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The Bondwoman's Narrative: Text, Paratext, Intertext and Hypertext

CELESTE-MARIE BERNIER AND JUDIE NEWMAN

At the close of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), a novel which exploits the conventions of slave narrative to dramatize gendered rather than racial oppressions, a set of "Historical Notes," the partial transcript of a lecture in 2195 by Professor Pieixoto, the editor of the text, provides a wicked satire on academic commodification. Professor Pieixoto, a major scholar from Cambridge, who is slumming it at the University of Denay, Nunavit, is introduced obsequiously by the fawning Professor Maryann Crescent Moon, and proceeds to patronize his chairperson, his audience and his eponymous subject, demonstrating that patriarchal prejudice remains almost unchanged over the centuries. Pieixoto analyses the technology of the tapes on which a story was recorded, considers the possibility of forgery, earnestly discusses the possibility of using musical traces as dating devices, attempts to trace the history of the house where the tapes were found and offers a great deal of information about each of the two men who might have been the handmaid's master, but discovers absolutely nothing about the handmaid herself: not her name, not her origins, not even whether she escaped from bondage. Pieixoto is sharing the conference podium with Professor Sieglinda Van Buren from the Department of Military History at the University of San Antonio, Republic of Texas. Clearly, despite the presence at the conference of women professors and ethnic minority speakers (Professor Johnny Running Dog, for example), not much has changed, and the supposed admission of women and minorities to the academic mainstream is merely a smokescreen for their continued domination.[1] The

Professor Judie Newman and Dr Celeste-Marie Bernier teach American Studies at the University of Nottingham, Nottingham, NG7 2RD. The authors are grateful for the opportunity to deliver a pilot version of this essay on 13 September 2002, at the Third International Conference of the Institute for the Study of Slavery, "5000 years of Slavery," University of Nottingham, and for the comments at the Roundtable, particularly from fellow speaker Sarah Meer.

[1] See Michael Foley, "Satiric Intent in the 'Historical Notes' Epilogue to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 11 (1989), 44–52.

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handmaid is Pieixoto's cultural capital, a source of prestige, and an opportunity to participate in an academic beanfeast. Marginality (in this case, female) can be a very valuable commodity, especially to a celebrity academic like Pieixoto, a cultural broker, mediating a global trade in cultural commodities, while denying himself none of the local attractions (Arctic char and a charming Arctic Chair) in Denay, Nunavit.

Atwood's tongue-in-cheek parody today appears positively old-fashioned in its image of the scholarly edition published by Pieixoto. When Henry Louis Gates, Jr. discovered the manuscript of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* in an auction of African Americana in February 2001, it was published not by a scholarly press, but by AOL Time Warner. As Paul Grainge comments, the buyout of Warner Communications by Time Inc. in June 1989, and the merger of Time Warner with Internet giant America Online in January 2000, created a media conglomerate of enormous size in which publishing was merely a small part of "a decentralized corporate monolith trying to maximize the synergistic potential of its investments in cable, programming, film studios, music and online services."[2] According to the *Chicago Sun Times*, "Gates has sold the movie rights for a possible HBO production."[3] *The Bondwoman's Narrative* has its own website (http://www.bondwomansnarrative.com/) which lists events, discussions and signings. The marketing operation is intensive. Hannah may be unknown but Gates is not. As Jeff Zaleski commented in *Publishers Weekly*, "With Warner's publicity push (editor tour, TV appearances, national advertising) Gates's first-rate reputation, the prospect of this being the first novel by a former slave woman and the manuscript's own merit, count on this title to be a very big seller."[4] David Shumway has argued that the emergence of a star system in literary studies is a function of consumer culture, with celebrities presented as images, surrendering to a mediatized view of personal intellectual performance which inhibits the production of collectively held knowledge and weakens public confidence in the profession.[5] The way in which the

[2] Paul Grainge, "Remembering the 'American Century,' Media memory and the *Time* 100 list," *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 5 (2002) 201–19, 205.

[3] Bob Minzesheimer, "Novel May Be First by Escaped Female Slave," *Chicago Sun Times*, 28 March 2002, 32.

[4] Jeff Zaleski, "The Bondwoman's Narrative," *Publishers Weekly*, 249 (1 April 2002), 53.

[5] David R. Shumway, "The Star System in Literary Studies," *PMLA*, 112 (January 1997), 85–100. Shumway (93) draws attention to Adam Begley, "Black Studies' New Star," *New York Times Magazine*, 5 June 1988, 24, in which dramatic lighting and personal images give the reader a sense of Gates's personal life. It is important to reiterate, as Shumway notes, that "the quality or value of an individual's work should not be impugned because it has been authorized by the star system" (98).

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press approached *The Bondwoman's Narrative* exemplifies the process.[6] Gates embarked on a publicity tour, signing copies of the book himself. The *Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, describes him as scheduled "to read from and sign his new book"; the *Seattle Times* manages to run a photo of Gates without mentioning the name of Hannah Crafts. Gates is big news in the *Rocky Mountain News*, the *Guardian* (a two-page spread), the *Scotsman*, the *Greensboro News and Record* and the *Sunday Gazette-Mail* of Charleston, which juxtaposed the review with a piece speculating on the possibility of Gates leaving Harvard for Yale. Ironically this speculation was apparently prompted by an academic row in which Cornel West had been accused in the *New Republic* of turning himself into a celebrity.

Fairly obviously, as far as the market is concerned, the story is only of interest if Hannah is a black ex-slave and this is how the book is sold to readers. Its appeal depends absolutely on the "fact" of its being authored by a black woman, and its readers are expected to value it according to the marginal and oppressed status of the author, her racial definition, and the particularities of her life. The dominant question is "who was Hannah Crafts?", not "what can this manuscript tell us about slavery?" or "what literary values does this book have?". Paratextual traces – the blurb, back cover, inside cover, notes and title – are part of the marketing process. Gérard Genette has distinguished between paratexts according to the degree of control which the author exercises over these threshold textual phenomena – a title would be considered a *péritexte*; a back cover blurb would be an *épitexte*. In this case, of course, the author has no control over any of these features. If, as Wendy Waring argues, the function of the back cover blurb is usually economic interpellation – its goal to induce readers to buy the book

[6] Press reports include Esther Addley and Oliver Burkeman, "A Slave Woman Writes," *Guardian*, 4 April 2002, 8–9; Fredric Koeppel, "Gates to sign *Bondwoman's Narrative*," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), 21 April 2002, G3, "Finally Slave's Story Is Told," *Seattle Times*, 9 May 2002, Local B1; Diane Roberts, "Tale Captivates, but Author a Mystery," *Rocky Mountain News*, 10 May 2002, 29D; Mia Bay, "Broken Chains," *New York Times Book Review*, 12 May 2002, 30; Charles Matthews, "Gates Traces a Slave Era Find," *Sunday Gazette-Mail* (Charleston), 19 May 2002, 1F; Carlin Romano, "Gates ponders ditching Harvard for Princeton," *Sunday Gazette-Mail* (Charleston) 19 May 2002, 5F; "Literary Notes," *Greensboro News and Record*, 26 May 2002, H5; Roger A, Berger, "The Bondwoman's Narrative," *Library Journal*, 127 (1 June 2002), 147; Benjamin Soskis, "Freedoms and Fictions," *New Republic*, 3 June 2002, 36–40; Roger Hutchinson, "*The Bondwoman's Narrative* and *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*: Land of Inequality," *Scotsman*, 6 July 2002, S2, 8; Ronald Segal, "The Bondwoman's Narrative," *The Spectator*, 13 July 2002, 36; Hilary Mantel, "The Shape of Absence," *London Review of Books*, 24 (8 August 2002) 3; Douglas Field, "The Bondwoman's Narrative," *Times Literary Supplement*, 5198 (2000), 28.

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and to persuade them that the book speaks to them – this book is well served by its contributors: Maya Angelou ("we get the story from the woman's mouth itself") and five professors, all major authorities on slavery and its literature, three of them women, who compare the narrative to Morrison's *Paradise* and evoke nineteenth-century women's literature and black culture.[7] Just in case the reader were in any doubt that this was a book written by a black woman, the inside cover describes the book as "a genuine autobiographical novel by a female slave," highlighting Gates's exhaustive research and the fact that the work is "unaltered and under its author's original title." Actually, on the front cover the title is *The Bondwoman's Narrative. A Novel*, with the lettering in cursive script on the image of what appears to be a slightly ragged manuscript tied with coarse brown twine which continues over onto the back.[8] Cut the string, however, open the book, and release Hannah from her symbolic bondage, and the words "a novel" disappear from the printed internal title page. Nor are they present in the reproduced image of the manuscript title page. The paper front cover features Hannah's name in smaller type than Gates's, though on the spine Hannah gets larger letters (though vertically) and Gates is in smaller type (though horizontally, and therefore readable to the browser). Take off the cover (once you have bought the book) and Gates gets equal space on the spine. Those intent on getting the story from the woman's mouth will find that it begins only after sixty-five pages of scholarly introduction and is followed by almost a hundred pages of annotations, appendices and bibliography. As Benjamin Soskis commented, "Gates has, in a way, inherited the role of the white abolitionists whose introductory remarks assured the reading public as to the authenticity of slave testimony."[9] The market reader is contradictorily seduced, by a text which is offering very different things: a black woman's true story or a novel; a raw, unmediated narrative; or a work guaranteed by a reputed editor and authority. Cover designs set up an initial horizon of readerly expectations, mobilizing a certain type of consumer. The "market reader" will pick up the dominant message, that the work is written by a black woman; the academic reader is liable to be equally seduced by the various legitimating agents deployed.

[7] Wendy Waring, "Is This Your Book? Wrapping Postcolonial Fiction for the Global Market," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 22 (1995), 455–65, is illuminating on paratextual traces, drawing upon Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (1987).

[8] Hannah Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative: A Novel*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.(New York: Warner Books 2002). All subsequent quotations from this text will be referenced by the abbreviation *BN*.

[9] Benjamin Soskis, "Freedoms and Fictions," *New Republic*, 3 June 2002, 36–40, 37.

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Paratextual traces extend in this case into the virtual dimension. As well as the book, the website advertises an audio version (read by Anna Deavere Smith, with introduction by Gates) and a *Companion* available through XanEdu, an e-learning company.[10] The website describes the book as "the oldest known work of fiction by a female slave." No negative arguments are presented with the exception of a comment by William L. Andrews that "If, on the other hand, Hannah Crafts was white, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, though an intriguing act of literary ventriloquism, does not compel attention and analysis except for specialists in nineteenth century American literature and history."[11] The *Companion* website includes critical essays, an interview with Gates, historical and legal material, a facsimile of the manuscript, photographs of manuscript features, maps of the underground railroad, multimedia and sound presentations, and period images comprising portraits, landscapes and sculpture. There are selections from slave narratives, plot summaries of each chapter of the novel, digitized versions of novels which probably influenced Hannah and information on the Wheeler family who are alluded to in the text (as well as the catalogue of Wheeler's library, to which Hannah may have had access).[12] Rarely has an "unedited" work been so swiftly processed and commodified.[13] Hannah becomes merely the centrepiece of a huge collection of variously relevant documents and images, swamped in ancillary material, merely one more exhibit in a museum which is almost a mini-curriculum for courses on slavery. The website adds high-resolution photographs of Gates, instructions on how to schedule an interview, and interviews with and photographs of Joe Nickell and Kenneth Rendell (the experts who identified the probable date of the manuscript from analysis of the paper, handwriting style and ink). The final bait to the academic is that "College instructors who adopt and use the *Educational Companion* for classes taught during the Fall 2002 semester can submit student essays from each class for consideration for the H. L. Gates, Jr. Scholarship for Research Excellence." A committee selected by XanEdu will judge the essays and award $2000 towards the lucky winner's college education. As the site puts it, "The Momentum Continues to Build," and if

[10] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *The Bondwoman's Narrative: A XanEdu Educational Companion*, (Ann Arbor: Proquest, 2002).

[11] This comment appears in the abstract of William L. Andrews, "Hannah Crafts's Sense of an Ending" on the *Bondwoman's Narrative* website (13 September 2002) but has disappeared in the printed full version of the essay of the same title in the printed *Educational Companion*.

[12] For further information see Gates, "Introduction" to *The Bondwoman's Narrative*.

[13] Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001) offers a penetrating critique of the global commodification of cultural difference in the booming contemporary alterity industry.

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you register you will be e-mailed with details of further events. And here is the catch: to access this wealth of information and to keep your students' eyes on the prize, you have to buy the *Educational Companion* and adopt it for your course. Each copy of the book contains a numerical key, unique to that copy, which allows the purchaser of the slim volume (118 pages, consisting of five essays on the *Narrative* and a general overview of slave narratives) to register and gain access to online resources. At $15.00 (plus shipping) it is not beyond a salaried academic's budget, but most students would expect to use it in a library. Nor can any purchaser pass on the unique numerical key, as the website cautions that it is for individual use only. Every student who wants to access the site will need a number. Can the British Inter-Library Loan service outwit the conglomerate? Yes, after three months and a fee of £8.00 it supplied access to both *Companion* and website. This is very different from the *Archives of Slave Narratives* site at http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/, edited by William L. Andrews, which offers free access to any number of slave narratives, and will eventually have digitized some 200 texts, with commentary. The prize may look like a well-meaning effort to concentrate students' minds on the various mysteries of the text, but it also functions to euphemize the more commercial aspects of this particular publishing operation. Hannah is sold to her readers as an American ex-slave, and as an opportunity to exercise benevolence towards one's students. Far from allowing a Utopian view of the Net (of peer-to-peer interactivity), there is no free exchange of data. You pay, or perhaps if you are a college instructor rather than a member of the general public, you invest in some cultural capital.

In contrast to the glories of the website (and it is a mine of marvellous information and imagery) the printed *Companion* is very much the poor relation. Again it markets itself in terms of nineteenth-century authenticity. The front cover bears the title in flowing script, and a small goose-quill adorns the top of each page, in incongruous contrast to the "Welcome" page which firmly warns the reader that this is a text which includes online and print resources, and that to access the former the reader must register and create a username and a password. Gates may be justified in printing the *Narrative* itself in uncorrected form, misspellings and all, but he might have spared us that level of authenticity in the *Companion*. The print volume is exceptionally poorly produced, with typos, omissions, repetitions, verbless sentences and redundant apostrophes. Surely Nina Baym did not write "Gate's discovery" (26) or Jean Fagan Yellin describe the novel as concerned with the "Hear and Now" (97)? Far from being a good companion, this volume is closer to those friends your parents and teachers warned you against.

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But perhaps content is all. Certainly the essays are well worth having, with William Andrews and Nina Baym particularly interesting on the likelihood that Hannah was a free black, Hollis Robbins excellent on intertextual links to Dickens, and Yellin similarly adept in drawing out the influence of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Whoever wrote the novel, it remains an interesting artefact. Authors and academics are not responsible for the publishing industry's marketing devices. But why has nobody suggested the author might be white? It is as if, in contemporary America, sensitized to any form of racial slur, this was literally unthinkable, comparable to the doubts poured upon nineteenth-century slave narratives by Southern pro-slavers.

While many of the arguments claiming Hannah Crafts's African American status are compelling, we would like to suggest in this article that it is scarcely less likely that she was not. Gates argues that no white author had anything to gain by pretending to be black and uses Harriet Beecher Stowe to illustrate that it was possible both to be white and to write about slavery.[14] The example of Stowe is a problematic one; unlike Crafts, she was self-consciously engaged in writing an antislavery novel and not a slave narrative and therefore would have had no need to prove her racial credentials. For Crafts, on the other hand, whose text is suggestive of its autobiographical origins, the burden of proving authenticity of authorship was much more pressing. There are many records of impostors, particularly on the trans-atlantic lecturing circuit, who assumed fugitive slave status for personal financial gain. In their search for a female slave, scholars have been inexplicably reluctant to pursue Crafts's self-proclaimed identity as a "bondwoman" or servant. One of Gates's main reasons for arguing that Crafts is black derives from his, and Dorothy Porter Wesley's, view that she portrays black characters in a natural manner without the "latent kind of racism" of white abolitionists."[15] He suggests that she used "the blackness of her characters as the default for the human."[16] However, as the analysis below shows, the text provides no such confirmation as Crafts's protagonist uses racist language repeatedly to dissociate herself from other slaves. Any empathy she records in her assessment of slave characters may derive from her similar status as a bonded white servant or immigrant.

Is the manuscript unpublished? Scholars have overlooked the fact that it is structured by periodic "cliffhanger" conclusions roughly every two chapters which suggest that, instead of being designed for book publication, it was

[14] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Introduction" to *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (2002), xiii.
[15] Gates, *The Bondwoman's Narrative Audiobook* (2002).
[16] Gates, "Introduction," *The Bondwoman's Narrative: A XanEdu Educational Companion*, ix.

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written with a view to magazine serialization. Moments of great suspense structure the manuscript: Chapter Two ends with a storm and a painting of ancient aristocracy falling from the wall to prefigure the subsequent Gothic horror; Chapter Four with the flight of mistress and slave; Chapter Five on the spine-chilling death of the master by his own hand signalled by "several little pools of clotted gore" (*BN*, 74); Chapter Seven with the death of the mistress, "a slight shiver of the limbs and she was free" (*BN*, 100). Chapter Nine uses natural imagery, "a burst of thunder" (*BN*, 120) to overshadow the apparent innocence of her concluding question: "Did this change prefigure the destiny of the wedding pair?" (*BN*, 120); Chapter Eleven concludes with the release of bloodhounds pursuing the escaped slave, Charlotte, and her husband. A magazine serialization would be much more difficult to trace than a book publication which may lend credence to the view that this text is "out there" in some form and that we should continue the search before bewailing that it never reached its intended audience.

Critics have ignored the narrative voice in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* which is not only engaged in explaining Southern customs, presumably for North American audiences, but which also exhibits the curiosity of the travel writer; is it possible that Crafts was writing for a transatlantic audience? Can internal evidence be used to suggest that she was born African British, European British or even, as some of the colloquialisms in the text attest, Irish? Crafts's extensive knowledge of sentimental fiction and the literature of slavery (readily available on both sides of the Atlantic) may have been employed to make tangible the familiar parallels between the slaves of North America and the "bond peoples" of Europe. A close reading of the manuscript betrays the direct influences not only of Charlotte and Emily Brontë and Charles Dickens but also of Frederick Douglass, William and Ellen Crafts, Harriet Wilson and Harriet Jacobs.[17] Crafts could have gained the raw material which provided first-hand insights into the slave condition by having a close female house slave for a friend; the fact of a white and black sisterhood is made much of, to different ends, by both William Andrews and Jean Fagan

[17] Those works likely to have influenced or at least been read by Crafts include William Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: The Escape of William and Ellen Craft* (1860; rpt. ed. R.J.M. Blackett, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999); Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself* (1845; rpt. ed. Houston A. Baker, London: Penguin Books, 1982); Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself* (1861; rpt. ed. Jean Fagan Yellin, Boston: Harvard University Press, 1987); Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). Our research is ongoing to prove that Crafts was influenced by William Craft; if this is indeed the case, then it would be likely that her manuscript was written at a much later date than has been suggested by recent debates.

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Yellin.[18] This interpretation would argue in favour of an earlier date for the work, in its abolitionist leanings as well as for the view that the manuscript was never published for the simple reason that it was known among abolitionists to be inauthentic and therefore unmarketable as slave testimony.[19]

Alternatively, comments made about class in the manuscript may suggest that the author was an "immigrant" into the United States whose harsh treatment caused her to ventriloquize her suffering through the more popular voice of an oppressed slave. In nineteenth-century racist discourse the Irish and black slaves occupied a close position of identification and opposition; Frederick Douglass was renowned throughout Ireland as the "black O'Connell" yet Irish immigrants in North America were fearful of the potential economic disadvantages presented by an emancipated slave labour class. This ambivalence may account for Crafts's simultaneous empathy for and distrust of field slaves, which is documented in the manuscript. The novel may be an immigrant literary "first" (rather than an African American). It is important to raise these questions in order to broaden the parameters of existing research on *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and to widen the field of intellectual inquiry. Regardless of ambiguities, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* testifies to the authority of Hannah Crafts. Slave or servant, bond or free, black or white, North American or European, she certainly has the academic community prostrate at her feet, plagued by uncertainty and ambiguity concerning the authorship and genesis of this manuscript. *The Bondwoman's Narrative* requires of its readers and scholars in-depth intellectual interrogation and an ability to challenge fixed interpretations of the manuscript's depiction of race and experimentation with genre.

The title page of the manuscript, which reads *The Bondwoman's Narrative by Hannah Crafts A Fugitive Slave Recently Escaped from North Carolina*, establishes two major points: first, Crafts wished to identify herself as both a "bondwoman" and a "fugitive slave" and not, as in the case of Frederick Douglass,

[18] Andrews, "Hannah Crafts's Sense of an Ending" and Jean Fagan Yellin, "*The Bondwoman's Narrative* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" in *The Bondwoman's Narrative: A XanEdu Educational Companion*. In his essay, Andrews suggests that the narrative represents "the ultimate fulfilments of the freedom reserved for those sisters who kept the faith" (20). Yellin takes this point even further to apply it to the problematic relationship presented in this text between that of mistress and slave: "What we are seeing is not the affinity of gender bridging the gulf of 'race' and of condition, but the sisterhood of two women, both nominally 'black' and enslaved" (91).

[19] Although beyond the immediate scope of this article, the arguments preoccupied with establishing Crafts's authorial identity as well as those examining her choice of generic form have a significant bearing upon the ongoing debates concerning the possible "date" of this manuscript.

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"an American Slave." The fact that, unlike Douglass, she refuses to dramatize her coming to consciousness and self-definition as an American with a legitimate claim upon the nation's sense of moral wrong may support the view that she is foreign-born. Second, the absence of the phrase "written by herself" suggests that she was not concerned with proving authorship to sceptical white audiences but that this was either taken as fact or deemed to be irrelevant. Indeed, Crafts is uninterested in reprinting any documents which would corroborate her story. Unlike Harriet Jacobs and others, she chooses merely to describe the "runaway advertisement" posted up of herself rather than to include it in her text (*BN*, 212). Craft's "Preface," which borrows from generic phrasing to suggest her "humble" (*BN*, 3) status, confirms her as an author in command of narrative conventions with full authority over her material and preferred method of narration. Her use of rhetorical questions conveys her ability to address a mixed-race audience: "Have I succeeded in portraying any of the peculiar features of that institution whose curse rests over the fairest land the sun shines upon? Have I succeeded in showing how it blights the happiness of the white as well as the black race?" (*BN*, 3). The fact that, for Crafts, the significance of her narrative lay in its ability to convey the nefarious influences of slavery upon both races imitates abolitionist tactics of moral conversion.

Crafts's opening to Chapter One manipulates generic conventions associated with the unassuming author: "It may be that I assume to[o] much responsibility in attempting to write these pages … I am aware of my deficiencies. I am neither clever, nor learned, nor talented" (*BN*, 5). Her narrator's emphasis upon "humble" origins is specifically unracialized to suggest that she occupies a lower social status, although not necessarily that of a slave. She problematizes her identification of herself as "black" in the same paragraph:

> I soon learned what a curse was attached to my race, soon learned that the African blood in my veins would forever exclude me from the higher walks of life. That toil unremitted unpaid toil must be my lot and portion … This seemed the harder to be borne, because my complexion was almost white, and the obnoxious descent could not be readily traced, though it gave a rotundity to my person, a wave and curl to my hair, and perhaps led me to fancy pictorial illustrations and flaming colors (*BN*, 5–6).

Crafts's description of herself as "mulatto" or mixed-race adopts the familiar conventional markers used by other slave narrators such as "a wave and curl to my hair" (Wilson, Jacobs) to signal difference. However, the suggestion that her racial identity "led me to fancy pictorial illustrations and flaming colors" evokes a stereotypical notion of blackness atypical of slave narratives and more akin to white perceptions of black culture. Crafts's tendency

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towards racial stereotyping is made clear in later general statements such as "I am superstitious, I confess it; people of my race and color usually are" (*BN*, 27). She manipulates conventions of stereotyping in her later narration of a slave wedding: "Queer looking old men, whose black faces … contrasted strangely with their white beards and hair; fat portly dames whose ebony complexions were set off by turbans of flaming red … all flaunting their finery and gay clothes of rainbow colors, and all doing their utmost to appear to the best advantage" (*BN*, 119). She also appeals to stereotyping for her description of individual slaves such as Maria: "She was a dark mulatto, very quick motioned with black snaky eyes, and hair of the same color. Yet she was an adept in the art of dissembling and her countenance would be the smoothest and her words the fairest when she contemplated the greatest injury" (*BN*, 203). These repeated interpretations of slave life and culture impress upon the reader, in their vagueness and oversimplification, the author's ignorance rather than knowledge as she relies upon stereotyped language and observations which would have been prolific during the period and which provide no proof whatsoever that she aligned herself with this race.

Despite its hybrid form, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* adheres to many familiar conventions of the slave narrative. For example, Crafts borrows from Douglass and others to dramatize her possession of literacy as a subversive act: "I had … an instinctive desire for knowledge and … I determined to learn if not in a regular, approved, and scientific way" (*BN*, 6). She shows respect for abolitionists in a naive belief in the "free North," "where the people were all free, and where the colored race had so many and such true friends" (*BN*, 8–9). Crafts differentiates herself from other slaves to portray her religious conversion and representative status: "while the other slaves were enjoying the banjo and the dance I would steal away to hold sweet converse with them [the white couple]" (*BN*, 10). She enhances the common perceptions of black female passivity under slavery by emphasizing her reconciliation with her lot: "'I am a slave' thus my thoughts would run. 'I can never be great, nor rich; I cannot hold an elevated position in society, but I can do my duty, and be kind in the sure and certain hope of an eternal reward['] " (*BN*, 11). She adopts the familiar technique of disassociating physical from psychological enslavement in a bid for intellectual freedom: "Then, too, I thought that though my perishable body was at their disposal, my soul was beyond their reach" (*BN*, 102–03). She echoes Douglass's arguments in favour of expediency concerning his own purchase by white abolitionists by stating that "the greatest favor that a mild kindhearted man or woman can bestow on … members of the outcast servile race is to buy them" (*BN*, 127).

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Crafts's method of flight echoes the escape of William and Ellen Crafts: "Here was a suit of male apparel … [it secured] my transformation of myself" (*BN*, 210). The fact that she draws upon epic escape stories which were so popular on both sides of the Atlantic (William and Ellen Crafts lectured all over Britain and Ireland) may undermine her authenticity or suggest that her manuscript was written at a time when such concealment of the mode of escape was no longer necessary. Like Douglass in *The Heroic Slave*, she highlights the necessity of a separate morality for fugitive slaves: "I could not resist the temptation to appropriate a pair of boots. It was doubtless wrong, and great necessity must be my excuse" (*BN*, 214). She also meets with other slaves who have undergone extreme suffering in flight to suggest the extent of black heroism and resistance: "His name was Jacob. The female was his sister, and together they had traveled from the frontiers of South Carolina" (*BN*, 216). Crafts's description of these slaves possesses distinct overtones of the narrative of Harriet Jacobs in her choice of name, "Jacob"; references to a faithful slave brother preoccupied with protecting his sister; and the point of origin, South Carolina.[20] In the same vein as Harriet Jacobs, whose narrative initially suffered from neglect because she chose to conceal her identity by adopting the pseudonym Linda Brent, Crafts deliberately constructs a narrative persona which represents an imaginative re-creation of autobiographical detail. These similarities with the slave narrative do not confirm that she was trying to write within this genre but failed; instead they illustrate a deep immersion in this narrative form which suggests Crafts was well read and intent upon manipulating these conventions to secure alternative ends.

A close examination of internal evidence in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* confirms Crafts's interests in distancing herself not only from black culture, but also from other black slaves, in ways which go further than slave narrators keen to express their exceptional status. She signals racial difference explicitly: "the little slave children were almost entirely confided to my care … I pitied their hard and cruel fate very much, and used to think that … if I could so discharge my duty by them … I should be amply repaid" (*BN*, 11). The connotations of "their hard and cruel fate" underscore the differences between their plight and hers; instead of identifying with the "little slave children," she feels responsible for them in a need to "discharge my duty," which suggests she filled a role closer to that of white governess than to preferred house slave. Crafts's point of identification

[20] See Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

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is class- rather than race-based: a bondwoman herself, she bewails their suffering yet is prevented by her own lack of freedom from mitigating it. She also hints at a paternalistic ethos: "the children now grown to be great boys and girls remembered me with affection and often mentioned my name, and told how kind I used to be to them, how I taught them to pray, and love one another" (*BN*, 170). Crafts's role is more akin to educational missionary than it is to fellow slave. She has a tendency to undermine the racial specificity of the plight of the slave by using black suffering as a platform upon which to represent the hardships faced by all "bonded" peoples, regardless of race. Thus, in her discussion of the slave Charlotte, she confides that "Her mistress was kind and indulgent … What multitudes of people, white and black, might have envied the situation in which she was miserable" (*BN*, 130). For the narrator of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* the position of servitude rather than enslavement resonates most closely with the particular circumstances of her heroine.

The case for seeing Hannah as a white bondservant is thus just as compelling as that for seeing her as a slave, and the intertextual features of the novel support this argument. Most of the literary influences are from the Brontës' governess/schoolteacher novels, particularly *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* (the ghost story as cover for illicit lovers). The other major source, Dickens's *Bleak House*, also features a heroine in a between-stairs position. Hannah is not just a house servant but also an upstairs one, rarely seen below stairs. A snob, she is always positioned between her mistress and other slaves, and never gives any sense of the internal politics of a slave group. She makes a great deal of unnecessary justification for her closeness to her mistress (*BN*, 150) because she anticipates the reader's doubts that she is a slave. She observes that, unlike herself, Lizzy had a great memory for dates and names (*BN*, 33), a handy note in a novel which clearly lacks the veracity of the slave narrative. Hannah is seen teaching children at the beginning and at the end, but has no children of her own, and never entertains the idea of marriage until the conventional happy ending, very much the position of the servant who marries for economic security. When Charlotte's slave husband is detected in the house by night, Hannah wonders what he is doing there. Then she tells her mistress all about it. Would a slave do this, even with a kindly mistress? She describes Charlotte, a slave, as her superior, as if that were surprising (as it might be assumed to be if she were white). When offered the chance to escape with Charlotte and her husband, Hannah declines. Even more astonishing, when her master is killed in an accident and there is no proof that Hannah is not free, she volunteers the information of her enslaved status. Essentially she then hangs about for some

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months, neither anyone's slave nor a servant. She describes her ambiguous situation: "It would be a difficult matter to tell what station I filled … I was not considered a servant. Neither was I treated exactly as a guest" (*BN*, 124). This is just the kind of between-stairs position that a governess, a nanny, or perhaps a superior lady's maid, would occupy. When Mrs. Henry declines to keep her and suggests sale to the Wheelers, she hangs around some more so that she can be enslaved anew. When she falls out with Mrs. Wheeler she is worried that her reputation with her mistress has been "blackened" (her term; *BN*, 205). It is as if she feared dismissal without a character reference. The truth of her position is to be found in what Hannah's imagination unwittingly reveals in the unexceptional moments of her daily existence. In short, the deep structure of the novel, the unconscious evidence of Hannah's real-life experience is that of a servant, not a slave, obsessed by her mistress, admiring of the great house, demarcating her territory as opposed to that of the slaves, and with absolutely no sense of real solidarity with them.

For signs that what we have here is not a slave narrative and instead, as argued by Andrews, "a novel," no further proof is needed than Crafts's dramatization of her protagonist's moment of epiphany.[21] *The Bondwoman's Narrative* departs remarkably from familiar slave narratives in its dramatization of the slave becoming conscious of her equal humanity and the barbarism of slaveholding. Rather than engaging in the physical heroics of Frederick Douglass or the trickster subterfuge of Harriet Jacobs, Hannah acquires a sense of independent selfhood by standing before the "pictured resemblances" (*BN*, 16) of white families:

> there surrounded by mysterious associations I seemed suddenly to have grown old, to have entered a new world of thoughts, and feelings and sentiments. I was not a slave with those pictured memorials of the past. They could not enforce drudgery, or condemn me on account of my color to a life of servitude. As their companion I could think and speculate. In their presence my mind seemed to run riotous and exult in its freedom as a rational being, and one destined for something higher and better than this world can afford (*BN*, 17).

It is curious that Crafts racializes her narrator's realization of her capabilities as a "rational being" as white; she finds her identity beyond bondage by a direct appeal to a white ancestral legacy steeped in Gothic mystery and white traditions of aesthetic value. This scene would be anachronistic in any slave narrative of the period because it displaces race in favour of acknowledging

[21] Andrews, 2.

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the superiority of the slaveholding elite whilst also maintaining the significance of class hierarchies as well as Old World privileges. No conventional slave narrative or even novel during the abolitionist period would have been able to endorse the humanity of the slave through aristocratic credentials.[22] This moment of identification with a white elite suggests a conflation of class rather than racial differences; in the event that Hannah Crafts is proven to be white, a house servant and possibly a recent immigrant, this extract supports the view that her main desire in this narrative was to transcend her marginal social status by Old World standards. Elsewhere in the text she identifies with a servile class, "we, the servants" (*BN*, 29) and "we liked it … the servants of glorious feasts" (crossed out; *BN*, 31), rather than with those enslaved. Crafts differentiates between herself and her mulatto mistress on the grounds of class rather than race: "I could not fully appreciate all she had suffered; for tho' a slave myself I had never possessed freedom, wealth, and position as she had" (*BN*, 57). These examples suggest a writer empathetic with a condition of enslavement not because she suffers an identical fate but because she is excluded from the elite as a result of her class.

The racial distinctions between the narrator and other slaves, particular field slaves, become more and more obvious as *The Bondwoman's Narrative* unfolds. Crafts's description of the "huts" of the field slaves in which "they all lived promiscuously anyhow and every how" (*BN*, 199) reveals her narrator's intellectual and physical separation from this "class" of slaves: "by night they contained a swarm of misery … crowds of foul existence crawled in out of gaps in walls and boards, or coiled themselves to sleep … where the rain drips in … and the damp airs of midnight fatch … and carry malignant fevers" (*BN*, 199). This extract reads like a Dickensian exposure of the sufferings of the British poor while her use of the colloquial words – "fatch," and later "blarney" (*BN*, 205) – are new to the literature of slavery of the period. In a continuation of this passage, she describes that "All day they toil beneath the burning sun, scarcely conscious that any link exists between themselves and other portions of the human race" (*BN*, 200). Such a candid admission concerning the brutalizing effects of slavery suggests a later date for this material; it is unlikely that during the abolitionist period any antislavery writer would concede as far as to expose black slaves unequivocally as "brutalized specimens of humanity" (*BN*, 202) bereft of any redeeming features. Even Douglass's powerful statement – "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a

[22] This tendency is certainly not present in the works of William Wells Brown, Frank J. Webb, Frederick Douglass or Harriet Wilson.

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man" – contains the promise of black heroism in an admission of black inferiority.[23]

Crafts condemns the race en masse for their depravity throughout the manuscript: "the children … clawed each other, scratching each other's faces … one of the woman [*sic*] … seized me by the hair, … gave me a furious kick and made use of highly improper and indecent language. Bill … commenced beating her" (*BN*, 209). This is not a description of the epic noble suffering slave as portrayed by Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb and others; instead it is redolent with the stench and odiousness of a Dickensian poorhouse characterized by the vice and villainy of social outcasts. Crafts is concerned not with reclaiming black humanity or redeeming individuals but with exposing their condition at the bottom of society. The disgust expressed by Crafts's protagonist at being "condemned to receive one of them [the slaves] for my husband," to which, she exclaims, "my soul actually revolted with horror unspeakable" (*BN*, 205), further substantiates her racist overtones. It is this "horror" which justifies her "rebellion" as a necessary "virtue" required by "duty to myself and my God" (*BN*, 206). Any assumption that Crafts's narrator identifies with the "house slaves," however, is equally undermined by the text: "Of course the family residence was stocked with slaves of a higher and nobler order than those belonging to the fields. They were better dressed, better provided for and better looking. It was necessary that those surrounding the person of the Mistress should have nothing offensive or disgusting about them" (*BN*, 202). In view of Crafts's emotive prose style, it is curious that she does not draw any parallels between those "slaves of a higher and nobler order" and herself, suggesting that she comments upon this "class of slaves" with an air of detachment to signal her difference from their condition.

The Bondwoman's Narrative reveals that, for Crafts, class possesses a greater significance than race. Her exposure of the injustices of North American slavery in a country "celebrated throughout the world for the freedom, equality, and magnanimity of its laws" is preoccupied with differences produced by class: "I could not help reflecting on the strange ideas of right and justice that seemed to have usurped a place in public opinion, since the mere accident of birth, and what persons were the least capable of changing or modifying was made a reason for punishing and imprisoning them" (*BN*, 76–77). The Dickensian character, Mr. Trappe, makes yet more tangible this emphasis upon universal oppressive structures: "We are all slaves to

[23] Douglass, 107.

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something or somebody. A man perfectly free would be an anomaly, and a free woman yet more so. Freedom and slavery are only names attached surreptitiously and often improperly to certain conditions" (*BN*, 97). The narrator generalizes the specificities of North American slavery to encompass the lack of freedom suffered by all peoples from diverse backgrounds, nations and cultures. Crafts's dramatization of her narrator's sense of ambiguity concerning her own position in the Henry family, neither servant nor guest, illustrates her ability to empathize across experiences. She frequently positions herself outside the position of the slave: "I have always thought that in a state of servitude marriage must be at best of doubtful advantage … The slave … should always remain in celibacy" (*BN*, 131). Examples such as these, which refer to "the slave," position Crafts as an outsider who occupies a "safe" position of assumed superiority. Sensitivity to class distinctions in nineteenth-century North American culture frequently prefaces Crafts's exposure of slavery and its injustices. She admires "the splendid show made by the President's House and the Capitol" while "wondering at the extraordinary contrast … presented by such wretches in rags, who appeared to be searching … for bones, pins, or other refuse among the rubbish" (*BN*, 196). She then describes a slave who "had taken refuge beneath the equestrian statue of Jackson, that lover of freedom; and thence he was dragged, though shrieking and praying, and struggling, manacles placed on his limbs, and borne back to the market" (*BN*, 196). For Crafts, the analysis of the "wretches in rags" frames her representation of a black man's bid for freedom.

The condemnation of the injustices of class distinctions provided by *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is generalized to the extent that it could refer to any of the oppressive social structures in the nineteenth century and not just those operating on the basis of race in North America: "if a great man sneezes the world rings with it, but if a poor man dies no one notices or cares … This is all the result of that false system that bestows on position, wealth, or power the consideration only due to a man" (*BN*, 200). Crafts's exposure of this "false system" invites condemnation from diverse audiences precisely because of its non-specificity: "this system is not confined to any one place, or country, or condition" (*BN*, 200). This is not the voice of a slave narrator bearing witness, in her protest, to an abolitionist audience; rather it is the voice of an oppressed figure seeking to rectify imbalances produced by aristocratic privilege upon the masses who continue to suffer in poverty and anonymity. The author's tendency towards generalization makes quite clear her desire to take her narrative out of its immediate context of slavery and translate it across to audiences in diverse social and national contexts.

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There is no way of denying that, in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, Crafts frequently adopts the position of cultural commentator to audiences presumed to be beyond the immediate locale: "Every one must be aware that in the southern states a person traveling at night, especially a female, would be certain to excite observation" (*BN*, 52). She also communicates the location of "Mr. Wheeler's fine plantation … situated near Wilmington the principal port of the state" (*BN*, 198). These comments may suggest her need to explain the details of slavery to audiences in the North, or to convince a post-emancipation black audience of the travails of slavery, or even to convey to a transatlantic readership the particular nature of its ills. The narrative adopts a didactic tone as if she is educating an ignorant readership unfamiliar with its practices: "Many of these huts … were even older than the nation, and had been occupied by successive generations of slaves. The greatest curse of slavery is it's [*sic*] heriditary [*sic*] character" (*BN*, 200).

The author of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, self-proclaimed Hannah Crafts, is an elusive figure and an indecipherable sign resistant to identification, explication or even definition. Yet the question remains – if she was not an African American, slave or free, how is she able to represent scenes from slave life with such authenticity? Nina Baym's proof that Crafts is a free African American woman rests upon shaky foundations as she writes that she "could have met and talked to numerous fugitives passing through the free community in which she resided."[24] Why would she need to be black to listen to such stories? Could she not have been a sympathetic white woman, North or South? May she not even have been an abolitionist or, perhaps, even a politically engaged Southern slave-owner's daughter? May she not have been a servant – conceivably not North American in origin but an immigrant? Acknowledging the diverse possibilities of authorship is more essential to scholarly endeavour than research which presumes the manuscript's racial identification, regardless of textual signs to the contrary. The final words of the manuscript, "I will let the reader picture it all to his imagination and say farewell" (*BN*, 239), confirm Crafts's intention that the interpretation of textual ambiguities for this work rests ultimately with the reader rather than the author.

The search for Hannah Crafts remains at the heart of continuing popular and academic debate.[25] A rare find, the manuscript has rapidly assumed centre stage for questions concerning slave literacy and history, the genesis of

[24] Nina Baym, "The Case for Mannah Vincent," in *The Bondwoman's Narrative: A XanEdu Educational Companion*, 33.

[25] Oddly no similar quest is being undertaken to discover the other name on the manuscript, which has the pencilled notation "C.A. Alma" on its back page (*BN*, 289).

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the slave narrative form, the particular suffering of the female body in sexual violation during slavery, and authenticity of authorship. Aside from the quest to establish Crafts's racial identity and the date of this manuscript, scholars have used her story to discuss the influence of Charles Dickens as well as the Gothic and sentimental narrative traditions which characterized transatlantic black and white abolitionist debates throughout the nineteenth century.[26] Gates describes it as "an astonishing first novel written by a female fugitive slave."[27] As proof of racial identity, he states categorically that "My rule is that if a person in the nineteenth century says that they're black, then they are black."[28] Is it necessarily this simple? Are we so blinded by the existing parameters of intellectual enquiry concerning slave testimony that we are unable to decipher clear-cut clues to the contrary? There is a risk here of starting with a solution and then pursuing the relevant hypothesis. Gates confides in an audio interview that "the manuscript [is] … full of, well I don't know how to put this delicately, sex [laughs]."[29] To put it indelicately, today's readers are being invited, by the packaging and paratextual features, to share nineteenth-century sexual voyeurism. There is a real risk here of double jeopardy: Hannah Crafts's appropriation of the slave narrative genre in an attempt to increase the appeal of her novel to readers, and Gates's appropriation of a woman's story for the same reason.

[26] See the unpublished work of Gill Ballinger, Tim Lustig and Dale Townshend, "Fog on the Thames/Gloom on the Potomac: Intertextuality, African American Literary Theory, and Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*." A panel session at the British Association of American Studies, University of Aberystwyth, 13 April 2003.

[27] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Bondwoman's Narrative: A Novel* by Hannah Crafts (New York: Time Warner AudioBooks, 2002). [28] Ibid. [29] Ibid.

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