

Black, Muslim, Brazilian, Slave:
Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua's *Interesting Narrative* and Its Challenges
to *Latinidad* and to the Slave Narrative in the 21st Century¹

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The presentation deals with the ways Mahommah Baquaqua and his *Interesting Narrative: Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua* (1854) defy conventional notions of *latinidad* and Latin American literature, on the one hand, and of the genre of the black slave narrative of the Americas, on the other. The text is the only known life narrative by a former slave that testifies to the experience of African slavery in Brazil and which was published during its author's lifetime (Austin 8, 160; Bergad 83; Law / Lovejoy 3-4). It further belongs to a handful of auto-/biographical narratives by and about West African Muslim slaves in the New World. I have chosen to discuss Baquaqua's life story and *Narrative* not because they are uniquely representative of Latin America or slavery (see also Law / Lovejoy 82; Bergad 94) but as one of a host of possible case studies that show how individual life stories and literary texts have been challenging definitions of key terms and ways of thought.

The concept of *latinidad* is to this day predominantly linked to an Iberian, often implicitly Spanish, or a mestizo heritage, to Spanish (or, less commonly, Portuguese) language competence and literacy, to a Christian, especially Catholic, religious identity, and to the notion of superiority to the "color line"-based racism of the United States. As a consequence, the experiences and cultural contributions of other ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups frequently remain underrepresented in socio-political debates about Latin Americanness as well as in Latin American Studies, despite their documented historical relevance (Kirschner 1-12, 32-38). In a similar vein, international discourses about slavery in the Americas are marred by a comparative focus on the United States and the Caribbean archipelago. Yet, Brazil was the single largest destination of the transatlantic slave trade (Akande 4-11, 44). "During the period of slavery, ten times as many Africans came to Spanish and Portuguese America (5.7 million) than to the United States (560,000)" (Andrews 3). Among these, scholars estimate, "from the 16th to the 19th century [...] as many as 30,000 to 3 million Muslims of various ethnicities and

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geographical backgrounds were abducted from West Africa and enslaved in the Americas” (Villanueva 175). They provided for up to 5 or even 10% of the African slaves brought to the Americas (Austin 22; Lovejoy 237).

Mahommah Baquaqua was born in the second half of the 1820s in the town of Djougou in today’s West African Republic of Benin. He hailed from a Muslim trader family and received a religious education, including some literacy in Arabic. In 1845 he was kidnapped near his home, sold into slavery in West Africa, but soon shipped to Pernambuco in Northern Brazil. In his two years as a slave in the country, Baquaqua passed through the hands of several slave owners, who treated him rather cruelly. His service to the Rio de Janeiro-based captain of a cargo ship brought him to New York in 1847, where he made his escape. He would subsequently live briefly in Haiti, where he converted to Protestant Christianity, as well as in New England, and Canada before leaving for the UK. His trace has been lost there in 1857 (Law / Lovejoy 1-2, 17-64). In 1854 his *Interesting Narrative* was published in Detroit, a collaborative work together with a white abolitionist named Samuel Moore, whose precise identity is unknown. The stated goals of this text were to scrutinize the evils of slavery and to raise funds that would allow Baquaqua to return as a Christian missionary to West Africa (see also Law / Lovejoy 1-3, 64-77; Austin 160).

The book’s emergence and purpose also account for some of its key problems: Collaborations with white amanuenses and/or editors were common for black authors in the 19th-century United States in order to reach the white-dominated reading public. As much as their participation enabled black voices to be heard, the white editors usually intervened in the compositions and precise agendas of the texts. In so doing, they performed acts of “racial ventriloquism,” filtering the black voice according to the shared concerns of the white editor and target audience. Baquaqua’s *Narrative* lists the black former slave as its sole author and presents his first-person account of his life, thus being in part an autobiography. Yet, the volume is simultaneously correctly titled a biography, as Moore’s voice remains a strong presence throughout the text. Not only is the first third of the book written from a third-person narrative perspective, but the sentimental depiction of Africa, patronizing tone, schooled Christian abolitionist rhetoric, and references to Anglo-American and English literature his influence. This becomes particularly obvious when comparing the text to Baquaqua’s letters to several correspondents (see also Law / Lovejoy 7-15; Austin 160, 168). Moore’s strong hand in the *Narrative* is crucially connected to the goal to make the account useful for its particularly U.S. American abolitionist agenda: While it scrutinizes slavery in African and Brazil but crucially leaves out any substantial critique of its ongoing practice in the Southern United States. Simi-

larly, the book denigrates both Islam and Catholicism as erroneous beliefs while advocating evangelical Protestant Christianity in general and North American missionary enterprises in Africa in particular.

The volume's depiction of Baquaqua's bondage in Brazil skillfully blends his personal testimony with more general, yet locally and socially very specific, ethnographic observations about slavery and slave life in the country (see also Bergad 85). For instance, the *Interesting Narrative* reveals that slave-owners in Pernambuco actually commissioned certain types of slaves from Brazilian transatlantic traders in order to meet their needs of labor force (Baquaqua 158). Similarly, Baquaqua's work as a manual laborer, merchant, and cargo ship steward (159, 163) exemplify common employments for slaves among the 19th-century Brazilian urban middle class (on these, see Law / Lovejoy 43-44; Bergad 86, 88; Karasch 193-94). Finally, the attempt of a wealthy black man in Rio to purchase Baquaqua as his slave points to the fact that master / slave status was not only a matter of race and origin but also of social class (Baquaqua 162; Bergad 91). In depicting his personal life, Baquaqua presents a series of incidences that give voice to more than a slave's mere struggle for survival, namely to his constant striving to regain some degree of agency. Quickly learning Portuguese enables him to obtain easier work and greater freedom as a bread seller for his first owner, a baker (Baquaqua 158-60; Bergad 86, 88). Being exposed to great cruelty despite all efforts to please, which was part of the institution of slavery (Bergad 91), then makes Baquaqua try to run away, then turn to indolence to trigger his sale, and, finally, attempt suicide to escape his lot (Baquaqua 160-61; Karasch 302-03, 316). His ability to quickly adapt to new situations and actively seeking to influence them as well as his strong emotional response to his own and other people's suffering clearly defy the widespread perception among populations of European descent that Africans were of inferior mind and number feelings. This is relevant not only for his original Anglophone target readers but also for contemporary discourses about African and Afro-descendant populations in Brazil as well as in the Americas and Europe at large.

As a literary text, Baquaqua's *Interesting Narrative* most closely aligns with the largely anglophone and North American-dominated genre of the black slave narrative of the Americas: This body of texts established the humanity of black people as voices in public discourse and, in turn, depended on their personal testimonies to claim authority on the topic of slavery. However, the legitimacy of the black speaking subject remained on the ex-slaves' integration into dominant society – that is, gaining knowledge of English, accepting the Anglocentric racially stratified society, and adopting Protestant Christianity. The genre recounts black suffering in bondage in Africa, the Circum-Caribbean, or the more feudally structured US Amer-

ican South in order to raise support for the abolition of this institution (Villanueva 176-77; Austin 9). By ignoring existing abolitionist efforts in the scrutinized areas, it was able to maintain a notion of anglophone Protestant civilizational superiority to these regions that could be used to justify colonization and missionary endeavors.

Muslim slave narratives somewhat differ from this literary model for different reasons. Muslim slaves in the early Americas tended to stand out from other Africans for their religious learning and knowledge of Arabic, which both fascinated whites and aroused their fears. They viewed educated slaves as potential rebels and Muslim religious identity as a sign of the slaves' rejection of white Christian culture (Villanueva 179, 184-85, 193-94; Austin 5, 11, 14, 21-25, 34, 43, 45). In several documented cases, the black authors of African Muslim slave narratives from the Americas were still enslaved when penning or dictating their life stories and thus could not as openly scrutinize the "peculiar institution." Moreover, a number of these texts were produced in the contexts of endeavors within the abolitionist movement for black "repatriation" to or for white Christian religious mission in West Africa. As advocates of both types of projects viewed literate, Arabic-speaking Blacks familiar with West African cultures and ideally converted to Christianity as useful to their causes, many West African Muslims enslaved in the Americas saw formal conversion to Christianity as a springboard for regaining their freedom and a possible return to their homeland (Villanueva 183-84, 187-88; Austin 8-11, 46). However, their life narratives repeatedly undermine their own official rhetoric of identification with whiteness and Christianity, indicating their authors' ongoing self-perceptions as African and Muslim. Their scrutiny of slavery and white society often unfolds through criticizing bondage in Africa and/or the violence enacted in the name of Christianity, while positive references to Islam subvert the idea of Christian superiority and the "right" to enslave Africans derived from it (Villanueva 193-94, 196).

Despite its clear anti-Brazilian agenda and integration into the Anglophone abolitionist discourse, Baquaqua's life and *Narrative* have become part of Brazilian history and literary production. In so doing, they challenge the ongoing identification of *latinidad* as non-black and the tendency toward *branqueamento* / *blanqueamiento* in Brazil and Latin America. Like other African Muslim slaves, Baquaqua's conversion and stated goal of missionizing in Africa may well have been a strategy to use white Anglophone abolitionism for his own purposes (see also Law / Lovejoy 49-52). As such, his *Narrative* may be seen as a reminder of the historical Muslim presence in the Americas and particularly in Brazil – one may only think of the vibrant Muslim-led black community of Salvador da Bahía, which organized the Malê Rebellion of 1835, the largest slave rebellion in the country (on this incidence, see Rosa; Akande

42, 44, 46, 181-204, 208-09, 211-12). Baquaqua's autobiography does not represent Latin American, or even Brazilian, literature in a traditional sense: It was written in English and published in the United States by a West African Muslim convert to Evangelical Christianity. It further aligns in literary form with the black slave narrative, which was largely informed by Protestant religious beliefs in the evil of slavery but also in the righteousness of Protestant mission and Western colonization in Africa. Moreover, the book's author only spent a short part of his life in Brazil and, being an African slave, never identified with the country. Nonetheless, owing to its unique role as the only known narrative text about Brazilian slavery from a slave's perspective, the text and its author have in recent years been claimed as part of Brazil's cultural and literary heritage (see Verás et al.) as well as been studied as part of the literature of slavery in the Americas (see, e.g., Bicalho; Nuto). As such, Baquaqua's life and his *Interesting Narrative* deserve to be taken as a stimulus to rethink notions of *latinidad* as well as conceptualizations of the slave narrative in/for the 21st century.

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