally the subjects of market considerations, people whose most intimate situations depend upon the economic "advantage" of their owners: since children "belong to the master of the female [slave,] It is therefore advantageous to have negro women."10 Those "who come immediately from Africa" are peculiarly subject to the cold weather, says Kalm, in language that both exoticizes and dehumanizes them:

There are frequent examples that the negroes on their passage from Africa, if it happens in winter, have some of their limbs frozen on board the ship, when the cold is but very moderate and the sailors are scarcely obliged to cover their hands. I was even assured that some negroes have been seen here who had excessive pain in their legs, which afterwards broke in the middle, and dropped entirely from the body, together with the flesh on them. Thus it is the same case with men here as with plants which are brought from the southern countries, before they accustom themselves to a colder climate.11

Kalm erases the African Americans’ history, taking it back only to "the year 1620" when they were first purchased by whites, and he repeats the claims that "free negroes become very lazy and indolent" and "when you show too much kindness to these negroes, they grow so obstinate that they will no longer do anything but of their own accord." Just as plants are "cultured" by gardeners but have no culture of their own, Kalm’s negroes, defined by lacks and absences, could hardly be expected to have "manners," a culture of their own that could matter to a European reader.12

10 Kalm, 206.
11 Kalm, 207. Kalm seems not to have considered that the sailors on the middle passage would have been free to move around. This passage also indicates Kalm’s credulity; he was taken in by a number of American tall tales, possibly some of them offered by Benjamin Franklin. Every traveler relies to some extent on local information, and clearly even travelers who are not liars have been frequently lied to.
Yet, Kalm does record in some detail one African-American cultural difference:

Several writings are well known which mention that the negroes in South America have a kind of poison with which they kill each other, though the effect is not sudden, and takes effect a long time after the person has taken it. The same dangerous art of poisoning is known by the negroes in North America, as has frequently been experienced. However, only a few of them know the secret, and they likewise know the remedy for it; therefore when a negro feels himself poisoned and can recollect the enemy who might possibly have given him the poison, he goes to him, and endeavors by money and entreaties to move him to deliver him from its effects.\[^{13}\]

Although Kalm assures his European readers, who may have read accounts about the use of poison by slaves in the Caribbean, that “there are few examples of their having poisoned their masters,” he clearly understands and fears this practice in a political rather than a natural historical context. The common targets of such poisoning, he says, are “their brethren as behave well [toward the whites], are beloved by their masters, and separate . . . from their countrymen, or do not like to converse with them.” Claiming that he has heard in Philadelphia many such accounts of poisoning, he describes more fully one incident in which such a favored slave was killed. The victim came to town during the fair, met other negroes who invited him to drink with him, and imbibed a fatal pot of beer, “but when he took the pot from his mouth, he said: ‘what beer is this? It is full of . . . .’” The ominous blank is Kalm’s; he omits the victim’s crucial word, “for it seems undoubtedly to have been the name of the poison with which the malicious negroes do so much harm. It might be too much employed to wicked purposes, and it is therefore better that it remain unknown.”\[^{14}\]

Kalm’s pose as the holder of secret knowledge is deceptive, because at the beginning of the same paragraph he admits that the secret belongs to the African Americans. “They never disclose the nature of the poison, and keep it inconceivably secret. It is probably that it is a very common article, which may be had anywhere in the

\[^{13}\] Kalm, 209–10.

\[^{14}\] Kalm, 210–11; Mary Louise Pratt, commenting on the use of poison in John Stedman’s Narrative, notes the use of poison in the Caribbean and connects it “with Afro-Caribbean religion,” 101.
world; for wherever the blacks are they can always easily procure it.”

He has the name but not the nature of the thing, and the silence he imposes upon the unfortunate victim is in fact a figure of his own ignorance about the cultural practice he describes—the only African-American cultural practice he describes, in fact. A late-twentieth-century reader might reasonably suspect that Kalm is describing not the use of some secret drug but the practice of magic, African obeah applied in New World situations. Important details seem consonant with this: the “poison” can take years to work; its victims seem to be mostly other African Americans; the victim can be released from its effects by conciliating the enemy who gave it to him. Kalm’s blindness to the presence and the ramifications of a distinctively African-American cultural practice is hardly surprising, since few writers about America before him spoke about African Americans as anything other than subjects without “manners” of their own devising. More surprising is Kalm’s willingness to write as much as he does about African-American “manners” that reveal a different cultural presence behind the apparently normative European-American culture. Kalm’s silence in fact speaks volumes, perhaps about his own anxieties, certainly about those of his European informants, and above all about the presence in mid-century Pennsylvania of an African-American culture working in the face of the masters.

II

Robert Beverley’s 1705 History and Present State of Virginia provides a kind of benchmark for the awareness of African-American culture before Kalm, although he represents the European colonizers who were Kalm’s principal informants rather than the observant traveler. He limits his discussion of African Americans to two paragraphs in Chapter 10, “Of the Servants and Slaves in Virginia,” where they are considered in terms of their status in law (“Slaves are


16 See Albert J. Raboteau, Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), 33–34. Also, see Owens, 43–44. Raboteau’s focus is on the spread of Christianity and the formation of black churches, but his opening section is an important and invaluable discussion of the problems of dealing with African cultural survival in New World communities.
the Negroes and their Posterity”) and in terms of their positions in the agricultural economy (“Sufficient Distinction is also made between the Female-Servants, and Slaves; for a White Woman is rarely or never put to work in the Ground, if she be good for anything else”).\(^7\) Two decades later Hugh Jones notes that indentured European servants “are but an insignificant number, when compared with the vast shoals of Negroes who are employed as slaves there to do the hardest and most part of the work.” Despite the claim of his title page to give “A particular and short Account of the Indians, English, and Negro Inhabitants,” he merely expands upon Beverley’s claim that Virginia servants and slaves are better off than day laborers in England and subsumes his account of the Negroes into a discussion of imperial trade. Claiming that “the Negroes, though they work moderately, yet live plentifully, have no families to provide for, no danger of beggary, no care for the morrow,” Jones masks and denies the cultural life of African Americans in Virginia. He reveals his observational priorities when he concludes that “the tobacco and the Negroe trades might be carried on . . . without any hindrance to arts, handicrafts, useful inventions and cultivations in Virginia.”\(^8\)

Dr. John Brickell’s observations in North Carolina in the 1730s also weave in discourses of law and trade, but he distances himself from the planters’ viewpoint, as when he criticizes their giving “whimsical” names to baptized slaves. As a physician his purposes differ from theirs, and his subsequent publication of A Natural History of North Carolina aligns him with the new formation of knowledge that would bring Kalm to North America a few years later. He is caught up in natural history’s “secular, global labor” that made points of contact with other cultures a “site of intellectual as well as manual labor.”\(^9\) If the discourse of natural history creates


\(^9\) Pratt, 27. Brickell took a short-cut to knowledge by plagiarizing heavily from John Lawson, A New Voyage to Carolina (London, 1709); see Percy G. Adams, “John Lawson’s Alter Ego—Dr. John Brickell,” North Carolina Historical Review 34 (1957): 326. However, Brickell’s material on African Americans is not stolen from Lawson, who has nothing to say about the culture of the black inhabitants of the Carolinas.
new perspectives in which Brickell could, like Kalm, see African-American cultural practices, he is, also like Kalm, unable to disentangle himself from hegemonic European categories. He recognizes that the slaves had a history ("sold on the Coast of Guinea"), although he accepts the planters' ideological construct of that past ("those brought from Guinea . . . have been inured to War and Hardship all their lives"). He describes performances of slave marriages, but minimizes their significance and the depth of feeling that the participants brought to marriage. To recognize points of African-American cultural difference without recognizing the slaves' full humanity overlooks their power to contribute to an emerging American identity.20

Brickell's and Kalm's natural history projects point them toward the manners and customs of the New World's non-European inhabitants, but they are far more attentive to those of the Indians than to those of the African Americans. Implicitly seeing the Indians as closer to nature, they find them more amenable to the motives of natural history's narrative, whereas the Africans' cultural practices are always seen through the screen of European economic and legal categories that seem to define their condition. This is equally true in writings before and after Linnaeus; the improvement of scientific understanding did not of itself sharpen perceptions about culture. If the discourse of natural history was to achieve for the travel writers a useful recognition of the African-American presence in American culture, it would apparently have to be supported by a discourse that questions those European categories in order to affirm African humanity. This enlargement of cultural perception fails to happen in America, however, even though travelers adopt a critical stance toward the European institutions that repressed African Americans.

The emergence after 1750 of "an unprecedented wave of humanitarian reform sentiment" in Western Europe, England, and North America legitimizes the criticism of slavery and the recognition of the humanity of its victims.21 A decade after Kalm, the Reverend

20 Brickell, 272–74.
Andrew Burnaby portrays slaves in Virginia not in terms of their status under the law but of the law’s failure to protect their humanity: the planters’ ignorance of mankind and of learning, exposes them to many errors and prejudices, especially in regard to Indians and Negroes, whom they scarcely consider as of the human species; so that it is almost impossible, in cases of violence, or even murder, committed upon those unhappy people by any of the planters, to have the delinquents brought to justice: for either the grand jury refuse to find the bill, or the petit jury brings in their verdict, not guilty.

Describing the condition of the black residents of South Carolina, Alexander Hewatt puts the case in positive terms: “Upon the slightest reflection all men must confess, that those Africans, whom the powers of Europe have conspired to enslave, are by nature equally free and independent, equally susceptible of pain and pleasure, equally averse from bondage and misery, as Europeans themselves.” Burnaby’s and Hewatt’s recognition of the humanity of the slaves is not deployed on the Africans’ behalf, however, but is part of a strategy to criticize the white settlers’ loss of, as Burnaby puts it, “that elegance of sentiment, which is so peculiarly characteristic of refined and polished nations.”

The critique of European institutions is in fact a reassertion of European values that leaves no room for the values of an African-American culture. Burnaby has nothing to say about how slaves actually live in the New World, and Hewatt, a vigorous critic of slavery and the slave trade, gives a more insidious view of African-American culture. The slaves’ essential humanity, he says, qualifies them along with the European immigrants as “members of a great empire, . . . unquestionably entitled to a share of national benevolence and Christian charity.” These humanitarian gestures are necessary because the slaves are “as much under the influence of Pagan darkness, idolatry and superstition, as they were at their first arrival from Africa.” Consequently, bearing a supposedly defective African culture with them, they have under slavery no cultural values or behav-

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iors that can give meaning or dignity to their lives. Their holidays in
South Carolina "are days of idleness, riot, wantonness and excess; in
which the slaves assemble together in alarming crowds, for the pur-
poses of dancing, feasting and merriment." Rather than observing the
slaves' holidays as the rituals of fully human beings, Hewatt falls
back on sentiments most familiar to him, adopts the point of view of
the masters, and voices white fear instead of describing black happy-
ness: "At such seasons the inhabitants have the greatest reason to
dread mischief from them; when set loose from their usual employ-
ments, they have fair opportunities of hatching plots and conspira-
cies, and of executing them with greater facility, from the intemper-
ance of their owners and overseers." Hewatt's benevolent senti-
ments supporting his opposition to slavery thus ultimately block his
recognition of the African-American cultural presence before him.

One of the few African-American cultural attainments Hewatt
mentions is the art of "poisoning their owners" in order to avenge
their wrongs. Unlike Kalm, who denied that slaves poisoned their
North American masters, Hewatt's text admits that poison may
stand as a possible metaphor of an African-American culture impris-
oned and occulted in the vicious heart of European domination just
as the slaves themselves are. Indeed, African-American familiarity
with the uses of various plants, for poison or cure, is a veritable leit-
motif in the accounts of travelers and is often a sign for a grudgingly
recognized humanity. Thomas Anburey, for example, tells his
reader, "You would scarcely credit, from the laborious and harrass-
ing life the negroes lead in this country, that the passions of love and
jealousy should act very powerfully on them, . . . yet so forcibly do
those passions operate on their minds, they are continually poison-
ing each other, thro' disappointment or jealousy." He notes the skill
in administering the poison "that it shall affect the life for a longer
or a shorter period, agreeable to their ideas of revenge on the
object." Like Kalm, he also confronts African-American culture as
a source of mystery: "when medical assistance was called in, it was
pronounced impossible to counteract the poison, unless what the
poison consisted of could be known which though in frequent use
among the negroes, had never yet been discovered."

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23 Hewatt, 2:98, 100, 103.
24 Hewatt, 2:97; Thomas Anburey, Travels Through the Interior Parts of America
Kalm signals, unintentionally perhaps, his blindness about an alien culture by taking silence upon himself, Hewatt denies his own imperceptivity by projecting his silence onto the other.

Some travelers, however, recognized another side to African-American knowledge of herbs and roots. Janet Schaw, visiting in North Carolina in 1774, commented, “The Negroes are the only people that seem to pay any attention to the various uses that the wild vegetables may be put to.” Thomas Jefferson knew that his slaves were using herbal medicines obtained from a black “doctor,” but, unwilling to recognize any cultural achievement among African Americans, he dismissed their medications as “poison.”

There is a long tradition of skilled use in the African-American community of herbal medicines and “root work”; in 1834 Frederick Douglass was shielded from the violence of a slave breaker by the gift of a root from Sandy Jenkins, “a genuine African [who] had inherited some of the so-called magical powers said to be possessed by the eastern nations.”

Even when European travelers stumble on evidence of African-American herbal skills, however, they seem unable to give it full credit. J. F. D. Smyth observes that “a poor negro slave” discovered a “valuable sovereign remedy” for the bite of the water moccasin and was given his freedom and two hundred pounds by the North Carolina Assembly. The point of the story for Smyth is not the slave’s medical knowledge but the Assembly’s benevolent patronage, “A laudable example to governments, and an instance of their superior humanity; which will for ever reflect upon them the highest honour.”

Lost is the slave’s name, his humanity, and the African cultural formation behind his contribution to the American materia medica.

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26 Frederick Douglass, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 137; this is from Douglass’s final, 1892, version of his autobiography, which unlike the Narrative of 1845 emphasizes Sandy’s Africanness.

The poison theme receives a devastating reversal in Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, published two years before Smyth's account. Invited to dine with a planter, the narrator comes upon a slave suspended in a cage and left to die; the birds have picked out his eyes, his blood "slowly dropped and tinged the ground beneath," and swarms of insects cover his lacerated body. Horrified at the sight, the narrator seeks to relieve the man's torments by offering him water in a shell left there by sympathetic Negroes. Instinctively guessing at the approach of water, the slave implores, "Tanky you, white man, tanky you; put some poison and give me." The European traveler is here presumed to be the master of poisonous arts, and it is the iron embrace of his culture that blinds the subject African before destroying him. When the narrator arrives at his destination, the planters attempted to explain away the hideous sight and "supported the doctrine of slavery with the arguments generally made use of to justify the practice, with the repetition of which I shall not trouble you at present." Crèvecoeur exposes the poison within the European-American cultural system by voicing the black human presence and silencing a white authority that seeks to deny its own savagery.

Indeed, Crèvecoeur is among the earliest travelers to the colonies that became the United States to include examples of black speech, and his voicing of the dying slave's request for poison marks what may be the most significant contribution of Africans to American culture, a vernacular that transformed and enlarged the English language. African-American herbal lore never passed over into the dominating white culture, but the black vernacular has touched everything from the lexicon to the available rhetorical strategies of


English. More important, African-American voices held the potential to change American self-understanding, even if the science of Linnaeus and his successors was unable to recognize African-American science as authentic knowledge. But as with other examples of African-American cultural formation, the power of this language was overlooked more often than it was perceived. Smyth, for example, describes a trip across the Roanoke to “contemplate on and enjoy an elegant, wild perspective, from the summit of a considerable eminence,” but on his return to the river he fails to meet Richmond, the slave who was to ferry him back in a canoe. He spends the rest of the day plunging through swamps, “with my cloaths torn, my flesh lacerated and bleeding with briars and thorns, stung all over with poisonous insects, suffocated with thirst and heat, and fainting under fatigue, imbecility, and disease,” until he comes upon Richmond asleep in the canoe. The slave excuses himself with a story:

Kay, massa, you just leave me, me sit here, great fish jump up into de canoe; here he be, massa, fine fish, massa; me den very grad; den me sit very still, until another great fish jump into de canoe; but me fall asleep, massa, and no wake till you come: now, massa, me know me deserve flogging, cause if great fish did jump into de canoe, he see me asleep, den he jump out again, and I no catch him; so, massa, me willing now take good flogging.

Smyth laughs “heartily at the poor fellow’s ignorance, and extreme simplicity, . . . and therefore forgave his crime.”30 The question here is whose is the simplicity? Certainly the promise of Kalm and other travelers to explain the “Manners of the Inhabitants” is subtly frustrated. In perhaps its first recorded example, Mr. Charlie has just been brought low by Brer Rabbit, but, following an already old tradition of white blindness toward African-American creativity, he does not recognize the full complexity of the new, transculturated America he has fallen into.

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30 Smyth, 1:118–21.