Genre

This section of the project addresses questions of agency and individual expression in the works at hand by establishing the extent to which each work may be considered autobiographical. To this end, I have placed each narrative on a continuum from journal to biography. Although the potential for self-expression varies between these works, I argue that each, as a narrative of conversion, necessarily possesses some kernel of selfhood—i.e., evidence of a unique individual beneath the layers of generic narrative convention. By viewing these works through the lens of generic category, I have attempted to establish the function each narrative, as a method of expression and introspection, may have fulfilled for its “author” (the person possessing editorial control) or speaker (the supposed narrator) and the limits that genre and context impose upon that function.

Autobiography as Generic Hybrid

It must be admitted from the outset that to refer to English-language narratives created during the 18th century as “autobiographies” is to speak anachronistically. According to Susan Imbarrato, the word did not circulate in Anglo society until 1809, when Robert Southey used it in the *Quarterly Review* (Imbarrato 2); after this debut, “autobiography” quickly became a “distinct […] form of both elite and popular literature” (Payne 15).

Yet to say that autobiographical writings did not exist until after this date would be to commit a serious blunder. Works illustrating what Rodger Payne refers to as the “‘subjective impulse’” precede the term “autobiography” by hundreds of years, and are to be found in such
various genres as “spiritual diaries” and the “oral relations” popular in New England during the
17th century (Payne 16). Indeed, students of early American literature have not hesitated to use
the term liberally: Daniel Shea compiled his lengthy survey of 17th and 18th century works using
the framework of “Spiritual Autobiography,” and when Cotton Mather’s Paterna was finally
referring to these 18th century works as “autobiographies,” then, I am hardly beyond the pale of
academic scholarship.

Indeed, considering the specific content of these six narratives of conversion, it seems
quite appropriate to locate them within the autobiographical tradition. Payne suggests that
“[a]utobiography and evangelicalism both appeared at roughly the same time in Western
culture,” and although one may quibble over whether the 1800s are proximate to the 1730s (even
“roughly” speaking), Payne makes a good case for viewing the evangelical conversion narrative
and the autobiographical impulse as interconnected (Payne 16). In Payne’s estimation, not only
were conversion narratives the “oldest example” of autobiography, but conversion was
autobiography’s only proper impetus; with reference to Jean Starobinski, he argues that “[o]nly
the transforming self constitutes both the subject and the object of proper autobiographical
activity” (Payne 16). Thus conversion narratives may exist without autobiography, but
autobiography cannot exist without conversion.

The question remains, however, of whether a conversion relation truly can exist
independent of autobiography. The case against considering conversion narratives as inevitably
autobiographical is strong: not only were conversion narratives often created to fulfill a public
function (in the case of church admissions, “to convince the elders that the presence of grace was
evident in their experience”), but they were highly formulaic in content (Shea 91). Patricia
Caldwell, citing Edmund S. Morgan, describes the typical "'morphology of conversion'" as "'knowledge, conviction, faith, combat, and true, perfect assurance'," and Shea claims that conversion narratives are little more than "formalistic recitation and mechanical pattern" which rendered them "not so much composed as recited" (Caldwell 164; Shea 90, 106). Thus Shea opines, "These narratives hardly deserve to be considered as autobiography" (Shea 91).

Although Shea admits that the spiritual autobiographies which contained these narratives are surprisingly variable—too variable, in fact, to merit the overly generalized manner in which they are often described—he questions the limits of the individual voice: "[H]ow far does autobiography of any sort allow itself to be put to special uses while remaining autobiography?" (x, 94). Shea’s answer is fairly conservative; he suggests that highly formulaic relations like the conversion narrative are not in themselves autobiographical, and that their prescribed quality can compromise the autobiographical aspects of the works that contain them.

Rodger Payne, however, interpreting the conversion narrative model using the terms of Foucaultian "discourse," insists that "[t]he conventional language of the texts of conversion need not be viewed as a liability" toward the narrative’s self-expression (Payne 10). Payne suggests:

"Certainly, evangelical spiritual autobiography and similar narratives of conversion cannot be read as descriptive texts if by this we mean that they give a straightforward account of the author’s conversion experience; but neither can they be dismissed as insufficiently autobiographical because they offered only stale reiterations of theological paradigms. To speak (or to write) the language of conversion was to claim the experience of conversion; but, conversely, only the experience of conversion empowered—"
In other words, at the heart of the formulaic conversion narrative was a genuine experience, some aspect of which must have been present in the resulting relations. Payne goes so far as to assert that this autobiographical experience was responsible for creating the conversion itself, insofar as that it was an instance of language “perform[ing]—by giving shape and form to individual experience—what it also described” (Payne 60). In effect, the conversion narrative, like the marriage ceremony, constituted a kind of speech act. Moreover, as Payne reminds us, the “model of evangelical conversion” was not simply “imposed upon individual autobiographers,” but was “constantly created” by the authors of these texts (Payne 11); thus the charge that the narratives were restricted by their genre may be inappropriately retrospective, assuming a conception of genre which was only imposed when, hundreds of years later, the narratives were placed under scholarly scrutiny. In sum, conversion narratives were neither overdetermined nor created independently of autobiography.

Scholars who agree that the conversion narrative must contain the genuine experience to which Payne refers (however diluted) have interpreted its presence in a variety of ways. Patricia Caldwell, in her study of 17th century relations, suggests that the American conversion narrative grappled with specifically American themes. While English conversion narratives often included dream sequences, in American conversion narratives the generic “dream” was replaced by the “American dream” (Caldwell 26). Puritan immigrants, expecting to find the “promised land” in America, encountered instead a “wilderness,” and wrestled with this very personal “disappointment” in their narratives (Caldwell 120): “It is as if, for most of the people, there is an unexpected deadlock between their experiences of the migration and the fulfillment of their
If the Puritans were disillusioned by the reality of the New World, they hardly considered this to be a simple matter of unfulfilled expectations. Rather, as God himself had directed them to America, their unhappiness in their new home was nothing less than “a sin” (Caldwell 130). Conversion narratives thus became a tool for sorting out the conflict between expectation and reality, the result often being narratives that professed successful conversion but betrayed significant doubt. As Caldwell puts it, “the words of the narratives say that hearts have been cured of disappointment in New England, but the music says that the hearts are disappointed in themselves for still being disappointed in New England” (130). Thus these early conversion narratives, contrary to Shea’s dismissal of them as “hardly deserving] to be considered as autobiography,” belie a kernel of selfhood which cannot be fully extricated (Shea 91).

In Rodger Payne’s estimation, this kernel of selfhood emerges as the true heart of the 18th century conversion narrative. Payne describes the “rise of the concept of the ‘self’” as concurrent with “the rise of various pietistic traditions that emphasized personal and affective experience,” and he interprets the conversion narrative as an attempt to work through these new concepts and traditions (Payne 7). Protestant pietism demanded the “humiliation” of the self in accord with the belief that “true salvation implied the negation or extinction of the self” (i.e., that the self was in no way responsible for salvation, which was granted wholly by God) (Payne 41). Nevertheless, “iconoclasm requires an icon, and in their need to search themselves in order to deny themselves, pietists had to first imagine themselves” (Payne 41). Thus, when authors used the conversion narrative to “eliminate the self,” they paradoxically engaged in a project of self-creation (Payne 41). Rather than being oppressed by proscribed narratives, the authors of conversion narratives were given the opportunity to speak (or write) themselves into being.
Payne sees this as an avenue to egalitarianism: “By investing the experiencing self with the ultimate power to speak about conversion, evangelicals democratized religious authority” (Payne 9). Although Payne argues that the emergence of these “first ‘democratic’ forms of literature” (spiritual autobiography and conversion narrative) is directly related to the emergence of political democracy in the United States, his observations apply to the genre long before the period he identifies as the birth of democracy, 1780-1830 (Payne 47).

Susan Imbarrato, too, believes that the “self-examination” borne of spiritual autobiography and conversion narrative can manifest as a democratic phenomenon; although she describes the practices of the 17th century as “reinforc[ing] the individual’s limitations,” she suggests that “this same act within a more democratic, eighteenth-century secular context inspires individual expression” (Imbarrato xvii). Although 18th century evangelicalism can hardly be considered “secular,” Imbarrato traces the phenomenon she describes back at least as far as Jonathan Edwards, whose conversion narrative she finds progressive in the “expression and quality” of the identity it asserts (33). But increased opportunities for self-expression are not opened only to Anglo-American men. Although she is not speaking specifically of the types of narratives in this study, Imbarrato does note that the philosophical atmosphere of the 18th century was relatively congenial to women and otherwise disenfranchised persons; she sites the increased use of diaries during this period well as the rise of the conversion narrative and spiritual autobiography as evidence that introspection (and thus, eventually, self-expression) was encouraged for all individuals, including “‘women and dissenters’” (xvi, 9 [citing Felicity Nussbaum]). Thus, despite significant indications to the contrary, conversion narratives and spiritual autobiography should be considered as “providing a platform for declarations of self” (Imbarrato 13).
Following the arguments of Caldwell, Payne, and Imbarrato, I consider these narratives to hold the potential for self-expression, however mediated. Admittedly, in some cases that potential is far more limited than in others: Joseph Quasson’s narrative, for instance, quite possibly contains no glimmer of selfhood whatsoever, while it would be difficult to argue that Cotton Mather’s was complete fabrication. These limitations are indelibly linked to the subject’s social position: while Quasson, a condemned criminal and a Native American, has as little control over his speech as over his life, Mather, an esteemed minister, has all the necessary resources (financial and intellectual) to control his voice. In order to aid the discussion of these narratives, I have placed them on a continuum from journal to biography, suggesting that they all constitute some version of what I see, in these cases, as a hybrid genre: autobiography, as it arises out of the conversion narrative. While journal writing constitutes the medium least retouched for public viewing and biography the medium over which the subject has the least control, autobiography (which, following Payne, I consider all of these narratives to be, due to their focus on the conversion process) can, as we shall see, fall anywhere between the two extremes. By examining these narratives, we can come to a fuller understanding not only of the variety of conversion relations, but of the wide spectrum of possibilities for self-expression (and the considerable limits to those possibilities) during the early 18th century.

Cotton Mather

Cotton Mather’s autobiography falls closest to the journal on our spectrum because Mather constructed it using passages from his own journals, which he sometimes extensively “expand[ed] and embellished” but often simply reproduced “verbatim” (Shea 165-166). This
editing practice, which minimizes the “retrospective” quality typical of most autobiographies, enhances the sense that the reader is granted immediate access to Mather’s (temporally variable) self (Shea 154). Nevertheless, Paterna can hardly be considered an unfiltered glimpse into Mather’s inner life. Mather began the work when his son, Increase, was a year old, intending to give it to the child as a sort of life guide, and Shea observes that despite its origin in the journals it is remarkably “impersonal”: “In one sense, it seems, Puritan autobiography has only found a new way to be impersonal when a father can leave his son neither possessions nor expressions of feeling, but only Things, Talents, and with definitive finality, monitors” (Shea 167-168). Some of this distance may have been generated by Mather’s possible occasional intention to circulate the autobiography more widely (Shea 169-170, Bosco xxxvii-xxxix); Richard Bosco has argued that his refusal to include many specific details lends the narrative “the illusion of objectivity and truthfulness” (Bosco lv).

The reader should remember, however, that Mather likely also conceived of Paterna as a “literary vehicle for self-examination, meditation, and self-evaluation,” as was common Puritan practice (Bosco xxxix-xl). Even if the specific details of Mather’s life cannot be gleaned from the narrative, certain aspects of his personality are evident in his choice of subject matter as well as his editing method. The following passage, for instance, although tragically humorous to a 21st century reader, belies intensity bordering on obsession, as well as a tendency to think metaphorically which threads through the entire work:

I lost abundance of Precious Time, thro’ Tormenting Pains in my Teeth and Jawes: which kind of Pains have indeed Produced me many a Sad Hour, in my short Pilgrimage. In the Pains that
were about this Time upon me, I Sett Myself, as well as I could for my Pains, to Search and Try my Wayes.

I considered,

Have I not Sinned with my Teeth? How? By Sinful, Graceless, Excessive Eating. And by Evil Speaches: (for there are Literae Dentales used in them!) The Lord thus Taught me, to Gett Good out of Every Thing. May Hee Teach Thee also, My Son!

At last, by a Course of Washing behind my Ears, & on ye Top of my Head, with Cold Water, I obtained a Deliverance from these Uneasinesses. (Mather 31)

Indeed, it is difficult not to locate humanity in a speaker who so often depicts himself “prostrate on [his] Study-floor, with [his] Mouth in the Dust,” as pleased to compare high stature to “High Attainments” as he is that “About Eleven years afterward, ye prayer had a remarkable Answer" (87, 56, 25). Even if one considers the author to be quite removed from the speaker, this speaker argues for the selfhood of the man who created him.

According to Bosco, the manuscript was initially completed and given to son Increase around 1702 (Bosco xix); after Increase was charged with fathering a child in 1717 (amongst other misadventures), Mather returned to the manuscript, redirected it to his other son, Samuel, and worked on it intermittently during the years between 1717 and 1727 (Bosco xxiv-xxxi). Samuel received the manuscript in 1727 and referred to it when writing Cotton Mather’s biography (Bosco xxxi). Interestingly, Paterna was not published until Richard Bosco’s 1975 edition (Bosco iii); thus this most self-conscious articulation of the selfhood of Cotton Mather, a
figure so influential during his own lifetime, was effectively silenced until over two centuries after his death.

**Jonathan Edwards**

Jonathan Edward’s “Personal Narrative” was probably written for purposes similar to those for which he published the “Narrative of Many Surprising Conversions in Northampton and Vicinity”: to quell the skepticism of naysayers who doubted the validity of the Great Awakening (Shea 188-189). As such, and because it was written years after the actual conversion experience, it may be considered self-aware, removed both temporally and narratively from the conversion experience itself (at least if one does not subscribe to the view, as Payne does, that it is the autobiography which brings the conversion into existence) (Shea 190). Nevertheless, as Imbarrato points out, Edwards describes his conversion in a singularly “poetic voice,” thus modifying the conventions of spiritual autobiography to express a unique self: “Edwards brings the aspirant out onto the landscape and asserts the self in new ways through a most traditional form. Metaphorically, conversion is an affirmation of subjectivity; it is the individual’s most personal articulation of spirituality” (33, 38). In his privileging of the self and attention to the natural world, Edwards gestures toward the Romantic writers, who would celebrate the self more fervently than any American authors who preceded them (Imbarrato 1, 35).

The “Personal Narrative” was written at some point after 1739; Samuel Hopkins published it in 1765 (Baym 440-441). Like Mather, then, Edwards represents a highly influential figure whose greatest attempt at self-expression was suppressed until after his death. Although
Hopkins clearly had some editorial authority over the work, it is probably safe to say that he made very few editorial changes to it (although, the manuscript having been lost, it is difficult to claim this with absolute certainty) (Shea 189). I have located the “Personal Narrative” near “Journal” on our continuum because, next to Mather’s *Paterna*, it represents the narrative of the six included here over which the author had the greatest amount of editorial control.

**David Brainerd**

*The Life of David Brainerd* was composed by Jonathan Edwards using Brainerd’s diaries after Brainerd died in the Edwards home on October 10, 1747, of tuberculosis (which he transmitted to Edwards’s daughter, Jerusha, with tragic consequences) (Pettit 70-72). Although Edwards essentially “allowed the Indian missionary’s diary to speak for itself,” he did engage in extensive editing, particularly to the end of downplaying Brainerd’s chronic depression, which Edwards found troubling (Shea 189, Pettit 19). Certainly “the editing did not disguise the melancholy tone of the text, nor did Edwards try to disguise it” (Pettit 22). Yet one need only compare the following two passages (both from pp. 131-133 of Pettit’s edition) to see that Edwards’s editing, in its attempts to contain Brainerd’s melancholy, at times significantly affected both the tone and the content of the text:

Brainerd: “…and hence felt something eased of all that distress I felt while struggling against a sight of myself, and of the divine sovereignty. I felt something like a criminal at the bar waiting for his sentence, excepting this, I felt but little concern which way my case went, for the fear of hell was almost if not entirely taken away from me. I had the greatest certainty that my state was
forever unalterable by anything that I could do, and wondered and was almost astonished that I had never been sensible of it before because it had now the clearest demonstration of it. And in this case I felt neither love to God, or desire of heaven as I used to think I did. Neither fear of hell, or love to the present world. Indeed I had rather be, or suffer anything than return to my former course of carelessness. I thought my convictions were all gone and that seemed dreadful. But I thought I could but go to hell, and that I had no sense of, nor could I make it appear dreadful as formerly. Indeed I seemed to feel wholly destitute of any happiness or hopes and expectations of happiness either in the present or coming world, and yet felt no considerable degree of misery sensibly, though I felt indeed something so far bordering upon despair of any satisfying good that it appeared almost as comfortable to think of being annihilated as anything that I then knew of, though I can truly say I was not willing for that neither. My whole soul was unspeakably bewildered and lost in myself and I knew of nothing that seemed likely to make me happy, in case I could with the greatest ease have obtained the best good that I had any conception of. And being that lost I became a suitable object for the compassion of Jesus Christ to be set upon, since he came ‘to seek and to save that which is lost’ (Luke 19:10).”

Edwards: “The tumult that had been before in my mind was now quieted; and I was something eased of that distress which I felt while struggling against a sight of myself, and of the divine sovereignty. I had the greatest certainty that my state was forever miserable, for all that I could do; and wondered, and was almost astonished, that I had never been sensible of it before.”

The Life of David Brainerd is near the center of the continuum because, although much of the diary stands untouched, Edwards’s editorial hand was occasionally quite heavy. Certainly
scholars have raised the question of whether this can rightfully be called “a ‘biography’ or even a ‘work’ of Edwards”; nevertheless, as Pettit points out, the text is controlled by Edwards’s intentions to “teach by example,” and as such constitutes as much his work as that of his subject (71-74).

Sarah Pierpont Edwards

Sarah Pierpont Edwards, Jonathan Edward’s vivacious, articulate wife, experienced her own conversion during a period of her husband’s absence, apparently in response to her feelings of jealousy over the warm reception extended to a competing minister by the congregation (Gustafson 203-204, Goen 69). When Jonathan returned, he asked Sarah to record her experience, and she complied, supplying him with raw material for Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival (Goen 69-70). Although Edwards had rewritten other women’s conversion narratives (most notably those of Abigail Hutchinson and Phoebe Bartlett), Sarah was the only one of these subjects who “was both mature and alive” at the time he rewrote her experience (Gustafson 203). It is difficult to say how much input Sarah had over Jonathan’s revisions, but the surviving text of her original narrative, available in Sereno Dwight’s The Works of President Edwards, allows us to see what he changed. Although heavily edited by her husband, Sarah Edwards's spiritual autobiography (as it appeared in Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival) was based upon her own relation.

Jonathan Edwards created two different versions of Sarah’s relation, “one a defensive text designed to shore up his waning pastoral authority, the other an abstract example of revival piety” (Gustafson 203); thus his motivations in rewriting Sarah’s words were quite similar to
those which compelled him to publish David Brainerd’s narrative. Sarah’s motivations may also have been quite transparent: she could easily have recorded her narrative for any of the purposes discussed above (introspection; self-assertion; piety) or simply to please her husband. Yet Sandra Gustafson suggests another possible motivation: to subtly undermine her husband’s authority. In Gustafson’s reading of Sarah’s original relation, Sarah, angry with Jonathan for having scolded her, used her narrative to replace her husband’s authority with the higher authority of God (204). Although Jonathan in turn attempted to contain this protest by editorially desexing Sarah, he effectively only draws attention to the fact of the body with his conspicuous efforts to efface it (Gustafson 206). Thus, according to Gustafson, Jonathan’s rewriting fails to control Sarah’s expression, just as it fails to testify to the emotional tenor of conversion so apparent in Sarah’s original narrative (Payne 25).

In order to illustrate the range of expression arising out of this one narrative, I have included both the original text of Sarah’s narrative, as excerpted by Sereno Dwight, and the edited version included in Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival.

*Patience Boston*

Patience Boston’s narrative is one of two in this study which falls into a complicated subgenre: that of the criminal conversion narrative. Like the broader conversion narrative tradition of which it is a part, the criminal narrative began as an oral practice, specifically with the execution speeches given by condemned criminals and the sermons that complemented them (Williams Pillars 4). As the genre developed, criminal testimony began to be published separate of the sermons which originally accompanied them, and Patience Boston’s account (following
Joseph Quasson’s, published approximately a decade earlier) was among the first of these stand-alone narratives (Cohen 14). Although ministers’ motivations for creating these narratives were similar to those for publishing any conversion narrative, the condemned criminal served not only to illustrate successful, genuine conversions, but also “to give warnings” (regarding the fate of the impenitent sinner) “and to offer encouragement” (that reform is possible for anyone) (Williams Pillars x). Thus the criminal functioned simultaneously as an example of what to be and what not to be, and often the criminals cooperated in this role, finding that it was an avenue for symbolic reentry into the society which had rejected them (Henigman 80, 87). This was perhaps particularly true for Patience Boston, who, as a Native American woman who married into slavery, occupied a position of multiple marginality in a community which likely shunned her long before she was condemned for the murder of her master’s son (Henigman 83).

Most of Patience Boston’s narrative is related in the first person, framed by an introduction and a several page summary of the final days of Boston’s life. Samuel and Joseph Moody famously claimed that Boston’s narrative was “taken from her Mouth” (admittedly with some changes in her “Way of expressing her self”), and it is of course natural to be skeptical that the published document was in fact “faithful” to Boston’s supposed relation (Boston 119). As Daniel Cohen points out, however, most ministers would not only have hesitated to fabricate narratives on moral grounds, but also would have been deterred from doing so by the many witnesses who attended to the convict during the days leading up to execution (Cohen 42). Assuming that the narratives were not largely invented, Cohen interprets the increased willingness on the part of ministers to “concede a literary voice to the prisoners themselves” as a symptom of the coming Great Awakening: “[criminal conversion narratives] prefigured, even as they promoted, a massive upsurge of popular evangelism in New England by the early 1740s”
Considering this political atmosphere, it is not unreasonable to suspect that Patience Boston’s first-person narrative allowed for more than the illusion of self-articulation. If this is the case, it would more than explain why Boston’s narrative repeatedly destabilizes itself by painstakingly drawing attention to each instance of her compulsive lying. This pattern may have arisen from reasonable insecurity over the issue of Boston’s credibility, but its effect is that of persistent instability; it is as though Boston (the person) were attempting to undermine the stated goals of Boston (the character) by suggesting that she, however repentant, remains an unreliable witness. Although Boston’s narrative lies to the side of biography on our spectrum, her voice is far from effaced by the Moodys’ editorial controls.

**Joseph Quasson**

Joseph Quasson’s narrative is arguably the least autobiographical of the six we are surveying. Quasson was executed for murdering an acquaintance (possibly unintentionally, as the friend succumbed to his injuries days after their encounter) on August 28, 1725, after being attended for weeks by the local minister, Samuel Moody. Published by Boston’s Samuel Gerrish at the request of Moody, Quasson’s story consists of a brief first-person narrative, followed by an extended third-person summary of Quasson’s speech and actions during the period leading up to his execution. Like Patience Boston, Joseph Quasson possessed Native American heritage, and his narrative could be described as an extended extrapolation of the “drunken Indian” stereotype which persisted into the 19th century (and beyond) thanks to writers like James Fenimore Cooper. This stereotype appears frequently throughout the publication, both in the first-person narrative and in the appended materials (Quasson repeatedly refers to his Drinking and laments that he is a
“poor Indian,” and Moody does his part to bring these facts into focus. The stereotype here appears in stark contrast to Boston’s narrative, which, although also admitting to her drunkenness, hardly mentions her race at all. As Quasson’s narrative so vigorously reinforces stereotypes, and as the relation “taken from his Mouth” spans only the first nine of 41 pages, I find this narrative to be the least likely candidate for self-expression of the six.

Nevertheless, Quasson’s narrative, like Patience Boston’s, “constitute[s] a dramatic exception to the rule of exclusion” applied to Native Americans, for in allowing even a fictionalized Quasson to be heard Moody “boldly privileged the spiritual insights and subjective experiences” of an unlikely protagonist (Cohen 79). As a narrative unappended to an execution sermon, Quasson’s was the first of its kind, and its appearance in the same year as Cotton Mather’s “last crime pamphlet” signaled a wider generic shift (from the clerical to the congregational voice) in accord with the approaching Great Awakening (Cohen 69-70). By removing the sermon, the minister shifted the focus to Quasson’s voice even as his may have suppressed that voice with his editing techniques. That criminality might be described as the only path to recognition for Quasson, or Boston after him, is tragic; yet the fact remains that they, and not Cotton Mather or Jonathan Edwards, were granted a public forum (or at the very least, the privilege of being portrayed as exemplars of conversion) during these formative years of evangelicalism.

These six narratives hardly represent a comprehensive survey of the multitude of voices for whom the Great Awakening represented a first chance for self-articulation. Nevertheless, they
do illustrate the range of possible modes of articulation and the great variety--both in form and content--of the conversion narrative genre. By reading these narratives, we may not always gain a clear view of the lived experience of the people who voiced them; we will, however, inevitably stumble across evidence of that lived experience, and garner some greater understanding of the potentiality and limitation of the discourse(s) of conversion along the way.