

Redemption and Reconciliation of the African American Liberator in Sharon Ewell Foster's *The Resurrection of Nat Turner*

Keiko Shirakawa

1. Re-Revival of Nat Turner

For the 150th commemoration of the start of the Civil War, as well as the 180th commemoration of the Southampton Insurrection, Sharon Ewell Foster, a Christy award-winning African American author, published a historical revisionist novel entitled *The Resurrection of Nat Turner* [RNT], *Part One: the Witnesses* in August 2011. Subsequently, part two of RNT, subtitled *the Testimony*, appeared during Black History Month in 2012. Around this time, the opening narration of Foster's website began to advertise the new books as follows: "The truth has been buried for 180 years. The real story has never been told—until now. By acclaimed author Sharon Ewell Foster in *The Resurrection of Nat Turner*, here's his story for the very first time."¹ If readers are indeed enticed by this catchline, what kind of "truth" is revealed to them? After five years of research and interviews with descendants of both former slave owners and their slaves, how much fresh ground did Foster break concerning the rebellion? And how does she represent the revised, "real" Turner?

Prior to Foster's historical re-representation of the slave rebel, there was not only the tragic event of the insurrection itself (1831) but also a traumatic controversy about Nat Turner, provoked by the publication of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (CNT(b), 1967). Apparently

criticizing Styron's emasculated Turner figure, Foster resurrects a version of the incandescent black hero while strategically conciliating the antagonistic relationship between the races. This essay aims to explore how Foster reinterprets these past events and documents, and how she weaves the new story of Nat Turner, America's Toussaint manqué. But first, let us begin with the outline of the Southampton Insurrection.

2. Gray's and Styron's *Confessions*

On August 21, 1831, the exigencies of racial politics in the United States of America gave rise to confrontation: Nat Turner's slave revolt comprised the largest and most successful uprising in the 250-year history of slavery in America. Believing himself divinely appointed to guide his fellow slaves to freedom, Nat Turner (1800–31) led a band of almost 60 insurgent African Americans, who, in the ensuing battle, killed about 50 white men, women, and children in Southampton County, Virginia.

Turner's rebel band was suppressed within a few days, and he himself was captured on October 30, 1831; however, the revolt ignited tremendous fear throughout the South. The fact that an admired and mild-mannered African-American prophet and preacher could thus instigate such a brutal massacre contributed to a sense of impending crisis about the Southern slavery system: it was a bitter lesson for white America to learn that even a pious, well-behaved slave, whom most would have regarded as tame property, could suddenly transform himself—as whites perceived it—into a monstrous fiend who threatened the entire nation. Thus, after the revolt, it was reported that close to 200 innocent blacks, many of whom had nothing to do with the rebellion, were killed by hysterical white mobs (“This Quiet

Dust” 10).²

The 5,000-word pamphlet *The Confessions of Nat Turner (CNT(a))* contains an account of the rebellion dictated by Turner to a local white attorney Thomas R. Gray while Turner was in prison awaiting trial and execution. Gray secured the copyright and published this pamphlet in Baltimore in 1831, shortly after Turner was executed. The pamphlet includes introductory remarks by Gray, Turner's “confessions,” Gray's commentary on the significance of the episode, an excerpt from the court ruling, and lists of both white victims of the revolt and blacks charged with participating in it.³

CNT(a) has been regarded as significant, given that it is one of the few firsthand legal and political documents pertaining to what was the largest slave insurrection in US history. Because Turner begins his confessions with his childhood experiences, the text is not only historically valuable but also literarily exceptional as an example of a slave narrative. In fact, many historians/authors have referred to Gray's *CNT(a)* in their interpretation/fictionalization of the event; they considered it an available, reliable source on a seminal African-American legend, as well as a touchstone for the historical and literary representation of rebellious slave figures.

More than 130 years after the Southampton Insurrection, another Virginian writer, William Styron, published a novel that has the same title as that of Gray's pamphlet. Raised in proximity to the site of the Southampton Insurrection, Styron seemed naturally to focus on Turner, and the result was *CNT(b)*. Although Styron's original intentions in writing *CNT(b)* were sincerely anti-segregation and antislavery (“Nat Turner Revisited” 434-439; “This Quiet Dust” 14-22) and his achievement was praised by many, several African-American critics charged Styron with distorting historical

facts related to Turner's Rebellion, and ultimately with racism, in *CNT(b)*. As Mike Thelwell explains, these critics found Styron's representations of Turner and slavery to evince "the persistence of white Southern myths, racial stereotypes, and literary clichés even in the best intentioned and most enlightened minds" (91). Even if Styron regarded himself as a Southern liberal, his critics attacked his text out of sensitivity to its resonance with the particular forms of racism prevalent in the age of Black Power. These critics viewed *CNT(b)* as reflecting vestigial beliefs in white superiority descended from those of white Southerners in the antebellum era following the Southampton Insurrection. That is, Thelwell's explanation suggests that Styron subconsciously sympathized with the Old Southern state of mind.

In fact, even though Styron's representation is literarily challenging and complex, it is certain that *CNT(b)* includes elements that provoked contemporary African-American intellectuals and political leaders. Styron's Turner is peculiarly attached to his white planter family, and greatly respects his master, who endows him with literacy and the Bible. Ignoring the importance of the slave family, especially obliterating Turner's slave wife, Styron's Turner seems impassioned about white females, even to fantasies of raping them. In addition to the several descriptions of homosexual traits of characters surrounding Turner, this black leader becomes, in a way, feminized and totally intimidated at the critical moment of rebellion. Later, confined in a prison cell, Turner agonizes over the sense of absence of God; however, he is consoled by the illusion of a white girl whom he adores. Turner is executed while fantasizing that he is physically and spiritually unified with the girl.

Ironically, Styron's severely criticized novel disencumbered the Southampton Insurrection from the shadow of Southern history, since at

the time of publication, Turner, as a historical figure, was still obscured even in the very place the revolt occurred. Styron's *CNT(b)* aroused the so-called Turner controversy, thereby not only motivating the re-evaluation of the erstwhile literary representation of the rebellion, but also serving as the catalyst of further creation of the black hero's story.⁴ Although Styron experienced "almost total alienation from black people," was "stung by their rage," and finally was "cast as an archenemy of the race, having unwittingly created one of the first politically incorrect texts of our time" ("*Nat Turner Revisited*" 435), he resurrected Nat Turner for contemporary America. That is, without Styron's *CNT(b)* and the 1960's revival, Foster's *RNT* would not have been possible.

3. "Fresh" Evidence in Foster's *Resurrection*

Foster seems to intend to subvert Styron's representation of Turner; she aims to restore the deprived, in other words "whitened," hero to African-American history. Even the cover design of Foster's books clearly indicates her plan; their resemblance to Styron's *CNT(b)* implies her purpose [Figure].



[Figure] Book jackets of Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and Foster's *The Resurrection of Nat Turner*

Moreover, in an “Author Letter,” at the end of *RNT: Part One*, Foster openly declares her mission in publishing the story, making a downright distinction between Styron’s *CNT(b)* and her *RNT*:

There were two of my parents’ books I did not read: *Valley of the Dolls*, because my mother showed it to me and showed me where she hid it, while warning me that nice girls didn’t read such books. The other book was William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. I remember the red book cover. I stared at it, resting on my mother’s nightstand, but I did not read it until 2007, as part of my preparation for writing *The Resurrection of Nat Turner*. This is a story about paradigms and puzzle pieces that don’t fit together. It is about how we often believe what we are told to believe even when it doesn’t make sense. About how lies repeated often enough are accepted as facts. It is a story about the endurance of truth. (437)

Thus, Foster’s declaration of the resurrection of Nat Turner in her “Author Letter” itself shows the marked contrast with Styron’s “Author’s Note,” in which he has allowed himself “the utmost freedom of imagination in reconstructing events” to produce “a meditation on history”(n. pag.).

If Foster tries to reveal “lies repeated often enough” that have been long “accepted as facts” and to write “a story about the endurance of truth,” how she does that must be carefully and critically examined, since “the buried truth” she maintains she discovered is not really “buried,” nor can “the real story” she claims to represent “for the first time” be borne out by the novel.⁵ She skillfully presents herself as a discoverer/founder of the lies/truth about Nat Turner, as one who deconstructs/reconstructs the legendary liberator

for African Americans. Effectively nullifying the plausibility of Gray's pamphlet and focusing on the hitherto less, if not least, examined trial records, and at the same time, exerting her imaginative power as an author, Foster successfully produced her own version of "a meditation on history" of reconciliation, which may appeal to contemporary readers. In sum, *RNT* is a well-woven composition of literary imagination and historical fact. And if so, let us explore, first of all, Foster's negation of Gray's *CNT(a)*, as well as the way her narrative works.

For one thing, Foster discovered discrepancies in description between trial records of the revolt and Thomas R. Gray's *CNT(a)*, on which Styron depended greatly when writing about Turner. Foster reports,

Gray further claims that Turner's confession was read in open court and affirmed by Turner at his trial. As part of a five-year research effort, I located the 1831 Virginia trial transcripts.... I began with Turner's trial. Immediately, I noticed that Thomas Gray was not Turner's attorney. Then I read that Turner pleaded innocent. There is no mention in the transcript of a confession or of Gray. I was confused. I read it again, searching for Gray's name, searching for some mention of Turner's confession. But there was no confession. My reaction surprised me: I fluctuated between confusion, anger, disappointment, sadness and even fear. I felt betrayed. We have been taught to trust the transcribed primary-source documents, like trusting the word of a parent or a priest. ("The Truth" pars. 3-8)⁶

Then, she simplistically concludes that Turner's "'Confessions' were a lie" ("The Truth" par. 1).⁷ Her notion that "some of what we accept as history

is no more than fiction” (“Author letter” Part One, 440) is syllogistically adapted to Styron’s representation of the revolt; if the original confessions are a lie, then a story based upon Gray *a fortiori* becomes a lie. Whereupon Foster appears, having found the “buried truth,” and in doing so, she “resurrects” the black hero. The subtitles of her novel—witnesses and testimony—embroider the hue of authenticity endorsed by the legal document.

Interestingly, however, the “truth” of which Foster speaks had already been unearthed by Henry Tragle, a historian who compiled the entire trial record, the Virginia governor’s diary and letters, the newspaper accounts, and the literary explanations in 1971, shortly after Styron’s publication of the novel.⁸ Remembering the time of her locating the trial transcripts in Courtland, then called Jerusalem, Va. in 2011, Foster rather dramatically reports that she was standing in the courthouse, into which, she imagined, an African American woman like her would not have been admitted at the time of the rebellion, or for more than a century after it, and yet, she was now holding the original manuscripts of the trial records for her ongoing project (“The Truth” par. 6). Even though these primary documents had already been printed and published as a book some 40 years ago, her actual visiting to “find” the hand-written documents at the site of the insurrection reinforces the credibility of her narrative representation, conveying the misleading impression that Foster is a sort of pioneer.⁹

According to the trial records, “William C. Parker is by the Court assigned Counsel for the prisoner in his defense, and Meriwether B. Broadnax Attorney for the Commonwealth filed an Information against the prisoner who upon his arraignment pleaded not guilty” (Tragle 221). Tragle provides the information that there is *no* indication that the “confessions”

given to Gray were read in Court, nor that the name of Thomas R. Gray was mentioned during this trial (244). Moreover, out of the ten presiding judges at the trial of Oyer and Terminer, four names are missing in Gray's *CNT(a)*.¹⁰ Given these discrepancies, Tragle admonishingly writes,

Directly or indirectly it [Gray's *CNT(a)*] has provided the basis for most of what has been written, in both a fictional and pseudo-historical sense, about the Southampton Revolt.... The fascinating thing about the "Original Confessions" is that, while those who wrote about the revolt, or about Nat Turner, used the pamphlet as a primary source, all, without exception, seem to have done so without applying to it a purported contemporary source. How did it square with other information from recognized sources? Was it consistent with the official records which were available? ... The "Original Confessions" is a key document in the general problem, but it must not be accepted uncritically. (301)

Indeed, compared to the sensational, flamboyant tone of Gray's account of the event, the trial records give us plain facts, such as the amount of compensation for executed slaves and the remuneration for the defense attorney.

Although these facts are all introduced and given reality in Foster's *RNT*, there is a note of affectation in her enterprise, because she seems to turn Tragle's suggestion to her own advantage. In addition, she must have been conscious of the critics' repeated indication that at the time of the publication of the pamphlet, Gray, an agent of white authority, obviously manipulated Turner's confessions.¹¹ In any case, learning from Tragle's lesson, Foster

proceeds to the next phase: she speculates as to why Gray constructed and published the false confessions, which are the crux of her narrative. In the course of her research, Foster realized that specific witnesses appeared frequently, and that some of their testimony was inconsistent. Foster then advances a theory: the Turner confessions are the result of a politico-legal conspiracy; she deploys the conspiracy theory as a narrative tactic, whereupon in *RNT* she has John Floyd, the Virginia Governor, implicitly order Rep. Trezvant to prepare some credence convenient for the Virginian authority to cover up the inadequacy of judiciary proceedings and the false testimony against Turner.

In Foster's *RNT*, one of the two prosecution witnesses who made false statements against Turner was an illegal distiller as well as a slave owner named Levi Waller. The other witness, who serves as a "newspaperman," is Rep. James Trezvant, "the congressman, lawyer, militia colonel," as well as "chief justice of the court called to oversee the rebellion trials—if they could be called trials" (Part Two, 303). Governor Floyd notices that American people "don't want to hear that Negroes are being hanged on the word of a drunken perjurer," nor "to hear stories about the abuse of power" (Part One, 407); if the northern abolitionists find out about such a scandal, they "would trumpet it in their newspapers" and "turn the whole country against us" (Part One, 405). Floyd indignantly vociferates, "[t]he great Commonwealth of Virginia will not be undone by a few drunken, ignorant crackers! I will not have my name or this state's reputation associated with this debacle." He then orders Rep. Trezvant to "handle this" since "we must assure the nation that we have our slaves in hand and that they are loyal and grateful for slavery. The nation doesn't want to hear stories of smiling slaves rising up to kill their masters at night. They don't want to hear about gallant Christian

revolutionaries called by God” (Part One, 409). As a result, Trezvant and his conspirators “would fashion an official document, a confession, an official transcript that re-created the trial. Thomas R. Gray, not William Parker, would be the attorney of record. In the reconstructed record of trial, there would be no congressman acting as judge and witness, there would be no record of Levi Waller or his perjury, and they would take Nat Turner down a peg” (Part One, 411–2). Of course, the signature and seal of Trezvant as a judge were removed from Gray’s *CNT(a)* (Part One, 414).

In this vein, Foster presents the answer to the discrepancies between the trial records and Gray’s pamphlet, trying to enhance the validity of her own fictional story. Providing a counter-narrative to Gray’s *CNT(a)* and Styron’s *CNT(b)*, Foster’s creation of the white conspiracy theory in *RNT* itself serves as an alternative conspiracy against the historical/literary representation of Turner that had been politically and/or legally manipulated. Building upon the previous Turner explications provoked by the controversy with regard to historical accuracy, Foster constructs her version of Nat Turner as a victim martyr. She enters the fray less to get the record straight than to do battle.

4. Redemption of Turner, Reconciliation of Foster

Foster, intentionally unveiling the fictionality within Gray’s *CNT(a)* (and consequently Styron’s *CNT(b)*), impresses readers with the resurrection of Nat Turner. That is, Foster, who says “some of what we accept as history is no more than fiction,” by assessing and controlling the usability of Gray’s historical document, in what she calls a fiction, composes an imaginative story, through which she induces readers to consider her fictional representation as historical truth. In so doing, she skillfully redeems the

dignity of the perverted hero called a “religious fanatic.”

The theme of redemption and reconciliation in *RNT* is, above all else, confirmed in the narrative framework of the novel, in which all relevant characters—both whites and slaves—narrate the event from their viewpoints. This multilayered representation sharply contrasts with Styron’s *CNT*, which is composed solely of Turner’s first-person narrative. In *RNT*, each character’s explanation prior to, during, and after the insurrection is eventually unified and woven together by Harriet Beecher Stowe. At the closing of the rebellion, Foster’s Nat Turner had chosen William Love, or Will, to run away to preserve and pass down the true story of the rebellion. In Boston, Stowe visits the runaway Will to discover the truth about Nat Turner. Styron, on the other hand, depicts Will as Turner’s foil, the most atrocious villain among the insurgents who threatens Turner’s leadership. In this way, the characters in *RNT* complement each other to redeem and resurrect Nat Turner.

In fact, Foster’s Turner is a pious prophet as well as an eloquent religious revolutionist. As an African-American woman writer, who has published several “Christian” novels¹², Foster gives Turner a devout mother, Nikahywot, who lived harmoniously with her family in the Ethiopian Highlands around 1798. After being captured by Muslims, she is sold in Southampton, Virginia, and gives birth to a white planter’s child. Nikahywot (renamed Nancie) teaches her son Negasi (meaning “prince,” but renamed Nathan) about her ancestors’ cultural affluence, her native tongue Amharic, and Ethiopia’s rich Christian heritage. She keeps telling her son that he has been called to set all captives free. Endowed with literacy in both Amharic and English and knowledge of the Bible, Turner realizes that the white planters are distorting the story of the Bible to justify their proslavery

argument. Citing passages from the Old Testament, he reprimands the wrongs of the slavocracy and demands that white people repent for the sin of man-stealing. But, of course, his admonitions cannot succeed. Foster then employs a typical method as a “Christian” novelist; she makes Nat Turner serve not only as Moses, the liberator of his people, but also as Christ, the Redeemer, offering propitiation for Southern sins. Turner attempts to set the enslaved captives free, leads a rebellion, and is then martyred for his cause. In other words, Foster imagines motivations other than those proposed by Gray and Styron for Turner’s role in the revolt: the Christian motives, which is of central significance for Foster.¹³

However, note that Foster does not intend simply to restore the forfeited power of African Americans one-sidedly. Given that she understands how the Turner controversy segregated polemicists essentially along racial lines, in *RNT*, she strategically seeks to render reconciliation and rectification between the rulers and ruled. For instance, Foster has Turner himself embody racial integration and religious/political atonement, creating his parents as the Ethiopian-turned-American-slave mother and the benevolent, well-intentioned white master, Benjamin Turner. This parentage is, of course, entirely fictionalized. In *RNT*, Turner has been raised repeatedly hearing, “You are an African prince, a prince of Ethiopia, a man of two continents—of this America and our mother, Africa” (Part One, 267). Also, in naming, Foster juxtaposes two different appellations—Nikahywot/Nancie and Nathan/Negasi—for the protagonists, giving them both Ethiopian and American identities/subjectivities.

More significantly, Foster shows that even in Ethiopia, the peculiar institution exerted a power similar to the one it wielded in the American South. Nikahywot’s Ethiopian episode ironically reveals that before being

captured in her homeland, she had been in the *chewa*, the master class, using *barya*, slaves. She remembers her beloved cousin slave, Misha, with whom she was captured and put on the slave ship to the New World. Nikahyot witnessed Misha's drowning with her baby girl during the Middle Passage. She blames herself for their deaths, and profoundly repents not having given them their freedom. Acknowledging divine justice, Nancie confesses her sin to her son:

The family debt you owe is because of me! I could have freed her [Misha]. I was selfish; I only thought of myself. I am sorry I did not beg Misha's forgiveness. I knew all along that I was wrong; there was always a sinking feeling in my heart.... We were the same but I treated her as a stranger, as though she was *ferengi* [white]. Why did I force Egzi'abher Ab [God Almighty] to make me naked before I could see there was no difference between her and me? ... I am one of the wicked ones, like those people of Virginia! (Part One, 288)

Therefore, to expiate her ancestors' sin in Ethiopia, Foster makes a conventional Christological plot: Nikahyot/Nancie must "give my best offering...my only son!" for the liberation of all African-American brethren (Part One, 282).

The most propitiative example between the ruler and ruled in *RNT* is observed in the relationship between Gray and Turner. They are friends from childhood, closer than brothers, acknowledging that only to each other can they exchange their true feelings and thoughts. So, in *RNT*, it is Gray who secretly enhances Turner's intelligence and knowledge:

Everyone knew that Nat Turner could read and write, but it was still forbidden by law. Thomas Gray had made it to lend his books to read, sometimes newspapers. Thomas had once even shown him the Declaration of Independence reprinted in a Fourth of July newspaper. Then the two of them would meet to discuss, every two months or when the weather would allow it, what Thomas had shared. Nat Turner would return the loaned items and usually Thomas Gray would have something new for him. (Part Two, 189)

Thus, Foster alters the inherently opposing existences into a collaborative consanguinity of intelligences.

Their intimacy causes Turner to assert how disappointed he feels about Gray's hesitancy to fight against slavery. Turner's decisive moral suasion and Gray's vacillation over the slavery argument undermine the conventional slave-master relationship, since during their discussion, Turner consistently overwhelms Gray's opportunism. When Turner implies his contemplation of unyoking the chain of slavery, Gray, even offering to buy his friend's freedom, replies,

"You are my friend, Nat. Perhaps the only friend I have who understands me, the only friend I can tell that I am dissatisfied with my life, the only friend who says, listen to your heart. Maybe I am as selfish as the others who would keep you a slave. I would rather have you alive as a slave than to see you martyred to some romantic notion." (Part Two, 208)

Although Gray can never understand Turner's exigent necessity of

insurrection, nor his sense of divine mission to liberate his race, this affinity has never been described in the previous stories of Nat Turner. Foster's presentation effectively foreshadows the white authorities' treacherous conspiracy to fabricate a false confession under Gray's name; at the same time, Turner's ardent avowals of an antislavery crusade and of celestial revelation help diminish the negative impression of the brutal slaughter that subsequently occurs.

Likewise, in the final phase of the novel, two narrative co-explorers—Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Dred*, and Will, a surviving witness and insurgent—cooperatively redeem Turner's life story. After the buried truth is all unearthed, Foster underscores anew the revival of Black Power:

Harriet [Beecher Stowe] smiled. She looked across the coach at her brother [Henry Ward Beecher] and then back at William. "There were so many deaths and weapons." "There is war. We celebrate our warriors and paint pictures of them with weapons in their hands. Can a Negro not be a hero, even a tragic one, because he bears a weapon?... She looked at William. "Do you think there is hope? Are we doomed?" "So much harm has been done," William said. "But I have faith that we can be healed, though we may always walk with a limp. And if we die," he added, "there is always resurrection." (Part Two, 375-6)

Foster's revisionist approach to narrative creation impresses readers with the element of atonement. With her crystal-clear intention of resurrecting the legendary African-American liberator, she challenges both hitherto accepted images of heroes and complacent-slave theories.

Foster's website narration, which advertises these two volumes as revealing the 180 year-old buried truth as a real story told for the first time, might sound ironic, when we find the fine print in the copyright page that reads "This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental." However, behind Foster's *The Resurrection of Nat Turner*, there continues the representation of the multifaceted black rebel liberator, which fascinates critics, scholars, and a myriad of people, whether it is based on fact, truth, or imagination.

* This essay was supported by JSPS KAKENHI (Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research [c], Grant Number 24520327).

Notes

1 Foster's webpage provides a double effect: besides the audio narration, it also reads "[f]or 180 years, the truth of Nat's story has been tainted. Award-winning author Sharon Ewell Foster reinterprets history to offer a *new* American story of one man's struggle for freedom and the redemption of his people. Based on actual trial records, interviews with descendants, official documents, and five years of research, *The Resurrection of Nat Turner, Part Two: The Testimony* is a story of the quest for truth and the true meaning of liberty." Thus, uncritical readers of the site are effectively imprinted with the authenticity of her fictional representation. The website also announces that Foster won the Annual Michael Shaara Prize for Excellence in Civil War Fiction for *The Resurrection of Nat Turner, Part One: The Witnesses*. For more information, access the webpage: <<http://theresurrectionofnattturner.com/>>.

2 The number of black victims varies depending on the source. For instance, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, citing "the frank phrase" of a North Carolina

correspondent, mentions that “‘passengers by the Fayetteville stage say, that, by the latest accounts, one hundred and twenty negroes had been killed,’—this being little more than one day’s work” (61). French juxtaposes several reports as follows: “‘From the best information,’ a North Carolina newspaper reported, ‘32 dead bodies [negroes] have been seen, besides a number are supposed to have died in the woods of their wounds.’ The senior editor of the *Richmond Whig*, who traveled to Southampton County as a member of a cavalry troop, deplored ‘the slaughter of many blacks, without trial, and under circumstances of great barbarity.’ He estimated the number killed in that manner—‘generally by decapitation or shooting’—at forty, perhaps higher. The *Lynchburg Virginian* reported that ‘troops under the command of Gen. Broadnax, had slain upwards of 90 blacks, taken the leader in that section prisoner, shot him, cut off his head and limbs, and hung them in different sections, to inspire a salutary terror among the slaves.’ The *Raleigh Register* reported that ‘two leaders were shot and their heads placed upon stakes in the public road’” (French 2).

3 Probably because of his dictation and publication of Turner’s *Confessions*, and partly because of his service as a defense attorney for some of the other insurgents, Gray had been generally and misleadingly regarded also as Turner’s counsel. In *CNT(b)* Styron, too, has Gray play a court-appointed lawyer for Turner. Besides, Gray is described as “fifty or a little more” (11), which shows that Styron apparently got confused and mistook Gray for his father, also named Thomas Gray. See also n. 6.

4 For more on the Nat Turner controversy hitherto existing and its revival in the 1960s, see Aptheker, Clarke, Duff & Mitchell, Davis, Foner, French, Greenburg, Oates, and Stone. Styron’s *CNT(b)* and the Turner controversy shed light on the literary lineage of the Turner-related stories other than Foster’s *RNT*, such as George Payne Rainsford James’s *The Old Dominion; or The Southampton Massacre: A Novel* (1856), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856), Martin R. Delany’s *Blake; or The Huts of America* (1859–62), William Wells Brown’s *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (1863), Mary Spear Tiernan’s *Homoselle* (1881), Pauline Carrington Rust Bouvé’s *Their Shadows Before: A Story of the Southampton Insurrection* (1899), Randolph Edmond’s “Nat Turner” in *Six Plays in the Negro Theater* (1934), Daniel Panger’s *Ol’ Prophet Nat* (1967), and Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* (1986). In addition, as part of the Independent Lens series, PBS produced the film *Nat Turner: a Troublesome Property* (dir. by Charles Burnett, 2002), which blends documentary narrative, historical re-enactment, and critical reflection to examine the event.

Many scholars and authors involved in the Turner controversy appear in this film, rendering various aspects of the insurrection. Furthermore, recently, the graphic novel *Nat Turner* by Kyle Baker, an award-winning animator and director, was published in 2008.

5 Foster does not clearly mention all the details of her archival research and the content of her interview with descendants whose forefathers were related to the rebellion. Besides, as the fine print in the copyright page admits the work's fictionality, readers cannot precisely distinguish which part is her original discovery of the "new" facts, and which part is her imagination. Probably the key issue is that she clarified as a literary author that Gray had not been Turner's defense attorney, but that is not a fresh indication, as I mention in this essay. See also n. 9.

6 In this essay, Foster remarks "In the original 'Confessions,' Gray asserts that he was Nat Turner's defense attorney." However, in close reading of Gray's *CNT(a)*, Gray never asserts himself as such, even though he had been considered misleadingly as a court-appointed lawyer to represent Turner. See also n. 3.

7 Although Foster's remarks are a part of the sales strategy to catch the public eye, to profess Gray's *CNT* to be a complete lie seems rather an abrupt and too simple conclusion. It has been repeatedly pointed out that Gray, an agent of white authority, manipulated Turner's confessions out of a concern that the revolt might provoke social disorder, but it is noteworthy too that Turner seems to have participated actively in creating the role in which the narrative casts him. That is, Gray and Turner effectively cooperated in the negotiation that produced *CNT(a)*. As Eric Sundquist suggests, Gray's apparently intentional focus on only Turner's religious eccentricity diverted readers' apprehensions of more widespread slave uprisings. Yet Turner donned the white-made black mask of the spiritual deviate willingly, feigning submission to Gray's authority, that is, Turner might have performed the role of a trickster within the white discourse defined by Gray (48–51). In this light, the pamphlet emerges as Turner's rhetorical take on Gray's "Confession," rather than Gray's political reappropriation of Turner's confession, for Gray seems quite unintentionally overwhelmed by the narrative he presents. In this regard, Turner's rhetorical strategy proved more profoundly subversive of the slave-holding society than the straightforward violence of the insurrection he led. Seymour Gross and Eileen Bender also view *CNT(a)* as a rhetorical collaboration that Turner and Gray negotiated to produce a political document palatable to the antebellum public. Indeed, the pamphlet was from the beginning a product of both Gray's reliance on

Turner and vice versa. Though fully aware of the events of the insurrection before interviewing Turner, Gray nonetheless needed the slave to authenticate his narration. Moreover, before Turner's execution, the trial had already been completed, and hence the lawyer had a clear idea of what Turner might or might not tell the public under the gaze of Southern authority; this knowledge was useful to Turner in shaping his narrative. Thus, Tragle questions in such a "salable manuscript . . . where Gray stops and Nat begins" (409). Understanding how the "Confessions" would be received, the rebel slave and the attorney collaborated to narrate a text that would appeal sensationally to the curiosity of readers, yet at the same time withhold the crucial but untenable significance of the event: the threat it represented to the Southern slavery system. As Andrews observes, "Turner needs Gray as much as Gray needs Turner" (76); The politico-textual cooperation of Gray and Turner—whereby Gray succeeded in sidestepping whites' horror of the true motives of the insurrection, and Turner in objectifying himself as a slave hero—depended upon a public reception of *CNT(a)* as an object of interest. Yet through their deft admixture of politics and literature, Gray and Turner succeed in defamiliarizing the narrative discourse of the pamphlet vis-à-vis this tradition; in so doing, Gray established his legal/narrative authority, and Turner established the Turner Myth as a central narrative of subsequent black folklore. In particular, Turner's use of the Old Testament to justify the rebellion and his rhetorical strategy to parallel himself with Christ overwhelm Gray's intention of degrading the slave rebel. In any way, judging from various indications that have been made by scholars and critics above, it seems to be difficult to simply declare that the manipulated collaboration between Gray and Turner is just "a lie." After all, the textual control to the advantage of white authority after the subversive insurrection is a presupposition for analyzing Gray's *CNT(a)*.

8 Another compilation is Kenneth S. Greenberg's *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's P, 1996).

9 In the "Author Letter" and "A Conversation with Sharon Ewell Foster," both at the end of Part One, the author mentions that before writing *RNT*, she studied historical documents and nonfiction works including Tragle's, thereby quoting some sentences from the historian who questions the credibility of Gray's text. However, it may be surmised that when she first located and actually held the handwritten trial report, she probably had not acknowledged Tragle's work.

10 The ten judges include Jeremiah Cobb, Samuel B. Hines, James D. Massenburg,

James W. Parker, Robert Goodwin, James Trezvant & Ores A. Browne, Gent. Carr Bowers, Thomas Preston, Richard A. Urquardt; those who are missing in Gray's pamphlet include Massenburg, Goodwin, Trezvant, and Urquardt. See Tragle 211 and Gray 98.

- 11 See also n. 7.
- 12 As her first novel *Passing by Samaria* (1999) debuted on the CBA (Christian Booksellers Association) bestseller list in the first month of its release and then won the Christy Award in 2000 shows, Christianity is the central theme of her creations, for which her works are sometimes called gospel novels. Other than *RNT* she has published *Passing by Samaria* (1999; the NAACP Book of the Year in 2000, a RWA (Romance Writers of America) double-RITA finalist, winner of Christy Award for fiction); *Riding Through Shadows* (2001) and its sequel *Passing into Light* (2003); a series of *Ain't No River* (2001), *Ain't No Mountain* (2004), and *Ain't No Valley* (2005); and *Abraham's Well* (2006; winner of the Romantic Times Editors Choice Award for Best Inspirational 2006, Historical Novel Society Editors Choice Selection).
- 13 Foster intentionally avoids describing the atrocities of the Turner rebellion, since neither Moses nor Jesus murdered anybody, obviously. Instead of attributing the fiendish acts solely on Turner, she justifies his revolt as God's will, that is, "it was the sure and righteous judgment of the Lord" to the slave owners and proslavery advocates who ignored God's warning to stop man-stealing (Part Two, 243). Foster then explains: "he [Turner] was the instrument of God's judgment. It was not his will—he was no more than an axe in the hands of God" (Part Two, 243). Before the uprising, Foster has Turner address his people, "We are not murderers! We are innocent men! We are men of peace forced to take up arms against our brothers to save our lives. They [white planters] have forced our hands" (Part Two, 246). Turner further continues, "Lift your heads, men, mighty men of God! Rise to defend our families! Rise to defend our humanity! Rise to defend our dreams! We rise to fulfill God's judgment! We rise in service to the King of kings! We are the great and powerful army of the Lord!" (Part Two, 249). Thus, unlike Gray, who regards Turner as just a religious fanatic, as well as unlike Styron, who finds behind Turner's religious obsessiveness the perverted affection to his previous master and a white girl, Foster strongly underpins Turner's divine mission and relates it with the white sins of the peculiar institution.

Works Cited and Selected Bibliography

- Andrews, William L. *To Tell A Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988.
- Aptheker, Herbert. *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion*. New York: Humanities, 1966.
- Clarke, John H., ed. *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*. Westport: Greenwood, 1968.
- Davis, Mary K. *Nat Turner before the Bar of Judgment: Fictional Treatments of the Southampton Slave Insurrection*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999.
- Foner, Eric, ed. *Nat Turner*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971.
- Foster, Sharon E. *The Resurrection of Nat Turner, Part One: the Witnesses*. NY: Howard, 2011.
- . *The Resurrection of Nat Turner, Part Two: the Testimony*. NY: Howard, 2012.
- . "The Truth about Nat Turner: On the 180th anniversary of the slave revolt, this author says his "Confessions" were a lie. " August 23, 2011. *The Roots*. Web. Jan. 25, 2013 <<http://www.theroot.com/views/truth-about-nat-turner>>.
- French, Scot. *Remembering Nat Turner: The Rebellious Slave in American Thought, 1831 to the Present*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.
- Gray, Thomas R. *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. 1831. Rpt. in *William Styron' Nat Turner*. Ed. John Henrick Clarke. Westport: Greenwood, 1968. 92-118.
- Greenberg, Kenneth S., ed. *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Gross, Seymour L. and Eileen Bender. "History, Politics and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner." *American Quarterly* 23 (October 1971): 487-518.
- Higginson, Thomas Wentworth. "Nat Turner Insurrection." 52-65. *The Nat Turner Rebellion: The Historical Event and the Modern Controversy*. Eds. John B. Duff and Peter M. Mitchell. NY: Harper, 1971.
- Oates, Stephen B. *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1975.
- Stone, Albert E. *The Return of Nat Turner: History, Literature, and Cultural Politics in Sixties America*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992.
- Styron, William. *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. 1967. NY: Vintage, 1992.
- . "Nat Turner Revisited." 1992. *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. 1967. NY: Vintage, 1992.
- . "This Quiet Dust." 1965. *This Quiet Dust and Other Writings*. New York:

- Random House, 1982.
- Sundquist, Eric J. *To Wake the Nations*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Thelwell, Mike. "Back With the Wind: Mr. Styron and the Reverend Turner." *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*. Ed. John Henrik Clarke. Westport: Greenwood, 1968. 79-91.
- Tragle, Henry I. *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1971.