Narrating Family Lives: Religion and Enslavement in Samuel West's *Memoirs* (1807)

Carsten Junker

"As he professed to be a servant and a disciple of Christ, he received the words of Christ and of his inspired Apostles as the only rule of his faith and of his religious conduct; he could not therefore call any man on earth master..." (Lathrop 16). These are the words of John Lathrop, a pastor, which he delivered at a Unitarian church in Boston in 1808 on the occasion of the funeral of his late colleague, the Rev. Dr. Samuel West (1738-1808). In his eulogy, Lathrop refers to West's religious conviction as a reformed Christian that there was to be no human or institutional mediator between him and God but Christ. As is to be expected of a eulogy, Lathrop's served to praise West highly, and one way to do so consisted in recounting the belief that the deceased could be remembered as "a servant and disciple of Christ," and that he "could therefore not call any man on earth master." Lathrop establishes two positions of "master" and "servant" here. One might argue that cognitively, Lathrop's negative framing of the sentence evokes a positive framing of its propositional content and that, accordingly, both West and Lathrop considered a master-servant relationship a potential, albeit avertible, social form of human interaction. Lathrop's reference to the master-servant dichotomy indeed speaks volumes about the wide range of meanings assigned to the words *master* and *servant*, depending on the semantic field in which they are deployed. Alongside Lathrop's religious use of the terms, abolitionists at the time used them to refer to literal enslavement practices in the context of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas: the beginning of the year 1808—the year that the pastor Samuel West died—also marks the moment in U.S. history when abolitionist petitioning had finally led Congress to officially abolish the trade in enslaved people.

In order to find critical references to the transatlantic slave trade and plantation slavery in un-canonized texts of the early republic, as I set out to do in the context of a larger project on abolitionist writing in North America around 1800,[1] one does not have to resort to reading texts contrapuntally, or against the grain, or between the lines. During my research on abolitionist writing at the American Antiquarian Society, I unearthed an unpublished manuscript by Samuel West, the Unitarian minister from Boston whom his fellow clergyman Lathrop eulogizes, which is remarkable for its passages that briefly but explicitly address slavery in the South in the 1770s. In a "biographical memoir" by Thomas Thacher, added to Lathrop's sermon, there is mention that "he [West] has written a succinct narrative, ... some memoirs of himself and family, ... it is very probable that either the whole, or some parts of this will be published" (10). To this day, West's memoirs in fact have remained unpublished.

The manuscript consists of long passages that reconstruct his family genealogy, detail family anecdotes, and provide reminiscences of his childhood as well as personal reflections on various aspects of life, including marriage, raising his children, death, and on various theological questions. It also includes accounts of historical events of his time such as the outbreak of the Revolutionary War and public affairs. Reflections of personal experiences and political matters during his lifetime go hand in hand, which makes this text by Samuel West paradigmatic for an instantiation of life writing. However, the memoirs are not only remarkable in thematic scope but also worthy of attention because of their shifts in narrative perspective and use of different genres of life narrative. Of special interest in this regard are letters that are integrated into the memoirs. These are letters from West's brother Benjamin West, written during his travels from New Hampshire to South Carolina between 1778 and 1779. Apart from descriptions about

1 This piece originates from research at the American Antiquarian Society (AAS) in Worcester, Massachusetts, for which the AAS and the German Association for American Studies (DGfA) jointly awarded me a Christoph Daniel Ebeling Fellowship in the year 2011-2012. My thanks go to the AAS and the DGfA for affording me the opportunity to enter into productive scholarly exchange with a community of co-fellows and to recover a rich archive of unpublished material on slavery and abolition at the AAS.

the changing climate and landscape on his journey, these epistolary passages in the memoirs recount slavery as one of the central political problems of the times. Benjamin had worked as a teacher on a South Carolina plantation, and in his letters, he reports back to Samuel his observations of enslavement practices in the South.

I argue that the significance of West's memoirs derives from a tension between what the text marks as Samuel's personal project of religious experience and the contrasting *Problem of Slavery* (David Brion Davis), and this tension becomes generative for the memoirs with respect both to their subject matter and formal composition and the interdependence between them. An emphasis on this tension between the personal and the political also allows for a general reconsideration of life narrative as a textual practice: how do selves put their personal experiences in relation to political matters and vice versa, how are political matters reflected through the lens of personal experiences? How do autobiographical selves unfold their lives under particular discursive conditions that they in turn shape in and through writing? As a matter of *textuality*, these are not simply questions of thematic content but also of formal structures such as terms of address and generic framing. There is an endless plurality of forms and voices of life narratives.[2] But it seems that a common denominator of all life writing across time and place is that selves and their lives are constituted in narrative practices along the lines of personal experiences and political affairs.

This essay introduces the unpublished family memoirs of the Reverend Samuel West, and it aims to read them with a focus on placing them in enslavement history. The interplay between the personal and political, then, becomes central in this instance of life writing. How does this interaction play out and come to bear with reference to questions of

2 Today, various forms of life narration "from dispersed global locations" that are "circulated for differing purposes" are mapped and theorized by an ever growing body of life writing scholarship: "In the last two decades, life writing studies has moved from the periphery to an academic center," Sidonie Smith noted in her presidential address at the annual convention of the Modem Language Association in 2011, a claim that was corroborated by the overall theme of the convention, "Narrating Lives," as well as by the choice of "American Lives" as the central topic for the 2012 annual convention of the German Association for American Studies.

religion, and how is the issue of slavery inserted into this dynamic and mediated through the memoirs? In the following, I will first address the thematic and formal scope of the memoirs with reference to Samuel West and his investment in religion. I will then consider in more detail the generic status of his brother Benjamin's letters and their references to the problem of slavery in the larger context of the memoirs to conclude with an assessment of the text as a space that stages the tension between the personal and the political in particular ways.

Self / Religion / Memoirs

The Reverend Samuel West wrote his memoirs in 1807, and they were copied by his son Benjamin West (born 1776) following his father's death in 1808.[3] Image 1 shows the title of the memoirs. Toward the end of his life, once West has retired from his public office, he feels joy in turning his life into text. It seems as if West has lived his life to now write it down, for himself and his readers. What could be a better example for life narration *as* textual practice than West's notion that writing his life down becomes an almost inevitable task that now gives it structure and meaning? In a gesture comparable to Benjamin Franklin's, he also underlines the exemplary character of his narration:

> As retirement then appears necessary to my happiness, how can I improve that retirement better than by retracing the events of my past life? I would to God there was more to please and gratify, either my own, or the minds of those, who may be at the trouble of reading them. And yet I flatter myself there may be found some things both entertaining and useful; some shoals and landmarks may be pointed out, which the unexperienced navigator, warned at my expense may happily avoid. (5) Such is the ease with which I write these memoirs that it amuses without producing any fatigue; and it greatly adds to my pleasure in performing this ser-

3 As a librarian of the American Antiquarian Society noted, there are "three known copies which, being in private hands, have been only with difficulty accessible to the historian. One of these copies, a large calf-bound manuscript over three hundred pages, made by Dr. West's son Benjamin, was recently [in 1945] presented to us by Mr. Nathan Rice of Worcester." (Shipton 282)

> vice that it gratifies two or three persons at least, who are of all others nearest and dearest to my heart. (216)[4]

As far as the construction of Samuel West's life is concerned, the memoirs provide closure; we are given the author/narrator/protagonist's life story from birth to death. The main body of text begins as follows, "I was born on Martha's Vineyard, November 19th old stile, in the year 1738 of reputable Parentage" (9). It ends with an account of his death, anticipated first by West in first person. In the preface, West writes about his feeble state at the age of almost seventy: "I am now drawing towards the close of life in the course of nature. ... The powers of my mind, with my health are much more weakened" (3). West's death is then told from the point of view of his son Benjamin, who is also the transcriber—and possible editor—of the memoirs. In an addendum, Benjamin concludes them in the following way:

> The author of the foregoing family memoirs finished them in the fall of one thousand eight hundred and seven, at that time the disease with which he had been so long afflicted increased to that degree as rendered him totally incapable of further attention to composing, which through his sickness had been his principal amusement. He was now confined to his bed entirely. ... He expired without a groan on Lords day morning the tenth April one thousand eight hundred and eight, at about three o'clock. The Wednesday following the funeral was attended, a sermon was preached by the Revd Doctr J. Lathrop .... (325-27)

The entire memoirs are a monument to West's personal and professional dedication to his religious faith, which runs like a golden thread through the text. As his son praises, "it may be truly said of him that, 'The lingering and very painful disorder which closed his useful life, marked him to be, in the hard task of suffering, as well as in acting, a firm sincere Christian'" (326). Religion is the central theme of Samuel's reflections, and writing serves him to outline his set of beliefs: "I have intermixed so much of Religion as may lead those who read it to a complete discovery of my religious opinions, and I hope do no disservice to the cause of Christianity" (5). Religion is also the major structuring device

4 All quotes are my transcriptions from the original manuscript, without changes in spelling and punctuation.

of the self's life plot; it determines his career as a clergyman, from his studies at Harvard through to his work as chaplain and finally as ordained minister near and in Boston, at a Congregational church that turns Unitarian in 1800. A central passage that highlights religion as a personal affair is the narrative of his conversion. West was born into a Calvinist family but eventually found "all the horrors of Calvinism" (21), as he says, stiflingly dogmatic. His religious conversion is anticipated as an account of his literal personal experience of conversion:

> I can truly say that what at the period lay with the greatest weight on my mind and gave me the most painful affliction was the never having experienced that strange and unnatural kind of conversion or regeneration of which I so often heard from the Desk and found in pious books represented as essential to happiness and the only security against the torments of eternal fire. (21)

For West, his religious beliefs are crucially a matter of personal development and self-discipline. At various points, he speaks about the need for self-restraint and self-control over tempers and passions, to which he refers as "self-government" and "self-command." This shows in a passage such as the following: "But if there is a previous well established habit of self-command founded on religion it will unfailingly enable us to preserve that calmness of temper language and behaviour which give dignity to character and influence to example" (20).

Geopolitical events such as those of the Revolutionary War are present primarily as far as they affect West's personal life. Once he becomes a participant observer of the casualties around him, as he witnesses the outbreak of open armed conflict between British troops and American militiamen during the Battles of Lexington and Concord fought on 19 April 1775, West turns from Loyalist to the British crown into a supporter of American independence. Five members of his congregation die in battle, and the war for him becomes a project of counseling and of taking pastoral care of the remaining family members. He thus frames the war as a conflict that enables him to affirm religious experience as an inter-personal affair: "It is remarkable that the five who fell, all of them had families. ... I visited those families immediately, and with a sympathetic sense of their affliction I gave to some the first intelligence they had of the dreadful event, the death of a Husband and a

Parent" (80). The genre of the memoir here becomes a site for a personal ethics of care based on pastoral work in the face of adversity.

(Br)Other / Slavery / Letters

West dedicates over forty pages of the whole manuscript to his younger brother Benjamin, one of nine brothers and sisters, to whom Samuel has a particularly affectionate relationship. After college, Benjamin decides for a career in law—something Samuel considers divine "Providence" (251)—but the war gets in Benjamin's way and frustrates his plans to settle down as an attorney in New Hampshire. He literally becomes unemployed and, in order "to escape" the "tumults" of the war in the North, decides to accept an offer to work as a tutor for the children of a rich plantation owner in South Carolina:

> But the revolutionary war coming on soon interrupted, and at length completely suspended his business in the practice of the Law. Meeting in Boston with a very inviting offer to visit South Carolina, he was induced to accept it, as the war had not as yet extended to that part of the Continent, he hoped to escape its tumults, see a considerable part of the Country and hereafter return in peace to his situation in Charlestown New Hampshire for which he now felt a very great predilection. (252)

As Benjamin travels from Charlestown, New Hampshire, to Charlestown, South Carolina, he writes letters to Samuel that are integrated into the larger whole of the memoirs, which can be considered a textual strategy on Samuel's part. Samuel introduces them in the following way: "An account of his journey as also some general account of South Carolina its customs and manners I shall give from himself by copying one or two of the letters which I received from him on his arrival, and during the time of his residing there" (253).

There are actually five letters; they span a time period of roughly two years and are directly addressed to Samuel, including descriptions of the climate, natural landscape and the people he meets during his journey by horse from the North all the way through to South Carolina. In this way, they add a kind of travel narrative to the memoir. Benjamin's journey marks a movement to the outside of Samuel's personal retirement retreat and, in that sense, the letters underline a distinction between the interior

and the exterior space of the family memoir; a *here* versus a *there*. They also add dramatic tension to the larger text when Benjamin, in his last letter, writes about how he has become a soldier and subsequently been taken as a prisoner of the British troops. He ends the letter in the following, "Adieu my Dear Brother. Continue to think of and love me. If I shall have my reason the last hour of my life shall be employed in writing to you that you may know my thoughts to the last" (275). The letter can be read as adding dramatic tension here because as readers we are left to speculate whether this indeed is the last sign of Benjamin's life. The frame narrative resumes with Samuel anticipating the uncertainty of his brother's return to the North. Samuel writes,

> I had both from himself and others repeated accounts of his sickness, and at length received an account of his death. It was what I had been expecting and was therefore in a measure prepared for it. I did not indeed at first give credit to the report. But after some months had elapsed and I had gained no intelligence to the contrary, I was led to suppose that it must be true. I suffered therefore all the painful impressions of such an event, and every one who has read these memoirs must be convinced that it was no common degree of affliction which I felt on the occasion. Nor was I relieved from it until his return, and ocular demonstration of his being alive. (277-78)

The report about Benjamin's death eventually proves to be unfounded when Samuel describes the scene of Benjamin's return home. This passage of his re-appearance creates narrative suspense in a gothic mode, which deserves mention here because it points to the textual constructedness of the memoirs, to their artifacticity.

To return to Benjamin's description of his observations of enslavement practices in the South: his first remarks about slavery are part of an ethnographic description of Virginia.

> This is the most miserable place 1 ever saw. It is but thinly inhabited. The inhabitants extreme poor, and a proof of Mons[sr] Montesquieu's observation, "that all indolent nations are proud" for indolence and pride are characteristics of these people.[5] I was often vexed to see a ragged scurvy fellow stand bawling half an hour for a negro to take our horses rather than touch them himself or even show us the stable. Their negro's are many of them entirely naked, and the white women view ever those that are adult of both sexes with the same indifference that they do their cattle or horses. (256)

Benjamin pictures a scene that provides ample evidence for what Hortense Spillers has described as "pomotroping," that is to say, the ambivalent exposure, over-determination, and dehumanization of the enslaved through the enslavers.[6] What is noteworthy about this passage is that Benjamin seems to voice a critique, if an implicit one, of the ways that white Virginians treat their enslaved laborers. His disdainful comment about the ways in which the "ragged scurvy fellow" treats "a negro" is remarkable here because it installs a normative attitude toward how whites should interact with the enslaved. Also, Benjamin's description of the white women's indifferent and dehumanizing gaze at enslaved laborers seems to bespeak his surprise and might point to his sense of shared humanity between black and white. Affectively, Benjamin is "vexed." He reacts in a distressed way, perhaps with shame, to the scene he describes. But he revokes this response quickly, as that

5 The reference is to Charles de Montesquieu's considerations of the impact of climate and terrain on people's manners, put forward in Book XIV, "Of Laws in Relation to the Nature of the Climate," in his *Spirit of the Laws*, first published in 1748, first translated into English by Thomas Nugent in 1750.

6 "[T]he female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific. ... 1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time—in stunning contradiction—the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming *being for* the captor; 3) in this absence *from* a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of 'otherness;' 4) as a category of 'otherness,' the captive body translates into a potential for pomotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general 'powerlessness,' resonating through various centers of human and social meaning." (Spillers 206)

short passage is immediately followed by a neutral description of the eating habits of white Virginians. In a different section primarily concerned with the economic and agricultural aspects of plantation slavery and the exploitative working conditions of enslaved laborers, Benjamin's account shows less of an affective response. His acknowledgement of the "sufferings" of the enslaved and his framing of them as "fellow creatures" is in line with a conventional sentimentalist discourse of abolition at the time:

> There is no difficulty in a man's employing a thousand negros in planting rice and indigo, though there are but very few who own that number. But it is uncommon for one man to own five, six, or seven hundred. One hundred is thought as many as is profitable to work on one plantation. These are governed by an overseer, armed with a broad sword, and under him a black driver always carries a whip, the inventor of which I presume never felt the least pain at the sufferings of his fellow creatures. (263-64)

Elsewhere, Benjamin addresses the judicial dimensions of slavery, particularly the incentive that the Southern legal system provides for slave owners to benefit materially from bringing the enslaved before the court:

> They have also a brief way of trying negros for capital crimes. The Court consists of one justice and two freeholders, who order the negro before them, try him and hang him up immediately. But there would perhaps be but few negros prosecuted were it not from interested motives. For when a negro is hanged by authority, the Government pay his master his full value which if he shoots him he looses. This brings man to the Gallows who would otherwise receive their pass to the other world from the musquet of the master. (267)

In sum, there are three passages in the letters that address enslavement practices, and apart from considerations of the economic and judicial dimensions of slave labor and punishment, they are noteworthy for their more or less explicit attention to the ethical challenge slavery poses. In the following passage, Benjamin addresses his brother directly, sharing his observations while at the same time evading detailed descriptions:

> I have many anecdotes of the behaviour and treatment of Negros, but as they would rather give you pain than pleasure 1 shall not relate them. But only observe that notwithstanding the despicable opinion which is generally entertained of that order of beings, there are many who give evident tokens of courage resolution and genius which in happier circumstances would transmit their names with honor to posterity. And yet a man will shoot a negro with as little emotion as he shoots a hare. Several instances of which have come within my own knowledge since I have been here. (266-67)

Benjamin finds himself in a situation that confronts him with the notion of an utter difference between white and black. He witnesses plantation overseers shooting slaved laborers like animals, events that performatively enact the dehumanization of blacks, and this stands in direct contrast to the notion in which Benjamin seems invested, the notion of a shared humanity between black and white. The passage above bespeaks his refusal to accept anthropological claims to difference and value, and it gives evidence of his refusal to become emotionally indifferent toward the enslaved. The way in which this conflict is expressed here is also representative of two competing positions in a larger discursive framework at the time. In debates about slavery from the 1770s onwards—Roxann Wheeler and George Boulukos have argued this point cogently and comprehensively—the assumption that humanity was a shared feature of all human beings came increasingly under attack by proponents of slavery who argued that racial difference was indeed meaningful and who distributed in unequal ways a sense of human value to blacks and whites (Wheeler 37-38; Boulukos 7). The passage shows that the signa- tory of the letter is an opponent of slavery, which is corroborated by the difficulty he has in relating the realities of enslavement practices to his brother back in Massachusetts. As Benjamin writes, anecdotes of the treatment of the enslaved might be too painful for Samuel to hear.

Not-free, Not-me / Thematic Hierarchy / Generic Supplementary

Slavery is a thematic undercurrent in the overall design of West's memoirs, excluded from the memoirs proper, yet incorporated in the letters within the framework of the larger whole. While the memoirs are the prevailing mode of West's narrative, Benjamin's letters flank his

brother's life writing practices. And while the memoirs are the site for Samuel to stage religion as a project of personal experience, his brother's letters feature as a site where the political problem of slavery can be addressed, a problem that poses a crucial, if unacknowledged challenge to the religious faith of Samuel's self. The text thus negotiates a complex relation between questions of the personal and the political, establishing a hierarchy between these differences along lines of an ethics of personal care associated with Samuel's self-referential memoirs versus the problem of slavery that finds an expression in Benjamin's letters.

The memoirs become a space in which West arranges various topics according to matters of personal importance. His religious faith is the lens through which he makes sense of his life and the lives of his relatives as well as the world around him, and which enables him to turn an event such as the Revolutionary War into an interpersonal affair. Slavery, in contrast, becomes an issue to include in the memoirs through his brother's point of view, but it also remains something to keep at a safe distance. It is an issue far away and relevant to someone else. That way, enslavement and the processes of propertization and dehumanization that result from it, remain outside the sphere of Samuel's personal reflections. As such, the text seems to participate and reenact on a textual and epistemic level the processes of exclusion that are constitutive for *Slavery as Social Death* (Orlando Patterson).

We are here dealing with a supplementarity of genres, a force field of voices that distributes attention unequally and in hierarchical ways. In this polyphony of generic framings, an "axis of ethics" (to borrow from Michel Foucault's essay on the question, "What is Enlightenment?") that is concerned with the self and his appropriate ways of self-government is assigned to the main body of text—the memoirs. At the same time, an "axis of power" which is concerned with the question of the Other of the self in the discourse of the self, and which addresses the question: "How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations" (Foucault 49), is shifted to the epistolary framework of the letters, where it inhabits the margins. It is safely tucked away there.

I contend that it is slavery that poses a fundamental challenge to Samuel West's ethical program of religion, and that his memoirs are paradigmatic for this very dynamic, in which a writing self comes into existence through what is excluded from its center of attention and from

his own sphere of sociality. In West's text, it is the epistolary mode in which that Other of his discourse is contained. That position of the Other takes ultimate form and shape in a very specific way. It is an Other in the racial making: the figure of the enslaved laborer on the Southern plantation.

To learn about slavery in relation to life writing practices today, one merely needs to turn to the vast body of scholarship on slave narratives—which we may more accurately call "freedom narratives," as Paul Lovejoy has recently suggested (8).[7] Recovering significant but unpublished material such as West's memoirs may add yet another perspective to an understanding of the intricate and notorious dialectics of enslavement and freedom that were being negotiated at the time. For, as Toni Morrison has noted, "in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free, but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me" (38). West's memoirs are part of that dynamic. He could "not call any man on earth master" but had no words of his own to speak about the masters his brother encountered in the South.

Samuel West used his voice to give an account of himself and his family, his life narrative, however, is not only constituted through him. The manuscript serves as an example for life narratives as complex textures of vocal references in which different voices give context and shape to particular lives. Samuel's voice is supplemented by his brother's epistolary passages and his son's addendum. This brings us back to Lathrop, whose eulogist perspective is anticipated in the latter's account of the funeral: Lathrop's eulogy further adds to a potentially endless proliferation of voices that make up Samuel West's life narrative.

7 Lovejoy distinguishes between "narratives of freedom composed by individuals who had once been free in Africa from accounts by those who were born into slavery in the Americas," and makes an argument for referring specifically to the former as "freedom narratives" (91).

Image 1: Mss. title page of Samuel West's Family Anecdotes and Memoirs. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.[8]

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8 A penciled annotation to the right of West's name reads, "1738-1808, Harvard 1761." An annotation on the bottom right of the page reads, "Cousin of Rev. Dr. Samuel West (Harvard 1754)." West's cousin and namesake, the Rev. Dr. Samuel West (1730-1807) was a delegate to the 1788 Massachusetts Convention that ratified the federal Constitution. The librarian's annotations can be considered indicative of the social positioning of West's family.

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