

While Hall presents his Igbo ascription as a given, in view of Equiano's iconic significance, I think Hall should have commented on this issue.⁷

Notwithstanding Law's serious critique of one chapter, and the likelihood that others will take issue with Hall's work, this book is, for that very reason, important, providing a new template for critics as well as supporters, and opening up a new chapter in what is clearly a changing paradigm. Hall plans to have an ongoing role in this process, having accepted the position of director of a major project to record ethnicities from all known African migrants to the Americas. This extraordinary undertaking will, however, be only a beginning. It is the cultural evaluation of the impact made by these ethnic groups that is far more significant. Hall undertook an evaluation of the cultural implications of her data in her Louisiana volume, but, beyond the generalizations in regard to skills and economic contributions, it is essentially lacking in *Slavery and African Ethnicities*. It is very much missed.

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The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America. By David M. Henkin. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006. Pp. 238. Cloth, \$38.00.)

Reviewed by Konstantin Dierks

David Henkin has, for the second time, written a marvelous book. His first monograph, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (Columbia University Press, 1998), was a strikingly original account of an important new kind of literacy in mid-nineteenth-century New York City, exemplified in the reading of commercial signs on city streets. That book pulled the histories of literacy and of cities in new directions. Henkin's equally original new monograph, *The Postal*

7. Vincent Carretta, "'Oludah Equiano or Gustavas Vassa?'" *New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity*, *Slavery and Abolition* 20 (1999), 96-105.

Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America, broadens the concern to communications and nation. Whereas scholars tend to write the history of communications through the invention of technologies such as the telegraph or telephone, Henkin focuses instead on the everyday use of communications. This enables him to discern a “communications revolution” in the United States in the 1840s and 1850s premised not on technological innovation, but on popular culture—the sudden and concerted application of an old technology to new purposes, by new groups of people. Earlier in the nineteenth century the postal system operated by the federal government was primarily a carrier of newspapers, business correspondence, and letters on special occasions. By the 1870s that postal system had become a widespread communications medium enabling many ordinary Americans to experience a peculiar new and modern sensation of *connectedness*—for good, as well as for ill.

In making this argument Henkin’s second book shares a common theme with his first, namely an unsung element in the emergence of modernity in the United States. In both books, Henkin asks us to appreciate the modernity of the nineteenth century with fresh and subtle eyes, without the usual technological determinism. Richard John accomplished something comparable with his account of the development of the federal postal system in the early national era, enabling us to appreciate the formation of perhaps the first modern large-scale enterprise, ironically by a government otherwise committed to smallness even in its military apparatus (*Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse*, Harvard University Press, 1995). John examined the role of the post office in crucial political debates of the early national era, but Henkin shifts our gaze in the subsequent antebellum era from political controversy to everyday life, from newspapers to letters, from the elite to the masses. The most important context was not political or institutional, but geographical and social: the extraordinary mobility animating the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century.

That mobility came from broad historical patterns like a rush of migration westward, and from concerted historical events such as the California Gold Rush (1848–1855) and the American Civil War (1861–1865). The United States Congress responded to the emergence of such geographical mobility—and mimicked the pioneering example of the British Parliament—by dramatically reducing the cost of postage, first in 1845 and again in 1851. The most significant result was not the speed of mail

across space, but access to and use of the post by more and more Americans. The volume of mail carried by the postal system more than tripled in a decade, and Henkin highlights new practices and new expectations as ordinary Americans swiftly turned something novel into something normal—into *habit*, into *culture*. Americans of all sorts wrote more and more letters, and they used those letters to send money and daguerreotypes to one another, filling the mail with objects as well as words. The California Gold Rush was remarkable in propelling mail beyond the reach of post offices and propelling the creation of new post offices in, as a major instance, the mushrooming new city of San Francisco. In its turn the American Civil War was remarkable for an absolutely massive volume of correspondence between battlefield and homefront. Whether to gold fields or battlefronts, mail often transmitted supposedly female sensibilities into male domains, so that the idealization of “home” already circulating in a commercial society was complemented by an idealization of “family” in an increasingly mobile society. “Home” may have represented stability and sanctuary, but mail made “family” portable in representing affection and purpose.

That kind of family connectedness was one of the bright sides of the new American postal culture of the mid-nineteenth century. Yet Henkin is alert to dark sides as well—not just intimate, poignant connections to family and friends, but also anonymous, fraught connections to strangers. The 1850s, for instance, saw the intrusion of those two modern banes, junk mail and the equivalent of scam e-mail, never mind the perceived danger of sexual promiscuity in anonymous “valentines.” Through good and bad, ordinary Americans learned how to present themselves in letters, how to navigate the public melee of post offices, how to cultivate apparently (but not exclusively) white middle-class values and skills, and how in different moments to reveal or conceal themselves. All this amounted to a widespread, new, modern postal culture centering upon a fundamental expectation of connectedness to the wider world, a connectedness that people from then on would have to negotiate, both for its opportunities and its perils.

Henkin ends his account at the advent of the telephone in the 1870s, insisting that the connectedness of modernity had already settled into American life before and without technological innovation, government program, or business entrepreneurship. In other words, Henkin effectively advances a theory of revolutionary historical change enacted by ordinary people on a massive scale in everyday life. It is thoroughly

refreshing to encounter so many subtle and sophisticated insights accumulating inside the broad argument of a book unmarred by abstruse jargon or dehumanizing abstractness. Henkin's is that rare book suitable for undergraduates, instructive to graduate students, and useful for any scholar of nineteenth-century America. Indeed, while he is mindful throughout of the multiplicity characterizing the monumental number of personal letters that survive in the archives, and of the diversity of epistolary experiences beyond the white and the middle class and the male, Henkin certainly does not lapse into a mere "complexity argument," found in enough recent scholarship. Instead, his empirical care remains in service of a broad and compelling claim about the emergence of modernity in the mid-nineteenth-century United States.

It might have been helpful for Henkin to have fleshed out the international comparison to the British case in particular. He alludes several times in the book to British initiative preceding American uptake, and yet the ideological embrace of postal service by ordinary Britons—similar? different?—stands unclear. That, however, is the tiniest of quibbles. Ultimately, Henkin has written an original, ambitious, compelling, and elegant book that should spur greater scholarly attention to the history of communications in nineteenth-century America.

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Herndon's Lincoln. By William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik. Edited by Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis. (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006. Pp. 528. Cloth, \$35.00.)

Reviewed by Sarah Klimenko Riedl

Since 1930, scholars have relied on Paul M. Angle's venerable edition of *Herndon's Lincoln* when consulting the most influential and controversial biography ever written about Abraham Lincoln. In this new volume, coeditors Douglas Wilson and Rodney Davis have brought the landmark biography up to date with more than seventy years of Lincoln scholarship, thereby giving us the definitive modern edition of the work.

As the editors explain in their comprehensive introduction, upon Lin-