theories and methodologies

Early American Studies—by the Book

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AS A GIFT FOR HIS BAPTISM IN LONDON, IN FEBRUARY 1759, OLAUDAH EQUIANO RECORDS THAT HE RECEIVED A COPY OF BISHOP THOMAS Wilson's *Essay towards an Instruction for the Indians* (1740 [78]). The book's preface proclaimed the tract suitable for both "the *Indians* . . . a tractable People" and "[t]he very *Hottentots*, who are supposed to be the dullest of Mankind" (v, ix). At this point in his life story, Equiano has moved beyond the now famous "talking book" trope that marks the earlier sections of his autobiography to engage an emergent body of printed materials that were intended to speak to an interethnic cohort of potential Christian converts throughout the British Atlantic world.[1]

A few years later, across the Atlantic, the Mohegan minister Samson Occom wrote to Benjamin Forfitt, a London missionary-philanthropist, requesting "a few Little Testaments to Dispose of among our Young People . . . [and] Little Hymn Books Design'd for the Negroes, Printed by John Oliver in Bartholomew Close near West Smithfield" (95). Occom had spent two years in England around the time Equiano was baptized and had been introduced to the richness of the English book trade in its metropolitan center. The specificity of his request is telling. It suggests that his relation to print culture, like Equiano's, went far beyond its mere printedness to include what the book historian Robert Darnton has termed the "communications circuit that runs from author to the publisher . . . the printer, the shipper, the bookseller and the reader" (11). More significantly, the request points to less discussed, alternative routes of the English book trade, ones constituted by the specialized body of missionary tracts that were directed to an imagined interethnic readership—the Indians and Africans to whom Wilson patronizingly refers in his preface.

The standard history of the English book trade in America, *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* (1999 [Amory and Hall]), has provided scholars with a sound foundation for the exploration of dominant-culture communications circuits and their role in colonial cultural development. Its editors define the "colonial book" as "what

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the colonists bought and read, as well as what they printed or reprinted" (Amory 28), maintaining that these activities were "structurally interrelated with the book trades of western Europe" (Hall 7). While avowing a structural and Eurocentric focus, the book argues for improved histories "of reading and writing, and of efforts to regulate readers and writers" (12). In this way, it leaves open the opportunity for scholars to connect its rigorous analysis of colonial printing and binding, reprinting and importing, paper making and press operation with more socially inflected studies of how such structural systems affected human self-understanding and public interactions in the colonies.

Such projects have, of course, been ongoing since the 1990s, when Michael Warner's groundbreaking *Letters of the Republic* (1990) established that colonists who read printed books entered an emergent social space that Jürgen Habermas called "the public sphere." Other scholars have since added to or qualified Warner's work. David Shields, in *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (1997), examined a parallel system of scribal publication in the colonies, one that encouraged new forms of sociability constellated around manuscript coteries, salons, and literary societies. Most recently, Trish Loughran's examination of how "nation-building" books like Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* were actually produced, circulated, and consumed has revealed a more fragmented book circuit than Warner proposed.

So far, so good. But recently recuperated outliers to the kinds of texts and practitioners described in *The Colonial Book*—books like Wilson's *Essay* and readers and writers like Occom and Equiano—have proved difficult to match with the manuscript coteries and literary societies Shields describes, much less with the abstract, anonymous print public sphere that Warner theorizes. Many scholars of late, in fact, have begun to express dissatisfaction with methodologies that neatly yoke the structures of the English book trade with the establishment of an early American public sphere by excluding Native peoples and Africans from participation in its constitutive civil institutions and material practices. Warner's observation that the early American print public sphere proved "inappropriate to blacks and Indians" (13) prompted Sandra Gustafson to ask, "[W]hat if oratory and not print was the defining genre of political modernity . . . ?" (471). Going further, Joanna Brooks asserts that "it is no longer possible to theorize about the eighteenth-century American public print sphere without acknowledging the emergence in this era of a distinctly black tradition of publication . . . premised on principles of self-determination and structured by black criticisms of white political and economic dominance" ("Early American Public Sphere" 68).

I agree, but propose a somewhat different angle of attack, one that draws on emerging methodologies in book history to help clear spaces not only for the identities and voices of subaltern readers and writers like Occom and Equiano but, more importantly, for the material practices by which they engaged the English book trade. In so doing, I follow the lead of Scott Lyons and Leon Jackson, each of whom argues that to understand the place of print in Native and African diasporic societies, we must reorient "scholarly analysis from being to doing" (Lyons 66), shifting the ground of our understanding of Native and African diasporic communicative practices from methods based in identity politics toward those centered on social practice.

This demands a fundamental alteration in our conceptualization of key nodes in Darnton's communications circuit. First, we must reconceptualize the circuit itself, replacing undertheorized structural interrelations between the English book trade and its colonial outposts with more nuanced topographies of textual circulation. Next, we must rethink the role of the printer-bookseller,

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especially in relation to nontraditional writers and readers like Occom and Equiano. Finally, we must expand our understanding of the production side of the circuit, especially authorship, to include the oral and the performative, the collective and communal practices that tend to characterize this other route of the English book trade.

A brief analysis of the interethnic missionary communications circuit in which Occom and Equiano participated when they read and distributed books like *An Essay towards an Instruction for the Indians* offers a prolegomenon to a new methodology for reconstituting the counterpublics in which these men (and others like them) operated. For unlike their white counterparts, Equiano and Occom engaged in the Anglo-American book trade as ethnic and economic outsiders. Undaunted, they forged ahead in pursuit of these networks of association, exploiting the concomitant social capital to benefit themselves and their communities. Print for these men was not an abstract space of public debate but a tactile set of material practices, and it is this new avenue of exploration in book history—what Matt Cohen terms the exploration of "publication events" and communications "networks" (7, 9)—that guides my thinking here.

A close reading of Wilson's *Essay* and the specialized book trade that sustained it underscores the structures of power and communications technologies that supported the interethnic counterpublic textual practices that emerged after 1750 in the British Atlantic world.[2] The preface of *An Essay*, for example, insists that the codex was first and foremost an "*Index* or *Common-place*" (vii). In this way, Wilson positions the work as "a pedagogical instrument that every schoolchild or university student was expected to keep" (Cavallo and Chartier 29). Wilson's book is thus a disciplinary object, coupling Christian conversion with a civilizing literacy practice. Occom thought highly of the disciplinary aspect of tracts and bibles, telling Benjamin Forfitt that "our Young People . . . Carry them in their Pockets as vade mecum" (95).

Prefacing the 1787 edition of *An Essay* is a letter by the bishop of London that is also quite specific about the assimilative power of Wilson's book, calling it and works like it "Expedients"—communications technologies that touched on the material and the ideal, the oral and the printed. Such books, he explained, "being *short*, . . . are . . . read, . . . and being also *plain*, they cannot fail of understanding." Their cheapness and ubiquity, he reasoned, would make them "always at hand, and read over often," thus making "a *deeper Impression* upon [the readers'] Minds, than Instructions and Admonitions, either from the Pulpit, or by word of Mouth" (ii).

While the bishop places great stock in the way that the printed tract enables a continuous reengagement with theological discourse, he goes on to describe an even more important communicative medium, the missionary book trade itself. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, he reminds his readers, has put special effort into "the dispersing [of books] more effectually" and has begun to admit "Corresponding Members . . . who are intitled to have a Supply of [books], to be disposed of among such of the Neighbouring Clergy or Laity as desire them" (ii). The bishop's attention to the detailed workings of the English book trade is integral to the missionizing endeavor. The society offered "Bound Books" to corresponding members "at the prime Cost in *Quires*, . . . and the Stich'd Books, at one *Half* of the Price there set down, as the prime Cost of each" (ii). The bishop of London's language here is drawn from the mercantile side of book publishing and distribution that is well documented in *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*. Especially interesting is the way in which it imagines a kind of subsidized evangelical instrumentality in the trade's broader business model.

For his part, Occom considered his peripheral location in the British mercantile

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system an integral part of the trouble he was having in crafting an intertribal Christian Indian community woven together with the help of tracts such as Wilson's. Writing to Forfitt, Occom explains, "I live near a Center of five Towns of Indians and they Come to me for Books—We Used to be Supplyd in Some measure with Books from Dr Wheelocks Indian School, but he is now removed with his School far up into the Country to the Distance of 150 miles; and Boston and New York are at a great Distance from us" (94–95). Throughout Occom's journals (1743–90), the reader encounters commentary related to themes of time and distance, itinerancy and marginality, that jeopardize the author's relation to the dominant communications circuits.

Occom and Wilson's shared interest in the efficacy of the mercantile circuits for books in the British Atlantic opens to view what Cohen has described as early America's "continuous information topography," a new perspective on colonial books and their writers and readers that frames writing and reading practices as "centered around contests over communication" (27). In *The Common Pot* (2009), the Wabanaki scholar Lisa Brooks details the topography in which her ancestors contested Euro-American colonial communication dominance as a "spatialized writing tradition" (11). As she explains, writing and print entered and circulated in Native communities through already established channels of communication. Just as wampum had circulated through forests and watersheds (both physically and symbolically) since time immemorial, so too did alphabetic print and manuscript text follow well-trodden indigenous paths.

Once we acknowledge that Native textual production and consumption arose from within information topographies that were informed by indigenous spatial and material practices, we can more fully appreciate how radically divergent were the actual circuits traveled by Wilson's *Essay* and the "Little Hymn Books Design'd for the Negroes" that Occom mentions from those imagined by Wilson and his cohorts. They flowed, instead, along what Robert Warrior has called the "intellectual trade routes" of colonial America (181). Books were exchanged and writing debated in geographic and political hubs that developed at critical nodes in the interface between British colonial administration and Native space and the black Atlantic. Places like Buffalo Creek, in New York, and Detroit became communication hubs that intertwined print and colonial policy. Yet they remained, as Richard White has reminded us in *The Middle Ground*, "non-state world[s]" (xxvi), where the traditional council ground in the woods, or a kitchen table in a Native cabin or slave quarters, might serve as the center of written sociability just as well as the tavern and salon of the colonies' urban centers.

Occom comments in a letter that playing a central role in a backwoods communications circuit had "made my House a Sort of an Asylum for Strangers both English and Indians" (96). Around his table, literate Native congregants discussed books and debated such topics as "Temporal and Spiritual Concerns" and "what is it that makes a Christian" with their Euro-American backcountry counterparts (276–77). When Occom rode as a missionary circuit rider through this communicative topography, he often preached to mixed congregations of Native peoples, blacks, and poor whites. When he addressed his real and imagined Native audiences in handwritten letters and sermons, he thought of them as "Indians in this Boundless Continent," communing and communicating across a wide nonstate space of ethnic consanguinity rather than across imperial institutions (196).

Similarly, at the other end of the colonial book circuit, booksellers who exported or reprinted works like Wilson's *Essay*—John Oliver of London and Garret Noel of New York, for example—often took on more informal roles for interlopers like Occom in addition to their official practices in the English book

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trade. In his letter to Forfitt, Occom is careful to mention that "Mr Gart Noell Book Seller in New York, is my good Friend" (95). In his letters and journals we find the occasional glimpse of his glancing foray into this part of the English book trade, as in this entry from 1786 in Bennington, Vermont: "towards Night went to the Printers and Coming back I calld on Mrs Robbinson an old Mother in Isreal, and had agreeable Conversation" (324). The same year, in New London, he dropped into a bookshop to enquire about a "New Revised Law Book" and whether it was "in favour of the Indians" (328).

Clergymen like James Sprout, a Philadelphia Presbyterian, and organizations like the Officers of the English Trust for Moor's Charity School procured books for Occom, while Native congregants like Phillip Cuish and Isaac Uppuigui ferried letters and petitions between the Mohegan nation and the backcountry settlements. Occom even pressed Susannah Wheatley, mistress of the poet Phillis Wheatley, "to get me a Singing Book . . . Printed at Salem" (97). Phillis enlisted the aid of David Wooster, a merchant and customs collector, when she feared that her London-published *Poems on Various Subjects* (1773) might be pirated by the "Printers of New Haven." "It will be a great hurt to me," she told Wooster, "preventing any further benefit that I might receive from the Sale of my Copies from England" (170).

Finally, for a select few participants in the English book trade's interethnic communications circuit, such as Wheatley and Occom, authorship served as another node of alternative engagement. Again, this key node in the communications circuit differed significantly for Occom, who is credited with being the first American Indian author of a printed book, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul* (1772). Occom's book ran through some thirteen editions, becoming perhaps the most popular Indian book until the Removal Crisis of 1830. Yet, like Occom's other encounters with the book trade, his authorship confounds the structural assumptions of *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*. To date, no one has adequately described exactly how Occom's book came to be published. What circuit did the sermon manuscript follow? It is the only one of his more than twenty holograph sermons that was printed in his lifetime. Paratextual evidence indicates a mixed audience for the sermon's oral performance—magistrates, together with "Negroes [and] Indians." It also suggests that the book existed in a sensational corner of the book market, produced, as its author notes, from "an uncommon quarter" (177). Extant copies show that it was owned by many non-Native clergy members over several generations, and Latin marginalia in the copy owned by the pastor Joseph Lyman attests that he and other elite readers considered the book "evidence" of God's providence as much as anything else (Round 69). We also know, however, that literate Native people read it and that one, Joseph Johnson, a Mohegan convert, was inspired to print his own commentary on the Moses Paul affair, *Letter from J—h J—n . . . to Moses Paul* (1772).

But it is Occom's second and lesser-known book, *A Choice Collection of Hymns* (1774), that best confirms my thesis that an alternative communications circuit emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century and that new methodology is needed to expose its richness and socially constitutive power for Native and diasporic black communities. To date, Joanna Brooks has offered the most cogent reading of Occom's hymnal, arguing that in its pages Euro-American Christology is woven together with Mohegan sacred migration traditions to establish "the base text for a new, common Christian Indian culture" ("Six Hymns" 70). What remains to be explored is the information topography that this hymnal and books like it both followed and forged. For the book was not merely a product to be consumed but also the embodiment of a social activity (hymn singing) that helped

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constitute the migrant intertribal Christian community that Occom established in upstate New York on land procured from the Oneida.

It is the hymnal's separatist practice, finally, that allows us to connect Occom and Wheatley and Equiano in an interethnic communications circuit spawned by the English book trade but not ultimately contained by it. Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* is intimately tied to his desire for a relocation of free blacks to Sierra Leone. Although Equiano did not live to emigrate to Africa, his will, according to Vincent Carretta, "demonstrates . . . his continued interest in Africa" (365): it bequeathed half his estate to the Sierra Leone Company should his children predecease him. That estate was composed of income garnered from the sale of *The Interesting Narrative*. Indeed, even Wheatley's oft-cited rejection of missionary attempts to send her to Africa can be read in this context as springing from a separatist desire to live in a free black community, with civil institutions and a public sphere constituted by freed slaves. Her main literary effort after manumission, the unsuccessful attempt to launch an American edition of her verse, was no doubt part of that project.

If the interethnic trade in Christian tracts did not function as Wilson imagined, it nonetheless proved significant for the cultural formation of Native and disaporic black communities, structuring alternative engagements with the British Empire that participants like Occom, Equiano, and Wheatley turned to their advantage. Although the trade fostered friendly interchanges among blacks, Native Americans, and their Euro-American allies (epitomized by Occom and Wheatley's celebrated epistolary exchange), it did not ultimately underwrite interethnic, racially diverse communities of Christian fellowship in permanent settlements. When the land for the Brotherton community was deeded to Occom's people, they resolved that the parcel "shall not be possessed by any Persons . . . who are . . . Negroes or Mullatoes" (Murray 242).

Nor did the interethnic trade decide contests over communications dominance among Native and African peoples. Elijah Wimpey, a Mohegan, requested "a colony Law Book, to Guide & Direct us in our Conduct" from the Connecticut legislature so that he could challenge Occom's authority over land tenure in the Brotherton community (Murray 231). At Birchtown, Nova Scotia, where loyalist blacks relocated after the Revolution, John Marrant and Moses Wilkinson "publicly contended as rivals in a bitter Calvinist-Arminian debate" (Brooks and Saillant 11), leading to the publication of Marrant's *Journal of the Rev. John Marrant* (1790). Its preface imagines the Christian afterlife as a kind of public sphere: "We must all appear at that day, where I shall be permitted to speak for myself, where might will not overcome right" (95).

Books like these did not merely contain theology or disciplinary pedagogies; they embodied social interactions. The alternative circuits of the English book trade offered these communities a material means by which to "be carried safe through this troubled world" (95). Although Wilson's *Essay*, Occom's hymnal, and Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* were produced and circulated from within colonial and metropolitan urban centers, their embodied social practices constituted a structural relation of difference between the metropolitan book trade and its nonstate, interethnic colonial other.

Notes

1. As Leon Jackson cogently argues, "African American literary studies in the past thirty years has engaged little with scholarship growing out of the history of the book or any other form of empiricist historicism" (256). He traces this lack of engagement to the totalizing role of Henry Louis Gates's "talking book" trope in early African American literary criticism, which has resulted in a situation where "we know a great deal about the talking book as a *trope*, [but] we know very little about the production, dissemination, or consumption of the books

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that deployed that trope, and still less of the books that were begged, borrowed, stolen, owned, or encountered by the authors who wrote them" (252).

2. The editors of *The Colonial Book* and its contributors point to 1750–60 as a watershed period for colonial newspapers (Amory and Hall 154), coffeehouses (271), booksellers (325), schoolbooks (385), and diversified reading publics (397–99).

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