

little-known documents

Individual Influence

GEORGE MOSES HORTON

INTRODUCTION BY
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Introduction

GEORGE MOSES HORTON (1797?–1883?) IS ONE OF THREE AFRICAN AMERICANS KNOWN TO HAVE PUBLISHED POETRY WHILE ENSLAVED IN colonial North America or the United States.¹ The recently discovered holograph manuscript of “Individual Influence” is the only available evidence that Horton also wrote short essays. Written in 1855 or 1856 and published here for the first time, “Individual Influence” provides a new perspective on Horton’s writing process, his strategic affiliations in Chapel Hill, and his changing ideas about the relative efficacy of political and divine influence. More generally, the essay expands the available archive of writing by enslaved African Americans.²

Horton spent most of his life near Chapel Hill before moving to Philadelphia after the Civil War and then to Bexley, Liberia.³ He published poetry in several newspapers and in three books, and he also sold poems in manuscript to patrons in and around Chapel Hill. Until now, his prose was represented in just four unpublished letters and the oration “The Stream of Liberty and Science,” which was delivered to college students in 1859 and survives only in their handwritten transcript of it.

“Individual Influence” demonstrates Horton’s overlapping composition processes, reflecting the way his tendencies as an extemporaneous orator enter his prose style. In the 1820s and 1830s, Horton could not yet write in his own hand; he relied on mental composition, oral delivery, and amanuenses. At the beginning of his life as a poet, “writing” mattered more as a mental activity than as words on the page” (Hager 69). By the 1850s, Horton could write in his own hand, but he maintained habits of mental composition. “Individual Influence” begins as if it were spontaneously delivered orally: Horton offers images of “the tongue of reason” and “an orator of antiquity,” and he refers to himself as “a timorous speaker.” Another feature of composition as a mental activity, quotation from memory, is also evident in the essay, when Horton approximates biblical passages.⁴

The recovery and publication of “Individual Influence” are significant for scholarship on Horton and early African American writing, but the con-

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text in which it was created and preserved highlights how Horton was taken up and deployed by white antislavery advocates and also how early African American writing can become obscured in predominantly white archives. The manuscript is collected in Henry HARRISSE's papers in the New York Public Library.⁵ HARRISSE, born in France and educated in the United States, is best known as the bibliographer of the lawyer Samuel Barlow's private library, but from 1853 to 1856 he was an instructor of French at the University of North Carolina (UNC).⁶ "Individual Influence" is bound in a volume of unpublished manuscripts and scrapbooked print titled "Essays, Memorials, Etc., 1854–1857." The volume is a diverse and polyvocal collection of materials from HARRISSE's UNC period.⁷

In this context, the essay raises questions about Horton's connections to the social network of UNC and his involvement, literally or symbolically, in political debates over slavery. "Individual Influence" appears at the end of a set of documents recording tensions among UNC students, faculty members, and administrators in 1856—specifically, HARRISSE's complaints about student discipline and material related to the "black Republican" controversy surrounding Benjamin Hedrick, a fellow professor at UNC. In September 1856 HARRISSE lodged a series of increasingly serious complaints—against the defiantly disobedient students in his classroom, the faculty members who did not support his outspokenness, and the trustees who openly disliked him. At the same time, his colleague Hedrick raised the ire of many members of the UNC community by publicly supporting John C. Frémont, the antislavery Republican candidate for president.⁸ Hedrick, an individual identified as "Alumnus," and an unnamed trustee openly debated in the *Raleigh Standard* whether public salaries should support abolitionists and whether students should be subjected to Hedrick's influence. In October the trustees voted to dismiss Hedrick. HARRISSE documented the controversy by scrapbooking anti-Hedrick, proslavery clippings together with a pro-Hedrick pamphlet titled *Are North Carolinians Freemen?* In these print debates over the black Republican controversy, the anony-

mous "Alumnus" and Hedrick argued about the nature of "influence," addressing the supposed threat posed by an abolitionist professor. "Alumnus" writes that Hedrick's "poisonous influence is so powerful, and his teachings are so antagonistical" to the "honor and safety of the University and the State," that he should be fired (Hedrick 2). Hedrick replied, "'Alumnus' has also made [a] mistake in supposing that the faculty take upon themselves to influence the political opinions of students" (5). "Individual Influence," at the end of which Horton conspicuously identifies himself as "of colour" and as "belonging to Hall Horton," immediately follows this debate over slavery, abolition, and political influence in the university community. Horton's exploration of influence is deliberately placed in this context.

The arrangement of these papers suggests that HARRISSE, a Jewish immigrant from France and an outsider to the world of agrarian slaveholder elites shared by UNC students and trustees, may have identified with Horton or understood Horton's literary talents as a rebuttal to proslavery positions, but it does not entirely answer questions about what he meant by including "Individual Influence" in his collection of papers from UNC. Leon Jackson argues that the poetry Horton composed for students reflected his complicated negotiations within perpetually uneven economies of power (*Business* 58–60). HARRISSE—a fellow outsider in Chapel Hill—may have needed to conduct similar negotiations, and he could have constructed his interior state through identifications with African American outsiders, as Christopher Castiglia has argued that nineteenth-century white people sometimes did (135). HARRISSE's complaints about student disobedience indicate that he held no power over students who regarded him as an inferior, and HARRISSE may have felt this connected him to Horton across the divide between enslaved and free. HARRISSE definitely identified with Hedrick: they were simultaneously entangled in university controversies. HARRISSE's juxtaposition of Horton's writing with proslavery arguments against Hedrick suggests HARRISSE saw parallels between Hedrick's treatment and Horton's.

By 1856, when HARRISSE and HEDRICK were embroiled in controversies over whether they had too little or too much influence on students, Horton had already experienced the limitations of earthly sway. Horton's poetry and letters show him petitioning others to take notice of his talent and to apply influence to free him from slavery. These efforts continually failed. Horton's first volume of poems was intended to raise donations for his manumission and emigration but came up painfully short (Jackson, *Business* 74–77). While Horton once hoped his poetry would reach "some philanthropic souls as from afar," who "with pity strove to break the slavish bar" (91), by the time he wrote "Individual Influence" he had found that "terrestrial . . . power" had limited "sway." The Horton of "Individual Influence" studies the difference between earthly "popular sway" and divine "absolute sway," ultimately determining that only "spiritual influence elevates man into an angelical sphere." Faith Barrett has argued that Horton's poetic performance of a Southern romantic posture allowed him to "suggest indirectly [his] deeper frustrations with Confederate[s]" or with proslavery Southerners more generally (226). Here too Horton assumes a stance that would resonate even with a proslavery audience—freedom is a heavenly reward—while also saying that slaveholding is an "influence opposit to divine," which "perverts human nature into brutality from infancy into distant years."

Horton and HARRISSE harnessed the possibilities of writing and arranging texts to engage their complex and hostile climates. The recovery of "Individual Influence" raises new questions about Horton's writing and about the development of his religious, social, and political life. The essay's archival context hints at Horton's involvement in political arguments about slavery and abolition, and it also evidences how he and his writing were positioned by others participating in those debates.

NOTES

The original manuscript is reproduced with the permission of the Manuscripts and Archives Division, the New

York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. My transcription of the text remains true to Horton's original spelling and punctuation. Strikeouts and a running title were silently omitted. For their assistance and expertise, I thank Faith Barrett, Alex W. Black, Brigitte Fielder, Leon Jackson, Thomas Lannon, Harvey Long, Eliza Richards, and the staff of the Manuscripts and Archives Division in the Brooke Russell Astor Reading Room of the New York Public Library.

1. The others are Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon.

2. Other recently discovered early African American literary texts include two poems by Hammon (May and McCown; Gedal).

3. According to Reginald Pitts, Horton may have died in Philadelphia after returning from Liberia. For more complete biographies of Horton, see Sherman; Pitts.

4. Horton's paraphrases of Matthew 6.21, Luke 12.34, and Romans 8.7 appear in the text.

5. The accession sheet for the collection lists everything in the bound volume except for Horton's "Individual Influence" (www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/archivalcollections/pdf/harrisseh.pdf). The Brooke Russell Astor Reading Room's paper card catalog has a record for "Individual influence," by "Horton, George M. 'of color'" that directs users to "see: HARRISSE, Henry. Essays." At the time this research was carried out, that record had not yet been included in the library's digital catalog. In the late 1930s the librarian Randolph G. Adams studied the HARRISSE papers as part of his research for the Rosenbach Lectures he delivered at the University of Pennsylvania. These lectures resulted in the publication of Adams's *Three Americanists*, but his chapter on HARRISSE makes no mention of Horton. During this same period, Dorothy Porter Wesley, herself a foundational bibliographer and scholar of early black writing, was surveying archives and preparing her landmark "Early American Negro Writings: A Bibliographical Study." Porter Wesley's bibliography mentions known Horton writings and their locations. During her research at the New York Public Library she would have recognized Horton's name and hand had she come across it. That she apparently did not find Horton's "Individual Influence" in the New York Public Library speaks to the long-standing gulf between mainstream and African Americanist currents in bibliography and book history. For analysis of that split, see Jackson, "Talking Book."

6. For a relevant short biography of HARRISSE, see Adams 1–33.

7. "Individual Influence" was written no later than 1856, the year HARRISSE left Chapel Hill, and no earlier than 1855, because the paper Horton wrote it on carries a watermark that reads, "Kent Mills Improved 1855."

8. For the history of the Hedrick controversy, see Smith.

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Individual Influence

THE TONGUE OF REASON MUST PRONOUNCE this a complex subject, which must eclipse the planet of simplicity, or cloud with confusion an orator of antiquity; : It might be termed a literary medly, spread to the accomodation of a timorous speaker. This individual influence, comprehends a system of curiosity existent between a natural and supernatural feeling in man. It lean[s] with impressive weight on the physical perception and kindles to a blaze the dormant spark of imperial intellect: for intellect reigns as a Monarch, or dispenses as one King his influence to his subjects, and stands proud an individual, with absolute sway, and as between a popular sway and a plenipotentiary even so stands the contrast between a terestial and celestial power. The former is certainly dependent on the latter,

which acts as an individual agent, and hence with an individual influence, with a thorough predominating appreciation, under a cloud of solemnity, it checks the stream of egotism, and dulls the enthusiastical blaze of the philosopher: it furls the wing of imagination, and binds conceit in the chain of compunction: it sets the heart on fire from the seeming friction of a variety of thoughts, and effuses a universal conflagration through the soul, and thus it supports an individual influence in earth, and in Heaven. But on the opposite hand, it fosters a selfish spirit, and impedes the train of moral reflection, and frustrates the social harmony between a moral and a demoralizing capacity. And the individual is certainly influenced by the object mostly

preferred, or regarded, since where the treasure is, there the heart is allso.

Then beware, that this individual influence, mostly consists in the entire annihilation of natural affection: for what is the contrast between the extremities of Nature and Grace; “for the carnal mind is not subject to the things of the spirit, neither in deed can be.” Hence, we see that there are distinctly two principles, or individuals, each with its respective influence, and which can not flow together, and yet, very influential in their lawful spheres. Nature, influences the individual within her bounds; and it is even the case in a preternature point of view. We here take in consideration a magical influence, or the feigned power of necromancy, connected with neither a divine, nor natural influence. This may be considered an individual influence of the Demon, or the

Devil; which few have the power to unravel. A power strangely attractive, an over ruling craft. Yet it is only influential with those who have a propensity to yield to its tender; since by resisting the devil he retreats away. But all influence opposit to divine, perverts human nature into brutality from infancy into distant years; while spiritual influence elevates man into an angelical sphere, where he discovers one eternal individual, occupied of an omnipotent influence in time, and through all eternity—

George M Horton
of colour

Born in North Hampton county
North Carolina
60 years old belonging to Hall Horton
living now in Chatham County
NC

Individual influence

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when he says, that this individual influence, mostly consists in the entire annihilation of natural affection; for next is the contrast between the extremities of nature and Grace; for the carnal mind is not subject to the thing, of the spirit, neither in deed can be. Hence, we see that there are distinctly two principles, or individuals, each with its respective influence, and which can not flow together, and yet, very influential in their lawful spheres. Nature, influences the individual within her bounds; and it is even the case in a moderate point of view. We here take in consideration a magical influence, or the feigned power of necromancy, connected with neither a divine, nor natural influence. This may be considered an individual influence of the Demon, or the Devil; which few have the power to unravel. A power strangely attractive, and ever ruling craft; yet it is only influential with those who have a propensity to yield to its temptations; since by resisting the devil he retreats away. But all influence opposite to divine, prevents human nature into brutality from infancy into distant years; while spiritual influence elevates man into an angelical sphere, where he discovers one eternal individual, occupied by an omnipotent influence in time, and through all eternity.

George M Horton
of colour

Born in Northampton county
North Carolina

60 years old belonging to Hull Horton
living now in Johnston county N.C.

Ab C