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Writing Anti-Slavery: Abolition as Boundary Object in Transatlantic Enlightenment

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Abstract

The article examines abolitionist writing as a boundary object at the interface between discourses, genres, and disciplines. It discusses transatlantic slavery and colonialism as constitutive factors in the formation of European Enlightenment thinking and modernity and argues that anti-slavery writing, as part of a larger struggle against enslavement practices, contributed decisively to a critique of this constitutive logic. Taking as an example a central text by Quaker abolitionist Anthony Benezet (1713-84), the article interrogates the discursive conditions of possibility of anti-slavery writing at the interface of religious and philosophical discourse as well as its argumentative strategies and generic framing.

The article argues for an approach that takes into account speaking positions as well as contestations and multiple layers of knowledge production at work in struggles over the meaning of freedom and enslavement in the late eighteenth-century transatlantic sphere. It further discusses the epistemological consequences of an abolitionist intervention such as Benezet's for the larger project of decolonizing scholarship on Enlightenment discourse, interrogating how the study of abolitionist writing can participate in a scholarly project invested in a decolonial politics of knowledge production.

Keywords

Abolition, slavery, enlightenment, decoloniality, literature, genre.

Introduction

In 1771, Philadelphia Quaker Anthony Benezet published a book titled, in its full version, *Some Historical Account of Guinea, its Situation, Produce, and the General Disposition of its Inhabitants. With an Inquiry into the Rise and Progress of the Slave Trade, its Nature, and Lamentable Effects*. In this text, Benezet challenges positions in eighteenth-century debates on the transatlantic slave trade that legitimized enslavement and commodification practices on the part of white slave traders and those who justified enslavement. Providing testimony of early radical abolition, the writing as well as the persona of Anthony Benezet have recently garnered interest in scholarship of Enlightenment discourse, racism, and transatlantic modernity¹. In the following, I am interested in examining the discursive conditions of the possi-

bility of abolition at the interface of religious and philosophical discourse, the argumentative strategies, and the epistemological consequences of an abolitionist intervention such as Benezet's for the larger project of decolonizing Enlightenment discourse². What might be the hazards of interrogating (and de-centering and undermining?) the parameters of the very production of hegemonic knowledge based on European colonization and enslavement practices by way of examining abolition?

The *Historical Account* opens with a so-called "Advertisement" that outlines Benezet's biography. It was presumably added to the second edition of the text (published in 1788) to contextualize and authorize the writing of the account by referencing its writer

1 Dietze, G., Hark, S. (2006), "Das Subjekt der Aufklärung – Sklaverei – Gender Studies: Zu einer notwendigen Relektüre der Moderne", *Gender kontrovers. Genealogien und Grenzen einer Kategorie*, Ulrike Helmer Verlag, Königstein/Taunus, S. 152-180; Boulukos, G.E. (2007), "Olaudah Equiano and the Eighteenth-Century Debate on Africa", *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, No. 40.2, pp. 241-255; Jackson, M. (2009), *Let This Voice Be Heard: Anthony Benezet, Father of Atlantic Abolitionism*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 400 p.

2 I am situating this essay within the conceptual framework of the Black Studies research group at the University of Bremen, Germany, with its thematic emphasis on *Slavery, Black Diaspora and Modernity*. I had the opportunity to present earlier versions of this article in collaborative contexts spanning the Institute for Postcolonial and Transcultural Studies at the University of Bremen, the Center for Global Studies and the Humanities at Duke University, and the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy in Amsterdam. I would like to extend my thanks to Sabine Broeck, Gabriele Dietze, Robert Stam, and Ingo H. Warnke for their invaluable comments.

and his intentions to forward to cause of abolition. Benezet's life trajectory is indicative of the circulation of ideas and (forced) migration of people – both free and unfree – in the late eighteenth-century transatlantic sphere. He was two years old when his family escaped France via Holland and England in 1715, "in consequence of the persecutions which followed the revocation of the edict of Nant[es]" (Benezet iv). The revocation of the edict in 1685 had declared Protestantism illegal in France. Benezet eventually moved on to Philadelphia in 1731, when he was 18 years old. He would be the first to found a school for freed Blacks in Philadelphia in 1770, "Apprehending that much advantage would arise, both to the individuals and the publick, from instructing the black people in common learning" (xi). He had also opened a school for white girls in the 1750s, the first of its kind in the American colonies. These accomplishments seem to be out of joint, if you will, with the agenda of white colonists in North America at the time who had little interest in granting black and white women and black men access to education, let alone civil or human rights.

George Boulukos has ascribed Benezet's *Account* the status of a "key anti-slavery text" that strongly influ-

enced subsequent abolitionist writing such as, for instance, Olaudah Equiano's famous autobiography, in which Equiano provides an account of his move from enslavement to freedom³. In Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* from 1789, the narrator advises his readers to "See Benezet's Account of Africa throughout"⁴. It is my aim to follow this lead and examine Benezet's text. Before doing so, I will contextualize my discussion of the *Account* in a larger conceptual framework in order to suggest how a discursive intervention such as Benezet's might be useful for deriving broader questions from eighteenth-century debates on slavery and freedom for a scholarly project dedicated to an agenda of de-colonial critique, as I pursue it here. Let us thus consider the following preliminary remarks, all of which play into one another.

Enlightenment, Enslavement, Un/Freedom

One: A western discourse in line with Enlightenment ideals fashions itself

3 Boulukos, G.E. (2007), "Olaudah Equiano and the Eighteenth-Century Debate on Africa", *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, No. 40.2, p. 244.

4 Equiano, O., Carretta V. (2003), *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings. 1789*, Penguin, New York, p. 244.

as an innovator of freedom and democracy – and hence as a potential liberator from enslavement. The exclusionary effects of universal claims of an Enlightenment discourse of progress, however, have been challenged from a number of critical positions, which have identified it as an articulation of a hegemonic regime of knowledge from particular locations. It is impossible to sketch out a comprehensive line of critique of Enlightenment thinking here. However, such a sketch might encompass, in an early post-World War II setting, for instance, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), which traces the rise of fascism and totalitarianism to the Enlightenment notion of "instrumental reason." Horkheimer and Adorno saw Enlightenment discourse providing a framework for a notion of reason that could lead to systematic persecution. As contemporaneous anti-colonial critics of Horkheimer and Adorno have pointed out, Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of Enlightenment discourse *de-thematized* colonial-racist thinking and severed the link between the history of European imperialism and colonialism and fascism, a critique that Aimé Césaire put forward in his *Discours sur le Colonialisme* in 1950. More recent postcolonial interventions have

stressed that colonialism and slavery did not merely provide flip sides to Western notions of progress; they may be considered constitutive for the very formation of modernity. Theorizations of the *Black Atlantic* in the wake of Paul Gilroy's book (1992), or conceptualizations such as Shalini Randeria's *Entangled Histories of Uneven Modernities* (2002), for instance, have emphasized various black strands of modernity and thus aimed at decentering white Eurocentric narratives of the progress of Enlightenment and Modernity.⁵ Many more interventions into uncritical receptions of Enlightenment and Modernity (past and present) deserve attention.⁶ I refrain from doing

5 Gilroy, P. (1993), *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 280 p.; Randeria, S., Yehuda, E. (2002), "Entangled Histories of Uneven Modernities: Civil Society, Caste Solidarities and Legal Pluralism in Post-Colonial India", *Unraveling Ties: From Social Cohesion to New Practices of Connectedness*, Campus, Frankfurt/Main, pp. 284-311.

6 In a deconstructive vein, Toni Morrison has famously argued for a U.S. context that concepts such as freedom only gained meaning against the backdrop of an enslaved "Africanist presence," and has thus shown that national narratives actively unmark their racist biases in privileging hegemonic whiteness. Morrison, T. (1993), *Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Vintage, New York, 91 p. 5. In his *White*

so here but I want to stress again my first consideration – the fact that a western, occidental, Eurocentric discourse of Enlightenment advocating freedom, progress, and democracy can be criticized as far from universal and innocent of pursuing particular and exclusionary interests.

Two: The constellation of knowledge and power in which such an Enlightenment discourse is produced is tailored to white men. It establishes a notion of the subject that can only imagine white men as free, equal, and capable of taking possession of themselves.⁷

Three: Western Enlightenment discourse came to posit and thus constituted black and indigenous men and

women as well as white women as its Others – based increasingly on anthropological claims of (female) alterity and, as legitimizing grounds for enslavement and colonization practices, on Christian paternalisms and the emergence of scientific racism in the wake of such eighteenth-century figures as Carl von Linné, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, and Immanuel Kant.⁸ In *establishing* a notion of the civilized mind, a differential notion of an uncivilized body emerged – a racialized body reduced to subhumanity and imagined outside the bounds of subjectivity. It seems important to emphasize the *procedural* here – the discursive protocols in establishing a notion such as that of the "civilized mind" –, to frame thinking about the Enlightenment project as an effort and investment in the formation and very constitution of a free subject that would ultimately be correlated with notions of whiteness and mas-

Mythologies, Robert Young puts forward a critique of narratives of white self-affirmation by particularizing notions of writing a single "world history" as Eurocentric. Young, R. (1990), *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, Routledge, London, 304 p. See also Shohat, E., Stam, R. (1994), *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, Routledge, New York, 432 p.

7 By conceptualizing the "racial contract," Charles Mills demonstrates the ways in which this "contract" has shaped a system of the global domination of whiteness: how it produces "whites" as full persons and "non-whites" as sub-persons, and implicates them in racial hierarchies, epistemologies, and economies. Mills, C.W. (1997), *The Racial Contract*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 192 p.

8 On anthropological claims of female otherness, see Honegger, C. (1991), *Die Ordnung der Geschlechter: Die Wissenschaft vom Menschen und das Weib. 1750-1850*, Campus, Frankfurt am Main/New York, 300 p. On religious paternalisms, see, e.g., Freehling, W.W. (1994), *The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War*, Oxford University Press, New York, 336 p. On the establishment of scientific racism and biologic determinism, see, e.g., Gould, S.J. (1996), *The Mismeasure of Man*, Norton, New York, 448 p.

culinity. In this project, the figure of the Slave was eventually produced as an ultimate metaphorical constitutive exterior for Enlightenment selves. While slavery as a concept served as symbolic currency for free white men to claim freedom, enslavement resulted in the *Social Death* of the enslaved.⁹

Slavery came to feature as a trope that served white men as an anachronism or logical flip side to such concepts as freedom and self-possession, such that these concepts became meaningful only in relation to unfreedom.¹⁰ Such a metaphorization of slavery also distracted from literal enslavement practices. As a trope, the threat of slavery made possible the establishment of an ideology of freedom for all. But whose freedom exactly was being negotiated calls for particular examination. As Sabine Broeck has ar-

gued, claims to the *universal* applicability of freedom (as metaphor) were only an effect of willful "misreadings" of early modern texts such as John Locke's *Treatises* from 1680-90 (2006, 160).¹¹ Locke's engagement with freedom did not encompass the unfreedom of enslaved Africans; rather, it referred literally to the freedom of an emerging middle class of Englishmen and answered to their potential exposure to residual threats of subjection under feudal rule. The concept of freedom as self-possession became thinkable for white men in the context of colonization, and it became intricately tied up with possessive investments in the enslavement and commodification of Africans. Their enslavement constituted early-modern notions of a free (white, male) subjectivity in the first place. Questions of race become key here. In this vein, Roderick Ferguson reminds us, "As it has for at least three centuries, the study of race today names the different permutations of morality that continue to shape social formations according to freedom's relationship to unfreedom".¹²

9 Current scholarship that may be subsumed under the rubric of Afro-pessimism stresses this point. See, for instance, Hartman, S.V. (1997), *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Oxford University Press, New York, 296 p.; Wilderson, F.B. (2010), *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 408 p.

10 On the metaphorical uses of slavery in the French Enlightenment, see Sala-Molins, L. (2006), *Dark Side of the Light: Slavery and the French Enlightenment*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 176 p.

11 Broeck, S., Raphael-Hernandez, H. (2004), "Never Shall We Be Slaves. Locke's Treatises, Slavery, and Early Modern Modernity", *Blackening Europe. The African American Presence*, Routledge, New York, pp. 253-247.

12 For a historicization of race as a signifier and category of analysis, See Kitson,

Four: It is crucial to note that the history of transatlantic enslavement "is the story of enslaved resistance as much as slave-owning domination"¹³. I want to stress, by implication, that enslaved persons of African descent whose voices were excluded by force from hegemonic knowledge production had to resort to other modes of producing and distributing knowledge, not least to guarantee their survival. Structurally, however, in a hegemonic order of knowledge, they were denied the recognition of their voices.

What follows from these considerations in terms of Benezet – someone who inhabits an authorized speaking position marked by what would become conceptualized as whiteness and masculinity – are general questions we might subsume under the heading of self-exclusion: Why, in what ways, and

under what circumstances do white men distance and detach themselves from (and time and again reproduce) hegemonic regimes of knowledge and power that are tailored to their needs, interests, and advantage? What critical forms of knowledge do they produce that pose alternatives to a supposedly progressive project such as that of an Enlightenment discourse which allows for white practices of enslavement?¹⁴

Writing Abolition between Religion and Philosophy

Historians have recently noted the impact of Benezet's abolitionist interventions, not only on subsequent abolitionist writing and abolitionist leaders like Absalom Jones and James Forten, but also on protagonists of Enlightenment discourse such as Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush by emphasizing his correspondences with them.¹⁵ Benezet

P.J., Brycchan, C. (2004), "Candid Reflections": The Idea of Race in the Debate over the Slave Trade and Slavery in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century", *Discourses of Slavery and Abolition: Britain and Its Colonies, 1760-1838*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, pp. 11-25; Wheeler, R. (2000), *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 384 p.

13 Walvin, J. (1996), *Questioning Slavery*, Routledge, London, p. 117.

14 I might point out that my interest in willful practices of white self-exclusions here consciously disregards the fissures within whiteness and the epistemological challenge to racialized binarisms as posited by the phenomenon of white indentured servitude. See Jordan, D. (2007), *White Cargo: The Forgotten History of Britain's White Slaves in America*, Mainstream, Edinburgh, 320 p.

15 Jackson, M. (2009), *Let This Voice Be Heard: Anthony Benezet, Father of*

thus accounts for much of the impact that abolitionism had on Enlightenment discourse – abolitionism becomes one of its discursive threads (and *threats*), its "radical side line," as it were¹⁶. As such, abolition straddles and questions the boundaries that separate religious and philosophical discourse.

Benezet formed a distinct kind of anti-slavery critique that was directed against notions of the inferiority of enslaved persons. As a representative of Enlightenment thought, Thomas Jefferson voiced such a notion when he – in his 1785 *Notes on the State of Virginia* – proclaimed "the blacks" to be "in reason much inferior [...]; in imagination [...] dull, tasteless, and anomalous"¹⁷. In his introduction, Benezet articulates an explicit abolitionist agenda to counter and supplement such a position:

The slavery of the Negroes having, of late, drawn the attention of many serious minded people, several tracts

have been published setting forth its inconsistency with every *Christian and moral virtue*, which it is hoped will have weight with the judicious; especially at a time when the liberties of mankind are become so much the subject of general attention.

This passage indicates Benezet's Christian or, more specifically, Quaker frame of reference and, at the same time, alludes to the concerns of a broader public that extend into philosophical debates about moral standards. These debates were struggled over *across* particular communities such as the Quakers, and looking at the overlaps between religious and more philosophical debates about freedom and morality becomes particularly productive with regard to the precarious relationship between Enlightenment discourse and abolitionist critique.

The passage quoted above opens up two interrelated sets of questions. The first concerns the particular infrastructures that Quaker communities offered their members for articulating their voices, such as anti-hierarchical organizational forms of Quaker meetings for worship, or the concept of the "Inner Light," which Quakers may use to express their beliefs.

Second, in terms of contextualizing religious discourse in the context

Atlantic Abolitionism, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, p. 10.

16 Broeck, S., Raphael-Hernandez, H. (2004), "Never Shall We Be Slaves. Locke's Treatises, Slavery, and Early Modern Modernity", *Blackening Europe. The African American Presence*, Routledge, New York, p. 163.

17 Jefferson, T., Shuffleton, F. (1999), *Notes on the State of Virginia. 1785*, Penguin, New York, pp. 146-147.

of the formation of a new American nation, a nexus between religious and (political-)philosophical discourse becomes relevant in a transatlantic perspective. At the time of the publication of Benezet's text, the colonies had not yet declared their independence from Britain, but a specific negotiation of the relationship between religion and politics was well under way. As theorists of secularization in the transatlantic sphere have noted, the United States would ultimately provide a setting for a rejection of European social stratifications of feudalism grounded in the belief of a God-given order.¹⁸ In his 1835 work *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Toqueville famously argued that the notion of a separation between church and state would relegate religious practices to the private sphere. At the same time, however, a privatized religiosity and the proliferation of religious groups would entail the establishment of a specific form of what sociologist Robert Bellah came to call "Civil Religion."¹⁹

18 Milich, K.J. (2004), "Oh, God". Secularization Theory in the Transatlantic Sphere", *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, No. 49.3, pp. 409-429.

19 According to Bellah, whose use of the term "Civil Religion" in 1967 made it widely known, the founding of the nation (plus the Civil War and the 1960s) were periods when this notion was accentuated.

Benezet's intervention – and here the position it inhabits at the boundary between religion and philosophy becomes significant for authorizing its abolitionist agenda – does not merely motivate its arguments religiously. I argue that it attempts to set the historiographic record straight, as it were, in terms of struggles over the interpretation of historical fact and fiction, and it does so on the basis of rational, thus enlightened, thinking. For instance, the *Account* answers claims by slave traders such as William Snelgrave who claimed in 1734 that he was rescuing Africans from even worse fates at their places of origin, including human sacrifice²⁰. Such was a strong argument in narratives of the slave trade that legitimized the enslavement of Africans. Benezet makes reference to it when he writes:

And here it will not be improper to premise, that though wars, arising from the common depravity of human nature, have happened, as well among the Negroes as other nations, and the weak sometimes been made captives to the strong; yet nothing appears in the various relations of the intercourse and

Bellah, R. (1967), "Civil Religion in America", *Daedalus*, No. 96.1, pp. 1-21.

20 Snelgrave, W. (1734), *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade*, Cass, London, p. 158.

trade for a long time carried on by the Europeans on that coast, which would induce us to believe, that there is any real foundation for the argument, so commonly advanced in vindication of the trade, viz: "*That the slavery of the Negroes took its rise from a desire, in the purchasers, to save the lives of such of them as were taken captives in war, who would otherwise have been sacrificed to the implacable revenge of their conquerors.*" A plea which, when compared with the history of those times, will appear to be destitute of truth; and to have been advanced, and urged, principally by such as were concerned in reaping the gain of this infamous traffick, as a palliation of that against which their own reason and conscience must have raised fearful objections.

Benezet's line of argument here is tactical. He concedes that wars are ubiquitous but argues that those among African nations are no more deplorable than those among Europeans or any other. Instead, Benezet unmasks references to inner-African conflicts as arguments that put into perspective and conceal the violence of European slave trading practices. Furthermore, basing his judgment on European slave traders' and travelers' accounts that claim to be factual, Benezet can counter the argument in support of

the slave traders' good will toward the enslaved as factually not verifiable. It is exposed, not least, as a strategic lie, one that appeases the slave traders' conscience and sense of righteousness. Benezet thus refers not to his own moral or religious standards but appeals to those of the slave traders – standards to be negotiated by a larger public.

Benezet's text seems to be in line with a number of other abolitionist interventions that engage this dialectic in explicit and critical ways, which point to the double standards of who counts as human and who can claim a right to self-possession. And yet, or perhaps for that very reason, it seems as if Eurocentric narratives of the Enlightenment project "wrote this abolitionist sideline out of the genealogy of their philosophical self-reflections", such that today, in the context of late eighteenth-century historiography and political philosophy, this line seems largely forgotten and in need of reexamination.

Benezet's work is crucial in this regard because it co-constitutes eighteenth-century anti-slavery debates prior to the founding of the United States, at a time when the term slavery was being invested with metaphorical meaning to come to serve as the counter trope to the notion of the self-possession and

freedom of Enlightenment selves in the framework of inner-white transatlantic negotiations of nation building as well as religious and secular freedom. Since Benezet's abolitionist stance plays an important part in the context of these debates, it also challenges disciplinary boundaries in the academy today that may want to keep religious and philosophical discourses apart.

Juxtaposing religious and philosophical writing, and reading a text such as Benezet's at the interface of religious and Enlightenment historiography also challenges notions of "temporal a-synchrony."²¹ Rather than reading Benezet's *Account* as a late instance in a line of Quaker abolitionist writings,²² and as an early point of departure in the formative stages of Enlightenment discourse, I want to suggest a simultaneous reading of these discourses to avoid reproducing a narrative structured along a linear, teleological time line of an

Enlightenment discourse that measures achievements of freedom by its own standards. Instead, I suggest an approach that takes into account the contestations, interruptions, and multiple layers of knowledge production at work in struggles over the interpretation of the realities of freedom and enslavement.

This also raises questions about the parameters of knowledge production in the first part of the eighteenth century – a time when knowledge circulated in ways different from those in the nineteenth century, a time when an Enlightenment discourse had not yet been firmly established as a self-reflexive stance, for instance in philosophy departments at universities. As Broeck has argued,

The prototypical Enlightenment monologue altogether bypasses the historical experience of lively and angry early modern controversies around the slave trade, slavery, and issues of mastery, ownership, and oppression of human beings; it arrives at a philosophical condensation that does not know the "other" of its speculation, let alone their formulations of "rights" and "freedom"²³.

21 The term "asynchrony" is borrowed from Elizabeth Freeman, in: Dinshaw, C. et al. (2007), "Theorizing Queer Temporalities. A Roundtable Discussion", *GLQ*, No. 13.2-3, pp. 178.

22 As Jackson observes in his study on Benezet, the "Germantown Protests" of 1688 provided the first major anti-slavery efforts organized by whites in colonial North America. Jackson, M. (2009), *Let This Voice Be Heard: Anthony Benezet, Father of Atlantic Abolitionism*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, p. 42.

23 Broeck, S., Raphael-Hernandez, H. (2004), "Never Shall We Be Slaves. Locke's Treatises, Slavery, and Early Modern Modernity", *Blackening Europe. The African American Presence*, Routledge, New York, p. 236.

Retrieving those controversies shifts attention to the parameters in which their various positions could be articulated, and to the modes in which knowledge circulated in ways not yet marked by the differentiation, validation, and, for that matter, invalidation of various knowledge concerning the enslavement of Africans. Reading Benezet's writing does not only raise questions about where it is situated politically, philosophically, and theologically; it also raises questions about the ways in which generic boundaries are drawn between religious and political pamphlets and philosophical treatises. I hypothesize that over the course of the previous centuries, Benezet's texts were dismissed as religious pamphlets rather than validated as philosophical treatises and their author figure passed over for canonization partly because he put his finger on the dialectical logic of an Enlightenment discourse by decrying enslavement as its very constitutive subtext.

Genres matter in this regard if they are construed, as I want to suggest, as frames for the construction, validation, and authorization of knowledge. The procedures in which particular authors make use of different genres matter here. Benezet, for instance, authorizes his writing through the use of the genre

of the historical account, referring to travel accounts by other writers, bringing "empirical knowledge of Africa to the Atlantic antislavery discourse"²⁴. And this genre purports to be grounded in the factual, even though we can infer that it occupies a liminal space between fact and fiction, as it were, and that his descriptions of Guinea, Benin, and many other places at the West African coast are highly exoticizing and fantastical.

By Way of Conclusion: Decolonizing the Humanities

I am not attempting to provide an overarching argument about Benezet's text here. Rather, I have picked out two excerpts from his work to lay out some questions that arise from working with it. The first illustrates that a critique of transatlantic enslavement practices such as Benezet's goes hand in hand with and intervenes in debates concerning notions of freedom and the liberty of mankind. Black and white critics have articulated a critique of slavery from the beginning of transatlantic enslavement practices. The second excerpt raises questions about the ways in which such a critique might

²⁴ Jackson, M. (2009), *Let This Voice Be Heard: Anthony Benezet, Father of Atlantic Abolitionism*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, p. 55.

be possible. Benezet answers this question by taking up the arguments he counters, and by judging their validity by the standards of those who put them forward.

His writing becomes part of a political controversy that addresses religious and philosophical questions at the boundary of religious and philosophical discourse. It participates in the circulation of ideas and knowledge about notions of slavery and freedom. Benezet's abolitionist intervention – one that is concerned *literally* with the freedom of enslaved Africans –, becomes, at least from the perspective of an Enlightenment discourse concerned to a large extent with metaphorical meanings of slavery, a gesture of one of its constitutive exteriors. By voicing his critique, Benezet is being excluded from the figurative investments of Enlightenment discourse and constituted as one of its outsiders from inside this very discourse. Marking a critic of enslavement practices as one of its "Others," Western knowledge production

emerges strengthened and immunized against one of its resisting readers.

Tracing late eighteenth-century transatlantic abolition discourse – and Anthony Benezet as one of its glaring protagonists – raises some pressing questions with regard to a broader endeavor of decolonizing the humanities. In what ways does it contribute to a critical project of undermining and challenging hegemonic regimes of knowledge production? To what extent does a de-colonial critique of Enlightenment become possible when examining a white dissenter like Benezet who – nonetheless – moves within the Western bounds of epistemology, if the task that the *Grammar of De-Coloniality* (Mignolo) sets for us is *not* to reproduce white hegemony and reaffirm whiteness all over again as a central category of knowledge production? How can abolitionist writing as a boundary object at the interface between discourses, genres, and disciplines participate in the project of a de-colonial politics of knowledge that seeks to unlearn Eurocentric and racist assumptions?

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Очерки о борьбе с рабством: отмена рабства как пограничный объект трансатлантического периода Просвещения

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Аннотация

В статье рассматривается аболиционистская литература и публицистика как пограничный объект между дискурсами, жанрами и науками. Трансатлантическое рабство и колониализм рассмотрены как факторы становления мысли в период европейского Просвещения и в современности.

Ключевые слова

Отмена рабства, рабство, просвещение, деколониальность, литература, жанр.

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