Confronting Slavery Face-to-face: A twenty-first century interpreter's perspective on eighteenth-century slavery



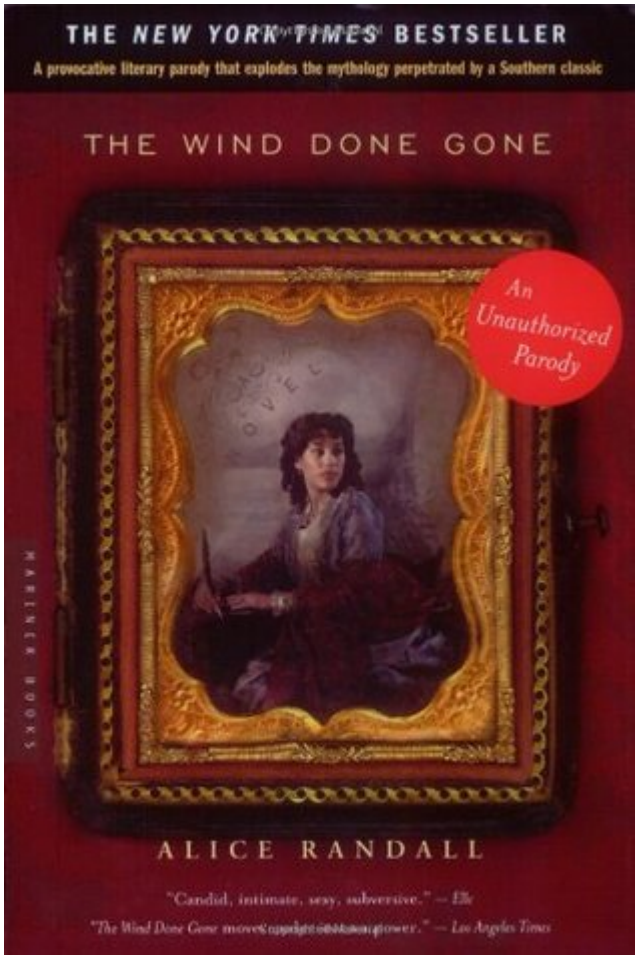
And yet, for all that, I am still troubled by the issue: why was a white person teaching about black history?

Seeing Slavery: How paintings make words look different



Why is there not a more detailed visual record of slavery and even slave life in early America?

Words and Chains



The cry for ‘apology,’ no matter how heartfelt, sounds positively quaint against the hotter rhetoric today’s activists embrace: Restitution. Redress. And, especially, reparation.

Salem Musick



Or How the Puritans Boogied Down, Down, Down Derry Down

[Spooky Streets]



“Compared with most heritage tourism, ghost tours—by turns campy and didactic—offer visitors unblinking and, no doubt, at times unwelcome views of the skeletons in the closet of early American history: slave coffles, Indian massacres, debtor’s prisons, and the sundry other sad and sorry fates of people you might expect would want to haunt America’s cities.”

Mount Vernon Makeovers



“What Mount Vernon Love Story offers are not steamy sex scenes, of which there’s nary a one (was it the teeth?), but countless moments spent in the throes of hot, throbbing interior decorating.

Shooting Back



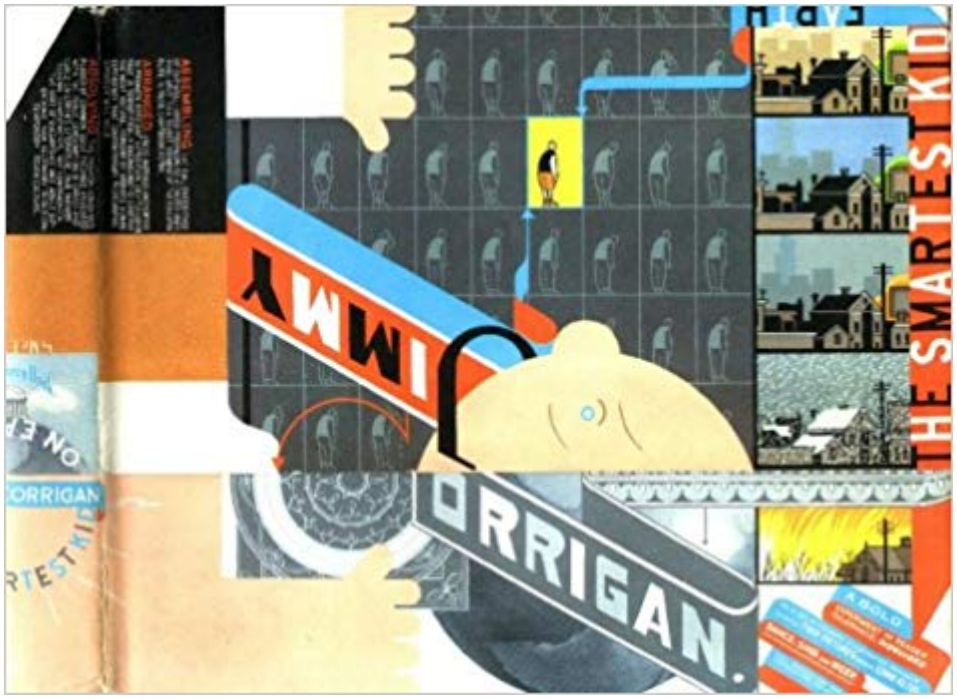
“Too often reenactments come across as just what they are—half-hearted attempts to make history come alive in a dramatic way without using the elements that make for dramatic story-telling . . .”

Three Poems



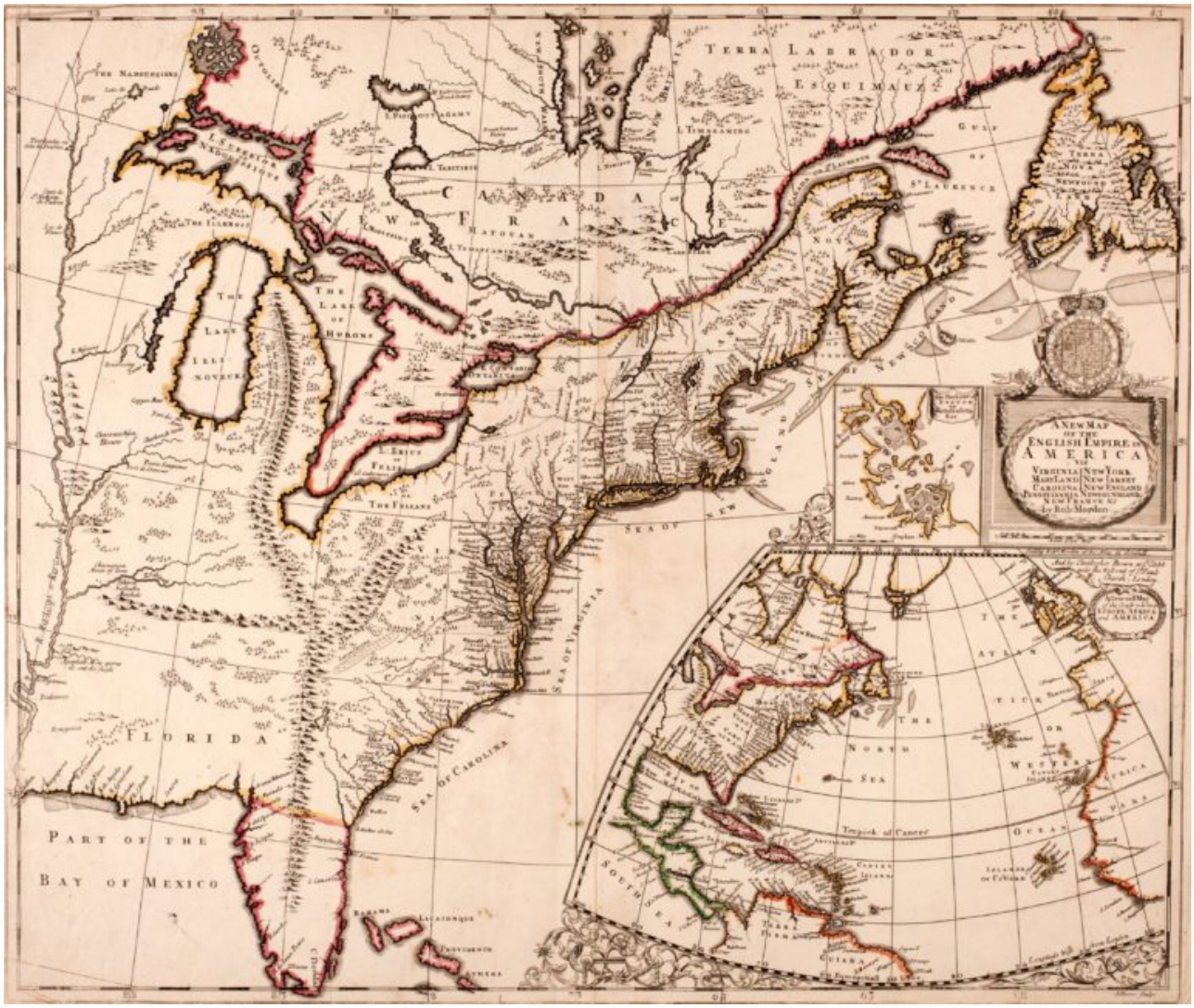
Thus, the poems examine both the social structures contributing to the accusations as well as the relationships between people that were wounded or destroyed by the suspicions, convictions, and executions.

The Past Impaneled



Why do history in the form of a comic book? Why use this particular medium as opposed to others? What can the comic book offer in the presentation of the past that is unique and compelling?

Synthetic Rewards



What's a synthesis? Everyone knows the smart aleck answer: history without original research. This conviction fuels the disparaging shrug so many academics have given when encountering a book advertised as a "synthesis." "It's just based on secondary works." "Oh, a *textbook*," our voice trailing away.

I won't defend writing synthetic histories on principle because I've recently done so in practice, by writing two: *Becoming America: The Revolution Before 1776* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000) and *Religion in Colonial America* (New York, 2000), the second published for adolescent readers. Instead, I'd like to say something about my experience and what I learned in writing them.

In the first place, I learned that writing a synthesis is quite different than writing a textbook. A synthetic or synoptic history emphasizes several

overarching interpretative themes that may be complementary or contradictory (or both) but share one common function: the themes guide almost all the material that appears in the book—events, people, and places.

This is quite different than textbooks, or at least different than many textbooks. Without impugning texts, anyone who has worked with them knows that they must accomplish another aim: cover everything, or *almost* everything. Textbooks are stuck with the Mount Everest problem—if it's on the route, it has to be scaled.

A synthesis might indeed become a course text. Years ago, this happened with Carl Degler's *Out of Our Past: The Forces that Shaped Modern America* (New York, 1959), although some faculty cribbed so many lectures from the book, they couldn't assign it to students. Rather than "covering everything" as a textbook might do, however, a synthetic or synoptic history—like Degler's—focuses on certain selected broad-scale themes. It distills elemental ideas about the evolution or development of a people or society. It explains things that its author chooses to place at the heart of matters. It assesses what's purposeful, worthy, good, and bad.

Ultimately, then, a synthesis probably is moral in some general sense. It makes judgments about the past, about the merits of people and events, even about their relevance for the present and future. It separates better from worse, the significant from the merely obvious, Mount Everest from its neighbors.

Synthetic history isn't for the weak at heart. In addition to elevating the historian to the (dubious) status of minor armchair moralist, it obviously requires a broad knowledge of the field. But I learned, often the hard way, that a complete command of the vast minutiae of the past was at least as important as a command of every modern historical field and all their latest interpretive and methodological twists. This proved true for two perhaps unexpected reasons.

First, a successful synthesis is filled with the tumult of the past, not bland abstractions. Of course, this is important in even the narrowest monograph. But the breadth of a synthesis can drown in its own dull abstractions. History moves through individuals and the lives they lead, the principle universalized, then expanded by a *Talmudic teaching* centuries ago: "If any man saves alive a single soul, Scripture imputes it to him as though he had saved alive a whole world."

Human tumult and its minutiae can't become mere antiquarianism, facts marshaled as their own ends. But they have to be present because real human beings and the lives they shape must stand at the heart of a successful synthesis.

It's not sufficient to say that men and women worked hard, for example. One must convey precisely what particular men and women did and what their work meant and signified. In *Becoming America*, I tried to convey this at one point through the words of a Long Island woman named Mary Cooper. She not only

described the exhaustion of her labor (in July 1769) but judged its meaning: “This day is forth years since I left my father’s house and come here, and here I have seene little ells but harde labour and sorrow. . . A fine clear cool day. I am un well.” What better words to convey a colonist’s disappointments, ambivalent feelings, dreams?

Ironically then, writing two books of synthesis made me scramble to replicate the intimacy of the small canvas seemingly more characteristic of the monograph. The author of every synthesis struggles to incorporate telling detail in only a few sentences and paragraphs, and the examples chosen must by necessity be particularly trenchant. We might know this from our most recent “historical” event. When millions of people told so many vivid office jokes about chads and politics in November 2000, they did so because their graphic humor conveyed the absurdity and urgency of the presidential election crisis better than blathering cable-TV pundits. It’s a point we historians shouldn’t miss.

Second, I learned that synthetic history isn’t homogenous. When the exteriors in a synoptic book appear smooth, they must, like Debussy’s *La Mer*, convey the possibility of immediate chaos and danger. A synthesis has to be complex, nuanced, and subtle—yet also clear. It must bear a suppleness that allows for variations, anomalies, crosscurrents, and exceptions.

To use an architectural metaphor, a successful synthesis usually looks more like buildings by Frank Gehry than structures by Philip Johnson, more like Gehry’s rambunctious Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, than Johnson’s restrained Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut. This is because no historical society ever coalesced into the cool symmetrical shapes Philip Johnson perfected. History is patterned, but unexpectedly, like Gehry’s impetuous yet disciplined museums, offices, and houses.

A successful synthesis must reflect these ambiguities. Interesting books on “Puritan” New England, “Quaker” Pennsylvania, or “Cavalier” Virginia comprehend the wholeness and intricacies of their societies by reveling in historical tensions and anomalies, not by assembling a reassuring but nonexistent homogeneity.

The demands inherent in writing a synthesis skirt disaster. The need to distill so much in so few sentences and use single facts to convey so many broad and complicated meanings can easily lead authors and readers astray if not well handled. In describing Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* at the end of *Becoming America*, I wrote that colonists recognized Paine’s “compilation of sarcasm, wit, and satire through British politics and through their own political invective dating back to Robert Hunter’s 1714 scatological [New York] play *Androboros*. Now Paine used the same language,” I concluded. But my friend Jim Kloppenberg took me to task in his*Common-place* review because he believed I’d said that *Common Sense* succeeded because it appealed to the colonists’ “taste for ribaldry.” My compression, if not my cheekiness, surely had produced a

monster.

I could have responded that one loose reference to a dirty play did not an interpretive paradigm make. But I wrote what I wrote, and it illustrates the care one must exercise in compacting so much into single paragraphs and sentences, if only to fend off witty reviewers!

Still, it isn't as though writing a synthesis is a Monty Python exercise in "something completely different." It's what most every historian has done at the beginning and end of every chapter or the beginning and end of every book. It's what we all do when we lecture. We connect our little monographic facts with the larger world. We tie some particular aspect of Puritan theology to the British Puritan movement, then to the continental Reformation. We link the task system on southern farms to colonial and British labor practices. If we're ebullient, we link everything to capitalism.

In short, synthesis might better just be called teaching. Whether in speaking or writing, we're describing and explaining, in little steps and big ones. And in both media, we know it involves real men and women, children and adults, organized and isolated, aware and unaware. And just as when we're standing in front of a class or staring into a computer, we know that vivid personal examples count. They make our generalizations understandable because they explain their human consequences.

Of course, teaching and writing also involve learning. One learns so that one has something to say. But one also learns for fun. That's what I liked best about writing two synthetic books: I learned a lot. The chapters I had the most fun writing concerned topics I knew least well—or even actively disliked. For *Becoming America*, they were material culture and economics. For *Religion in Colonial America,* my specialty, it was the Puritans, since I've written about almost every form of American religion *except* Puritanism and often have joked that the Jonathan Edwards manuscripts hissed when I walked near the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale. Put simply, reading on these topics—even on the Puritans—was pure pleasure.

Producing a synthesis can be nerve-wracking. All those generalizations will inevitably get an author into trouble with just about every possible reviewer, each of whom knows some part of the subject far better than you do. Then there are the mistakes! Trust me, like Santa, it pays to check your lists at least twice. And if the facts are straight, the "approach" is wrong. You should have covered more ground. You should have covered less ground. You should have covered different ground. You should have written the book the reviewer wanted to read, not the book you wanted to write.

Many of the complaints, if not quite all of them, are at least understandable. No matter. Even if writing broad-scale history takes far longer than one planned (my fault, no one else's), you reap the satisfaction of putting Humpty Dumpty together again—and not just Humpty but the whole wall.

And in the end, there’s the reward that comes with every book: it’s there, it’s yours, and it’s finished. I’d write each book again in a heartbeat—but naturally differently, perfectly, making every reader see how each little part forms a matchless synthetic whole.

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Common-place asks Jon Butler, who teaches American religious history and early American history at Yale University, about the challenges he faced writing two books of historical synthesis.