At the center of Lynn Festa’s study of empire and sentimentality is the emergence during the second half of the eighteenth century of a new language for representing marginal groups at home and in the colonies of England and France. In Festa’s account, seemingly tenderhearted depictions of enslaved and conquered people made sympathetic identification with them impossible on the part of European writers and their public. In this sense, her book offers a counter-point to the work of David Brion Davis, who connects the spread of a new “ethic of benevolence, personified in the ‘man of feeling,’” to the development of British abolitionism. In contrast, Festa suggests that expressions of benevolence tended to distance and even to dehumanize people while bestowing new visibility on their afflictions. As the world grew smaller, it was not only or even chiefly by means of racial hierarchies and exotic descriptions that European writers constructed boundaries between themselves and colonized people; of equal importance, from the late eighteenth century forward, were the subtleties that underlay affirmations of compassion and solicitude.

In chapter one, “The Distinction of Sentimental Feeling,” Festa theorizes the difference between sympathy and sentimentality by looking to texts by Hume, Smith, Rousseau, Diderot and Raynal. Here she seeks to understand the “disruptive nature of experiencing the feelings of another” (p. 11). Sympathy involves a collapse between self and other that occurs the moment one begins to feel what another feels or to see oneself through another’s eyes; sympathy is thus incommensurate with imperial domination and subversive of it. In contrast, sentimentality offered a means of positioning the self in relation to the other that made impossible the mobility of perspective that sympathy entails.

Remaining chapters of the volume explore the way that relations between self and other are mediated by things (objects or representations of them) in a practical sense and occluded by things in an intellectual or affective one. In Chapter Two, “Sterne’s Snuffbox,” Festa examines the problem of sentimental value as a theme in the writings of Lawrence Sterne. The chapter takes its title from "the most celebrated sentimental object in eighteenth-century literature": the snuffbox acquired by the parson Yorick from Lorenzo, a mendicant monk in Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* (1768) (p. 69). Yorick begins by dodging the elderly friar ("I had predetermined not to give him a single sou"), but meets him again, in the company of a fetching woman. While attempting to win the woman's favor, Yorick gallantly offers his tortoiseshell snuffbox to the monk, who gives his own horn snuffbox in return; this becomes Yorick's most treasured possession ("I guard this box, as I would the instrumental parts of my religion"). Festa builds outward from this odd transaction to theorize sentimental value in light of Annette Weiner's feminist critique of Bronislaw Malinowski. In Festa's reading, a sentimentally-valued thing is a thing invested with significances that make it impossible to exchange, on terms of equivalence, with any other object. Because sentimentally-valued things seem to exist outside the capitalist system, they allow their owners an albeit illusory escape from the taint of the marketplace. More generally, they are a means of affirming one's personal independence and authenticity against impingements by "the herd of the world" (p. 78).
In fact, the tenderness elicited by such curios is not at all harmless. In the world remade by sentimental value, the place of the other is usurped by an inanimate thing endowed with human-like qualities. These are objects that derive their aura of inestimability from being repositories and extensions of their owners' sense of self. And yet they are not as aloof to market principles as they at first appear. As Festa notes, there was an eighteenth-century cult of Lorenzo, a market in Yorick snuffboxes following the publication of Sterne’s book. She observes, “To acquire sentimental feeling in the form of an object like a snuffbox is to shortcut the emotional labor that creates a human relation to the world. . .” (p. 81). Ultimately, Festa reveals sentimentally valued things to be solipsistic repudiations of the other more than fond reminders of him.

Festa extends her investigation of subject-object relations in the sentimental mode into Chapter Three, “Tales Told By Things,” where she begins by exploring popular English novels in which quotidian artifacts—coins, coaches, canes, coats—describe their wandering through human society. These talking object tales, sentimental journeys of a kind, tend to conjure a benign image of empire, capitalism, and slavery. The pet-like objects that narrate these stories cannot take their minds off the people who abuse and fondle them. They recall the delights of having a master and the heartbreak of losing one. The talking imperial coin in Helenus Scott’s *Adventures of a Rupee* (1784) loves being in British hands.

In such stories, human subjectivity is everywhere and nowhere—conspicuously absent when simulatedly present. As Festa observes, language that humanizes is always ironic: it implies the absence of humanness. No one would mistake a talking frock-coat for a human. She is particularly incisive on this point. “Personifications are figural proxies that arise in the absence of subjectivity. They mark the non-appearance of a person” (p. 131).

That talking objects, especially talking books, make frequent appearances in autobiographies by former slaves allows Festa to move from her discussion of tales told by things into a reading of the *Interesting Narrative* by Olaudah Equiano (1789), the famed Afro-British journalist and abolitionist. Festa suggests that sentimental rhetoric, in blurring the distinction between persons and things, duplicates the logic of slavery. As a result, even former slaves who claimed a voice in autobiographies were unable to carve out identities as self-directed individuals in the contaminated medium of sentimental prose. Festa depicts these stories about the recovery of personhood as unfulfilled tales of becoming in which the manumitted slave, upon crossing the boundary from legal *res* to legal person, finds that he is a mere object awaiting animation and direction by the hands of God.

Olaudah Equiano wrote his *Interesting Narrative* to advance the cause of abolitionism in England. In Chapter Four, “Making Humans Human,” Festa addresses the moral limitedness of British abolitionist discourse and the role of sentimentality in shaping its contours. The figure of a kneeling slave in shackles that appeared on a Wedgwood medallion with the legend, “Am I not a man and a brother?” expressed broader shortcomings of the abolitionist movement. To Festa, the Wedgwood figure exemplifies what she calls the trope of redundant personification—humanizing the already human. To the extent that the Wedgwood figure stimulated emotion in the viewer, it was exclusively the feeling of oneness with fellow white abolitionists. And that identification, notes Festa, “is connected to the repudiation of being another, of being a slave” (p. 170).

In Chapter Five, “Global Commerce in Raynal’s *Histoire des Deux Indes,*” Festa suggests that sentimental tropes helped forge a new language of global history in Raynal’s work. Raynal, Diderot, and other contributors to the *History* depict commerce as a world system that draws remote peoples into relation with one another while creating new forms of affective isolation. In their account, the men who rule the world from small desks and remote encampments express unembarrassed indifference toward the people they destroy. In an apparent attempt to reverse creeping global numbness, the *History* includes apostrophes, written by Diderot, to the reader in the voice of the narrator and, in many cases, in the voice of imperial peoples. Festa draws attention to the problematic nature of this "catalog of victims in
an array of postures of supplication and abjection" to signal the lack of cultural specificity surrounding
the figures who speak—whether Indians, Hottentots, or slaves—or who are spoken for (p. 226). At the
same time, she recognizes the book's revolutionary character. Sentimental tropes "at times outstrip the
aims and intentions of their authors" (p. 232). In this case, the apostrophes to the reader by individuals
"adorned with barely enough decorative cultural detail . . . to locate them . . . in time and space" open
unexpected, radical possibilities (p. 227). The very unreality of imperial victims in the History, their
resemblance to man in general, may help readers from different eras and cultural contexts to insert
themselves into the text, to "shake off the myopia of [his] own worldview," and to see such people as
embodiments of a universal rights-bearing subject (pp. 231-232).

In her conclusion to the volume, “The Peripheral Vision of the Enlightenment,” Festa follows Gayatri
Spivak in lamenting the manufacture of denatured imperial others by Western scholars who fancy
themselves to be engaged in benevolent restorative projects.[4] Read against Festa’s portrait of the
eighteenth century, scholarly efforts to recover the agency of colonial subjects become acts of redundant
personification—a matter of exerting oneself to prove that a noted characteristic of human beings
everywhere is indeed present where one least expects it. In turn, to accord voice to colonized peoples
and to conjure stories of resistance is to risk ventriloquizing the European political imagination and
going the way of Diderot and Raynal.

Festa’s unsparing shakedown of European subjectivity in the age of empire and beyond makes this book
a salutary read for historians, who may catch unflattering glimpses of themselves throughout the
volume. It is a book that invites reflection upon the ethical problems that narrators confront when
representing marginal people and violence against them. The contemporary resonance of this study, as
well as its gliding prose, help to make this a constantly interesting book, though not an unflawed one.

In her introduction, Festa writes, “Although I analyze the sentimental construction of the category of
the person, I do not attempt to identify places where the subaltern can speak or has spoken” (p. 13). The
riddle a reader confronts, upon reaching the third chapter of the volume, is that of squaring this early
disclaimer with Festa’s inclusion of writing by subaltern people—namely, the autobiographies of former
slaves.

Henry Louis Gates has argued that former slaves who wrote their memoirs found in literacy a means of
triumphing over the objectifying logic of slavery by becoming subjects, masters of their own story.[5]
In contrast, Festa applies Paul de Man’s reading of Romantic autobiography to the slave narrative; in
effect, she argues that former slaves who wrote their autobiographies could not help being thrown back
upon the experiential reality, or site of speech, of the enslaved persons who come to life as characters in
these memoirs.

The application of de Man’s criticism to slave narratives raises a number of problems that I can only
briefly sketch here. De Man’s essay on Wordsworth, “Autobiography as De-Facement,” like his other
essays on Romanticism, engages the problem of a writer who seeks to use the imagination as a way of
transcending the boundaries of humanness.[6] In the essay, de Man defines autobiography through the
relationship it creates between a reader (who here would be the memoirist) and the figure that speaks as
I on the page. He suggests that the I who reads and the figural I in the text are enlaced, fused and
differentiated in a circular, unending fashion that he compares to a revolving door. De Man calls this the
“specular” or mirroring structure of autobiography. Where this account of autobiography suggests a
visual encounter, where two beings face one another, de Man provides a second, complementary
description of autobiography that emphasizes the obscurity which lies between the two partners in this
odd exchange, who are unenvisagable to one another, and yet confer a face upon one another. The
distinguishing trope of autobiography is prosopopeia, which de Man defines as “the fiction of an
apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply
and confers upon it the power of speech” (p. 75).
The text that de Man uses to demonstrate the dangers of prosopopeia is Wordsworth’s autobiographical *Essays on Epitaphs*. De Man argues that a maker of epitaphic inscriptions summons voices from the grave that bend back and absorb the writer into the deathly reality from which the voices issue. Thus the Romantic’s straining toward immortality is undone by the trope he uses to attempt this.

De Man presumes that autobiographical writers aim to secure their immortality and thus to place themselves above other humans. The same cannot be said of former slaves who write their memoirs. Such people write (among other reasons) to affirm or to prove their humanness before an undecided public. For this sort of narrator, the danger of prosopopeia, as de Man describes it, is not that of death. At stake is the danger of being enveloped by a different kind of nothingness—the relational nothingness depicted in these books, the one inhabited by the non-human or sub-human as defined by a society of slaveholders. It thus seems, at least to this reader, that to apply de Man’s interpretation of autobiography to slave narratives is to enact the dehumanization of the subaltern subject, against which Festa’s whole study otherwise warns.

In his recent biography of Equiano Olaudah, Vincent Carretta offers quite a different reading than Festa of self-abnegating religious language in Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*. Carretta suggests that Equiano Olaudah borrowed from the conventions of spiritual autobiography so as to model himself after Bunyan’s Everyman and thereby force Christian readers to recognize themselves in him.[7] Language that functions, in Festa’s account, to reduce the self-actuating former slave to a mere object is for Carretta a purposeful device that makes sympathy possible.

In her conclusion, Festa suggests that sentimentality lost its association with nominally anti-imperial movements to become the privileged idiom of empire in the nineteenth century. In this sense, Festa’s study traces the habits of mind and expression that later made it possible to justify conquest in the name of benevolent solicitude. Among the things elided by this forward-looking glance at empire and sentimentality beyond the Enlightenment are the experiences of people of color in the Caribbean as they crossed into the nineteenth century. Sentimental imperialism was not part of that world. Instead came the reenslavement of citizens in Guadeloupe and French Guiana, the invasion of Saint Domingue, and a ban against blacks entering domestic France. Wordsworth wrote a poem about sharing a coach from Calais with an expelled woman. “She was a Negro Woman driv’n from France/ Rejected like all others of that race/ Not one of whom may now find footing there”. [8]

NOTES


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