Geoffrey Sanborn, *Plagiarama!: William Wells Brown and the Aesthetic of Attractions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 212 pp.

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Geoffrey Sanborn's *Plagiarama!* is a dynamic, original discussion about plagiarism and the self-multiplying discursive aesthetics of William Wells Brown, the nineteenth-century escaped slave and abolitionist, best remembered as the landmark author of the first African American novel, *Clotel* (1853). But as Sanborn convincingly documents, Brown was a plagiarist—a serial plagiarist. The charge is not new. It followed Brown from as early as 1852, when Frederick Douglass exposed his promiscuous borrowing. It is also a feature of Brown's literary corpus that has been long countenanced by detractors and enthusiasts alike. So why now a study of plagiarism and William Wells Brown? Plagiarism is ubiquitous—more on this soon—and Brown is not particularly well-known outside of nineteenth-century African American literature circles. What is a scholarly focus on Brown's literary lifting really going to bring into view?

It is worth backing up just a bit.

First, Brown's backstory is inherently fascinating. After escaping slavery in 1834, he discarded his slave name, Sandford, and reclaimed the name first given to him by his mother: William. He took the second part of his name from an Ohio Quaker who saved his life and who was essential in his escape. Brown's composite name is a fitting tribute to a life shaped in relationship to risk in a world he first learned to access illegally. Thus, a complex, interstitial kind of consciousness predated Brown's foray into literacy. He walked away from the name Sandford but never fully tried to shake the self who was Sandford. Rather, he parlayed his characteristic malleability and drive into a variety of professions, working alternately as a barber, a steamboat operator, a traveling antislavery lecturer, a night school organizer, a social reformer, and a playwright. In a parallel fashion, Brown's writing capitalized on the modes of knowing and quick-thinking versatility that served him in his earliest years. This deeply provisional quality of Brown's aesthetic is the focus of *Plagiarama!.*

Brown was certainly a prolific writer. Besides his autobiography (1847), he wrote *Three Years in Europe* (1852), considered to be the first African American European travel memoir; *The American Fugitive in Europe* (1855); *The Escape* (1858) a drama that he publicly performed for at least a year. Other books include *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (1863); *The Negro in the American Rebellion* (1867); and *My Southern Home* (1880). Yet a sizable portion of his output was lifted. Aided in his work by various online databases, Sanborn documents that Brown

plagiarized no fewer than 87,000 words from at least 282 texts. Sanborn is also clear that this plagiarism was not just a kind of synthesized borrowing or creative redirection, but direct copying, often word for word—a "lush, louche plagiarism" (8).

Having previously documented extensive passages of plagiarized text in William Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860), Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood* (1902-1903), and in the 2016 Broadview edition of *Clotel,* Sanborn is unmistakably in his element when assembling Brown's literary praxis—as oscillation, echo, declamation, and repetition. Here he mobilizes Brown's passages and claims (inclusive of augmented stories, absorbed anecdotes, and outright piracy—sometimes all at once), into a narrative that teases the distance between self and history, and showcases "the always-vanishing point at which structure is superseded and history begins" (123). Adapting Paul Saint-Amour's idea of "readerly hedonics," Sanborn suggests that Brown's plagiarism was, in large part, language play for the pleasure of it, "a mostly unspoken pleasure in the blurrability of texts and styles" (25).

Attached to readerly pleasure is a democratizing spirit of play that encompasses voice, stylistic variations, tonality, and contextual slants—the pleasures of language. Though the book has two sizable appendices of plagiarized lines in Brown, its lean 127-page critical analysis points the way toward further explorations into the transformative nature of play. For example, play could be read as movement between production and desire (after Nietzsche or Jacques Derrida). Or play could be a kind of self-revisioning, something to lose your body to, your stories to—the kinds of text-to-play relationships that continually absorbed continental philosophers like Hans-Georg Gadamer. To be sure, *Plagiarama!* itself is delightfully playful, both stylistically and conceptually. Sanborn's is the finest study of Brown's performativity and theatricality I have encountered. But it would be exciting to read more from Sanborn on play—the kinds of values it generates, the ways it shapes what we think of as choices, and even its potential to reshape social convention.

Plagiarama! also takes up with something that Sanborn calls "the spirit of capitalization" (46). This concept is seemingly inspired by Max Weber's spirit of capitalism, but there is too much revisionist critique to wade through vis-à-vis Weber to make much of this connection. Sanborn's spirit of capitalization more thoroughly appears to equate (at least in purpose and payoff) with something he terms, "the spirit of fictionality" (64). These spirits are transitive, like verbs. They evince a kind of vehicular attachment to simulation as well as to the charged and particular (fetishistic) work that goes into swapping registers and manipulating identity in a world where the draws of popular entertainment rarely fixate on one object for long.

Plagiarama! is at its most riveting when Sanborn models Brown's self-fashioning—and his readiness to circulate himself—as a kind of virtuality that was ahead of its time. It is a virtuality that contemporary information-studies scholars would surely recognize as the versional, the recursive, or the hyperreal. Brown was doing it back in the nineteenth century. Using film historian Tom Gunning's phrase, "aesthetic of attractions," Sanborn deftly demonstrates how Brown created the nineteenth-century equivalent of a variety show by intoning, collating, and restaging popular, oftentimes oddly arresting antislavery spectacles and discourses for transatlantic audiences.

Moreover, Brown's narratives and fiction are kaleidoscopic conduits for maximizing spectacle. For one thing, they highlight human folly, extraordinary coincidence, and fantastical wit. (Brown loved midcentury popular satire and Southwestern frontier humor, and he often cribbed what most amused him.) Fictional energy reached its highest peaks and lowest depressions when Brown turned pathos to the nines. No author is more associated with the tragic mulatta trope than Brown. He worked it to a devastating spiral in Clotel's suicidal plunge into the Potomac toward the closing of his first novel. And he resuscitated the scene time and again, with suicidal dives appearing in the *Memoir of William Wells Brown* and (with little fuss or even plot integration) in *My Southern Home.*

So *why* a study of Brown and plagiarism? First, plagiarism is but the *premier cours*, the opening—or, better yet, the wellspring. It is not a verdict. It does not defeat the purpose of Brown's work. *Plagiarama!* speaks to the infrastructures of cultural meaning that undergird our cultural expectations of autonomous subjectivity. Sanborn's study also proved an intellectually rewarding read during this latest season of Presidential politics, during which a cadre of plagiarists and pantomimes took to the stage, sometimes in seeming succession. But more than that, it is a remunerative text to think alongside in a number of ways.

Plagiarama! leads readers through a range of floating concourses, exploring such questions as the relationship between the positions we espouse and the selves we project. Alternatively, it asks how do we account for subjectivity's negative spaces—the gaps that roil in the space between self and signification. And though Roland Barthes is mentioned only in passing, *Plagirama!* surely exhibits the *joie de vivre* of "S/Z" and *The Pleasure of the Text.* Reading Sanborn can even *feel* like reading Barthes (who is speaking?), especially when Sanborn illuminates how texts eschew ensigns of ownership. He writes, "because language belongs to no one, because its materials, protocols, and structures so dramatically exceed the proprietorship of its users, one is, in language, both oneself and anyone" (9).

So if he neither owns his language nor exists in it, where is Brown in all this? Nearly 25 years ago, Ann DuCille asked "Where in the World Is William Wells Brown?" in a highly memorable essay. Sanborn responds that Brown is "not within but between the speeches of the characters." According special attention to *The Escape,* Sanborn shines the spotlight on Brown as "a relay point within the diegesis" (113), not as a central entity upon which a notion of a literary tradition could be built.

Where Sanborn largely departs from a record of historiographic scholarship on Brown, and on early African American literature, for that matter, is in his resistance to making form accommodate purpose. He claims that, for Brown, form preceded the politics of antislavery discourse—that Brown placed pleasure before necessity. Sanborn stakes his critique on what he calls the "more-than-necessary and other-than-purposive aspects of early African American writing" (5). So rather than upholster the political work of Brown or prioritize the instructional or historic-legal applications of his work, Sanborn takes Brown's practice to be ostensibly nonteleological. He argues that his writing need not follow conviction. It mostly does not.

Now, even though William Wells Brown has long frustrated black cultiural historiographers (Addison Gayle, Blyden Jackson, Bernard Bell, etc.) with his excessive appropriations and supposed bourgeois-idealist attachments, one cannot overstate his commitment to the antislavery cause. In his life and art alike, he was a lifelong champion of the North American slave and an advocate for black parity. He took great personal risk in aiding fugitives, was active in the Underground Railroad, and was a tireless proponent for black rights during Reconstruction. This is not to say that Brown's penchant for platform-cooption and careless self-parody garnered him authoritativeness. Ezra Greenspan has recently discussed how Brown was very nearly forgotten by history. If Brown had any interest in being remembered as a representative race man, he did a good job of undercutting himself. But maybe, as Sanborn suggests, it was the price of being interesting.