


Literature and the Mind, the American Cultures and Global Contexts Center,
the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center, and "Slavery, Captivity, and the Meaning of Freedom"
present



"THE DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS OF HENRY BOX BROWN IN FOUR ACTS"

MATTHEW REBHORN



If Henry Box Brown is known to contemporary audiences, then it is as the slave who achieved freedom by mailing himself in a box from Virginia to Philadelphia in 1849. While critics have explored this incredible event, less attention has been focused on Brown's subsequent life as the performer of a moving diorama in England, a mesmerist, and a prestidigitator. Taking up his fascinating boxing experience, but also shedding more light on his later "acts," as I call them, I argue that Brown used his performances of the black body to construct a new idea of "double consciousness," Du Bois's classic term for the psychological splitting of African-American subjectivity. By exploring the way that Brown used his performative acts to construct a conscious body—minding the body, as it were—I argue that he offered a new "ontopossibility," as Jane Bennett calls it, one that traded the ontological clarity of mind-over-body for the more capacious, if murkier, understanding of a mind-in-body ontology. Double consciousness thus becomes not a matter of psychological splitting, I argue, but rather the discovery of consciousness not in the mind alone, but also in the often-objectified body of the chattel slave.

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5:00PM

SOUTH HALL 2635



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