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‘Whatever the law permits’:¹ Hannah Crafts’s
The Bondwoman’s Narrative

Henry Louis Gates has rightly earned a substantial reputation for the recovery work he has undertaken in the terrain of African American writing. In particular, he gained this reputation for spectacular recovery work in the field of African American women’s writing. Firstly, he and his researchers established incontrovertibly that the anonymous writer of *Our Nig, or, Sketches in the Life of a Free Black in a Two-Story White House, North, by “Our Nig”* was in fact an African American female, Harriet E. Wilson – a task made relatively simple because Wilson had registered the copyright of the book in Boston in 1859, but still a task that had to be backed up by substantial field and genealogical research. Then Gates went on to edit and publish the first reprint of *Our Nig* in 1983 to considerable – and deserved – acclaim.² Above all, this acclaim was justified because Gates had clearly established that *Our Nig* was the first novel known to have been written by an African American woman. Largely because of the book’s attacks on abolitionist sincerity and the abbreviation its spine and title-page contained – *Our Nig* – many nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentators before Gates had held that the book had been composed by a white American unsympathetic to the anti-slavery movement, though others recognized that the author was probably African American. Gates incontrovertibly established Harriet Wilson’s African American identity, and subsequent research, chiefly by Barbara A. White, provided fuller details and made some significant corrections to Gates’s research.³

Perhaps buoyed by this success, Gates, years later, in 2001, thought that he had discovered a second example of an unrecognized ante-bellum novel by an African American woman, though this time one never before published. This belief arose after Gates had the good fortune to notice that a manuscript by one “Hannah Crafts” was coming up

for sale at an annual auction of “Printed and Manuscript African-Americana” conducted by New York’s Swann Galleries in 2001. Little did Gates then realise, one suspects, how much controversy concerning Crafts and her ethnic identity would again be stirred up – as had been the case with Wilson, but this time in the twenty-first century. My essay will explore some of the key dimensions of this debate.

Entitled *The Bondwoman’s Narrative by Hannah Crafts*, the auctioned holograph manuscript had been tentatively identified as having been written by an African American woman by one of its previous owners, Dorothy Porter Wesley (to whom Gates dedicated his edition of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*).⁴ Gates set out to test this identification. His job was made difficult because nothing at all was known about the manuscript or its author; the manuscript was not even dated. After purchase, Gates and his researchers set about chiselling away at this problem. In particular, the paper and the handwriting that was scrawled on it were subjected to detailed analysis. This suggested that *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* was a text composed in the middle of the nineteenth century. The writing suggested a female hand and the syntax and grammar a female only partially educated – perhaps self-educated: “neither an untutored hand nor an example of elegant penmanship . . . consistent with the writing of a woman”⁵ (though, in my reading of the text, a female very far from ill-educated – as will become apparent). The title page’s declaration that Crafts was “recently” escaped from North Carolina, if it was to gain much plausibility, suggested a composition date in the mid-to-late 1850s or early 1860s.

Moving on from these discoveries, Gates now turned, as he had done in the case of Wilson’s *Our Nig*, to genealogical research, on the working assumption both that Crafts’s “novel” (as he denominated it on his edition’s cover in 2002) was highly autobiographical and that the names of the protagonists in the manuscript had not always been fictionalized. The fact that both the author’s first name and her narrator’s first name was the same, “Hannah,” provided some initial encouragement to this supposition, by suggesting an autobiographical self-identification between author and protagonist. However, almost all of Gates’s genealogical labours proved inconclusive. Some possible connections with Virginian families were found, though the surnames upon which these links depended were mostly not especially uncommon or unusual: Cosgrove, Henry and Vincent. One further name occurring in the novel – Hawkins – was slightly more uncommon, but

all of these four surnames could have reasonably been invented by *The Bondwoman's Narrative's* author.⁶ The best possible identification that Gates came up with was based on the name of the slaveholders who are the last to lay claim to owning Hannah in the book, Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler. Gates identified close parallels between what Hannah tells us about the Wheelers and what the historical record tells us of the household of John Hill Wheeler, once a resident of Washington and North Carolina (before selling his North Carolina plantation in 1853). Just as Hannah's Wheelers move between North Carolina and Washington, so did the John Hill Wheelers. Like Crafts's fictional Wheeler, John Hill Wheeler was involved in both State and Washington government affairs. At this point it must be clearly stated that Gates, by close reference to John Hill Wheeler's diaries, tracks down some very close correlations between the fictional and the historical Wheelers:

Judging from the relevant information in Wheeler's diary, Hannah's escape would most likely have occurred between March 21 and May 4, 1857. This period corresponds . . . with the Wheeler's recorded trip to the plantation from Washington . . . Wheeler's recent dismissal from his government post . . . [and] the relative proximity in time between the departure of Jane, a much-valued servant of Mrs. Wheeler and the acquisition of Hannah as a competent replacement (less than two years) . . . (BN lv-lvi)

Gates's point here is that all these events in John Hill Wheeler's life closely correspond to the events depicted in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*.⁷ For example, the reference to "the departure of Jane" alludes to an extensive earlier discussion by Gates of what is known in the historical record as "the Passmore Williamson Case" (though Gates makes the point it would be better known as the Jane Johnson Case). This 'case' involves the intervention in 1855 of a group of abolitionists, including the white abolitionist, Passmore Williamson, the African American William Still and some other African Americans, in the city of Philadelphia, where John Hill Wheeler and his slave, Jane Johnson, with her two children, stayed overnight whilst travelling to Nicaragua. Jane Johnson was led off the boat Wheeler had boarded in the morning of 19 July 1855 by Williamson, Still and the other African Americans. Gates maintains that a brief reference in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* to Mrs. Wheeler lamenting over the recent escape of her slave, Jane, is an allusion to this incident. So convinced of this is Gates that he adopts the device of rhetorically locating his "Hannah" in the historical Wheeler's household ("Hannah's escape would most likely . . .") even though no historical evidence of a direct sort exists.

I have to say this strategy may be correct enough, though I also have to note it almost forces us to reach the conclusion that Gates desires: that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is, in its essence, broadly autobiographical. This may be correct, but the case is simply not proven. For example, Katherine E. Flynn has launched a persuasive counter-argument, proposing that “Hannah Crafts” is not some separate slave, but Jane Johnson herself. In arguing this, Flynn unearths some compelling circumstantial details but neglects to address the way Johnson’s integrity is called into question by “Crafts” and how this sharp self-denigration (as it would be) can be accounted for. Either way, the Passmore Williamson case was for a while a cause célèbre, making Wheeler “the most famous slaveholder in the whole of America.”⁸ The event proved highly controversial: Williamson and Still claimed Johnson disembarked willingly, Wheeler claimed she did not. This mattered because it affected the legitimacy of her escape; at the very least these Philadelphia abolitionists’ intervention signified just how bold abolitionists were becoming in the 1850s and how the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act still left multiple problems in its wake – in this instance, an ‘escape’ (or ‘kidnap’) occurring upon free soil.

The notoriety that John Hill Wheeler garnered over this affair (not least because of his own outspoken behaviour), his subsequent prominence in ante-bellum pro-slavery agitation, his support for the re-introduction of slavery in Nicaragua and the way he advocated annexing parts of Central America as new slave states⁹ meant that he was a recurrent target for abolitionist attack. Consequently, when in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, Wheeler and, indeed, Wheeler’s wife, come across highly unfavourably, this lends credence to the idea that one way of understanding their inclusion in Crafts’s manuscript is to attribute this to its writer’s desire to denigrate a prominent ante-bellum pro-slaver. It does not have to be the case, then, that the Wheelers’ inclusion in Crafts’s story is a sure sign of a direct autobiographical involvement by either Jane Johnson or her (speculative) replacement, “Hannah.”

In all this I am not concluding that Gates (or even Flynn) is wrong, though I am suggesting they are far from simply right. Crafts, if she is not producing an account of slave experiences drawing upon personal experience, may be more of a novelist – and perhaps a historical novelist – and far less autobiographical than Gates thinks. One way of highlighting this possibility is to consider in some depth Crafts’s debts to *Bleak House* – an already quite well explored arena, but one that I want to re-explore and expand upon.

Even the very beginning of Crafts's novel owes something of a debt to the opening of Esther's narrative (which commences at the start of Chapter Three of *Bleak House*):

Bleak House: I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages, for I know I am not clever. I always knew that. . . . I was such a shy little thing that I seldom dared to open my lips, and never dared to open my heart, to anybody else . . . I had always . . . a silent way of noticing what passed before me, and thinking I should like to understand it better. (*BH* 62-3)

Bondwoman: It may be that I assume too much responsibility in attempting to write these pages. . . . I am neither clever, nor learned, nor talented . . . I was shy and reserved and scarce dared open my lips to any one I had . . . rather a silent unobtrusive way of observing things and events, and wishing to understand them better than I could. (*BN* 5)¹⁰

Immediately, by setting up this equation of Hannah with Esther, deprived of her family place because of the Victorian era's social and legal prejudice against illegitimate children, Crafts's novel is establishing a transatlantic comparison of injustices orbiting around the ambiguous relationship of morality, justice and the law. What follows in this essay seeks to explore these transatlantic comparisons at some length.

Henry Louis Gates's edition of Crafts's novel draws attention to the existence of intertextual debts owed by *The Bondwoman's Narrative* to *Bleak House*, if in a rather incomplete way. In one of his appendices, entitled "A Note on Crafts's Literary Influences," Gates's edition provides only two examples of how Crafts directly borrows from *Bleak House*, both furnished by Hollis Robbins.¹¹ Gates does however also correctly speculate that there are other debts to *Bleak House*. In fact, these debts are startlingly thoroughgoing; the manuscript is riddled with them, as critics have noted.¹²

Exploring these debts further quickly establishes them as complex: the use of such resoundingly echoic passages is motivated, and demands detailed analysis. Indeed, these echoes involve even the opening sentences of *Bleak House* and the way these find their direct echo in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*:

Bleak House: London. Michaelmas term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth . . . Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers jostling one another's umbrellas . . . and losing their foothold at street-

corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding . . . (BH 49)

Bondwoman: Washington, the Federal City. Christmas holidays recently over. The implacable winter weather. The great President of the Great Republic looks perhaps from the windows of his drawing room, and wonders at the mud and slush precisely as an ordinary mortal would. . . . mud so deep and dark that you would half fancy the waters of the deluge have but newly retired from the face of the earth . . . Carriages dragging through mire; horses splashed to their manes. Congress men jostling each other at the street crossings, or perhaps losing their foothold, where a negro slave was seen slipping and sliding but a moment before. Alas, that mud and wet weather should have so little respect for aristocracy. (BV 156)

I want to focus on what appear to be some apparent divergences between these two passages, just as much as I want to note their verbal and syntactical correspondences. What is obvious is how Crafts's focus falls not on the law (Dickens's chancery) but on its fount, which for her was the US legislature and its ultimate head, the President. This sets up a series of heavy ironies to do with how "the Great Republic" tolerates at its legislative heart "negro slave[s]." Crafts's wording also makes much plainer than Dickens's how slippery mud is no respecter of rank, whilst Dickens's pathetic fallacy seeks to expose how the mud and opacity of a London winter replicate the mud and opacity of the British judicial system. There seems, then, at least at first, to be a degree of contrast at work in these passages (despite the pronounced verbal parallels). But Crafts is in fact well aware of how, for Dickens, the British judicial system has clear class biases, discriminations and inequities at work within it. Once the debts of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* to *Bleak House* are fully recognized, and, I would argue, they can hardly be overlooked, then the oblique allusion in Crafts's passage to Dickens's Jo, the street-crossing sweeper, carried within Hannah's depiction of 'street crossings' as the site where Congressmen and negroes come into proximity, displays how Crafts is fully alert to the ways that *Bleak House* depicts legally-endorsed discriminations bearing down upon the poorest and weakest in society: as Jo will be harried to death for his (supposed) knowledge of the family affairs (and family secrets) of the Dedlocks, so Hannah's mistress will be harried to death because of another family secret (her mulatta identity).

By contrast, as *Bleak House* makes plain, it is men of property who are largely unthreatened by the law and can manipulate, and even play with it, as in the long-running, pointless property dispute between Sir Leicester Dedlock and Bayham Badger. Significantly, Dickens also

makes plain how such wealth is built upon colonial adventures – adventures that also, previously, had underpinned the UK's slave trade. Crafts's engagement, then, is quite deliberately going beyond verbal borrowing to encompass the thematics of Dickens's novel.¹³ Oppressive and discriminatory laws of the land loom over both these texts, with all their entrained social and historical injustices.

Thus, the suicide of Cosgrave's unnamed mulatta, the mother of his child (whom she also kills), to prevent her legal sale is framed by the syntactical and verbal constructions used by Dickens to present the death of Jo, the crossing sweeper:

Bleak House: The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead!

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day. (*BH* 705)

Bondwoman: Dead, your Excellency, the President of the Republic. Dead, grave senators who grow eloquent over pensions and army wrongs. Dead, ministers of religion, who prate because poor men without a moment's leisure on other days presume to read the newspapers on Sunday, yet who wink at, or approve of laws that occasion such scenes as these. (*BN* 178)

Cosgrave's mulatta here commits suicide and kills her infant son, her master's illegitimate child, rather than submit to their being sold away (by implication, down the river) – a sale motivated solely in order to allow Cosgrave to protect the domestic harmony of his plantation once the secret of his mulatta harem has emerged. Yet notice, too, the way that the thematic intertextual stratagems Crafts brings to the depiction of the President in muddy Washington are again present in this second borrowing. Once again, Crafts's passage is more obviously and heavily politicized than Dickens's: the mulatta's oppressions are explicitly connected to the legislature (“President of the Republic . . . senators”). The way this politicization is brought to bear on the institution of slavery is also patent. It should be noted, too, how the stock institutional targets of abolitionist writings (be these by whites or African Americans) – the Church and the Legislature – are identified. Yet, by linking the death of the mulatta to Jo's in *Bleak House*, Crafts also mobilizes the appeal Dickens makes – an appeal running throughout *Bleak House* – to the common “compassion” of “men and women” (*BH* 705).

Crafts's narrative is deeply enmeshed in these kinds of melodramatic transatlantic interconnections, though it deserves to be noted

how her insistence on bodily exposure and invasion intensifies the melodrama. In this way the point is driven home that slavery ratchets up the intensity of capitalist exploitation and its attendant asymmetries of power.

This becomes even clearer when the focus falls on the way bodily consequences follow upon oppression for both Dickens and Crafts, if to different degrees. Like Jo's, Hannah's slave companions' bodies are wracked by the law's workings. The conductors of these workings are also embodied in both texts by black-dressed agents of the law who each, if somewhat differently, link law to death sentences, whilst their deathly functions foreshadow and precipitate their own ignominious deaths. The death of lawyer Trappe in Crafts's *Narrative* is linked to both that of Lawyer Tulkinghorn and Krook, the archetypal hoarder of legal documents in *Bleak House*. In Krook's case, his death in *Bleak House* is linked to both the death of the master of Lindendale as well as lawyer Trappe in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (the grease spreading from Krook's spontaneous combustion becomes the blood spreading from the master of Lindendale; and the long litigation and the stolen papers of emancipation in Trappe's large hoard of papers lead to Trappe's murder).¹⁴

The law functions here as a death trap(pe), linking together (rich) client, (trap-setting) lawyer and those consequently oppressed and squeezed in their clench. This is a theme picked up from Dickens by Crafts and then developed by her. Again these links are quite apparent. Even in his naming, Trappe is linked to the two legal characters in *Bleak House*, Tangle (58) and Snagsby (178). It is clear how these two names, Tangle and Snags[by], are (again) ratcheted up by Crafts to become a Trap[pe] – an intimation of the extra degree of implacability and menace that Trappe possesses, as the potential for bodily appropriation becomes more direct under the laws of slavery. This provides a context for understanding why Crafts is attracted, in shaping her portrait of Lawyer Trappe, to Dickens's representation of the omnipresent, lurking inescapability of the law in his portrait of Lawyer Tulkinghorn. Both Trappe and Tulkinghorn are rusty in appearance and clothed in black (*BN* 27, 86; *BH* 58, 59), both stalk their victims implacably and both are deeply feared by their threatened victims, who sense the power these lawyers have over them (*BN* 28, 38; *BH* 217, 632, 635, 638, 706, 715). Both lawyers, in turn, manipulate and intimidate other victims, and in both cases these others turn on their tormentor: both are killed by those they have wronged under the

protection of the law, as the legal traps they create trigger recoil acts of revenge (*BH* 720-21; *BN* 232-33). This fatal power is far more nakedly dangerous in Crafts, whilst Tulkinghorn is more unswervingly wedded to the duty of the law, but legal chicanery lies plumb centre of the events for both Crafts and Dickens: their foci fall upon how such chicanery is fostered by the working of the law: its complex documents and its shifting precedents.

Krook, the archetypal hoarder of legal documents, and tellingly nicknamed the Lord Chancellor, is the inspiration for Crafts's linking of the master of Lindendale to Trappe, for, we are told, Trappe discovered the truth of Hannah's mistress's mulatta lineage by searching remorselessly through documents. Much insistence is placed upon Trappe's addiction to trawling through books and papers, plainly drawing upon Dicken's novel. *Bleak House's* depiction of Krook's "Chancery," "with its . . . tottering bench of shabby volumes . . . heaps of old crackled parchment scrolls, and discoloured and dog-eared law-papers" (*BH* 99) containing secrets pertaining to family inheritances, inspires Crafts's depiction of how Trappe's piles of books and papers contain the secret of the mistress of Lindendale's ethnicity:

Someone privy to the affair preserved a record of the facts and carefully concealed it among my father's papers . . .

One day contrary to his usual custom he requested the pleasure of seeing me in his room . . . He was seated at a low table, upon which lay a great pile of books and papers that he seemed particularly interested in examining . . . This gave me an opportunity to look around his apartment. Its chief furniture was books and bundles of papers. There were books on the floor, books in the corners, and books heaped up and piled up . . .

He held a paper towards me, old, and torn, and yellow with age. I took it and commenced reading . . . I perceived the worst and what I was, and must ever be. (*BN* 45-47).

It is certainly possible to read this as a thematic reflection upon the power of the 'logos,' the Greek term encompassing thought, law and reason as well as the word, as Dickens draws on them all and their multiple powers, but here this theme is quite plainly, as it is in Dickens, also laced with an acute awareness of how such power is both based upon economic relations and supported by statute.¹⁵ In Dickens, matters of wills and inheritance and descent are the crucial hinges of the plot of *Bleak House*. In *The Bondwoman's Narrative* this is also the case (if the pun can be excused), but now in an enhanced and more bodily-invasive way. After Trappe's murder, two men Hannah chances to

overhear reflect on how Trappe would have ensnared anyone who “had African blood in [his/her] veins” and would have sold anyone “into slavery” – linking law and the body in this act of possession. As the men discussing Trappe’s death melodramatically express it:

... he would not have hesitated a moment to sell his own mother into slavery could the case have been made clear that she had African blood in her veins. (232)

What this hinges upon is the clause, “could the case have been made clear.” The law must be followed, but this law includes those long lines of judgements and interpretations that have separated law from common justice: ‘case law.’ Precedent and the weight of precedent override common law and human rights – bearing down upon, and even crushing, the less powerful, who cannot afford the cost of manipulating these legal trails via subtle, expensive expert interpretations that apparently make the case legally ‘clear.’ This surely relates to a central motif in *Bleak House*: the mushrooming of case law and its accretions of precedence and legislative response in the early nineteenth century. Such sedimented layers of legislation and their interpretation overlay common law or the Constitution. It is plain that Crafts picks up on this process precisely because Southern laws on slavery so blatantly transgress upon individual freedom.

By now this reading has moved a long way from seeing *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* as shaped by autobiography: the Wheelers’ depictions in the text, it is clear, are almost as laced with borrowings from or allusions to Dickens as those of Trappe or the master and mistress of Lindendale; similarly the death of Jacob’s sister, the female runaway that Hannah meets up with, is interlaced with the timbre and vocabulary of Dickens – in particular Dickens’s portrait of the death of Jo in *Bleak House*.

Perhaps even more tellingly, the depiction of the slave quarters to which Hannah is sent near the end of the book closely chimes with the depiction of the slums in Tom All-Along’s. The slum tenements of Tom All-Along’s provide a close model for Crafts’s depiction of the huts of the slaves in the Wheelers’ Carolinian plantation.¹⁶

Bleak House: Jo lives in a ruinous place . . . Their decay . . . far advanced . . . these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery . . . these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fevers . . .

Twice lately there has been a crash and a cloud of dust, like the springing of a mine, . . . and, each time, a house has fallen. . . . The gaps remain, and there are not unpopular lodgings among the rubbish. (*BH* 272-73)

Bondwoman's Narrative: The huts of these people . . . Is it a stretch of the imagination to say that by night they contained a swarm of misery, that crowds of foul existence crawled in and out of gaps in walls and boards, or coiled themselves to sleep on nauseous heaps of straw fetid with human perspiration and where the rain drips in, and the damp airs of midnight fetch and carry malignant fevers.

. . . many of these huts were old and ruinous with decay, that occasionally a crash, and a crowd of dust would be perceived among them, and that each time it was occasioned by the fall of one. But lodgings are found among the rubbish, and all goes on as before. (*BN* 199-200)

I want to analyse this last passage in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* closely, because in it resides one of the most telling comparisons with *Bleak House* – and one of the most disconcerting. When considering the slave quarters and their dilapidated huts, Hannah, Crafts's narrator is moved to contemplate the 'false system' that creates such iniquities.

And this system is not confined to any one place, or country, or condition. It extends through all grades and classes of society from the highest to the lowest. It bans poor but honest people with the contemptuous appellation of "vulgar." It subjects others under certain circumstances to a lower link in the chain of being than that occupied by a horse. (*BN* 200)

On one level, this is of course a conventional equation of slaves with (farm) animals. By the mid- to late- 1850s, such a comparison was *sui generis*, and, in this respect, Crafts's narrative's famous progenitor, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, makes just such a comparison more than once.¹⁷ However, the yoking together of high and low around patterns of hypocritical class discrimination, as portrayed by Crafts, is also obviously Dickensian. Furthermore, even more tellingly than this, when Dickens describes Tom All Alone's, he explicitly makes the comparison that Crafts offers in her *Bleak House*-influenced fiction. Dickens puts the reflection into the mind of Jo (who in a sense, at this particular moment, becomes the book's narrator):

. . . to feel . . . I have no business here there or anywhere . . . It must be a strange state, not merely to be told that I am scarcely human (as in the case of my offering myself for a witness) but to feel it of my own knowledge all my life! To see the horses, dogs and cattle go by, and to know that in ignorance I belong to them, and not to the superior beings in my shape, whose delicacy I offend! (*BH* 274)

Dickens then comments: “Jo’s ideas of a Criminal Trial, or that inestimable jewel to him (if he only knew it) the Constitution, should be strange!” This vague reference to ‘the Constitution’ strikes a curious note. The British Constitution is unwritten, and subsists in a series of legislative customs and practices, judicial precedents and conventions. Consequently the British ‘constitution’ is ever-evolving, so to suggest the British Constitution is a “jewel” becomes deeply ironic, precisely because “jewels” denotes unchanging precious stones. Indeed, the term British Constitution is and was rarely used. The term more probably conjures up in the reader’s mind – in the nineteenth century as much as the twenty-first – not so much the unwritten British Constitution as the US Constitution, which by contrast is (supposedly) fixed in its words – and so more jewel-like, as it were. This causes Jo’s reflections to carry unavoidable echoes of the slave narrative genre, which repeatedly invoke the Constitution in arguing against slavery. Such a comparison, I think, becomes unavoidable when it is noted that Jo has just previously reflected on his illiteracy, just as so many fugitive slaves do in their narratives:

To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postman deliver letters, and not to have the least idea of all that language – to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb! It must be very puzzling to see the good company going to churches on Sundays, with their books in their hands and to think . . . what does it all mean, and if it means anything to anybody, how comes it that it means nothing to me? (*BH* 274)

It is therefore no surprise whatsoever to find Crafts taking up Dickens’s words when ruminating upon the lot of slaves:

To be made to feel that you have no business here, there, or anywhere except just to work – work – work – . . . It must be a strange state to feel that in the judgement of those above you are scarcely human, and to fear that their opinion is more than half right, that you really are assimilated to the brutes, that the horses, dogs and cattle have quite as many priveleges, and are probably your equals or it may be your superiors in knowledge, that even your shape is questionable as belonging to that order of superior beings whose delicacy you offend. (*BN* 201)

Here, as in her passage reflecting on conditions in the Carolinian slave quarters, Crafts is drawing directly on *Bleak House* (the constant verbal parallels are inescapable) to enable her description of the state of slavery, a process perhaps legitimated by Dickens’s opposition to American slavery, “that most hideous blot and foul disgrace,” as he names it in his *American Notes*.¹⁸

My argument has been not only that Crafts's narrative possesses a highly complex and sophisticated literary debt to Dickens. This is plainly true; but also, like Dickens, and following in his footsteps, Crafts sets herself against what the title of the fourth chapter of *Bleak House* denominates as telescopic philanthropy, and instead dramatizes forcefully the ills such philanthropy allows to be concealed: how, in capitalist society, the law and its build-up of precedence becomes arbitrary and beyond the power of humankind in general. As Dickens puts it, "[for] the general crowd . . . a million of obstacles to the commonest transactions of human life . . . [are posed by] law and equity, and . . . that kindred mystery, the street mud, which is made of nobody knows what, and collects about us . . . we only knowing there is too much of it" (*BH* 186). This process elevates justice beyond the reach and requirements of common humanity and human rights, making it into the property of the economically powerful, as are slaves and laborers bodily themselves:

Just where the gloom was densest and the muddy street the muddiest . . . [I] passed two gentlemen . . . There was something in the coat of seedy black, and the general bearing and manner of one of them arrested my attention . . . I even turned back to look at them and not minding my footing . . . slipped very suddenly and came down with all my weight on the rough paving stones. The two gentlemen immediately came forward and one of them assisted me to rise . . . I looked into the face of the other . . . I knew him in an instant, I could have remembered his eyes and countenance among a thousand. It was Mr. Trapp[e]. (*BN* 157-58)

Like the sea of mud in Dickens's London, seat of Chancery, the mud brings down Hannah in Washington, seat of the US legislature. This is the shared theme of the two books' human transatlantic message: Tulkinghorn and Trappe, embodiments of the law, symbolically loom over the lives of common humanity, in a very particularly-inflected anticipation of the arguments of Michel Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish*.¹⁹ Just as Foucault stresses the panoptic omnipresence of surveillance in modern society, so, respectively, Tulkinghorn and Trappe surveil Jo and Hannah. But, under the cast of class, on the one hand, and slavery, on the other, there is no need for the law's objects to be reduced to self-surveillance, for they know they are indeed (in deed) all constantly surveilled by the law's agents. This equation of issues of class and African American slavery runs directly counter to a recurrent, and dominant, aversion that African Americans and their abolitionist champions had to accepting the setting up of equations between lower-class enslavement under capitalism and black enslavement within the

South's peculiar institution. This aversion stemmed from the way that Southern pro-slavery apologists frequently suggested such an equation was valid, and that this validity revealed how anti-slavery advocates outside of the South were hypocrites, who, indeed, frequently treated their lower classes far worse than slaves were treated within a generally benevolent system of slavery. That Crafts's intertextual allusions advance an analogy between slave and proletarian is therefore surprising, disconcerting and, even, somewhat alarming – unless they be taken as further evidence that Crafts was, quite possibly, not African American in her origins, but white.²⁰ The way that Hannah recoils in distaste from the dark-skinned field slaves with which she is finally placed by the Wheelers even as the text draws attention, by way of its extensive borrowings from Dickens, to how these slaves are comparably badly treated as the London working-class lends some further weight to this suggestion. Frederick Douglass can provide a case in point here. He was shocked to see black beggars in the streets of London, but predominantly he reports positively about his experiences: “I breathe, and lo! The chattel becomes a man! I gaze around in vain for one who will question my equal humanity, claim me as a slave, or offer me an insult. . . . I am shown into the same parlor – I dine at the same table – and no one is offended. No delicate nose grows deformed in my presence. I find no difficulty here in obtaining admission into any place of worship, instruction, or amusement, on equal terms with people as white as any I ever saw in the United States. I meet nothing to remind me of my complexion. . . . Everything is so different here from what I have been accustomed to in the United States. No insults to encounter, no prejudice to encounter, but all is smooth. I am treated as a man an equal brother. My color instead of being a barrier to social equality is not thought of as such. I am every where treated with the greatest kindness by all with whom I come in contact. The change is wonderful.”²¹ I recognize that here Douglass's writing, in setting up the contrast with the US, is in part tactical, but such sentiments concerning life for Africans in Britain – almost exclusively at that time members of the proletariat – are at a very large remove from Dickens's sentiments concerning the working-class. That Crafts forswears such tactics whilst also, contradictorily, offering up a strong sense of caste and rank of gradations is, I feel, instructive when considering her ethnic identity.²²

I pursue this argument more fully elsewhere,²³ but here I will note that this suggestion would throw into some disarray the proposition

that Crafts's narrative, in a revision of the model of Henry Louis Gates's signifyin[g] African American text, is offering up a serious inter-ethnic play upon the idea of oppression: "The extent of Crafts's appropriations suggests how difficult it was for the female slave to be free, either of slavery's shackles or, less immediately but no less significantly, of a white literary master's prior voice . . . [and how much she offers] a language that was half hers and half someone else's."²⁴ This race-specific proposition carries some weight, for there is a persistent sense that we are not dealing in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* with 'mere' "snags[bys]" and "tangles" but with "trap[pe]s." Yet it has to be also recognized that all these snags, tangles and traps, irrespective of racial identity, carry deadly consequences for those surveilled, undifferentiatedly. The arresting suggestion of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, it seems to me, is that, in fact, discrimination and persecution based on the one hand upon class and on the other upon race are not so many poles apart and that common cause might exist, rather than schismatic differentiation. In this sense, Crafts's narrative takes one stage further what has been termed an anti-slavery – and indeed, often a Black 'Anglophilia.' Crafts's narrative enters into a "dream world of civility" to such an extent that Hannah is depicted as always acutely and proudly conscious of "rank." As Hannah almost revels in her status as a personal servant and recoils from the field slaves, Crafts's narrative distinguishes itself from any contemporary writing by African American abolitionists, and instead stands as a disconcerting mapping of a subversive transatlantic terrain of violent, legally-enforced oppression, even across lines of color.²⁵

Notes

- ¹ Hannah Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (New York: Warner Books, 2002) 98. Future references to Crafts's text will appear in the text, preceded by the initials, *BN*. In the same way, references to Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1853, rpt. London: Penguin Books, 1985) will also appear in the text, preceded by the initials *BH*.
- ² Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig, or, Sketches in the Life of a Free Black in a Two-Story White House, North, by "Our Nig"* (Boston: Geo Rand and Avery, 1853; rpt., ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 1983). My thanks to John Lucas for his invaluable advice about Crafts's debts to Dickens.
- ³ See Barbara A. White, "'Our Nig' and the She-Devil: New Information about Harriet Wilson and the 'Bellmont' Family," *American Literature* 65.1 (1993): 19-52. Recently, it has been claimed that Wilson survived into the later decades of

the nineteenth century, becoming a medium. See Gabrielle Foreman's edition of *Our Nig* (London: Penguin, 2004).

- ⁴ See Gates, introduction, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, by Hannah Crafts ix-lxxv (xi and passim).
- ⁵ Joe Nickell, "Authentication Report: *The Bondwoman's Narrative*," Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* 283-315 (296).
- ⁶ See Thomas C. Parramore, "The Bondwoman and the Bureaucrat," *In Search of Hannah Crafts*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Basic Books, 2004) 354-70 (366).
- ⁷ However, the date that Wheeler sold his plantation – 1853 – means that the extent to which Hannah Crafts can be regarded as writing autobiographically of her Wheelers is immediately constrained. In *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, when Wheeler returns to his plantation in his narrative, he must be doing so anachronistically, if, that is, he has purchased (as Gates believes he did) Hannah as a replacement for Jane [Johnson] – since the latter only escaped in 1855. See Parramore, "The Bondwoman and the Bureaucrat" 364-65; Katherine E. Flynn, "Jane Johnson, Found! But Is She 'Hannah Crafts'?": The Search for the Author of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*," *In Search of Hannah Crafts* 371-405.
- ⁸ Flynn, "Jane Johnson, Found! But Is She 'Hannah Crafts'?" 371-405; Gates, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* xlii.
- ⁹ Gates, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* xlv; Parramore, "The Bondwoman and the Bureaucrat" passim.
- ¹⁰ See Gill Ballinger, Tim Lustig and Dale Townsend, "Missing Intertexts: Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and African American Literary History," *Journal of American Studies* 39.2 (2005): 207-37 (224).
- ¹¹ Gates, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* 331-32. These limitations are noted by Ballinger et. al., "Missing Intertexts" 209ff.
- ¹² See Ballinger et. al., "Missing Intertexts" 207-08 n.2; and Hollis Robbins, "Blackening *Bleak House*: Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*," *In Search of Hannah Crafts* 71-86.
- ¹³ Noting this also reinforces Caroline Keyser's point that a key motivation underlying Crafts turning to and drawing upon *Jane Eyre* is that Charlotte also fingered colonialism as an ill of Victorian society. See Keyser, "Jane Eyre's Bondwoman: Hannah Crafts's Rethinking of Charlotte Bronte," *In Search of Hannah Crafts* 87-105.
- ¹⁴ The blood spreading from the master of Lindendale's body also carries echoes of the bloodsoaked death of Nancy in *Oliver Twist* (1838), and of the blood-stains on Sykes's hat. It is surely instructive that one of Dickens's most famous and intense death scenes is raided in this way.
- ¹⁵ Crafts could have also learned this from Harriet Beecher Stowe. See Stowe's story, "Marion Jones; or, Love versus Law," *The Mayflower, or Tales and Pencillings* (London: Nelson's Library, 1852) 111-59; and, of course, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
- ¹⁶ See the discussions in Ballinger et. al., "Missing Intertexts," passim and Hollis, "Blackening *Bleak House*" passim.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* 549.
- ¹⁸ Charles Dickens, *American Notes* (1842) Chapter III. The South was clear about

- Dickens's sympathies, and launched what was already a stock attack, impugning him for his "inaccuracy": "he has permitted himself to be made a tool of by the Abolitionists, has endorsed their stale slanders, heedless of their falsity or truth; has inserted in his work passages from Southern Papers, which were actually the coinage of lying Abolitionists; and has basely pandered to the prejudices of his countrymen, by asserting as facts, things obviously false; for which he had no shadow of proof," "Laon," Columbia, S.C., [Review of *American Notes*], *Southern Literary Messenger* (January 1843): 60-62 (62).
- ¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1977; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1995) 195-228 and passim.
- ²⁰ See R. J. Ellis, "Hannah Crafts," *The Literary Encyclopedia*, The Literary Dictionary Company, (November 2004) 12 December 2006 <<http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=5864>> and, subsequently, upon different bases, Celeste-Marie Bernier and Judie Newman, "*The Bondwoman's Narrative*: Text, Paratext and Hypertext," *Journal of American Studies* 39.2 (2005): 147-65.
- ²¹ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Collier Books, 1979) 232, 244.
- ²² See R. J. Ellis, "Hannah Crafts," *The Literary Encyclopedia*, and, subsequently, upon different bases, Bernier and Newman, "*The Bondwoman's Narrative*: Text, Paratext and Hypertext" 147-65.
- ²³ See R. J. Ellis, "'so amiable and good': Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and its lineages" (in preparation).
- ²⁴ See Ballinger et. al., "Missing Intertexts" 236 and passim.
- ²⁵ Elisa Tamarkin, "Black Anglophilia; Or, the Sociability of Antislavery," *American Literary History* 14 (2003): 464 and 444-78.

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