Interrogating the Interview as Genre: Five Cases over Two Hundred Years

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Picture this:

An interview with Michelle and Barack Obama from 1996 that was published in January 2009, weeks before Obama's election as President of the United States, in which they speak about the compatibility of family life and political work. // Interviews with people born into enslavement around the mid-nineteenth century, conducted in the nineteen thirties, decades after the interviewees had legally been manumitted. // A book titled *Who Speaks for the Negro?* from 1965, written by white Southern writer Robert Penn Warren, based on interviews with outstanding personalities of the Civil Rights Movement. // A best-selling novel titled *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) which would win its author William Styron the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and, at the same time, create an uproar among Black writers and intellectuals who criticized it for distorting the fictionalized portrayal of a figure they considered a heroic resistance fighter against the enslavement regime in the first half of the nineteenth century. The novel springs from a historical document based on an interview that Nat Turner gave his white court-appointed lawyer Thomas Gray in 1831. // Late eighteenth-century pamphlets giving interview-based accounts of enslaved men's life courses and the crimes they allegedly committed, for which they were to be executed, as well as their confessions and voluntary conversion to Christianity, so that they might be redeemed from their sins in life after death.

Covering a wide spectrum of epochs and text types, from the sentimental and personal story of a married couple in the wake of their ascendancy to the U.S. presidency to spectacular broadsheets covering confessions and conversions of fugitive enslaved men before their public execution in the late eighteenth-century, we might ask: what do these seemingly disjointed texts have in common? These texts and this is my concern here, are all based on interviews. This small-scale collection of texts may sub-

stantiate and lend itself to a diachronic reading of a discourse of race—a reading which might emphasize a historical trajectory from transatlantic enslavement and the U.S. plantation system and resistance to it all the way up to twenty-first century global Black leadership. I will, however, bypass such a (teleological) narrative. My reading is instead prompted by questions these texts raise with reference to the shared communicative structure on which they are based. The body of texts assembled here thus sets an agenda for a systematic interrogation of the epistemology of the interview as genre, of which central research questions, framed in general terms, are:

What constitutes an interview?
Who is being interviewed?
Who is the interviewer?
What impact does the interview have on the position of the interlocutors?
What is the impact of power differentials in the interview setting on the interview?
How and where is the interview published?
At whom is the interview directed?

To develop a theory of the interview as genre—which has not been done to date—it becomes necessary to speak about historically and culturally specific dynamics and effects of the interview as genre, and, more specifically, about the functions of the interview in positioning its speakers in particular ways and investing or divesting them with authority to speak. Such dynamics become particularly visible in the material examined here which, however disparate, is based on interviews conducted in the United States from 1795 to 1996, in which speakers who are racialized as Black are positioned as interviewees, and which are largely conducted, edited, and published by speakers racialized as white. The material could be read for its documentary evidence, for the ways in which it provides a platform for interviewees to articulate themselves, as it seems to give voice to them, heaving them into speech by providing them with speaking positions from which they can give accounts of themselves. It may also be read—and this makes the picture more composite—for the ways in which its interviewers interrogate their interviewees and frame their articulations, speaking for them and appropriating their life accounts for their own interests.

The texts examined here do not merely serve as starting points for a proposed agenda of an epistemology of the interview as genre, but they may also alter an understanding of genre theory in general. When I pro-

pose to develop a theory of the interview as genre, I suggest that genre theory—which is oftentimes discussed as if it were universally applicable—be read for the specific temporal and spatial uses to which a genre is put; in other words, that it be particularized and, in that sense, politicized. At the same time, genre theory allows for a discussion of the material under investigation from new angles and in terms that highlight what might otherwise be overlooked. Genre theory helps to conceptualize the communicative dynamics at play in interview-based texts as well as their effects on audiences. If we assume that "genres actively shape knowledge of the world [and] create effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility" (Frow 2006, 2), we move away from supposedly objective accounts of genre classifications which, in themselves, have always already involved mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion and their concomitant modes of (de)valorization. Genre theory may allow for examining "the kind of speaking position that is constructed for me and you by [a] genre, and the kinds of effect of knowledge and truth it generates" (Frow 2006, 2). As the following examples will show, interviews may indeed create such powerful effects.

In January 2009, the French newspaper *Le Monde* published the interview with Michelle and Barack Obama that had been conducted by U.S. American photographer Mariana Cook in 1996, for a volume of photographic and essayistic portraits of married couples that would be published under the title of *Couples: Speaking from the Heart* (2000). In the interview, Michelle und Barack Obama disclose how they met, how their family backgrounds have shaped them, and what they are aiming at in their respective careers. Barack Obama ran for, and won, a seat in the Illinois Senate during the year of the interview. Michelle Obama, noticeably, speaks emphatically and critically about the difficulties of making the demands of her husband's future work in public office compatible with private aspects of their lives—friends, children, travel. Barack Obama tones down this concern, and summarizes his political agenda by using a rhetoric that reconciles questions concerning the private and the public on the basis of shared values: "My priority is to return social values to public debate, because we are all one big family, transcending racial or class differences. We have obligations and responsibilities towards one another" ("Sacre Bleu," n. pag.). Barack Obama was already stressing an ethos of mutual responsibility thirteen years before he would be inaugurated into presidential office. He extends the image of the family to a "we" that encompasses

the whole U.S. nation, seeking to transcend boundaries of race and class. Obama thus anticipates debates on a post-racial U.S. society whose proponents would consider his election crucial evidence for their arguments.[1]

The Obama interview had not been included in Cook's coffee table book; it was published in *Le Monde* for the first time, with *The New Yorker* following suit and publishing excerpts from Cook's interview a day prior to Barack Obama's inauguration in 2009 (Cook 2009, n. pag.). Not only is this a conspicuous date, but what seems more noteworthy are the ways in which the magazine turns the interview with the presidential couple-to-be into a *home story*.[2] Under the heading "A Couple in Chicago," the magazine only prints those passages in which the Obamas speak about the mutual respect for their families and the admiration for each other. One could say that *The New Yorker*, in landing this timely journalistic coup, provides the candidate and his wife with a public platform and lends them an ear. But this also comes at the expense of domesticating and sentimentalizing the image of the couple; by reducing them to their private sphere, the edited interview dis(re)members the political dimensions of the initial, more politically charged interview.

This observation points to general questions pertaining to the dynamics at play in such published interviews as generic framework—dynamics that unfold at the moment of interaction between interview partners and that extend to practices of publication. Throughout this process, interviewees vie for control over the interpretation of social realities and personal experiences in their interest. This process is staged, however. I propose to read such a text as an instantiation of a genre that structures communication along the lines of a particular dialogic structure, akin to other dialogic genres such as speech, sermon, pamphlet, or essay.[3] Approaching interviews as genre, that is considering them as generic *frames* makes it possible for us to analyze how they provide speakers with positions to speak in particular structures of address within a text and in relation to an imagined audience beyond it, including processes of publication and acts of reading. If Cook's interview with the Obamas points to the ways in which the speaking posi-

1 For an analysis of the observation that "Barack Obama's ascent has amplified a national mythology of racial progress in the US multiculturalist age," and a critical discussion of the "racial logic [that] remains at play in the moment of a 'post-civil rights' Black presidency" see, for instance, Rodriguez (2011, 17).

2 "Home story" is a term used in German to refer to journalistic contributions that portray famous persons in their private homes.

3 For a study on the epistemology of the dialogic structure of the essay, see Junker (2010).

tions of the participants of the interview (including that of the interviewer) are marked by the workings of race and gender, the politics of publication also speak to the racialized and gendered conceptions of Barack Obama's body politic between the poles of the private and the public.

The interview between Cook and the Obamas shows that those interviewed have to be well-known or have to have achieved public significance to qualify as interviewees. At the same time, an interview may also change the position and enhance the public relevance of an interviewee (and interviewer). It may be the interview that authorizes the interlocutors and assigns them importance. The position of the interviewer may also valorize the interview. As a frame, the interview ascribes meaning to the interlocutors, providing positions of enunciation and roles of conduct that make the interlocutors actors in a staged and structured mode of communication.

Examining interviews as their own genre thus raises questions of narrative authority: how does the genre provide or refuse speaking positions for those who do not necessarily have access to such positions and allow them to authorize their speaking; how, for instance, do we assess the logic of the authenticity of someone's voice if we are to assume that any reference to this authenticity, based on an "authority of experience" (Diamond and Edwards 1977), is a staged strategy of authorization validated and consummated through readerly expectations?[4]

In the following, I examine the interview as a genre in its own right with a special focus on cases of interviews that were conducted and given, to use Saidiya V. Hartman's words, in the "afterlife of slavery" (2007, 6). They span three historical time periods: the later half of the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies, the nineteen thirties, and the decades around the year 1800.

4 Appeals to "the authority of experience" served (white) second-wave feminists to "validate women's actual lives and perceptions over against masculinist constructions thereof" (Berubé 2005, 122). Joan W. Scott challenged such appeals to "experience as uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation," arguing that this would foreclose attempts at "exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world," thus at investigating the sets of discursive conditions that shape perceptions of experience in the first place (1991, 777).

The Interview during and after Enslavement

Around the year 1937, formerly enslaved men and women gave more than two thousand and three hundred interviews in the context of the Federal Writer's Project (FWP), a scheme of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal that was expected to lower the unemployment rate and boost the national U.S. economy. As one of the "Works Progress Administration" (WPA) programs, the FWP had been administered to create jobs for unemployed writers and journalists. But the high rate of unemployment alone was not enough reason for the interest in interviewing people who were born into enslavement and had largely reached an age of above eighty by the time they were interviewed. Black writers in particular had an interest in collecting autobiographical testimonies by former slaves. It was in Florida that a group of Black writers joined to form a FWP group. The famous anthropologist, essayist, and novelist Zora Neale Hurston also belonged to this group.[5] The interviews they conducted provided them with an opportunity to map out a distinct and singular notion of Black Culture, and they also served to assist in the reconstruction of a past that was useful for an understanding of the present. This early mode of oral history writing could help revise images of slavery from the perspective of the formerly enslaved, in order to contest the persistent racist myth of the docile, grateful slave—a myth perpetuated by the dominant historiography of the nineteen thirties,[6] and which Black historians and sociologists such as Charles S. Johnson and W. E. B. Du Bois challenged.[7]

The majority of interviewers, however, where white and oftentimes direct descendants of former plantation owners. Perhaps they had ethnographic interests, or they sought to distance themselves from the enslavement regime that their ancestors had upheld. Many interviews were conducted in states where regional FWP units were directed by white women, which is reminiscent of the strong position of white women in mid-nineteenth-century abolition.[8] Whatever the motives of the interviewers, it is

5 For a collection of Hurston's material from this period, see Hurston (1999).

6 For a monograph symptomatic of this dominant strand of historiography, see Phillips (1918).

7 For background information in this paragraph and the following, I have drawn on Yetman's (2001) concise introduction to the WPA slave narrative collection.

8 The "achievement of the Arkansas Project—whose Director, Bernice Babcock, had a special interest in the ex-slave narratives—exceeded that of any other state […] the nearly seven hundred Arkansas narratives constitute almost one-third of the entire col-

clear that the interests they brought to the setting as well as their racial positioning had an impact on the course and outcome of the interview: "The relative absence of black interviewers introduced an important source of bias, for the interviewer's race was a significant factor in eliciting responses from the former slaves" (Yetman 2001, n. pag.). This is verified by historian Paul Escott:

> "As might be expected, the black interviewers obtained information that white workers could not get. There was more honesty in the all-black interviews and less obeisance to social rituals. In most Federal Writers' Project narratives, even those who were harshly critical of their former masters often found something complimentary to say about them first. Racial etiquette required that the former slaves express gratitude and respect for their white folks." (Escott 1979, 9)

26 percent of all interviewees responding to white interviewers gave unfavorable and very unfavorable accounts of their former owners compared to almost 39 percent of unfavorable responses by those interlocutors who responded to Black interviewers (Escott 1979, 11). What resounds here is a strategy that author Charles Weldon Johnson had noted as a dilemma of "double audience" for Black writers. In variation of the Du Boisian concept of "double consciousness" (Du Bois 1999, 11), Johnson refers to strategies of appropriately addressing Black and white audiences, respectively:

> "The moment a Negro writer takes up his pen or sits down to his typewriter he is immediately called upon to solve, consciously or unconsciously, this problem […]. To whom shall he address himself, to his own black group or to white America?" (Johnson 1928, 477).

The collection of WPA interview-based slave narratives largely disappeared in the archives of the Library of Congress after the late nineteen thirties, until they were republished from 1972 onwards.[9] The renewed interest they garnered in the early nineteen seventies may be ascribed to the fact that they answered to a demand generated by the Black Power Movement for a writing of history from the perspectives of the formerly enslaved and for a critical analysis of the historical causes for prevailing social inequalities.

lection" (Yetman 2001, n. pag.). The overall project was coordinated by John Lomax, a white Southerner, who instructed local and state units in April 1937 with systematically conducting the interviews.

9 See George Rawick (1972); Rawick et al. (1977; 1979). The collection of the slave narratives from the Federal Writers' Project is digitized today and can be accessed online (*Born in Slavery* 2001).

Considering differences among the interviewees in terms of age, gender, geographical location, as well as working and living conditions, this large body of interviews also provoked historians into debating how representative they might be for the reconstruction of enslavement, but this would of course assume that any such objective reconstruction would indeed be possible or desirable. Rather than considering these interviews to be reliable and factual documents, they should be considered narrative accounts from specific viewpoints, generated in particular through hierarchical communicative contexts and shaped by those who recorded them. Hartman has identified a set of problems inherent in these interviews that concern, among others,

> "the ability of those interviewed to recall what had happened sixty years earlier, the use of white interviewers who were sometimes the sons and daughters of former owners in gathering the testimony, [the] construction of black voice by mostly white interviewers through the grotesque representation of what they imagined as black speech, the questions that shaped these interviews, and the artifice of direct reported speech when, in fact, these interviews were transcribed non verbatim accounts […]." (Hartman 1997, 11)

Given these difficulties, Hartman answers the question of "how does one use these sources?" in the following way:

> "At best with the awareness that a totalizing of history cannot be reconstructed from these interested, selective, and fragmentary accounts and with an acknowledgment of the interventionist role of the interpreter, the equally interested labor of historical revision, and the impossibility of reconstituting the past free from the disfigurements of present concerns." (Hartman 1997, 11)

The historiographical interest in these autobiographical interviews—an interest that should also focus on the interviewers—corresponded to a concurrent attentiveness in Literary Studies toward those slave narratives which had been written, edited, and published in the antebellum period to propel formal abolition. As noted above, power differentials between Black writers and white editors, publishers, and audiences are at work in these late eighteenth and nineteenth-century testimonies as well, and this overdetermining discursive framework has became a central object of literary inquiry in the scholarship on these texts. The resurgent interest both in the WPA interviews as well as the previously written accounts has thus sought to give answers to the question of representation in the twofold meaning of the term: who may speak for whom, and how.

This question was raised with great clarity by a white Southern writer in the mid-nineteen sixties, and this brings me to a further instantiation of interview-based texts. In 1965, Robert Penn Warren (1905–1989),[10] the threefold Pulitzer Prize awardee, published a book under the title:

Who Speaks for the Negro?

It is the cover of the book—featuring its inquisitive title on top and the author's name below it—which gives away an answer to this very question: it is Warren itself who acts as mouthpiece, taking on the role of spokesman. Indeed, the volume teaches its readers to know better than *not* to judge the book by its cover. *Who Speaks for the Negro?* is a collection of transcribed and edited interviews that Warren had conducted with influential authors and political leaders of the Civil Rights Movement "whose influence is from the periphery" (blurb on the backside cover), and whose voices he intends to make accessible to a broader audience. The tacit assumption that his audience is white may not least be inferred from Warren's descriptions of his interlocutors. Warren, for instance, laboriously enlightens his readers that they should not be surprised to find the president of a historically Black college, Dr. Felton Grandison Clark of Southern University, suave and worldly: "Dr. Clark is tall and carries himself well, is extremely well-groomed—with small touches of elegance like the discreetly turned-back cuffs of the sleeves of his gray suit—speaks in a voice of fine natural modulation, has poise and self-command, and is charming," which, as Warren notes, could by all means be expected: "In fact, I have yet to meet the president of a Negro college or university who is not charming" (1965, 5). This paternalistic tone runs like a thread through the whole volume, in which the direct quotes from Warren's interviewees are embedded in his own reflections on sociopolitical concerns. In one passage, he ponders his own discomfort at his former favorable attitude toward segregation: "Back in the winter of 1929–30, […] I had written an essay on the Negro in the South. […] In fact, while writing it, I had experience some vague discomfort, like the discomfort you feel when your poem doesn't quite come off […]. The essay was a cogent and humane defense of segregation" (1965, 10–11).[11] While the passage is self-critical, it also reads too light-heartedly; Warren's unease about his prior

10 Warren received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1947 for his novel *All the King's Men*, and the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1958 and 1979, respectively.

11 The essay is titled "The Briar Patch," see Warren (2006).

errors shows him confronting his shame in a somewhat too self-absorbed way.

Warren also holds the upper hand in structuring the entire volume. Not only has he "chosen the sections which seem to [him] most significant and exciting" (Foreword, n. pag.); he also has the final editorial-typographical say when cutting off transcribed passages of his interviewees half-way through a sentence to comment on keywords directly and inserting his own ruminations about a subject matter. Again, the interview with Clark serves as an example:

> "WARREN: Let's turn to another topic. Why should the Negro Revolution occur now—and not , say, thirty years ago?
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> CLARK: It's part of a world movement for freedom, for a sense of identity—
>
> I seize the word *identity*. It is a keyword. You hear it over and over again. On this word will focus, around this word will coagulate, a dozen issues, shifting, shading into each other. […]
>
> But Dr. Clark is continuing:
>
> CLARK: … and we see that there are other people who feel as we do. […]" (Warren 1965, 16–17)

The structure of the book, the attitude of Warren's editor-author-narrator-interviewer-protagonist, and his positioning within the discursive field of the mid-sixties raise crucial questions that pertain to an assessment of the functions and effects of his "Speak[ing] for the Negro." Years ago, Linda Alcoff addressed what she calls "the problem of speaking for others" (1991–1992). This problem of speaking for others—of vicarious speaking—results from a recognition that a speaker's location is "epistemically salient" and that certain privileged locations are "discursively dangerous" (Alcoff 1991–1992, 7). Speaking as a privileged subject for or on behalf of less-privileged speakers potentially results in increasing or reinforcing their oppression, not least because it may draw a problematic distinction and homogenize those spoken for into an undifferentiated group. It potentially results in reproducing power differentials, "in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for," and such acts may exercise and "practice a kind of discursive coercion and even a violence" (Alcoff 1991–1992, 6–7).[12] This prompts a reassessment of the dynamics at play in War-

12 Alcoff notes that a speaker's social location "has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claim and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one's speech. The creation of women's studies and African-American studies departments was founded on this very belief: that both the study of and the advocacy for the oppressed must come to

ren's volume: does he appropriate the perspectives of his interviewees to capitalize on them; does he incorporate their vantage points and knowledge to claim leadership in forming public opinion, because he would otherwise lose control?

Against the backdrop of these questions, I propose a reading of the book that considers it a response to the highly audible voices of Civil Rights and Black Power protagonists included in the book, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. *Who Speaks for the Negro?* seems Warren's investment in defending his racialized white speaking position in the arena of pubic debate. It becomes the result of a tremendous effort to buttress and solidify his powerful discursive pervasiveness—a position of discursive dominance apparently not stable per se. By staging himself as a mouthpiece for Black politicians and intellectuals, Warren implicitly makes invisible that they had already spoken for themselves, and had claimed this as their right for decades. The struggle for discursive self-determination had been well under way. In 2008, forty years after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. a symposium at the *Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities* at Vanderbilt University made a loaded riposte under the telling title "We Speak for Ourselves" (2014).[13]

According to Ashraf Rushdy, the debate over *The Confessions of Nat Turner* by William Styron (1967) marks one crucial moment in which a new discursive formation on slavery gets mobilized by an "emergent post-civil rights era black intelligentsia [that] rallied itself around […] interrelated issues of historical and cultural representation" (1999, 54–55). The publication of this novel by white Southern writer Styron aroused indignation among Black intellectuals and provoked the publication of a volume of literary criticism in 1968, edited by John Henrik Clarke, that was subtitled *Ten Black Writers Respond*. The contributors of this collection contested Styron's first-person literary portrayal of the historical figure of Nat Turner, who had led a revolt against slavery in 1831 Virginia, as being a distorted image of a fanatic which thus reinforced racist stereotypes. Styron's critics saw the favorable reception of the novel on the part of estab-

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be done principally by the oppressed themselves" (1991–1992, 7). Black feminist writers and theorists famously pointed out that analogizing women's studies and African-American studies, by default, coded the former as white and the latter as male, see Hull et al. (1982).

13 This is also the title of a study in the field of environmental justice, addressing environmental racism by analyzing the disproportionately high exposure of racialized communities to environmental pollution (Bullard and Alston 1990).

lished critics as a response to prevalent fears of contemporary Black Power leaders. Clarke thus asks: "Have they failed to see Nat Turner as a hero and revolutionist out of fear that they might have to see H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael the same way?" (viii–ix). For Styron's critics, moreover, the novel was "part of a social project in which African American culture is both appropriated and denied its history" (Rushdy 1999, 55). As in the case of Warren, the debate over Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* centered around questions pertaining to the twofold meaning of representation, and as Rushdy notes, neither "the issue of who is empowered to speak for a cultural tradition has […] yet been resolved, nor has the issue of artistic license in a multiethnic society" (1999, 55).

What is of interest in this amply documented debate is the fact that Styron's novel builds on an interview that Nat Turner gave his white court-appointed lawyer Thomas Gray in 1831.[14] Gray conducted the interview before Turner's execution and had it published shortly after.[15] The critics of the novel do not merely address the ways in which Styron may have manipulated this historical document; they also ponder how the original interview setting may have elicited a particular version of the truth that is based on the blatant power differential between Gray and Turner. In a contribution titled "Nat's Last White Man," *Ebony Magazine* senior editor Lerone Bennett, Jr., sets the record of Turner's image as fanatic straight, as it were, when he returns the gaze from Turner back to Gray: "Nat Turner, his deed done, is sitting in a prison cell regarding Thomas Gray, a treacherous and unctuously condescending white man who is trying to worm his way into the black psyche for purposes of white aggrandizement. Nat regards this specimen with distaste and repulsion" (Bennett 1968, 3). The interview setting must indeed have been far from neutral, but rather than aiming at a reconstruction of historical facts,[16] Bennett's perspective is a reminder that the interview itself as well as its reception constitute nothing more or less than a bundle of accounts of historical 'facts,' framed, originally, by a white lawyer, and followed by numerous mediations of this account by various interested parties.

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14 See Rushdy (1999), who dedicates a whole chapter of his monograph on neo-slave narratives to the debate.

15 The Turner-Gray interview is reproduced in the appendix of Clarke's edited volume (1968, 92–117).

16 For instance, with reference to historiographical work undertaken by Henry Irving Tragle (1970), Rushdy discusses the possibility that Gray had broken Turner's enslaved wife under torture to obtain Turner's papers (Rushdy 1999, 60; Tragle 1970, 145–46).

In her short story aptly titled "Mediations on History," Shirley Anne Williams (1995) takes up the praxis of the interview to show how the powerful position of a male white interviewer results in a shamelessly willful misreading of his Black female interviewee, who awaits a death sentence for her involvement in what the law reads as a slave insurrection and what, from her perspective, constitutes an act of survival. In the story, a writer conducts the interview not only to extract a confession about his interviewee's involvement in the events, but also to capitalize on her story; he plans to write a book under the sensational title *The Roots of Rebellion and the Means of Eradicating Them* (Williams 1995, 69). Williams's fictionalized staging of the interview itself can be considered part of a larger structure of writing back, showing that the white interviewer does not listen and willingly fails to recognize the perspective of the enslaved woman.[17]

Gray's 1831 *Confessions of Nat Turner* were preceded by earlier confessional narratives from the late eighteenth century of Black men sentenced to death on accounts of allegations of minor and capital crimes. Awaiting the execution of their death sentences, these so-called dying speeches relate Black men confessing the crimes they allegedly committed, including passages, moreover, in which the confessants declare their conversion to Christianity for the sake of their redemption.[18] Based on interviews just like the one given by Turner, these texts are highly over-determined by the editorial and publishing framework of their white interviewers.

Consider, for example, an interview from 1795, in which a white interlocutor called Jonathan Plummer conducted with a fugitive of whom we only know the name of Pomp. Like the fictional protagonist in William's story, Plummer also provides the narrative framework for Pomp's narrative; he is "one of the first authors to try to earn a living with his pen in the years following the American Revolution" (Hutchins 2004, n. pag.). Plummer states clearly that there is no authentic material of Pomp's own making; he notes that he as not only recorded the runaway's confession but has also edited the interview and, in a palimpsestic mode, over-written the enslaved man's words: "I […] have taken the liberty to arrange the matter in my own way, […] to word his thoughts more elegantly […] than he was able to express them" (Pomp and Plummer 1795, n. pag.). A white writer and printer here claims to be speaking for an enslaved man under sentence of death, but in fact appropriates that man's voice for his own purposes,

17 My thanks go to Marie-Luise Löffler for alluding me to Williams's story.

18 For a thorough study of these dying speeches, see Junker (forthcoming).

one of which is selling the broadside on which the dying speech is printed. The selling point of such interview-based narratives as Pomp's are to be found no less in the criminal offences of which the interviewees are charged and convicted than in the violent spectacle of the executions which await the interviewees.

The interview-based confessions of Turner and Pomp may be read as building blocks that thwart their articulations. Turner and Pomp thus become "impossible witness[es]" (McBride 2001, 142) to their own enslavement because they are not able to articulate their own voices in unmediated ways during their lifetimes and beyond. McBride speaks about "impossible witnesses" with reference to racialized speaking positions in the context of the genre of slave narratives—constituted by texts that scandalize slavery by way of narrating the life trajectories of those who were born into enslavement and could escape into freedom. While the protagonists of slave narratives achieve formal freedom, unlike those of the dying speeches, the newly freed nonetheless remain caught in a pervasive narrative framework that forfeits their narrative agency: "We see that slave testimonies are being framed all the time by the context of their presentation" (McBride 2001, 5). McBride's assessment of this "overdeterminacy of the slave's testimony" (2001, 5) had already been anticipated by John Sekora, who, in the context of theorizing generic questions of slave narratives, had coined the phrase of "black messages sealed within a white envelope" (1988, 501).

An assessment of the discursive effects of their interviews may thus also be framed through current theoretical conceptualizations of what Wilderson and others have subsumed under the moniker of *Afro-pessimism*: "Afro-pessimism explores the meaning of Blackness [...] as a structural position of noncommunicability in the face of all other positions" (2010, 58). In the sense of writing over and eliding the speaking positions of its interviewees, Turner's and Pomp's interviews in particular seem to instantiate the kind of "noncommunicability" that Wilderson addresses (2010, 58).

To varying degrees, these different interview-based texts may be read as cultural instantiations that stage and thus take part in overwriting the voices of those speaking subjects racialized as Black, binding them to a history of enslavement and inscribing and entombing them in the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman 2007, 6; Sexton 2010, 31). As these texts engage the topic of the deaths of enslaved men proper, they may be construed as allegorical enactments of the *Social Death* (Patterson) of the enslaved in

general. The assumption that an enslaved person is socially dead is to assume that "the Slave is, to borrow from Patterson, generally dishonored, perpetually open to gratuitous violence, and void of kinship structure, that is, having no relations that need be recognized, a being outside of relationality" (Wilderson 2010, 11). One might object here that dying speeches do establish a kind of relationality by relating the enslaved to the judicial logic of criminal conviction and the Christian logic of redemption. But these discourses take hold of the enslaved as they inscribe them into these discourses only as dead beings. It is the white discursive frameworks which let the enslaved die, which amounts to making the free live, to paraphrase Foucault,[19] generating white narrative authority at the expense of the literal and symbolic death of their Black interviewees, and this carries all the more weight considering that they *seem* to give voice to their Black speakers.

Towards a Theory of the Interview as Genre

In the cases of the interviews conducted by Warren, Gray, and Plummer, the interviewers do not merely coordinate the dialogue with Clark, Turner, and Pomp; they orchestrate and control the interview and its subsequent publication to different degrees, subjecting their interviewees to their command. To develop a theory of interlocution with respect to the (fictional/non-fictional, literary, narrative) genre of interview, an *interview* will have to be differentiated from a *conversation*. Both are forms of dialogue but may provide distinct dialogic frameworks: while a conversation may be invested with power that can be negotiated, an interview may posit power differentials more clearly and endow its interlocutors with different degrees of authority.

As an object of literary study and cultural historiography, the interview as genre will also have to be juxtaposed with and differentiated from approaches to interviews in other fields of research: what differentiates an interview in a narrative text from a journalistic interview, a judicial hearing or examination, a job interview, or from public testimonies in public hearings such as those of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), to name but one example.

19 "The fact that you let more die will allow you to live more" (Foucault 2004, 255).

Furthermore, crucial epistemological and methodological questions have been raised in the fields of Social Sciences, Anthropology, and Linguistics. Significant examples here are reflections on ethnographical participant observation or the sociolinguistic observer's paradox and its repercussions for an interview setting: "the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain this data by systematic observation" (Labov 1972, 209). This prompts the question of what makes an interview as genre different from an interview as method. Furthermore, what may the methodological work in social research on structured, semi-structure, unstructured interviews, and on guided, informal, personal interviews as methods contribute to a conceptualization of the interview as genre?

The term interview, in historical perspective, derives from the early sixteenth century, and goes back to the French term *entrevue*, which means to see or have a glimpse at each other. While the term interview no longer signifies a face-to-face meeting between persons of the same rank such as popes or kings, the visual dimensions which an etymological perspective on the term affords, provides useful prospects for further investigations of the politics of looking relations that are at play in the force field of an interview.

A diachronic perspective also serves as a reminder that a theorization of the interview as genre—as well as genre theory in general—takes place against a Eurocentric background; Western genre theory goes back to the poetics of Plato and Aristotle. Taking the above interview-based texts as starting points, practitioners of a theory of interview may have to account for the potential gestures of appropriation that inhere in such an undertaking. It is the material, however, that can modify the theory, marking the presumably white default location of the latter, if not decentering it.

My proposed inquiry goes in several directions: what does the form of the interview do to those who participate in it; how does the interview as genre impact on interviewees' and interviewers' narrative authority; how does it invest or divest speakers (interview-protagonists, narrators, and authors) with discursive agency and power? Moreover, how do narrated interrogations contribute to an understanding of these texts as part of a genre of interview; what do interview-based narratives contribute to an analysis of the interview as genre? What can a particular interview tell us about the interview as form? How do the ways in which the interview as

narrative practice and generic framework is put to use in texts impact an assessment of the functions of this genre? Answers to these questions hold possibilities for working out an analytic of interview as genre, which in return allows for revisiting, rereading, and revisioning canonized and uncanonized texts, as well as reconsidering the dynamics of their theorization. The interviews examined here urge us to the task of developing a theory of the interview in particular and to thus contribute to a theory of genre in general that takes historical specificities and power differentials seriously.

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