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## William Wells Brown; or the Spook Who Sat by the Cabin Door From Black Ex-slave Narratives to White Abolitionist Fiction: Understanding the First African American Novel and Its Origins

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William Wells Brown; or the Spook Who Sat by the Cabin Door  
From black ex-slave narratives to white abolitionist fiction:  
understanding the first African American novel and its origins

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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*In loving memory of Blondena Henderson Furtick*



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## Introduction

The title of this project largely derives from Sam Greenlee's novel, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1969). Though the body of literature studied in this work predates Greenlee's novel by more than a century, I find canonical similarities between the stories of Greenlee's main character, Dan Freeman, and author William Wells Brown. Freeman, "a model negro" for the CIA, willingly served his role as the token black man for the agency. As the first African American in the CIA, he spent several years smiling and doing what he was told while learning guerrilla tactics and other means of covert subversion that he would later teach to street gangs in order to stage a revolt in Chicago. Ultimately, the story of Dan Freeman is of feigning compliance within a white power structure in order to topple it through using its own tools. As this project will demonstrate, William Wells Brown embarks on a similar journey through literature that begins with his ex-slave narrative and ends with the first novel written by an African American writer that is not dissimilar to the spirit of Freeman's rebellion.

Though the name William Wells Brown may not be familiar to modern readers, his involvement in the American abolitionist movement from 1847 and onward made him one of the most well known former slaves during his time. His first published work, *The Narrative of William Wells Brown, A Fugitive Slave* (1847) garnered similar reception and comparisons to that of Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). The abolitionist movement, however, presented Brown (and other ex-slave narrators as well) with a host of problems. As I will discuss in my first chapter, the role white abolitionists played, namely as publishers and editors, in

influencing the slave narrative undermined writers' authorship and stifled their narrative voice. In a sense, slave narratives became less about the slave themselves and more about how their work could garner support for the abolitionist cause. And yet, I identify aspects of Brown's narrative as subtle rejections of the restrictions and attempts to break free. Though writers like Douglass and Brown would certainly consider themselves as abolitionists, for the purposes of this project the term will be used to solely identify white abolitionists.

While their work in cultivating slave narratives has gone widely unknown by many, popular perceptions surrounding the legacy of abolitionist fiction does however capture how in fact abolitionists shaped slave narratives— namely through simplified identity. Perhaps no other work has been greater defamed by modern sentiments than Harriet Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the genres most popular work. As many have come to identify *Cabin* as the architect of such stereotypical portrayals of African American characters like *the uncle tom* or the *tragic mulatto*, Stowe's work was, as I will discuss in my second chapter, merely a culmination of earlier works having drawn from the likes of popular slave narratives and earlier abolitionist fictional writings alike.

While we often assume the regard of *Cabin* as a problematic work of literature a modern sentiment, writers like Martin Delany, a black nationalist and contemporary of Frederick Douglass, openly criticized the work as offensive. While I will briefly pay attention to Delaney in the second chapter, my discussion of William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or the President's Daughter* (1853) as subverting both the restraints of the slave

narrative and the portrayals of black identity in abolitionist fiction within my third chapter will capture a greater critique of abolitionism more generally through fiction.

As having written a slave narrative himself, it can be safely assumed that Brown experienced the same imposed limitations set by abolitionists that Raymond Hedin describes in his essay, *Muffled Voices: The American Slave Narrative*. Moreover, as Brown's narrative was particularly popular, understanding it as a deeply intentional work of literature opens it for a greater analysis that the slave narrative is rarely afforded. And as Hedin indicates when he writes that "slaves had to find ways to satisfy their own needs within the limits imposed by the[eir] masters," observing how Brown finds ways to break free from the restraints imposed on him makes his literature all the more rewarding to read.

It's a shame *Clotel; or the President's Daughter* (1853) is widely unread, but it is an even greater travesty that is widely misunderstood. Between its relationship to abolitionist fiction and plagiarism, the novel has largely gotten a bad rep by those who are unaware of its literary experimental subversion. Understanding the greater context behind the novel offers a meaningful look at the beginning of the African American novelistic tradition. Though he may not inspire gangsters to upstage a rebellion in Chicago, William Wells Brown's influence on later African American writers consciously grappling with creating black identities that stray from white perceptions is evident. Like Freeman, Brown does his time in feigning compliance before he rejects his restraints and similarly teaches future black narrators to utilize tropes and archetypes to expose white societies racisms and American cultures hypocrisies.

## Chapter 1

While the predominant literature of the American Antebellum period was marked by romantic utopian fantasies that spurred its readers to contemplate visions of what (the United States) could be, slave narratives offered its readers tragic accounts of the brutal realities of slavery as told by those who escaped it. Complete with both horrific accounts of their time spent as slaves and their perilous journeys to freedom, slave narratives were broken into two parts that equally tapped into their readers emotions and forced them to both envision themselves in the slave's circumstance as well as their position between pro and anti-slavery sentiments. While we can never know the effect slave narratives had on shifting public opinion we do know that their emerging popularity was due in large part to white abolitionists believing that they could in fact do so. The same genre that contained few and largely unread narratives across a century-and-a-half prior quickly exploded by the 1840s and became the primary tool(s) or, as Raymond Hedin notes, vital "weapons in the battle against slavery."<sup>1</sup> As we continue to read slave narratives to this day, it is important that we understand the role white audiences, editors, publishers and critics played in crafting slave narratives. As weapons against slavery, abolitionist publishers and editors cultivated them for popularity amongst audiences as well as sharpened them against intended pro-slavery criticisms.

For audiences, distant and even-toned objective narrators instilled confidence and trustworthiness in their readers while withholding accounts that were exceptionally

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<sup>1</sup> P. 130 (or 2 in pdf)

gory and or graphic did the same while also maintaining their palatability. Edmund Quincy's letter to William Wells Brown, which precludes the preface to Brown's narrative, demonstrates audiences favor for a specific tone when he writes: "What I have admired, and marvelled at, in your Narrative, is the simplicity and calmness with which you describe scenes."<sup>2</sup> William Lloyd Garrison, editor (whose relationship with Frederick Douglass I will discuss later) of Frederick Douglass' narrative, regrettably codified the reason for urging narrators to withhold accounts in Douglass' preface:

Tell them of cruel scourgings, of mutilations and brandishings, of scenes of pollution and blood, of the banishment of all light and knowledge, and they affect to be greatly indignant at such enormous exaggerations, such wholesale misstatements, such abominable libels on the character of the southern planters as if all these direful outrages were not the natural result of slavery.<sup>3</sup>

As William L. Andrews notes, "white prefacers and editors... learned that certain kinds of facts plotted in certain kinds of story structures moved white readers to conviction and support of the antislavery cause."<sup>4</sup>

For pro-slavery critics who contested the merits of narratives' factual accuracy publishers and editors accepted an absurd standard of authenticity "as crucial to the

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, *Clotel; or the President's Daughter* (4)

<sup>3</sup> Douglass, *Autobiographies* (3)

<sup>4</sup> Andrews, *The Novelization of Voice in Early African American Narrative* (23)

narratives' legitimacy"<sup>5</sup> as evident through editor Thomas Price's attestament to Moses Roper's *Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper from American Slavery* (1848) having

stood the ordeal of the most severe examination, he has been solemnly warned of the consequences of deception; how it would tend to his own injury, as well as the cause of freedom in general.<sup>6</sup>

From Prices words, specifically "the cause of freedom in general," we begin to understand what the slave narrative was: propaganda, and what it was not: an authentic expression of the ex-slave's experience.

Abolitionist publishers and editors willingly met audiences' desires and critics' standards because slave narratives were extremely effective in depicting the harsh and brutal realities of slavery and illustrating "slavery as it is—" to quote abolitionist rhetoric of the time— to its readers through first person accounts that justified the abolitionist cause. As far as abolitionists were concerned, meeting audience desires for authentic sounding narrators as well as containing unquestionable factual accuracy for pro-slavery critics only strengthened the narratives ability to illustrate *slavery as it is* and thus better serving its purpose. The desire for solely authentic and accurate accounts of slavery, however, removed the slave from his own story and created narratives more concerned with abolitionism and anti-slavery than the ex-slave him/herself. Ironically, as

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<sup>5</sup> Hedin, *Muffled Voices: The American Slave Narrative* (130)

<sup>6</sup> Blassingame p. xxiii

authenticity became the standard publishers and editors searched for and the aspect that audiences and critics sought and desired most, the rhetoric that inspired the authentic removed the very aspect that made it so. In this regard, *slavery as it is* represented less the desire to hear the slave's story and more of a desire to confirm white myths. Hedin's analogy of the slave narrative as the "weapon in the battle against slavery" effectively captures a propagandization of the ex-slave's story which, in curtailing itself to meet a host of white desires and expectations, functionally co-wrote and co-narrated stories that ultimately created the slave narratives we know today.

*Slavery as it is* became something of a double edged sword. As what invoked the most interest for readers of the time often over-burdened its writers to meet an absurd standard of authenticity that drowned their own voices from their narratives. As earlier mentioned, both anti and pro slavery readers contributed to this standard as the latter of the two questioned "factual accuracy and reliable characters" while the former "accepted[ed] this criteria as crucial to the narratives' legitimacy." Because slave narratives were solely used for propaganda for abolitionists, public opinion was important and thus meeting the criteria of factual truth (so to avoid southern attack/criticism) while creating narrative voices that had proven to instill trust in audiences from slave narratives that became popular (so to reproduce popularity) became publishers' inspiration for printing slave narratives.

"Not surprisingly," as Andrews notes, "white abolitionists encouraged ex-slave narrators to conform to conventions that had proved successful." Considering William Wells Brown's and Frederick Douglass' narratives were by far the two most popular

slave narratives of their time, studying similarities they shared with other slave narratives not as coincidences but as intentional checkboxes, provides us with examples of the aforementioned recycled conventions. Two similarities in particular do this and, as I will argue, functionally divorced narrators from their work and created a remarkably standardized and uniform genre and body of literature; while in strokes of profound literariness, writer like Brown's subtle attempts to break free from restrictions subtly subverted white society. The first of which being the reappearing "defensively aggressive assertions" of truth that riddle the annals of nineteenth century American slave narratives.<sup>7</sup> While one may read such examples as Linda Brent's "this narrative is not fiction," but rather "strictly true" or Douglass' "this picture... to be strictly true"<sup>8</sup> as evidence of narrators attempting to convince their readers of authenticity, assertions of the like are juxtaposed by disillusionment with other truisms and objects of truth. The second commonality regards narrators' inability to express themselves. Perhaps even more prevalent within narratives are instances such as Brown's "loss of language to express my feelings" and Douglass' similar loss of "language to express the... deep anxiety... which were felt among us." The prevalence of similar statements is peculiar considering both authors' well documented remarkable command of the language. Akin to J.W.C. Pennington's narrative when he could not "with pen or tongue, give the correct idea of the feelings of wretchedness [he] experienced" or Moses Roper, in recounting an entire week he had spent both chained to another slave while being incessantly flogged, writing "again, words are insufficient to describe the misery which possessed

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<sup>7</sup> Hedin p.130

<sup>8</sup> Douglass p. 16

both the mind and body whilst under this treatment...,” such moments when narrators affirm they are unable to express themselves are issued under “particularly extreme experience[s].”<sup>9</sup> Keeping in mind the role of censorship, it is not far reaching to assume these instances were edited out by white abolitionists. Thusly, as these moments mark some of slavery’s most brutal practices, ex-slave narrators’ inability or rather inability to express them signifies language itself as dysfunctional and the slave narrative as an unreliable vessel for self-expression. The two commonalities present the strange irony of and within abolitionist writing but also demonstrates a profound literariness as how narrators engage with truth takes on a form of its own while what they say is as equally important as what they don’t say and how they do or don’t say it.

Satisfying whites largely came at the expense of the slave’s own voice in his/her narrative as abolitionists had “singled out the narrating voice itself as the most problematic of either the writing or the reading of a narrative as authoritative.” Narrators were meant to depict slavery as though they were detached witnesses to the institution and not “painfully involved participants.” While the “calmness” that Brown’s novel uses was praised during his time, modern readers may find the same tone as particularly vexing as narrators detailed accounts of painful memories lack any account of how they felt. In Brown’s narrative for instance, visibly lacking from such accounts as witnessing his mother’s brutal beating or his sister’s arrest are any accounts of how such tragedies made him feel. In this way, as Hedin notes, “amazingly little sense of the narrator’s individuality comes through” in most slave narratives. Where both Douglas and Brown

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<sup>9</sup> Hedin p.135

stand out is how they responded to these restraints and how in their writing subtly indicted liberal white abolitionists as complicit in the institution of slavery.

While Garrison and his preface were well intentioned as supportive of Douglass, writing

I am confident that it is essentially true in all its statements; that nothing has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination; that it comes short of the reality rather than overstates a single fact in regard to SLAVERY AS IT IS.

Douglas, ten years after his narrative, in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) would later voice his frustration with Garrison and others when describing his experience of being restrained as both a speaker and writer:

Let us have the facts," said the people. So also said Friend George Foster, who always wished to pin me down to my simple narrative. "Give us the facts," said Collins, "we will take care of the philosophy." . . . "Tell your story, Frederick," would whisper my then revered friend, William Lloyd Garrison, as I stepped upon the platform. I could not always obey, for I was now reading and thinking. New views of the subject were presented to my mind. It did not entirely satisfy me to narrate wrongs; I felt like denouncing them. I could not always curb my moral indignation for the

perpetrators of slaveholding villainy, long enough for a circumstantial statement of the facts which I felt almost everybody must know. Besides, I was growing and needed room.

Here, Douglass captures the greater irony of abolitionist literature. In spite of their freedom, ex-slave writers were shackled to the whims of their white audience much like they were to their former masters. The price for white readership's sole interest in factual recounting of true events is felt by the genre's homogeneity as audience's interest in *slavery as it is* and publishers willingness to accommodate ultimately refused authors' ability to express slavery as they felt and experienced it. As the genre was controlled by and depended on the credulity of its white readership, facts that were deemed either too hard to believe or too horrifying to read were pulled from narratives in their final print. In effect, the desire to see *slavery as it is* represented more a desire to affirm habitual thought. As Andrews notes, "the idea of authenticity and the relation of authority would... remain simplistic and subservient to white myths rather than expressive of black perceptions of reality."<sup>10</sup> Even more ironic than audience's desire for truth ultimately withholding truth were the restraints they imposed on its writers. Whereas Douglas would later sever ties with Garrison and break free from these restraints<sup>11</sup> through publishing his own newspaper (the first African American owned), *The North Star*, William Wells Brown would later break free through fiction. The two legacies engaged in the tensions between expression and constraint as well through

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<sup>10</sup> Andrews p.24

<sup>11</sup> In a fashion that would later inspire Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

subverting the idea of authenticity by disseminating fact from fiction. Before doing so, as I will argue for the remainder of this chapter, a critical look at the literariness of their narratives, most ostensibly Brown's, will demonstrate a keen self-awareness of their white readers and a rejection of white abolitionist hypocrisy.

Like most slave narratives, Brown's articulates very little emotion. Infact, anxiety is the only named emotion he uses whether it is at the prospect of losing his mother to a slave trader or almost dying in his escape to freedom. Emotions, however, find their way through the lyric poetry of intermittently woven lyric pros throughout his narrative. In fact, there are six pros that I distinguish belong to three groups. The first two that appear are original lyric pros written to attempt to explain the feelings of other slaves; the third is a fragment from an white abolitionist poem; and the final three are original pros that he uses to describe his own feelings. Considering how Brown's usage of original lyric pros separate his narrative from any others, the lack of specific attention to them is surprising. Moreover, while the title of Hedin's article, *Muffled Voices: The American Slave Narrative*, suggests the restraints impressed upon ex-slave narrators in their writing limited their expression to an unmatched realm of realism, the lack of attention to Brown's prose as perhaps both the first fictional writing by an African American and the ironic clarity it gives to unrequited truths make his narrative deserving of greater attention. Though Brown at times professes his inability to express himself, his use of pros to convey feelings dually functions as both an escapism from the structure of the slave narrative while the natural ambiguity that lyric poetry offers separates his feelings from his narrative so to not compromise his authority.

For the purposes of this chapter I will discuss Brown's first use of lyric pros in which his narrative verges into his imagination. After recounting a horrific scene of a female slave losing her new born baby to a slave trader annoyed by its crying, Brown includes the following poem as his imagination of her feelings:

O, master, let me stay to catch  
 My baby's sobbing breath,  
 His little glassy eye to watch,  
 And smooth his limbs in death,

And cover him with grass and  
 leaf,  
 Beneath the large oak tree:  
 It is not sullenness, but grief,--  
 O, master, pity me!

The morn was chill--I spoke no  
 word,  
 But feared my babe might die,

And heard all day, or thought I  
 heard,  
 My little baby cry.

At noon, oh, how I ran and took  
 My baby to my breast!  
 I lingered--and the long lash  
 broke  
 My sleeping infant's rest.

I worked till night--till darkest  
 night,  
 In torture and disgrace;  
 Went home and watched till  
 morning light,

To see my baby's face.

O! do not lash me so!

One little hour--one little hour--

Then give me but one little hour--

And gratefully I'll go.

The poem and its use to capture a slave mother's plight upon losing her daughter is very similar to the following excerpt of John Greenleaf Whittier's poem used two years prior within Frederick Douglass' narrative:

Gone, gone, sold and gone

To the rice swamp dank and lone,

Where the slave-whip ceaseless swings,

Where the noisome insect stings,

Where the fever-demon strews

Poison with the falling dews,

Where the sickly sunbeams glare

Through the hot and misty air:—

Gone, gone, sold and gone

To the rice swamp dank and lone,

From Virginia hills and waters—

Woe is me, my stolen daughters!

While Douglas utilizes an excerpt from a white abolitionist's poem, Brown writes his own. The effective distance felt between the two narrators of this poem is clear, but considering Brown's later work such as his novel, *Clotel*, that similarly rewrites another white abolitionist's work, this poem marks the beginning of a defining pattern in Brown's writing. Brown's fictional voice ironically beginning with rewriting a white abolitionist poem is framed within the specificity of the duration of time Brown spent as an aid to a slave trader. Brown's choice to choose such a specific and, as others<sup>12</sup> have noted, unique duration of time spent alongside a slave trader in his narrative to write a similar poem signifies a correlation Brown makes between the slave trader and the white abolitionist. As an aid to the slave trader causing the mother's distress, Brown is complicit in her mother's pain and in narrator it he demonstrates a similar distance by occupying the same narrative space as Whittier. By his relative proximity, however, his poem is certainly more authentic than Whittier though it is still fiction.

Brown's relationship with the slave trader and the abolitionist render an ironic comparison between the two that is uniquely present during the scene that begins this portion of the narrative. Brown remarks (not coincidentally) that "no one can tell my emotions" whereupon discovering his "having been hired to a negro speculator." As I have earlier discussed abolitionists refusal to allow ex-slave narrators to relay their emotional relationships in their narratives, such a response in how it succumbs to abolitionist censorship followed by the dubiously titled nickname of "soul-driver," begins to capture a similarity being drawn between the two if we understand the abolitionist

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<sup>12</sup> Edmund Quincy

refusal to allow the ex-slaves voice as effectively driving his/her soul. Moreover, Brown's familial relationship to his master which prevents his permanent sale to the slave trader situates a strange liminality that mirrors his relationship to abolitionists. While they both share the desire to abolish slavery, Brown is keenly aware of his value to white abolitionists in so far as its contingency rests upon his ability to serve as a functional tool to produce support for their cause. While he had long since been planning his escape, he notes the new assignment as tragically voiding his preparation. Similarly, abolitionist limitations imposed on ex-slaves can be seen as functionally voiding their freedom. The end of this scene describes Brown's disbelief of this liminality. Despite being told by both his master and the slave trader that he was not in fact purchased but instead merely rented, he did not believe either until his time was finished. Functionally, this captures the ex-slave's ironic surprise when he realizes his supposed allies confine him despite his freedom.

Beyond Brown's initial reaction to his new role as aid to a slave trader, his account of his time spent continues to subtly allude to the relationship between white abolitionists and ex-slave narrators. As an aid to a slave trader, the liminality space between the slave and the slave trader becomes eerily palpable when he describes himself as "the other," representing a similar space for the ex-slave narrator. His account of guiding Walkers' slaves through "the blacking process" in which he would polish and groom slaves to fetch a higher price on the auction block perhaps captures this best.

I had to prepare the old slaves for market. I was ordered to have the old men's whiskers shaved off, and the grey hairs plucked out, where they were not too numerous, in which case he [Walker] had a preparation of blacking to color it, and with a blacking-brush we would put it on. This was new business to me, and was performed in a room where the passengers could not see us. These slaves were also taught how old they were by Mr. Walker, and after going through the blacking process, they looked ten or fifteen years younger; and I am sure that some of those who purchased slaves of Mr. Walker, were dreadfully cheated, especially in the ages of the slaves which they bought... Before the slaves were exhibited for sale, they were dressed and driven out into the yard. Some were set to dancing, some to jumping, some to singing, and some to playing cards. This was done to make them appear cheerful and happy. My business was to see that they were placed in those situations before the arrival of the purchasers, and I have often set them to dancing when their cheeks were wet with tears. As slaves were in good demand at that time, they were all soon disposed of...

Here marks Brown's first experience in creating fiction. As Brown would alter the identities of Walkers' slaves so to make them more desirable for intended purchasers, abolitionists similarly forced ex-slaves to edit their own narratives for consumption/marketability. Both abolitionists and Walker force Brown to create their

fictions of black identities for their purposes. Brown's poem, however, is a new fiction that conveys both his distance from black characters as well as his intrinsic need to subside the space between them.

Across Brown's narration as an aid to a slave trader, he begins to demonstrate a subtle, yet profound affect the occupation had on him. As Brown continues to serve Walker, the reader may notice Brown's growing distance between him and other black characters. While he first refers to them as his "fellow creatures bought and sold," which indicates an adopting of his boss' mentality, the reality of his not being one of them takes shape when he soon after refers to them as Walker's "cargo of human flesh." As his time with Walker continues and he gets better at his job, Brown's growing distance from other Black characters is visible by the consequences they suffer from interacting with him. This becomes most clear in an interaction he has with a free black man who Brown tricks into receiving a brutal whipping that was intended for him (the scene also dually functions to reject any notion of freedom for any black individuals whilst slavery is still legal). Brown's impending distance from other black characters is only second to Walker's more obvious distance from brutality. Brown's trickery is only made possible by a note Walker gives him to deliver requesting its recipient to whip its deliverer. The similarity between Walker and the abolitionist becomes clearer by their perceived distance and relationship to literature. What is perhaps most strange about his depiction of Walker is the lack of hatred towards him to which Brown himself later addresses when he writes: "For fear that some may think that I have misrepresented a slave-driver,

I will here give an extract from a paper published in a slaveholding state...<sup>13</sup> and quotes a dramatic damnation of the slave driver written by a white writer. The gesture of recognizing a potential misrepresentation on his part is ironic in that it assumes a “proper” representation exists— suggesting that Brown’s narrative, defying such a representation, is not valid. More ironic, his decision to quote a white abolitionist’s depiction to address the “misrepresentation” suggests that Brown’s actual experience with and account of his time spent with a slave trader is somehow less valuable. More ironic than that is that it is true. What follows the abolitionist’s portrayal is not only Brown’s acknowledgement of the “revolting picture drawn,” but he himself questioning the abolitionists lack of anger towards others from those that purchase slaves to those that do not have slaves but do not condemn the practice either. Though he does not outwardly condemn the abolitionist, by challenging their sole hatred for the slave driver and not the rest of those complicit in the institution, Brown subtly identifies the abolitionist as in fact part of the problem.

Brown’s poem as well as the given pretext around it exemplifies yet another problem with white abolitionists. While I will discuss their literature in greater detail in the coming chapter, I hope to have had sufficiently laid out both the flaws of the slave narrative but also how one writer responds to them. Considering Brown’s poem, at the core of this project is understanding what compelled him to write it. Once again Frederick Douglass’ offers a useful comparison. As Brown’s first use of lyric pros come in the form of a fictive poem, Douglass’ come in the form of a song. Less important than

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<sup>13</sup> p.41

the song itself, Douglass' telling of what *the song* was and represented for the slaves is particularly noteworthy. As Douglas first rebuked northerners who believed slaves' songs were "evidence of their contentment and happiness," he noted in fact the very opposite writing

slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The song of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an an aching heart is relieved by its tears... The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave; the songs of the one and of the other are prompted by the same emotion.

With this, we may better understand what prompts Brown to resort to Fiction. As Douglas would later discuss the song in *My Bondage and My Freedom* as what slaves sang to *make* themselves happy rather than to express happiness, Brown's use of fiction can be seen as an attempt to break free from the limits of black identity imposed on black writers by white abolitionists to in fact begin to create black identity.

## Chapter 2

As we saw in Chapter 1, ex-slave narratives had dominated the abolitionist literary circuit in the 1830s and 40s. However, abolitionist literature was drastically reimagined by 1852 with Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The movement whose most successful publication in Frederick Douglass' narrative which sold 30,000 copies in fifteen years was immediately dwarfed by the 300,000 copies (not to mention the additional 200,000 in England) of Stowe's novel sold in just one year. The popularity of Stowe's fiction had proven that despite the careful craftedness of the realism in the ex-slave narrative it was no match for the combination of romantic sentimentalism and purported realism of abolitionist fiction. Stowe's work was, however, not the first of its kind as abolitionist fiction- though, save for a few outliers, was not widely read- had since long existed. Just as abolitionists had cultivated slave narratives, *Cabin* was largely an amalgam of popular slave narratives and less popular abolitionist fiction. In this chapter, I consider the crafting of abolitionist fiction and what Alfred R. Ferguson recognizes as the "unconscious racism [that] speaks to us from behind the mask of [the] self-proclaimed abolitionist," that is, "...the abolition of blacks."<sup>14</sup> To do this, I will discuss portrayals of black identity through sentimentalism with *Cabin*, but more importantly its predecessor in the works of Lydia Maria Child through one character portrayal in particular that I believe best captures the abolition of black identity within abolitionist literature-- the tragic mulatto. As many have identified Child's fiction as having birthed

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<sup>14</sup> Ferguson, *Abolition of Blacks* p. 134

the archetype, *Cabin* and its fame due in large part to utilizing the portrayal captures the very identity of abolitionist fiction as genre.

Abolitionist fiction is particularly unique. No other genre is perhaps more defined by its apotheosis in *Cabin* which Hedin notes as “probably the most influential novel up to its time - and possibly of all time.” The fluctuating reception of the novel has come to define Stowe’s work and the genre more generally as well as their legacies which have become considerably more important than the works themselves. Twentieth century discourses surrounding the novel (and the genre more generally) passionately debated whether or not it did more harm in popularizing racial stereotypes than good in promoting the abolitionist cause. Undoubtedly, the most famous modern indictments of the novel’s racism comes in the adopted moniker of “an uncle tom” and insinuations of “tomming,” co-opted from the novel’s title character by readers and non-readers alike. Such insults towards black men “acting white” and the novel’s now infamous reputation for its poor portrayal of black characters has not only framed popular perceptions of the novel but in doing so has demonstrated which school of thought ultimately prevailed in dominating public perceptions of the work. This, however, is certainly ironic considering that its most important characters, Uncle Tom included, are mimetic portrayals of famous ex-slave narrators and other slaves.

In Stowe’s following published work, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, to name a few, she specifically cites the *Life of Josiah Henson* and *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* as the inspirations for the characters of Uncle Tom and George Harris, respectively. Given the popular modern perception of the novel we may

immediately question the accuracy of her portrayals and may assume vexed feelings among such writers as Douglass about their involvement in Stowe's work- but such was not the case. Infact, Douglass' overwhelming support of the novel appears to directly contradict the prevailing discourse that is most famously attached to Baldwin's *Everybody's Protest Novel*, in which Baldwin casually dubs the work as "a bad novel."<sup>15</sup> Martin Delany, a black nationalist, physician, journalist, and, more importantly, a contemporary of Frederick Douglass, similarly criticized Stowe's novel for its representations of black identity and castigated Douglass for both his support of Stowe as well as his dependence on white support for social progress. Delany's criticisms sparked an intense debate between Douglass and himself that literary scholar Grant Shreves cites as one of the first "dialectical conflicts between African American (male) public intellectuals" such as those between the more famous Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, or Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, or James Baldwin and Richard Wright, or, most recently, Cornel West and Ta-Nehisi Coates. Similar to twentieth century discourse surrounding the novel, Douglass' praise came from his belief in the novel's utility (in advancing the abolitionist cause) whereas Delany's criticisms were in the novel itself (and its portrayal of black characters). Though Shreves notes the debate between Douglass and Delany as more productive than what would be future dialectical conflicts, the two writers argued completely different points as the argument boiled down to which was more important than the other and, characteristic of such debates, neither conceded to the other.

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<sup>15</sup> Baldwin p.14

Though Baldwin cites neither Douglass nor Delany, his critique of *Cabin* clearly captures Delany's objections to the text but also utilizes the spirit of Douglass' support to denounce the literariness of Stowe and her novel. Just as I identified the slave narrative as propagandistic in Chapter 1, Baldwin characterizes Stowe as "not so much a novelist [but] as an impassioned pamphleteer." Effectively, Baldwin takes hold of the novel's only saving grace and spotlights the issue of abolitionist literature's propensity for sentimentalism, the result of the genre's identity as propaganda. There is a reason *Cabin* sold 500,000 copies in its first year of publication, as Ferguson writes, "it has, literally, everything: the chase, hairbreadth escapes, sex (discreetly suggested), violence, brutality, easy identification of the good guys versus the bad guys, a clear cut moral problem put in simplistic terms," and the list goes on ending with "the triumph of good over evil and a happy ending."<sup>16</sup> Much in the way slave narratives were cultivated for its audience, *Cabin* (in large part a culmination of such narratives) and other abolitionist works recycled provenly popular topoi- namely sentimentalism and character or rather, as I will demonstrate, caricature portrayals of black identity.

While slave narratives appear to follow a specific template that its most popular publications perfected, the genealogy of abolitionist fictional narratives demonstrates an even stronger relationship between works. *Cabin* and its relationship to earlier abolitionist works in Richard Hildreth's novel, *The Slave; or Memoirs of Archy Moore* (1836) and Lydia Maria Child's short stories demonstrate the genre's propensity for recycling similar subjects and structures. In his essay, *The Origins of Uncle Tom,*

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<sup>16</sup> p.Ferguson 138

Charles Nichols went as far as to say that the novel was “primarily a derivative piece of hackwork” in identifying, as he writes, the novel’s “*real source*” (italics added) in Richard Hildreth’s *The Slave*. After having denounced the merits of Stowe’s *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, citing historical inaccuracies and questionable accounts as well the general spirit of the book,<sup>17</sup> Nicholas argues that Hildreth’s novel not only inspired setting and events but also most of *Cabin’s* characters. Stowe’s Uncle Tom is remarkably similar to Hildreth’s Tom; Eliza directly mirrors Cassy; and George Harris is an almost carbon copy of Archy Moore. With both the dark-skinned Toms being imbued with white Christian virtue and the quadroon identities of the latter characters being idealized yet thematically divided by literary Darwinism, at the core of abolitionist portrayals of black characters was an incessant desire to whiten them as perhaps best typified by the title of Hildreth’s later edition of the novel, *White Slave* (1852). Moreover, *Archy Moore’s* influence on *Cabin’s* character portrayals is certainly ironic considering its own unique infamy.

With Hildreth’s anonymously published first person narration most of its readers had taken *Archy Moore* to be a genuine slave narrative and true to the nature of his occupation as a journalist and historian (whose works are to this day considered by many as highly accurate), *Archy Moore* was was considerably more graphic than any other slave narrative in its portrayal of violence and sexual abuse. In doing so the novel sparked outrage by many of its readers, leading one Benjamin Hallet, a proslavery U.S

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<sup>17</sup> Stowe had long maintained that the book was inspired by her experiences with slaves and her involvement with the underground railroad. Southern outrage demanded proof of the novel’s accuracy which inspired *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in which she double-downed on her relationships with slaves. Scholars have since debunked any indication to her having a relationship with slaves or helping them escape to freedom.

attorney for Massachusetts, to promote a law that would make it a capital offense to “write or print such a book as this,” avowing that its author should be “lynched on the spot by gentlemen of property.”<sup>18</sup> The irony of Stowe’s drawn inspiration from a white-authored fictional novel pretending to be a black-authored factual slave-narrative captures the degree of fiction in her portrayal of black identity as caricatural as much as it reveals the nature of her fiction in its desire to whiten black identity. Though Hedin notes the imbued white Christianity in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (the moniker given to future similar representations) as evident of this desire, for the purposes of this chapter I will demonstrate how the portrayals of mixed raced characters as tragic mulattoes expressed the same pathos.

Though noted writer and literary critic, Sterling A. Brown did not include Lydia Maria Child’s work in his article, “Negro Character as seen by White Authors,” which first coined the term of “tragic mulatto,” most have since attributed the birth of the archetype to her two short stories *The Quadroons* (1842) and *Slavery’s Pleasant Homes* (1843). When we ask why, despite the wide range of similarities between *Cabin* and *Archy Moore*, was one widely popular and the other barely read? *Cabin*’s adopted romantic sentimentality as the narrative’s primary part pris from Child’s short stories unlike the unapologetic abolitionism of Hildreth’s novel, accounts for the difference in both popularity and response. As Hildreth attempted to depict the horridness of slavery through mimicking earlier slave narratives, by offering a noticeably more graphic portrayal of violence and sexual abuse it also made Hildreth’s politics, unlike Stowes

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and Child's, unquestionably clear. For instance, the role of the good slave owner, absent in Hildreth's novel but present in Stowe's and Child's narratives, implied that it was not slavery itself that was to be abhorred but certain participants in the institution who were objectionable. Moreover, *Archy Moore's* refusal to give any assemblance of a happy ending through Christianity which was a key component to *Cabin*, set apart the two texts. In a sense, Stowe's novel is less an indictment against slavery than a celebration of Christian virtue as the dichotomy between good and bad slave owners demonstrates.

Despite his more apparent abolitionism, Hildreth expresses the same unconscious racism as his literary successors did through his and their biracial characters as Jules Zanger (and most likely Sterling A. Brown as well) cites the earliest indication of the tragic mulatto in Hildreth's novel. Child is, however, seen as the archetype's inventor most likely because her work was realist fiction whereas Hildreth's was fictionally real. Moreover, the degree in which its sentimentality, namely romance, played as the narrative crux to Child's short stories outdid both Hildreth and Stowe. Whereas the thrust of *Archy Moore* was in abolitionism and Christian virtue in *Cabin*, romantic tragedy defined Child's short stories.

The *Quadroons* takes place in the bucolic fictional town of Sand-Hills, Georgia. The introductory paragraph solely dedicated to the stories' setting as "a perfect model of rural beauty" undoubtedly conjures visions of Eden. Complete with its described "hidden[ness] among the trees," lavish foliage, and imposing gateway- paradise, as it were, frames the story without even mentioning its inhabitants. Thusly, Sand-Hills

foregrounds the titular characters' existence as attached to paradise and undoubtedly foreshadows the tragedy to come when they will eventually leave. Having already imbued her setting with nature she effectively creates her setting as of nature and indicates a difference between the world within Sandhills and out when she writes "the tasteful hand of Art had not learned to *imitate* the lavish beauty and harmonious disorder of Nature." In the following paragraph the main character is introduced, though just as a nameless "quadroon; the daughter of a wealthy merchant." Here Child goes on to describe her main character as an occupant of Sandhills as though the resident were a creature only able to exist in its habitat. Moreover, she indicates the quadroon's uniqueness, or rather otherness, by indicating her and her lover as the sole year round habitants of Sandhills unlike the wealthy summer inhabitants who come and go with the season. Her otherness, however, becomes idealized by Child's characterization of the quadroon which takes on a quite literal representation as a product of its environment. Its expressed identity and physical appearance as extraordinarily beautiful, graceful, intelligent and virtuous (characteristics in the extraordinariness that would later come to define the archetype) compliment its earlier expressed environment which distanced herself from "the edicts of society [which] had built up a wall of separation between her and them." Clearly referring to racism, the outside world represents reality as much as Child's utopian garden of Eden-like setting taps into popular utopian fiction of the time. Also popular at the time was domestic as well as romantic fiction and the quadroon's "highly cultivated mind," which may conjure visions of Voltaire's domestic happiness, also inspired the stories central romantic plot. It was in fact her mind that Child noted

“inspired” her lover to feel “a far deeper sentiment sentiment than belongs merely to excited passion...” Here, Child begins to demonstrate the crux of her short story as one of sentimental romance when she continues, writing that “It was in fact Love in its best sense--that most perfect landscape of our complex nature, where earth everywhere kisses the sky, but the heavens embrace all; and the lowliest dew-drop reflects the image of the highest star.”

Indeed, we are presented with a passionate sentimental characterization of “Love” and a detailed account of the paradise in which it exists before we are given the main character's name. In fact, the quadroon remains nameless until Child introduces it alongside the story's introduction to the theme of miscegenation, the midpoint between the story's romance and tragedy. When Child first uses her name, she writes “Rosalie's conscience required an outward form of marriage; though she well knew that a union with her proscribed race was not recognized by law, and therefore the ceremony gave her no legal hold on Edward's constancy.” Though the story is regarded as an abolitionist work of literature, the issue of slavery is only implied by the imposition of a racist law onto the narrative's romantic plot. Rosalie and Edward, both children wealthy families, and their forbidden love certainly hints at an earlier Shakespearean story whose tragedy similarly fell along the trivialness of heredity. And like Romeo and Juliet, Child's lovers and their “marriage sanctioned by heaven though unrecognized on earth” at first appears as though it will survive. Ten years go by and their love produced a daughter in Xafira, an octoroon, whose “rare loveliness” and “marvellous beauty” appears to surpass her mother's, whose impending anxiety “spoke of anxious thoughts

and fearful foreboding for her daughter's future" foreshadows Xafira's "unavoidable" fate. An additional nine years go by and Child sets Edward upon a Byronic<sup>19</sup> change of heart, indicated by her quoting the poet's famous line (which would later also serve as a chapter title in Frederick Douglass' *My Bondage and My Freedom*) when she writes "a change came o'er the spirit of his dream."

While miscegenation is the unnamed hindrance to the story's romance, Child the names "ambition" and "political excitement" of Edward's as the impeding forces to his and Rosalie's love. Here, Child goes on to condemn such things when she writes that

The contagion of example had led him into the arena where so much American strength is wasted; he had thrown himself into political excitement, with all the honest fervor of youthful feeling. His motives had been unmixed with selfishness, nor could he ever define to himself when or how sincere patriotism took the form of personal ambition. But so it was, that at twenty-eight years old, he found himself an ambitious man, involved in movements which his frank nature would have once abhorred, and watching the doubtful game of mutual cunning with all the fierce excitement of a gambler.

In stark contrast to the "deeper sentiment" of "Love," Edward effectively loses himself in "excited passion" amongst the "fervor" of ambition. Despite his continued love for

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<sup>19</sup> Byron and his hero has been discussed at length in other essays as a model for the mulatto hero

Rosalie, she and, implicitly her blackness, become “associated with restraint” as he eventually marries a white woman for political appearances. Child identifies her quadroon’s victimhood with a “Poor Rosalie,” in a dramatic farewell to her love lost. This victimhood, however, becomes shared with Edward’s wife when Child similarly writes

Poor Charlotte! had she known all, what a dreary lot would hers have been;  
but fortunately, she could not miss the impassioned tenderness she had  
never experienced; and Edward was the more careful in his kindness,  
because he was deficient in love.

But neither of these women capture the stories true tragedy. Pertinent to the archetype is the trope of inherited heightened tragedy that passes on from mulatto mother to quadroon daughter. As the implication goes, the mulatto is only superior to the common negro because of her whiteness but yet the reality of her black blood relegates her whiteness to the tragedy of a black identity. The quadroon is thus even more tragic due to her greater proximity to whiteness but her unavoidable inability to escape the vestiges of her black blood make her tragedy all the more pitable. As Child is said to have first cultivated the trope, true to form, it is Xafira who occupies the stories true tragedy. Both Rosalie having lost love and her eventual death and Charlotte’s loveless marriage pail in comparison to the tragedy that befalls Xafira whom after both her parents’ death ends up as a slave and in suggested concubinage. In an attempt to

rescue her, her white lover, George, is shot and killed before her eyes that ultimately lead to Xafira going mad and killing herself.

Mind you, the brief summary I've given does Child's exceptional ability to wrap every inch of her story in sentimental dramatic, romantic, and poetic descriptions throughout the *Quadroons* no justice— but that is in fact part of the problem. Strip the sentimentalism away and you realize that Just as Baldwin famously dubbed *Cabin* a “bad novel” Child's is equally a bad story. Moreover, absent from her critique of masculine ambition and political involvement is any admonition of the institution of slavery itself. As scholars have begun to critically re-examine the abolitionist movement,<sup>20</sup> questions surrounding their end-goals have further exposed latent racisms. While the 19th century discourse began to recognize their racisms, they were saved by their abolitionist sentiments. More recent arguments have questioned abolitionists even more. With Lydia Maria Child's story being more a romantic tragedy than a work of abolitionist literature and *Cabin* more a profession of Christian virtue than an abolitionist novel. Moreover, such narratives and their erasure of black identity through either killing them off or sending them to Liberia do not bode well for anyone seeking to defend the work as not in fact attempting to abolish black identity. Such fates as the only viable options to Black individuals may appear counter to writers' attempted whitening of black identity but it instead demonstrates why they did it, proving Baldwin correct in his assessment of sentimentalism.

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<sup>20</sup> Some historians have noted that there is very little evidence to suggest that they actually had an effect on abolishing slavery.

As the title of his essay may suggest, Ferguson identifies the “thrust” of abolitionist fiction as less concerned with the abolition of slavery and more with “the abolition of blacks.”<sup>21</sup> Functionally relegating the narratives of real former slaves to the realm of fiction (and not giving them credit unless you’re Stowe and, under public pressure, are forced to defend the authenticity of your work) achieves this, but at the core of the argument lies the use of black characters as “sentimental set-pieces” and programmed automatons. For the purposes of Ferguson, the characterizations are purposeful allegories of Puritan virtue as iterations of uncle toms embodied Christian love, acceptance and forgiveness. It is thus strange that largely absent from the argument for the effectively “purged” “black essence” of characters is an account of biracial characters character quite literally embodying Ferguson argument. What better exhibition of the de jure of whitened black identity than the de facto incessant usage of the tragic mulatto throughout abolitionist fiction and their dramatic deaths.

To Ferguson’s credit, the tragic mulatto has received substantial scholarly attention and his ability to discuss the abolition of black identity in abolitionist literature without discussing biracial characters’ portrayal as quite literally, as well as figuratively, embodying the sentiment is somewhat remarkable. Additionally, in Baldwin’s admonitioning of sentimentalism within regards to *Cabin*, he virtually lists the associated tropes of the archetype but attached them to sentimentality when he defines it as

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<sup>21</sup> Ferguson p.135

the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty... [and is] the signal of secret and violent inhumanity... Uncle Tom's Cabin-- like its multitudinous, hard boiled descendants-- is a catalog of violence.<sup>22</sup>

The literally purged blackness of the mulatto paralleled by the figuratively purged blackness of the slave merits a reconceptualization of our understanding of the archetype as embodying black identity as a whole. As the focus of this project studies the origins of a fiction and its historical paratext, this chapter, like the last one, asks what compelled its authors use of fiction? When Baldwin urges us to question Stowe's "journey... to discover and reveal something a little closer to the truth,"<sup>23</sup> what are we to make of the effective whitening of black identity and white supremacy as the discovery? In this chapter, I to marry the discussion of sentimentalism with abolished blackness through an analysis of the tragic (sentimental) mulatto (black) in abolitionist fiction.

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<sup>22</sup> Baldwin p. 14

<sup>23</sup> Baldwin p. 15

### Chapter 3

Though crowning achievements of liberalism during their time, modern pallets have since come to identify the racisms of abolitionist writers through, for example, their depictions of tragic mulattoes. As a result, much of their work has fallen by the wayside and modern perceptions of *Cabin* have largely represented perceptions of the genre--and understandably so. Just as Stowe's novel attempted to recycle popular topoi, tragic mulattoes that appeared in the works of writers like William Wells Brown, Mary Langdon, W.W Smith, John Townsend Trowbridge, Mayne Reid, James S. Peacock, Dion Boucicault, and others, including Stowe herself in her later works, undoubtedly appear to draw inspiration from *Cabin* in their portrayals of slavery and black identity in what were most likely attempts to duplicate Stowe's success. None, however, came close to *Cabin's* notoriety and readings of such works appear to exhibit unimpressive imitations that, not unlike slave narratives, inspire very little difference amongst one another. Though it has been lost in the mix of its contemporaries, one text in particular should stand out among the rest if for no other reason than its authorship.

William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or the President's Daughter* (1853) has been widely forgotten. While one would think that the first novel written by an African American would be a well known text, its reputation as both a work of abolitionist and 19th century African American fiction have castigated the novel to a surprising realm of obscurity. As M. Giulia Fabi notes, 19th century African American fiction is often generally accused "of literary incompetence, ... racial self-hatred," and compliance in utilizing "white literary

stereotypes of blacks.”<sup>24</sup> At the surface, Brown’s novel’s bizarre relationship to abolitionist literature and his main characters as tragic mulattoes appears to warrant a critique far harsher. Not only does *Clotel* utilize familiar plots, characters, structure and persuasive elements of abolitionist fiction, but the novel is rife with verbatim plagiarism. As Geoffrey Sanborn notes in an essay dedicated to the very subject, roughly thirty-five percent of the novel can be attributed to writers other than Brown. Moreover, amidst his plagiarism, Brown largely fails at writing a coherent fictional novel as his jumping back and forth between unrelated stories, some factual some fictional, intermittently interrupted by his own historicizing develop a work of literature that is-- well, a brilliant display of literary genius.

*Clotel* is less a novel than it is an experimental work of subversive literature. As I have attempted to spotlight latent dilemmas that malign both the works of ex-slave narratives and abolitionist fiction in my previous chapters, for this chapter I recognize *Clotel* as a self-aware functional nexus between the two earlier discussed genres that implicates them both in developing reified history for its audience. Moreover, in its self-awareness, *Clotel* indicates Brown’s own awareness of the disingenuousness of both genres long before any literary scholar would do so. Thus, his adoption of language from other writers becomes just some of the many subversive paratexts that indicates the fiction of the work as itself a parody. As abolitionist writers purported their work as accurate representations of truth, Brown as an ex-slave narrator and thus a messenger of *actual* truth, and how he rewrites his obvious co-opting of abolitionist

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<sup>24</sup> Fabi

literary characters, plots and language exemplifies their work as inaccurate fictions. As I will argue for the remainder of this chapter, *Clotel* subverts the reified history of African Americans (and their literature) through paratext that manipulates its readers preconceived notions of and associations with truth and fiction by juxtaposing the two in a complex discourse of metafiction that obscures the line between them. Simultaneously, insofar as its positionality within the literary genealogies of both African American and abolitionist literature, I will demonstrate *Clotel* as an exploration in divorcing the voice of the former from the restraints of the latter. While relatively new interest in the novel has begun to give it the attention it deserves in recognizing it as a discourse that questions national identity, my own reading narrows the scope of the discourse to an exercised venture in exploring the complexities of black identity through nuanced reiterations of earlier simplified archetypes.

One of *Clotel's* most important, yet widely unrecognized character is in fact Brown himself. Following the book's preface is "an abridged, third-person version of his popular"<sup>25</sup> earlier mentioned narrative whose narrational voice bleeds into the first chapter with a continued delivering of facts and information before any assemblance of a story begins. The distinction between historical facts and the novel's narrative becomes unclear. In doing so, Brown rejects the earlier imposed limits of slave narratives as his novel bears the representation of truth by actually framing his novel in reality. Moreover, he establishes both Brown, the escaped slave, as the distant narrator but also a character within the text whose presence becomes marked by interspersed

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<sup>25</sup> Ganster p.431

first-person narration that authenticates portions of the novel-- thus “mediating between the two worlds” of fact and fiction. In practice, Brown the narrator relies on paratextual evidence to authenticate the novel while Brown the novelist’s usage of such things as newspapers and advertisements similarly utilizes paratextual elements to authenticate the narrative. The two conjoin in the middle of the novel’s first chapter where the narrator’s discussion of slavery meets the novelist’s beginning of the story in the following newspaper advertisement for a group of slaves for sale:

Notice: Thirty-eight negroes will be offered for sale on Monday, November 10th, at twelve o'clock, being the entire stock of the late John Graves, Esq. The negroes are in good condition, some of them very prime; among them are several mechanics, able-bodied field hands, plough-boys, and women with children at the breast, and some of them very prolific in their generating qualities, affording a rare opportunity to any one who wishes to raise a strong and healthy lot of servants for their own use. Also several mulatto girls of rare personal qualities: two of them very superior. Any gentleman or lady wishing to purchase, can take any of the above slaves on trial for a week, for which no charge will be made.

The shift from fact to fiction is subtle and unannounced. To the reader the story begins as a continuation of a factual account-- making it appear as equally factual. The continual blurring of fact from fiction can be seen as representational of Brown’s critique

of his audience as their ability to easily read the selling of human beings as apart of an easily digestible fact calls into question their understanding of slavery as having been so greatly reified by their relationship to it and understanding of it. Moreover, generally missing from discussions of Brown's novel are its similarities to his narrative. It is certainly no coincidence that the beginning of the fictional narrative is in a newspaper advertisement for the selling of slaves. As discussed in my first chapter, I identified Brown's first experience with cultivating fiction in his own involvement in selling slaves whereupon he was tasked with creating false advertisements through modifying the identities of slaves. In *Clotel*, however, Brown tasks himself with accurately advertising slavery and black identity.

His unique previous experience as an aid to a slave trader is once again referenced in the next chapter by the character of Pompey who "having been long with the trader and kn[owing] his business" is reminiscent of Brown's experience as an aid. Moreover, Pompey's declaration of himself as "no countefit;... de genwine artekil" conjures slave narratives' assertions of their authenticity. Brown uses Pompey's broken dialect in his own assertion of authenticity to demonstrate the backwardness of narrators having to do so as well as once again implicating abolitionists as slave traders. Aside from the obvious tagname of the city covered in ash, Pompey's continued portrayal and broken dialect while preparing slaves for auction is Brown's conjoining of his experience as an aid to a slave trader with himself being used by abolitionists in a sort of shuck and jive routine.

Brown continues to reference himself and his own narrative throughout the novel, but more important to the narrative are the mentioned “mulatto girls of rare personal qualities” who became the novel's main characters. Curren, a mulatto, and her two daughters, Clotel and Althesa, octoroons, frame the novel's primary narrative and, as the title of the novel begins to suggest, their relationship to Thomas Jefferson as mistress and bastards provides an important backdrop to their stories. Just as Pompey's inspiration came from an earlier work of Brown's, his main character in *Clotel* is largely inspired by an earlier poem from his *Anti-Slavery Harp* (1848) entitled “Jefferson's daughter.” As the preface to the poem writes:

It is asserted, on the authority of an American Newspaper, that the daughter of Thomas Jefferson, late President of the United States, was sold at New Orleans for \$1,000.'-Morning Chronicle

*Clotel* becomes a vessel in which Brown explores the irony of, as he writes,

at which two daughters of Thomas Jefferson, the writer of the Declaration of American Independence, and one of the presidents of the great republic were disposed of to the highest bidder!

The daughter of one of the United States' founding fathers and “sons of liberty” being sold into slavery is a critique of the institution as well as its participants. Moreover,

utilizing a portion of a speech in which Thomas Jefferson avowes for the eventual abolition of slavery in a later chapter of his novel highlights the irony of his involvement with the peculiar institution and his daughters enslavement highlights the hypocrisy of white abolitionists in general.<sup>26</sup>

Brown doubles down on his critique of white abolitionists through the confounding juxtaposition between facts and fiction that persist throughout the novel. While interspersed factual accounts of slaves stories appear intermittently, the story of *Clotel* as a work of fiction is largely a retelling of Lydia Maria Child's *Quadroons*. In effect, the fictionality is exposed and characters such as tragic mulattoes and even uncle toms, when placed in Brown's reality, are very different than when used in abolitionist fiction. Clotel, the quadroon described as the "most beautiful girl, coloured or white, in the city" and her upbringing in "comparative luxury" as well as the love story between her and Horatio Green reads as invariably similar to the love story between Rosalie and Edward when he purchases her from the auction block. *Clotel's* narrative similarities to Child's short story persist after a narrative departure of two chapters returns to Clotel with his fourth chapter entitled "The Quadroons Home." Aside from the very name of the chapter as a combination of Child's tragic mulatto stories *The Quadroons* and *Slavery's Pleasant Homes*, the chapter is almost word for word extrapolated from *The Quadroons*. For instance, when Brown frames the setting of the two lovers' home, he writes:

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<sup>26</sup> Ch 17

The beautiful cottage surrounded by trees so as scarcely to be seen. Among them was one far retired from the public roads, and almost hidden among the trees. It was a perfect model of rural beauty. The piazzas that surrounded it were covered with clematis and passion flower. The pride of China mixed its oriental looking foliage with the majestic magnolia, and the air was redolent with the fragrance of flowers, peeping out of every nook and nodding upon you with a most unexpected welcome. The tasteful hand of art had not learned to imitate the lavish beauty and harmonious disorder of nature, but they lived together in loving amity, and spoke in accordant tones. The gateway rose in a gothic arch, with graceful tracery in iron work, surmounted by a cross, round which fluttered and played the mountain fringe, that lightest and most fragile of vines.

The same description of Rosalie and Edwards home can be found in *The Quadroons* when Child writes:

Among the beautiful cottages that adorn it was one far retired from the public roads, and almost hidden among the trees. It was a perfect model of rural beauty. The piazzas that surrounded it were covered with Clematis and Passion flower. The Pride of China mixed its oriental-looking foliage with the majestic magnolia, and the air was redolent with the fragrance of flowers, peeping out from every nook, and nodding upon you in bye

places, with a most unexpected welcome. The tasteful hand of Art had not learned to *imitate* the lavish beauty and harmonious disorder of Nature, but they lived together in loving unity, and spoke in according tones. The gateway rose in a Gothic arch, with graceful tracery in iron-work, surmounted by a Cross, around which fluttered and played the Mountain Fringe, that lightest and most fragile of vines.

But whereas Child uses her description of a utopia to begin her story as an idealized bucolic landscape, important to Brown's usage of this description is its location at the beginning of his fourth chapter, immediately following his third. Just before the reader is presented with this setting, they are given a horrific account of a slave's execution from a southern newspaper which reads:

The body was taken... Faggots were then collected and piled around him, to which he appeared quite indifferent. When the work was completed, he was asked what he had to say. He then warned all to take example by him, and asked the prayers of all around; he then called for a drink of water, which was handed to him; he drank it, and said, 'Now set fire--I am ready to go in peace!' The torches were lighted, and placed in the pile, which soon ignited. He watched unmoved the curling flame that grew, until it began to entwine itself around and feed upon his body; then he sent forth cries of agony painful to the ear, begging someone to blow his brains

out; at the same time surging with almost superhuman strength, until the staple with which the chain was fastened to the tree (not being well secured) drew out, and he leaped from the burning pile. At that moment the sharp ringing of several rifles was heard: the body of the negro fell a corpse on the ground. He was picked up by some two or three, and again thrown into the fire, and consumed, not a vestige remaining to show that such a being ever existed.

The account bears resemblance to a story Brown tells in his narrative where a slave is similarly tied and beaten and “subdued” and “tamed.” Though in Brown’s narrative this slave remains alive, his having been tamed can be seen as him having lost his soul in so far as the headstrong assertive identity that had once defined him was replaced by a shell of his former self. Brown utilizing yet another newspaper to deliver information signifies his role as the delineator of facts while his usage of Child’s story and her writing demonstrate his account of fiction.

While Brown’s work is criticized for utilizing archetypal characters and their sentimental plots, what he in fact does with the elements of abolitionist fiction is widely lost. Taking Child’s words, his bucolic landscape is juxtaposed by the newspaper article and the setting of slavery. In effect, Brown takes Child’s utopia and (considering the greek origin of utopia as “nowhere” or “no place”) spotlights its existence as a fictive realm of Child’s imagination. Just as Sandhills Georgia does not exist, neither does an American paradise in which an African American is free exist. As I earlier discussed the

restrictions placed upon ex-slave narrators as ironically bonding them to abolitionists, I identify abolitionist fictional writers' tendency for limiting portrayals of black identity as similarly taming and subduing black identity. In a sense their black characters are their slaves and William Wells Brown having once well played the role of ex-slave narrator in what is functionally his second escape (he also wrote *Clotel* in England which may be seen as literally signifying this escape) to the realm of fiction, Brown subtly indicts and exposes abolitionists relationships with their cultivated characters and exposes them as fictions.

Much of Brown's fourth and eight chapters (signifying the quadroon and octoroon identities) as well as his fifteenth borrow Child's language directly. To understand why he does this, it is important to recognize where his story diverges from Child's. Whereas in Child's short story Charlotte remained appearingly sympathetic and even virtuous when, after discovering Rosalie and Xafira, she continued to take care of her husband's child after his death, how Charlotte allowed Xafira to become forced into slavery, however, was never explained. Brown's rewriting appears to be inspired by this plot hole and though it begins to diverge upon Gertrude's discovery of Clotel and Mary, her reaction and the sequential events that followed, mark the beginning of an entirely different story from Child's. While heavily drawing from Child's story may have at first appeared to honor Child, Brown's divergence from her story, particularly through a white and appearingly virtuous woman much like Child herself, appears to in fact critique Child and her story. Considering the "unvarnished"<sup>27</sup> truth with which Brown describes

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<sup>27</sup> p.82

his novel as delivering to his reader, utilizing Child's story only to drastically change it subtly defaces *The Quadroons*. Moreover, his allusions to tragic mulattoes such as those used by Child and Harriet Beecher Stowe are juxtaposed by other references Brown makes to true stories that he himself suspends narration to tell the reader they are in fact true. Such moments as when Brown tells the story of Nat Turner and other real stories of escaped slaves subtly begins to achieve Brown's goal, but his twenty-third chapter, suitably titled "*The Truth Stranger Than Fiction*" is perhaps the most direct.

After having long since abandoned Child's words after his eighth chapter, Brown returns to her words at the end of his twenty-third chapter to depict the death of Clotel's niece, Jan. Jan, an octoroon, and her death mirror that of Child's character, Xafira, who was also an octoroon. Side by side, there is not much difference in their deaths and the profoundly tragic events that lead to them. Despite having both been born free they were both were (tragically) forced into slavery as young women as assumed concubines and (tragically) lost their white lovers who attempted to free them and then (tragically) went mad and "died of broken heart[s]." Brown, however makes an important departure from Child's story which ends with the following message to her reader:

Reader, do you complain that I have written fiction? Believe me, scenes like this are of no unfrequent occurrence at the South. The world does not afford such materials for tragic romance, as the history of the Quadroons.

The end of Brown's chapter and thus the end of his rewriting of Child's story is drastically different.

This, reader, is an unvarnished narrative of one doomed by the laws of the southern states to be a slave. It tells not only its own story of grief, but speaks of a thousand wrongs and woes beside, which never see the light; all the more bitter and dreadful, because no hope can relive, no sympathy can mitigate, and no hope can cheer.

After having told seemingly the exact same story, Brown issues a completely different message that, once again considering the title of his chapter, makes clear why he uses Child's work. The difference between the two takeaways perhaps best demonstrates/exemplifies Brown's work as a metanarrative that directly challenges Child's tragic mulattoes. With Brown equivocating his narrative as the "unvarnished," the direct implication is that Child's narrative is in fact varnished. As we can see by her own ending, Child understands her work and characters in it as exemplifying tragic grief of which Brown complicates both the object of and the reasons for such tragic grief. Whereas Child's narrative concerned itself with miscegenation laws as the greater tragedy that befell "almost-white" slaves, Brown demonstrated tragedies of all slaves. In effect, Brown challenged both a "whitening" on the part of abolitionists onto black characters and the very reasons for why such writers as Child and Stowe "whitened"

their characters long before scholars such as John Herbert Nelson would later note the “inconsistencies” within their work.

## Conclusion

William Wells Brown and his novel's obscurity baffles me. Within a novelistic tradition that is as entrenched in a discourse within itself that is in many ways rooted in subverting white stereotypes of black identity, *Clotel* as the first novel to do so offers a profound insight into the beginning of African American fiction. From Toni Morrison's *Tar-baby* to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* one can find nodes of the same spirit mediating between the worlds of fact and fiction in order to create its own truths that narrates *Clotel* throughout the wider cannon of African American fiction. The beginning of the first true African American voice in literature finding its way through fiction is a compelling story and one that certainly deserves greater attention. If we are to believe Baldwin's critique of early African American representation in abolitionist fiction as in fact a "catalog of violence," than William Wells Brown certainly studied it better than anyone else and in beginning the African American novelistic tradition by largely undermining his predecessors than perhaps he did begin a revolution.

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