

PICTURES IN BLEAK HOUSES: SLAVERY AND THE AESTHETICS OF TRANSATLANTIC REFORM

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In his 1853 chapter “The Nature of Gothic,” John Ruskin famously aligns different visual styles with different ethical connotations. The crude, unpolished style of Gothic ornament symbolizes a free and autonomous art production, while the perfect symmetry of modern English ornaments signifies the arduous, mechanical labor typical of the Victorian factory. While Ruskin’s essay has stood as the prototype for an aesthetic theory founded upon a specific political stance, critics have missed a particularly pressing political issue that surfaces in this text. For here Ruskin develops a theory of labor-aesthetics founded upon the key term of slavery, with direct reference to the British anti-slavery debate that was dominating public forums in the early 1850s.¹ If Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the 1848 *Communist Manifesto* had described workers as “daily and hourly enslaved by the machine,” Ruskin gives the metaphor a body and nerves as he describes the toll taken upon bodies of modern art-workers; for them “the eye of the soul must be bent upon the finger-point, and the soul’s force must fill all the invisible nerves that guide it, ten hours a day, that it may not err from its steely precision.”² Directing his readers to examine “this English room of yours,” in particular the finished ornaments that epitomize their national feeling, he laments, “Alas! if read rightly, these perfectnesses are signs of a slavery in our England a thousand times more bitter and more degrading than that of the scourged African, or helot Greek.”³ Ruskin’s rhetoric borrows its heat from the propaganda of the British anti-slavery movement. Dwelling upon the repetitive “palsy” of glass bead makers’ hands, he concludes that “every young lady, therefore, who buys glass beads is engaged in the slave trade, and in a much more cruel one than that which we have so long been endeavouring to put down.”⁴ With this somewhat incongruous image, Ruskin neatly bridges the divide between the worlds of factory production and domestic consumption, showing how British women unwittingly participate in a kind of slave trafficking by supporting wage slavery with their purchasing power.

Ruskin's "Nature of Gothic" rehearses tropes that recurred in mid-Victorian texts arguing for British labor reforms. First, he calls for the reform of industrial labor using the ubiquitous icon of the African slave, even while suggesting that British anti-slavery efforts ought to be focused on problems closer to home.⁵ Ruskin's nationalist investment in "English rooms" translates into a bias against overseas actions, such as the British policing of foreign slave-transport ships; but the compelling image of the "scourged African" still serves his rhetorical purpose, bringing the vision of the slave body—as sheer body—into the upright British drawing room, with its décor of fetishized commodities. In a corollary to this metaphorical usage, the oppressed British working body is implicitly racialized by its disfiguring labor, and hence comparable to the body of an African slave. Finally, Ruskin uses these slave figures to highlight the circuit of production and consumption mediated by an aesthetic judgment. British young ladies are making the wrong stylistic choice—an immoral, enslaving choice—by preferring glossy English ornaments to those with a Gothic, rough-hewn look. The shapely aesthetic commodity is revealed to emerge from the same stark conditions of urban modernity that galvanized many early-Victorian social crusaders.

In this essay, I explore how certain mid-century activist texts—protesting the plight of the "slave," whether British or African-American—wrestled with the politics of aesthetics within genres that were becoming increasingly commodified. The major literary work I examine is Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, which in many ways epitomizes the conflicted mid-Victorian reformist attitude toward aesthetics.⁶ *Bleak House* presents a panoramic view of the British social world in which character and class are insistently hierarchized using symbolic aesthetic objects and modes. While the novel's numerous laboring bodies are racialized in ironic metaphoric reference to American slavery, the upper-crust characters exist in a pallid and luxurious state, idly consuming the fruits of others' labor. Dickens foregrounds the aesthetic component of this race-class dynamic with a parade of fine art objects, which serve, like Ruskin's glass beads, as degraded signs of an opulent and immoral economy. Yet these arts-within-an-artwork also allow Dickens to propose his own *ars poetica* of social fiction, demanding a truer and more ugly vision to unsettle a complacent British public. Reformist arguments must be made without devolving into desirable, and hence ineffectual, commodities; *Bleak House* thus critiques both bankrupt fine arts objects as well as the popular modes of melodrama or sensation—which exploit graphic scenes of poverty or slavery—to

claim instead a more grim and uncomfortable realism. My discussion will show how the novel implicitly converses with alternate kinds of activist fiction, especially Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, whose passionate theatrics captured a wide British audience. By making a discursive turn away from melodrama toward realism, Dickens proposes a puissant social fiction that might escape the impotence of commodification, wielding a cold and detached eye as a powerful argumentative weapon. These critiques seem increasingly ironic, however, given Dickens's own matchless role in the commodification of the Victorian novel, as well as his investment in promoting the novel as the modern art form best suited to the modern age.

While the image of the slave served the rhetorical ends of white British reformers, actual American slaves also participated in the reformist discourse that metaphorically adopted them. This essay's second part pursues discussions of aesthetics into the writings of American slaves who toured Britain in the early 1850s, and whose writings show a striking commonality with the British reformist outlook. These African-American travel writers performed a Victorian reformist consciousness modeled by Dickens in *Bleak House* when they eschewed sensation or sentiment in accounts of their own slave histories and travel experiences. Instead, they wrote cultured travelogues in imitation of Victorian gentlemen, describing tourist encounters with the art objects of Europe as signs of a new cultural mastery. If anti-slavery accounts threatened to become mere commodified spectacles, these travelogues laid claim to a more refined status to confirm the authors' own distinguished sensibilities. I conclude with a discussion of Hannah Crafts's *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, a slave narrative that rewrites *Bleak House* as a novel of the American South—and a work that also foregrounds aesthetics to make its anti-slavery argument. In my analysis, the insistent mid-Victorian link between laboring bodies and aesthetic art objects is an obvious result of their mutual symbolic participation within the overarching hierarchy of social class. But this link also points toward the difficulties faced by social purpose literature as it aimed to move audiences while also asserting its own aesthetic prestige.

I. BLEAK HOUSE AND THE AESTHETICS OF LABOR

It is worth remembering why the slave figure would be significant to Dickens in the years 1851–1853 when *Bleak House* was first serialized. The strength of British anti-slavery fervor had initially waned after 1833, when slavery was finally outlawed in the colonies (the slave trade

by British ships had been abolished in 1807). After 1842, when the British attempts to found a missionary colony in Niger ended miserably in disease and death, concern for the Christian souls of Africans, slaves or otherwise, had cooled considerably. Yet a vocal minority had now turned its sights on the practice of slavery in America, galvanized by the first transatlantic anti-slavery convention in London in 1840.⁷ Britons could view a growing number of lecturing American slaves in the wake of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, which induced many Northern runaways to flee to Britain for safety. The American slavery issue was most boldly catapulted onto public forums in 1852 by the publication in England of Harriet Beecher Stowe's phenomenal bestseller *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which sold 150,000 copies in six months and a million and a half in the first year.⁸ It was the coincident publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with Dickens's *Bleak House* that inspired some contemporary commentators to consider the two books together, even though *Bleak House* seems at first glance to be far removed from the British slavery debates.

Dickens had taken an impassioned stand against American slavery in his 1842 travelogue *American Notes*, but by 1850 his view had become more equivocal.⁹ In the 1852 essay "North American Slavery," written with Henry Morley and published in *Household Words*, Dickens still assails slave-holding practices, but suggests that "step by step" change is preferable to any immediate action in the South.¹⁰ And in *Bleak House*, he inveighs against Mrs. Jellyby's "telescopic philanthropy" for fixating on the distant African natives of "Borrioboola-Gha" while her own children swarm in filthy disorder. England needs to care for its own impoverished class, Dickens asserts, before setting its sights on needy foreigners, whether African natives or African-American slaves. Dickens and Ruskin both echo the popular viewpoint that anti-slavery activism was diverting energies away from England's more pressing local problems. Even though Mrs. Jellyby sets her sights on Africa rather than America, British readers still understood Dickens to be targeting anti-slavery activity; a pamphlet by Lord Denman titled *Bleak House, Uncle Tom's Cabin, and the Slave Trade* attacked Dickens for his Borrioboola-Gha parody, asking indignantly, "Who but the slave traders can gain by this course of argument?"¹¹

Yet if Dickens's novel displays the same equivocations about slavery harbored by many mid-century reformist British authors, the book is also still inflected by the powerful image of the African slave. Race appears in *Bleak House* because the novel so insistently thematizes labor problems and class conflict. Although Dickens expressly devotes

the novel to attacking England's moribund court system, his outrage also extends to the broader inequities of a social hierarchy that ignores the demands of "the People." At times the oppressed majority are represented only by the synecdoche of their Chartist burning torches, as a mob threatening to violently rupture the charmed circles of Lord Coodles and Boodles. Yet the most memorable suffering characters are those who are individualized through their labor—grueling work that is often wasting, disfiguring, and blackening. I don't mean to suggest that these darkened characters are innately or inevitably racialized, but rather that Dickens deliberately wields the associations of dark skins with black servitude in order to make his class critique. In *Bleak House*, the metaphorical racializing of the laboring body becomes confused with more literal disfigurements in a slippage that was common to mid-Victorian discussions of urban poverty. As Anne McClintock has observed, social commentators from Henry Mayhew to Engels used a rhetoric of race "to invent distinctions between what we would now call *classes*"—as when Engels writes that the workers of Manchester have become "a physically degenerate race, robbed of all humanity, degraded, reduced morally and intellectually to bestiality."¹²

Most visibly in *Bleak House*, Jo, the young crossing-sweep, works at a Sisyphean occupation that covers him with dirt: "Homely filth begrimes him, homely parasites devour him, homely sores are in him, homely rags are on him."¹³ The brickmaker visited by Esther and the charitable Mrs. Pardiggle is "all stained with clay and mud" (*BH*, 156). And Phil Squod, the impoverished lackey at the shooting gallery, has been deformed—quite literally scorched—by a life spent in industrial labor: "What with blowing the fire with my mouth when I was young, and spileing my complexion, and singeing my hair off, and swallering the smoke; and . . . what with a dozen years in a dark forge . . . and what with being scorched in a accident at a gasworks; and what with being blowed out of winder, case-filling at the firework business; I am ugly enough to be made a show on!" (*BH*, 422). Dickens rehearses the new Victorian commonplace that bad labor conditions disfigured bodies so as to forge a new race, creating a biological difference in working people. Mayhew's 1851 journalistic exposé *London Labour and the London Poor*—contemporaneous with Dickens's *Bleak House*—influentially propagated the trope of the homegrown savage, portraying London street workers as a wild, dark-skinned, foreign tribe living in the heart of the capital city.¹⁴

Even characters in Dickens's novel who are not paupers are blackened by their exploited labor, most conspicuously Caddy Jellyby. Secretary

to her irresponsible and negligent activist mother, forced to copy innumerable documents, Caddy exists in a perpetual “state of ink” (*BH*, 85). “Talk of Africa!” she exclaims, “I couldn’t be worse off if I was a what’s-his-name—man and a brother!” (*BH*, 236). Caddy compares herself directly to an African slave by invoking the resonant anti-slavery slogan, “Am I not a man and brother?” The phrase captioned the ubiquitous icon from British and American anti-slavery propaganda, first appearing on a “Slave Medallion” manufactured by Wedgwood in the late eighteenth century, which depicted a kneeling, manacled slave.¹⁵ Dickens deliberately blackens Caddy with ink to highlight her ironic likeness to the Africans her mother doggedly pursues; the whole neglected Jellyby family is similarly covered in dirt. The relationship between Caddy and her careless mother represents a domestic version of the national malaise, as England refuses to take care of its own laboring “slaves.” When, late in the novel, Caddy has a baby, it is “a tiny old-faced mite” with “curious little dark veins in its face, and curious little dark marks under its eyes, like faint remembrances of poor Caddy’s inky days” (*BH*, 736).¹⁶ Dickens’s humor again invokes an underlying vision of labor as a heritable, racial characteristic. And, in a point to which I will return, Caddy’s story is echoed on a larger level by the story of Esther, the novel’s heroine, who contracts a disfiguring illness when she kindly accepts the diseased and homeless child Jo into her home. Esther’s complexion, like Phil Squod’s, also becomes darkened and “spiled.” The racializing of *Bleak House*’s workers hearkens back to a long tradition of English labor activism deploying the image of the white slave.¹⁷ Even while Dickens attacks activism on behalf of exotic foreigners, he deliberately wields the trace-image of the American slave to attack British labor practices, whether in factories, in cities, on aristocratic estates, or in the middle-class home.

How do these racialized, laboring bodies speak to aesthetics in *Bleak House*? If the slave metaphor serves to emphasize the corporeality of hard labor, Dickens uses art objects as ironic counter-images, hollow luxuries that symbolize the economy of uselessness defining the lifestyle of the novel’s wealthier classes. These art commodities are characterized by their surface effects, and often seem literally inseparable from mere costumery. The disfigured body, with its unnatural uglification resulting from overwork, serves as an antithesis to the novel’s many vacant, beautiful exteriors. The aristocratic Dedlocks and their charmed circle are reviled for “Dandyism,” figuring Tory conservatism as an old-fashioned costume. The Dandies camouflage social problems using anachronistic pretty surfaces. At Chesney Wold

the “ladies and gentlemen” are “very elegant . . . [and] have agreed to put a smooth glaze on the world, and to keep down all its realities. For whom everything must be languid and pretty” (*BH*, 211).¹⁸ At the Dedlock’s townhouse, the narrator ridicules Sir Leicester’s art collection as the “Fancy Ball School,” “which would be best catalogued like the miscellaneous articles in a sale. As, . . . ‘One stone terrace (cracked), one gondola in distance, one Venetian senator’s dress complete, richly embroidered white satin costume with profile portrait of Miss Jogg the model, one Scimitar superbly mounted in gold with jewelled handle, elaborate Moorish dress (very rare), and Othello’” (*BH*, 457). The narrator mocks the extreme ornamentalism of British history paintings, but also finds these to be a fitting representation of the Dedlock economy. Fake grandeur is founded upon old-looking, expensive commodities, whose intricate surface patterning is more valuable than any real human emotion. Artworks for Sir Leicester are merely another avenue by which he can confirm his superior position; hence they are indistinguishable from the other valuable artifacts that he possesses. (It seems a pronounced irony here that Sir Leicester fails to notice the character of Othello, the classic jealous husband, from whom he might gain a clue.)

The fine arts are not merely the province of aristocrats in *Bleak House*. Indeed, all of the different rungs of the novel’s social world are marked in figurative shorthand by characters’ aesthetic engagements. I would suggest that Dickens uses art objects, as he does racial markings, as symbolic indicators of both class status and labor conditions. At the top of the social ladder, the Dedlocks reside in leisurely repose at a picturesque country estate with its own portrait gallery. Lady Dedlock herself, it seems, is mentioned less frequently than the state of the shadow falling across her portrait (yet another symbolic disfigurement in the novel). The gallery functions as a part of *Bleak House*’s Gothic parody. If Gothic haunted mansions always come equipped with a portrait gallery, these artworks are visual symbols of the genealogy of landed wealth passed down through the generations.¹⁹ *Bleak House* is a Gothic novel with an urban heart; when the Snagsbys are introduced in Cook’s Court, in deliberate imitation of Chesney Wold, the urban alleyway is wreathed in “[s]moke, which is the London ivy” and haunted by the small-fry ghost of Peffer, Snagsby’s long-dead partner (*BH*, 179). The middle-class Snagsbys copy the Dedlock portrait gallery with their own mediocre portraits “in oil—and plenty of it” (*BH*, 181). Guster, the Snagsbys’ seizure-prone servant, has “recompenses” for her work in the form of their portraits, which seem to her as exquisite as

the masterpieces of “Titian or Raphael” (*BH*, 181). Dickens uses the portraits to mock the aristocratic pretensions of the middle classes. These art objects derive not from inheritance but from Snagsby’s sale of innumerable forms of stationary, contributing to the city’s vast accumulations of waste products.

At the bottom of the novel’s social hierarchy, the shabby Mr. Weevle’s most prized possession is “a choice collection of copper-plate impressions from that truly national work, *The Divinities of Albion*, or *Galaxy Gallery of British Beauty*, representing ladies of title and fashion in every variety of smirk that art, combined with capital, is capable of producing” (*BH*, 340). Adorning the barren wall of Weevle’s apartment, this sad replica of the Dedlock portrait gallery functions as an ironic sign of his demeaning poverty. Weevle finds “unspeakable consolation” in reading tabloids about the rich while looking at their pictures, by which he “seems to know the originals, and to be known of them” (*BH*, 340). Dickens mocks the high-flown language of British nationhood attached to the high-art and upper-class world of fashion; the discourse of (white) “Albion” beauty in both person and country evidently excludes the nation’s majority, the working poor. The exquisite commodities of the rich are only accessible to lower classes in debased, reproduced, conventionalized forms. These high arts create a powerful false consciousness that shapes the desires of all the people in the novel’s social world.

Bleak House insists upon a direct link between the artful beauty of its parasitic characters and the disfiguring toil of those they suck dry. The Dedlocks transform the workers on their estate into “picturesque” additions to the landscape, contributing to the Dandyish (and Neo-Catholic) scene at Chesney Wold (*BH*, 211). Mr. Turveydrop, who styles himself in exquisite imitation of the Prince Regent, maintains his picture-worthy, aristocratic pose through the back-breaking labor of his son Prince, who slaves all day as a dancing master; the same drudgery, the novel suggests, has already worked Turveydrop’s wife into the grave. For these privileged characters, beauty is possessed or enjoyed only at the expense of another’s body and another’s labor. Phil Squod, the blackened personification of England’s industrial labor force, repeatedly describes his own physical deformity as “beauty”: “My beauty was queer, wery queer,” says Phil, as he launches into the litany of hazardous occupations that have ruined his looks (*BH*, 422). That Phil finds “beauty” the most apt word to describe his damaged physique is funny, but also ironically mirrors the fine-art beauty possessed by the novel’s well-groomed, aristocratic (and pseudo-aristocratic) char-

acters. If the Gothic novel dramatized wrongs committed by parents against children to allegorize political oppression, here acts of inter-generational Gothic violence are rewritten as Victorian labor abuses, as the aesthetic nation-state sins against its own working children.

Slave labor appears as an aesthetic problem most strikingly, and most damningly, in the character of Harold Skimpole. The novel's signature villain, Skimpole has created as whole "Drone philosophy" of labor by which he might live a beautiful life off the toil of others (*BH*, 143–44). Skimpole styles himself as an artist and aesthete, and invents elaborate rhetorical feints to package what is essentially a complete moral nihilism. His seemingly naïve ignorance of time and money, his cheerful paeans to nature, landscapes, and pretty girls, all disguise his schemes to consume without paying no matter what the consequences to others. Skimpole embodies an economy of pure consumption; his speeches prettify what is essentially one ravenous mouth. Dickens uses Skimpole to dramatize how an aesthetic world-view can invite immoral detachment and disinterest starkly opposed to the concerns of sympathy and care. In one of the most patent revelations of Skimpole's malignant character, he aestheticizes American slavery:

Take an extreme case. Take the case of the Slaves on American plantations. I dare say they are worked hard, I dare say they don't altogether like it, I dare say theirs is an unpleasant experience on the whole; but, they people the landscape for me, they give it a poetry for me, and perhaps that is one of the pleasanter objects of their existence. I am very sensible of it, if it be, and I shouldn't wonder if it were! (*BH*, 307)

Skimpole's viewpoint clearly echoes the "telescopic philanthropy" of Mrs. Jellyby, taking a distant perspective that detaches him from the reality of slave labor. Here Dickens implicitly aligns himself in sympathy with the slaves, whose labor mirrors that of the novel's British working-class characters. Beauty for Skimpole becomes an excuse for the most extreme self-absorption, as other people exist merely to enhance his sense of the world's "poetry." Reorienting the landscape so that it revolves around himself, Skimpole's egocentrism imitates the blinkered charmed circle of aristocrats who fail to notice the flaming torches threatening to break their reverie. Dickens also uses the presence of American slaves here to intensify the novel's ongoing critique of the picturesque, a commodified aesthetic of landscape appreciation linked to the privileged class of land-owners. Picturesque views make the landscape into a prospect, rather than representing the land as a

place where people labor. (Ruskin would famously launch a similar critique of the picturesque in the third volume of *Modern Painters* in 1856.) In *Bleak House*, picturesque views are inevitably the province of the Dedlocks; as Sir Leicester comically meditates at the novel's opening, Nature is generally "an idea dependent for its execution on your great country families" (*BH*, 12). In the midst of *Bleak House*'s urban modernity, the picturesque seems an anachronistic blend of property, privilege, and exclusion.

Though Skimpole is not an aristocrat, his participation in the Dedlock aesthetic-politics is cemented at the end of this chapter when Esther, glancing one more time at the Chesney Wold estate, catches sight of the French maid Hortense, just dismissed from her job by Lady Dedlock, "a peaceful figure too in the landscape, . . . shoeless, [walking] through the wet grass" (*BH*, 312). The lodgekeeper's wife remarks that Hortense seems to wade through blood—summoning up the specter of the French Revolution, of which Hortense seems to be a literal remnant. Dickens implies not only that Hortense will have her bloody revenge upon the Dedlocks, but also that, if the current state of things remains unchanged, all of the oppressed peoples of America and England—the slaves as well as the English poor—will eventually have their revenge upon their masters, despite the glaze of peacefulness offered by the picturesque view.

II. EXHIBITIONS: SLAVERY AND THE SPECTACLE OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Dickens's assault on the visual disengagements of Skimpole and Mrs. Jellyby suggest that he was likely commenting upon the most extravagant spectacle of his own day, and a defining event for Victorian visual culture: the Great Exhibition of 1851, at which a wonderful myriad of objects, displayed in a glass-and-iron Crystal Palace, demonstrated the "Industry of all Nations."²⁰ Many scholars have argued that *Bleak House* launches a sustained critique against the triumphalist logic of the Exhibition, beginning with the novel's very title. If the Great Exhibition narrated the sweeping progress of Western civilization—especially as proved by Britain's manufacturing might—using the image of a lucid, "Crystal" modernity, Dickens proposes instead a muddy, foggy, sooty London as symbol of a suffering nation, a "bleak house" indeed.²¹ The Exhibition's classification scheme divided its objects into a neatly-organized material world, ranging from raw materials to machines to fine arts; in *Bleak House*, by contrast, Dickens provides an inventory of modern life consisting of dead lists and discarded junk, epitomized

by the refuse piled in Krook's rag and bone shop. The Exhibition's crystalline eyesight, Enlightenment symbol of reason, is also indicted by Dickens in the phrase "telescopic philanthropy"—describing not merely a kind of far-seeing blindness but also a type of mechanized visual technology. The Exhibition was distinctive to visitors for its novel use of glass, not only in constructing the Palace itself but also for displaying objects under glass cases. From a Dickensian perspective, the Exhibition's pedestal effects, its elevation of objects apart from any account of how those objects were made (or at what human cost), align its glittering surfaces with the sham facades and immoral detachments of other aesthetic views in the novel.

Yet fewer critics have suggested that even while Dickens reviles the logic of Exhibition display, his mode of visual realism in *Bleak House* is dependent upon the very same kind of crystalline looking he attacks.²² In *The Realistic Imagination*, George Levine writes that classic realism bases itself in empiricism and the evidence of the eyes, rejecting artifice and evincing "a grumpy suspicion of ideas, a hard-nosed facing of the facts and of the power of the external world over dream, desire, idea."²³ In *Bleak House*, beauty and the fine arts are parodied as an extreme mode of unreality to be counteracted by the hard visual evidence of urban blight. Some critics have linked Dickens's realist style to the rise of photography, invented in England in 1839; I would suggest, though, that Dickensian realism in *Bleak House* accords with a broader kind of scientific vision on display at the Great Exhibition, exceeding a lone technology to encompass a whole metaphoric web of truth in seeing.²⁴ Readers are confronted with graphic, unsightly details in depictions of the brickmaker's cottage, "offensive to every sense," Nemo's death chamber, and the notorious slum of Tom-all-Alone's (*BH*, 366). The narrator avers that the slum by day is actually worse than by night since "the more that is seen of it the more shocking it must be, and that no part of it left to the imagination is at all likely to be made so bad as the reality" (*BH*, 683). The inventions of human imagination are inadequate to the depiction of such ugly conditions, which can be rendered most shockingly by the mere cataloguing of their reality. The distancing, abstracting, and objectifying eye—the Skimpolean specialty—is thus problematically necessary to Dickens for conveying his social-change message. Truth here seems the very opposite of beauty—but both employ similar techniques of representation to accomplish their effects.

The assertion of a boldly accurate visual reportage was also a recurring trope in slave narratives, which promised to present slavery

“as it is.”²⁵ Emphasizing the eyewitness account and the unvarnished truth, these narratives proposed that ontological transparency was the necessary first step toward social change. An 1836 review of Charles Ball’s *The Life and Adventures of a Fugitive Slave* praises “the perfect accuracy” of the book’s “picture of slavery”: “If it is a mirror, it is of the very best plate glass, in which objects appear so clear and ‘natural’ that the beholder is perpetually mistaking it for an open window.”²⁶ In both slave narratives and social problem fiction, the idea that conditions must be seen to be believed—and the need to announce this fact—usually entails the graphic depiction of sights from which readers would usually avert their eyes, especially sights breaking middle-class social taboos surrounding the human body.²⁷ Thus *Bleak House* presents us with cesspool domestic spaces, women doing hard labor, drunk men beating their wives, and the diseased bodies of infected children (in the brickmaker’s cottage, the baby is a corpse). In slave narratives, the broken taboos are more extreme. The recurring scene is that of slave torture, including beating, whipping, and attack by dogs.²⁸ The “plate-glass” here is necessary to persuade readers that the distressing conditions are presented in good faith, without sensation, in the name of middle-class moral necessity.

The insistence upon a window-like view of social horrors was especially necessary given that slavery itself proved to be such a desirable commodity in the entertainment worlds of both America and Britain. American reading audiences showed an insatiable appetite for slave narratives, inviting the efforts of profiteering white imitators. In Britain, slavery itself was one of America’s greatest selling points; at the Royal Victoria Hall a panorama advertisement made the sensationalist sights of slavery indistinguishable from the famous sites of American tourism: “SLAVERY, SLAVERY! Grand Moving Panorama of the African and American Slave Trade, Affecting Land and Thrilling Aquatic Scenes, Views of Noted Places and Picturesque Views of Southern Slavery! British Man of War in Chase of a Slaver, Conflagration of a Slaver! Auction of Slaves. Burial of the Dead. Inauguration Day, Tomb of Washington, Mount Vernon, Underground Railroad to Canada, &c.”²⁹ Dickens had to ensure, as did the abolitionists, that his graphic portrayal of social misery worked decisively toward the purpose of realist necessity rather than edging into the morally questionable realm of exploitation and profit.

Opposed to the plate-glass realism of some abolitionist works, a different aesthetic strategy of moral appeal was wielded by anti-slavery’s most famous artwork, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Packed with scenes of amplified emotions and sentimental plot turns, Stowe's novel was an instant hit with the British reading public. Despite its popularity, though, British reviews of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were mixed, reflecting in part Britain's ambivalent attitude toward American slavery. (Many feared that the end of slavery would negatively affect Britain's own economic prosperity, especially the cloth trade that depended upon cotton from the American South.)³⁰ Reviewers channeled their ambivalence about slavery into aesthetic questions about *Uncle Tom*, in particular questioning its realism. If England was accustomed to a Blue-Book tradition of visual reportage to reveal appalling social conditions, the melodramatic style of Stowe's novel seemed a questionable and unreal tactic. The London *Times* makes the issue into a problem of bad art, in a review worth quoting at length:

An error . . . is committed by our authoress in the pains she takes to paint her negroes, mulattoes, and quadroons in the very whitest white, while she is equally careful to disfigure her whites with the very blackest black. The worst negroes are ultimately taken to Heaven, but few of the fair colored are warranted, living or dying, without blemish. The case of Slavery is submitted in this work, it is true, to the reader's enlightened attention, but before his judgment can calmly set itself to work his sympathies are thoroughly secured by a lady who takes care not to let them loose again. The very first scene of the book introduces us to an offensive dealer in slaves, and to a slave proprietor without feeling, and both are bargaining for the disposal of slaves who, in personal appearance and in moral attainments, are not to be surpassed on either side of the Atlantic. What becomes of the judgment under such an ordeal, if the intellect be weak and the heart be strong? We are not ignorant of the mode in which great morals are enforced at our minor theaters, and of the means there taken to impress the imagination and to instruct the intellect by help of the domestic melodrama. A villain on the Surrey side of the water is a villain indeed, and a persecuted heroine is persecuted beyond endurance in any other place. It is very easy to adduce startling lessons from a dramatic work, as it is easy enough for an artist to delineate fear by painting a man with staring eyes, open mouth, and hair on end. Truth, however, demands more delicate dealing, and art that would interpret truth must watch the harmonies of Nature, which charms not by great 'effects,' but by her blended symmetry and grace, by her logical and unforced developments. Did we know nothing of the subject treated by Mrs. Stowe, we confess we should hesitate before accepting much of her coin as sterling metal.³¹

This reviewer outlines the two major aesthetic strategies open to social problem fiction in the battle between "intellect" and "heart." Stowe's

sentimental treatment takes her novel into the realm of theatrics, melodrama, and fakery. Not surprisingly, the “authoress” is aligned with a feminine and heartfelt “domestic melodrama,” while the skeptical male reader masters the intellectual wherewithal to propose a more sound, “sterling” aesthetic judgment. The theatricality of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—which, in England, enabled the novel to be quickly adapted into series of popular stage melodramas—here becomes a sign of a badly-crafted artwork, a cartoonish image much less harmonious and graceful than a truly high-art painting. The reviewer attacks the black-and-white moral states of Stowe’s characters, and the especially unrealistic moral purity of the black characters as symbolized by their unearthly physical beauty. In English minds, the African slave would have connoted gross comic stereotypes and even, as we saw in Dickens and Ruskin, bodily disfigurement.³² If truth is signaled by ugliness, especially in the case of the American slave, then *Uncle Tom* fails to convince under this English code. But though the reviewer calls for a more ugly reality, he still wields the terms of high art to judge a social problem novel. These expectations point to the shifting status of the novel itself at mid-century. Richard Stang has written of how the novel was transitioning in the eyes of its critics from mere popular entertainment to a high-art literary endeavor.³³ The reviewer’s comments here suggest that the distancing moves of realism were gaining the status of a high-art novelistic technique that opposed itself to more popular forms of sensationalism or sentiment.

If the aesthetic tactics of social problem fiction oscillated between “intellect” and “heart,” these two approaches are neatly represented in the doubled narration of *Bleak House*. Esther’s first-person narration shows sympathy for the abused characters surrounding her, while the more ironic third-person narrator offers a broadly scathing indictment of England’s social wrongs. Bruce Robbins summarizes the distinction as “Esther’s ethical myopia” versus “the second, impersonal narrator, who like the far-sighted Mrs. Jellyby sees telescopically.”³⁴ Even while the moral center of *Bleak House* seems instinctively to align with Esther’s sympathetic and intimate eye, there is a critical tradition finding Dickens complicit with the system he criticizes via the tyrannical eye of the omniscient narrator.³⁵ Rather than attaching a moral judgment to either narrator, I would suggest that both narrators typify different aesthetic approaches to the problem of a socially activist fiction, especially one that takes a middle-class perspective on laboring bodies of the poor. More than simply offering sympathy to its disenfranchised characters, *Bleak House* presents a clashing doubled

narration that swerves between far and near, sympathy and objectivity, melodrama and disinterestedness. Sympathy is desirable when voiced by Esther, but the novel also seems to harbor a suspicion that sympathy might devolve into melodrama, commodified sentiment, or mere sensation.³⁶ Hence the kind of fine-art detachment satirized in Skimpole also becomes necessary to the novel's narration, as Dickens strives to achieve a more sterling, high-art kind of social fiction. The ensuing contradictions are evident in a famous passage that appears to be Dickens's *ars poetica* of social problem fiction, striking for its pictorial terms, and calling forth the most pathetic character in *Bleak House*, streetsweep Jo:

He is not one of Mrs. Pardiggle's Tockahoopo Indians; he is not one of Mrs. Jellyby's lambs, being wholly unconnected with Borriboola-Gha; he is not softened by distance and unfamiliarity; he is not a genuine foreign-grown savage; he is the ordinary home-made article. Dirty, ugly, disagreeable to all the senses, in body a common creature of the common streets, only in soul a heathen. Homely filth begrimes him, homely parasites devour him, homely sores are in him, homely rags are on him: native ignorance, the growth of English soil and climate, sinks his immortal nature lower than the beasts that perish. Stand forth, Jo, in uncompromising colours! From the sole of thy foot to the crown of thy head, there is nothing interesting about thee. (*BH*, 696)

Critics have found this passage to be the ultimate statement of Dickens's nationalist hostility to foreign activism. Yet it is also striking for how the narrator invokes metaphors of display, dirt, and "uncompromising colours": Dickens is telling us here how exactly the poor should be seen. Implicit in his critique is that the Mrs. Pardiggles and Jellybys, like Beecher Stowe herself, employ "compromising colors" to garner sympathy for their exotically dark subjects. The telescopic mode of distant looking, which lights upon African bodies and converts them into colorful and sensational adornments to a landscape, is here exchanged for a more "homely" and repellent local view. The narrator's rhetoric implies that seeing Jo closely will call forth a true sympathetic response in the reader like the one modeled by Esther. But the narrator still has Jo "stand forth" as an object on display, quite literally rendered an "ordinary home-made article." If the most famous and indignant demands for social change in *Bleak House* are voiced by the omniscient narrator, as in this passage, these moments suggest that Dickens's major tactic in the novel is not sympathy but a special kind of view, ugly and real, opposed to the beautifying and dishonest

modes of competing (female) activists. The problem with “compromising colours” is that they undercut the moral probity of social-change agents by giving the public exactly what it craves. By making modern politics into melodrama, Dickens seems to say, Stowe’s kind of activism allows a complacent British audience to eagerly consume narratives of social awareness without feeling driven to address the nation’s real and overwhelming problem, namely, wage slavery.

Yet the narrative move in *Bleak House* away from sympathy and toward an unflinching eye results in a worrisome silence most apparent in the depiction of Jo. The novel’s most disempowered character is completely excluded from the spectating audience invited to view him. His visual display makes him into a mute, spectacularized figure, unvoiced and uncharacterized. Dickens’s moral aesthetic of realism makes the subjectivity of Jo one of the most troubling in *Bleak House*. The narrator continually calls him a “beast” and a “brute,” especially because he can’t read. As the narrator exclaims over Jo’s illiteracy, “It must be a strange state to be like Jo!” (*BH*, 274). His character is a complete cipher, and his repeated avowals throughout the novel that he “don’t know nothink” (*BH*, 274) take on a philosophical ominousness, implying that perhaps, in his state of uneducated ignorance, he simply does not think.³⁷ Not coincidentally, Jo is the character whose lack of agency most distinctly reflects that of an American slave, as he is helplessly moved from place to place and passed from hand to hand during the plot’s various twists. Chadband’s pompous oration unwittingly says it all: “Devoid of parents, devoid of relations, devoid of flocks and herds, devoid of gold and silver, and of precious stones!” (*BH*, 414). Jo is a “void,” a walking black hole of nothingness. Chadband’s words about Jo also point ironically to Skimpole, who disingenuously claims that “possession is nothing to me” (*BH*, 120)—and indeed, the two characters inhabit diametrically opposed positions in the novel. Where Skimpole masters rhetoric to distance himself from objects, Jo himself, in the realist economy of the novel, is pure object; he is an object of our sympathy, but never a subject. Perhaps Esther’s words are Dickens’s own apologia: “What the poor are to the poor is little known, excepting to themselves and GOD” (*BH*, 101).

For all of his attempts to gain sympathy for Jo, then, Dickens unwittingly participates in a racial politics linking Jo’s metaphorical blackness with his lack of subjectivity. We might read this depiction as an example of the “white on white racism” that, David Lloyd argues, “throw[s] the cultural logic of racism into relief with peculiar force.” For Lloyd “whiteness” is not merely a racial categorization but also

a metaphor for the “metaphorical production of the Subject as one devoid of properties”—indicating the utopian Enlightenment dream, inherited by Victorian liberalism, of a public sphere consisting of members perfectly interchangeable and ideally alike. Lloyd points specifically to the example of the Irish, whom the Victorians dubbed “white negroes,” as revealing the “anomaly in English racist discourse”; but I think his argument also holds for British depictions of their own working classes, even when those depictions were meant to inspire to social change.³⁸ There is an ironic tinge to Lloyd’s formulation of the ideal self as “devoid of properties”—since, as his phrasing surely intends, a beautifully transparent lack of qualities can only likely accompany the real-world ownership of property, whether in the form of tangible possessions or of a more elusive cultural capital. In *Bleak House*, this irony is captured in the contrast between Jo and Skimpole, both of whom possess nothing, yet whose contrasting labors in the novel make one character an aesthete and the other a slave.

III. AESTHETICS REGAINED: AUTONOMY AND THE EX-SLAVE

This discussion goes toward explaining why *Bleak House* ultimately takes such a contradictory stance on the question of aesthetics. For even while Dickens relentlessly parodies the commodified art forms possessed by the rich, the novel also uses high-art metaphors and aesthetic language to signal its most cherished human values. The novel’s middle-class, reformist sensibility presents an aestheticized narration as an alternative to more dandified or commodified art forms, most centrally through the sympathetic eyes of Esther. Her sensitivity to the beauty of picturesque landscapes and female friends reflects her generous nature and her willingness to see goodness in most things. Watching Ada bend over Jenny’s dead child, Esther has a vision of the mother and child icon familiar from Renaissance paintings; she thinks she sees “a halo shine around the child through Ada’s drooping hair as her pity bent her head” (*BH*, 162). The mother-child painting is also a vision entertained by Mr. Snagsby when he visits the brickmaker’s cottage; he dislikes the unpleasant surroundings, “offensive to every sense,” but seeing Lizzie with her child, “is strangely reminded of another infant, encircled with light, that he has seen in pictures” (*BH*, 366). The aesthetic functions in these scenes as the sign of a recuperative, beautiful Christianity that lifts its oppressed characters out of their sordid settings. The religious quality of a divine aesthetic is also apparent when Esther first gazes upon Chesney Wold: “O, the solemn

woods over which the light and shadow travelled swiftly, as if Heavenly wings were sweeping on benignant errands through the summer air; the smooth green slopes, the glittering water, the garden where the flowers were so symmetrically arranged in clusters of the richest colours, how beautiful they looked!" (*BH*, 300). If ugliness has been the sign of human cruelty and disfiguring negligence, then beauty can signal the orderly care of a Christian god whose lights and shadows are arranged in "benignant" symmetry.

Yet if God is the creator of beauty, the appreciation of that beauty is still an act of human perception. When Esther loses her looks after her illness, she is transformed from a pretty (and suspiciously tainted) female object to a perceiving subject: "I found . . . every flower and leaf and blade of grass, and every passing cloud, and everything in nature, more beautiful and wonderful to me than I had ever found it yet. This was my first gain from my illness. How little I had lost, when the wide world was so full of delight for me" (*BH*, 557–58). Esther's gain of a powerful aesthetic subjectivity recompenses her lost beauty, and makes for a marked contrast to the book's opening, when she announces her un-cleverness and difficulty with narration. Her own disfigurement echoes the other blackenings in the novel, even while she learns to transcend the trappings of mere surface beauty that have delineated other female characters, especially Lady Dedlock. The value placed on that subjectivity resonates with Dickens's own claims in the preface to *Bleak House*, when he mocks a pompous Chancery judge by quoting Shakespeare: "My nature is subdued To what it works in, like the dyer's hand: Pity me, then, and wish I were renewed!" (*BH*, 41). These lines evoke the classic Victorian aesthetic notion that the most authentic self exists apart from one's occupation and labor. The "dyer's hand"—describing the sheer materiality of the laboring body depicted in the novel—desires a renewal that art might provide. This wish inflects Dickens's famous prefacing statement that in *Bleak House* he has "purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things" (*BH*, 43). The novel offers its own artistic efforts as an antidote to the modern degradations of professional labor. Esther's escape from the materialism of her own body would thus seem to be echoed by Dickens's attempts to escape the materialism of his own novelistic profession, which—owing to his own phenomenal success—was becoming increasingly commodified with its serialized cycles of popularity and payment.³⁹

The novel ultimately cannot dispense with aesthetics for the same reason that the *Times* reviewer of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* demands more

ugly realism using the metaphor of a fine art painting. In the nineteenth century the fine arts were increasingly coming to describe an autonomous and alluring world safely removed from the rapacious business of buying and selling—the commerce so strongly critiqued in *Bleak House*. If the ultimate act of commodification is symbolized by the sacks of ladies' hair stockpiled in Krook's basement—just one step removed, the novel hints, from the buying and selling of bodies themselves—the fine arts offer a potential release from this dirty business. While most of the fine art forms in the novel are inadequate to the task of representing modernity—either too anachronistic or too melodramatic, and hence too tainted by the payoffs of status or profit—the novel asserts its own suitability as the best modern art form for a modern age. Dickens's critique of other art forms in *Bleak House* is also an *ars poetica* for the novel itself. The shift from material object to printed word suggests that the mechanically reproducible linguistic arts are the best match for what Mr. Turveydrop so witheringly refers to as “a levelling age” (*BH*, 174), when cheap serialized magazines can reach a wide audience on both sides of the Atlantic. The emphasis on language also explains why Jo's illiteracy is so problematic in *Bleak House*. Jo is excluded from the new economies of both professional labor and aesthetics, a “tough subject” indeed (*BH*, 365).

I think that the aesthetic difficulties dramatized in *Bleak House* between subject and object, between the local and the distant, and between high and low art can be fruitfully pursued into another commodified art form being exchanged across the Atlantic at mid-century. All the questions or frustrations of commodity circulation vexing *Bleak House* also accrued, with even stronger persistence, to the memoirs and travelogues written by American slaves as they narrated accounts of journeys through Britain. These narratives might be seen as another genre of British anti-slavery agitation, whose techniques both adapted and transformed the methods of social-purpose fictions. Like Dickens, these authors were selling social activism to British readers in ways that threatened to become mere commodified spectacle or melodrama; hence their travelogues attempted to avoid sensationalism about a sensational subject by laying claim to a higher form of aesthetic production. Accounts of a European tour offered just this possibility. If “Europe” had always served as the essential repository of high arts for Americans, for American slaves the refuge of Europe—and especially Britain—epitomized both political enlightenment and cultural refinement. I want to explore briefly how some of these writers used the fine arts to evoke their own reformist sensibilities, and hence ar-

rived, perhaps surprisingly, at some of the same complications faced by Dickens.

African-Americans visiting mid-Victorian England were greeted based on their class markings much more than on their skin color, as Douglas Lorimer has documented.⁴⁰ Educated black lecturers met with many of England's intellectual luminaries, and visited Europe's cultural gems. A repeated trope in the accounts of former or fugitive slaves traveling through Europe describes how the doors of culture, so resoundingly slammed upon them in America, now wonderfully opened to admit them into Britain's most elite spaces. In *My Bondage, My Freedom* (1855), Frederick Douglass makes a bitter list of all the American establishments that have barred him from entry, while in England he visits Eaton Hall, "one of the most splendid buildings in England." "As I walked through the building, the statuary did not fall down, the pictures did not leap from their places, the doors did not refuse to open, and the servants did not say, 'We don't allow niggers in here!'"⁴¹ William Wells Brown's account of his travels in *Three Years in Europe*, published in London in 1852, presents a veritable slideshow of famed European venues, including Versailles, the Louvre, the British Museum, and even the Crystal Palace. "Guide book in hand," he tells us, Brown provides descriptions at every turn of European high-art beauties such as the "beautiful sculptured gods and goddesses" adorning the grounds of Versailles, or the antiquities of the British Museum.⁴² These arts themselves become symbols of Europe's cosmopolitan race tolerance. Brown's eloquence upon "the progress of civilization, and the refinement of the nineteenth century" are in perfect imitation of an educated Victorian gentleman.⁴³

Elisa Tamarkin has argued that early African-American intellectuals were profoundly influenced by an idealized British culture in their writings and memoirs. In what she sharply dubs an "Anglo-maniacal imagination," black abolitionists "fondly rehearse[d] narratives drawn from periods when most British peasants were little more than slaves themselves."⁴⁴ Lurking beneath the paeans of ex-slaves to the color-blind eyes of Britain, Tamarkin suggests, was a class-based desire to belong to yet another exclusionary hierarchy. I think that these paradoxes speak to the difficulty faced by former slaves in their British travels as they struggled to negotiate a series of contradictory roles. Traveling on the abolition circuit, they often displayed their own scars and mutilations to prove the horrors of slavery, thus figuring—as they do in *Bleak House*—as pure bodies, and objects of sheer display. Some former slaves even chose to make their own stories into the stuff of

sensational showmanship—as in the case of the famous Henry “Box” Brown, who toured across Britain in the 1850s re-enacting his own escape from slavery by bursting forth from a packing crate.⁴⁵ Yet other escaped slaves like William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass also toured as eloquent lecturers, finely dressed and exquisitely mannered. These educated speakers were forced to occupy a fraught space between subject and object, speaker and sufferer, self and other.⁴⁶ Even while they gazed upon the splendors of Europe, they still carried with them the self-knowledge of their traumatic past experiences and their former disempowered, mute selves. The sense of a divergent dual identity seems especially conspicuous for former slaves writing in the genre of travel narrative. In America, the travel of slaves occurred at the behest of others or in illegal escape; but in Britain, some former slaves gained cultural power by assuming the role of the tourist, consuming picturesque landscapes or museum objects in the manner of leisured white travelers. Former slaves thus resisted the supreme commodification summed up in the phrase “chattel slavery” by producing their own commodified genre in the form of the high-art travelogue.

This double consciousness manifests itself in a remarkable moment in William Wells Brown’s *Three Years in Europe*, when he views the “celebrated obelisk of Luxor” on display in the center of Paris. A triumphant spoil from Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt, the obelisk now ornaments the Place de la Concorde—former bloody site of the guillotine during the French Revolution. Brown describes the obelisk’s impressive features, its size and hieroglyphics; then he outlines the stone’s history, its long journey from ancient Thebes, to Biblical Egypt, to modern-day France, “and lastly its arrival in Paris on the 23d of December, 1833—just one year before I escaped from slavery.”⁴⁷ Throughout his travelogue Brown has confidently appropriated the voice of the cultured Englishman; here, though, he admits to his own difference from that identity. “He who can read Latin will see that the monument tells its own story, but to me its characters were all blank.”⁴⁸ Rather than performing the Skimpole-like aesthetic detachment that signals personal autonomy, Brown identifies with the art object itself: both are survivors of long, unlikely journeys across many cultures, and both are narrators who tell a story laced with omissions. The obelisk connotes the biblical escape of slaves from Egypt, but it is also a mysterious African object put on display for foreign powers, a marker of new empires as well as an obliterator of past atrocities. Here Brown seems to allude, however obliquely, to his own fraught role as both freedom crusader and body on display, a visitor hosted at

the whimsical behest of European powers. We might read this moment as speaking to one of the major developments in *Bleak House*, in the travails of Esther herself: infected by the national disease, Esther is both scarred and speaking, beheld and beholder, object on view and subject in narration. Even while Jo is shut out as a thinking subject, the plot arc of Esther's development might serve as a powerful version of a body and mind caught in between the novel's divided social vision.

IV. AESTHETICS IN AMERICA'S BLEAK HOUSE

This link between Esther's subjectivity and that of the former slave in Britain might go some way toward explaining a stunning fact, recently uncovered: that in the 1850s, an African-American woman and former slave wrote a novel, set in the American South, modeled upon Dickens's *Bleak House*. Discovered at auction by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in 2002, Hannah Crafts's *The Bondswoman's Narrative* has immediately become an item of fierce interest for critics of both Victorian Britain and nineteenth-century America.⁴⁹ The book's gripping, visceral depictions of slave life and an escape to the North led Gates to make early claims that Crafts was documenting her own authentic experiences as a female slave. But Victorianist readers quickly perceived that many of the book's plot elements, characters, and social pleas are rewritten from Dickens's novel, in a transformative process that Hollis Robbins has termed "literary alchemy."⁵⁰ Scholars remain divided on the true identity of the author, and the book occupies a fraught space between slave narrative and Dickensian imitation.⁵¹

Critics have naturally wondered how Dickens's novel, with its unmistakable arguments for a nationalist British localism, could have lent itself so readily to an American novel assailing the social evils of American slavery. Yet it is a marvel how Crafts adapts Dickens's characters and social commentary on British poverty to address the situation of American slaves. *The Bondswoman's Narrative* transforms Esther into Hannah, an educated house slave whose mistress Mrs. Vincent, like Lady Dedlock, conceals a sinful secret. Lawyer Tulkinghorn becomes the slave-trader Trappe, who makes it his job to discover white women who secretly harbor African ancestors. And the muddy megalopolis of London becomes the dreary capital of Washington, D.C., where lawmakers refuse to address the peculiar institution that oppresses the nation.

Most critics comparing the two novels have found that Crafts surpasses Dickens in the arena of social protest by revealing slavery's true physical misery in the form of hard labor, torture, and rape. In

Bleak House, Esther's estrangement from her mother is a result of Lady Dedlock's sexual sin, in a plotline that is separate from the more overtly political tales of Chancery and poverty. But in *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, the dread secret of the mistress's parentage is a drop of African blood, hence uniting the domestic and the national horrors more directly.⁵² When slave-trader Trappe reveals his knowledge to Hannah and her mistress and attempts to put both on the auction block, they are forced to hazard an escape that leads to Mrs. Vincent's untimely death.⁵³ If Dickens seems to dance around the subject of poverty without really making it central to his plotline, Crafts takes a more head-on approach to her subject, not sparing the reader from gruesome scenes of torture and cruelty.⁵⁴

I want to suggest, however, that *The Bondswoman's Narrative* also borrows something more substantial from *Bleak House*, even beyond its numerous copyings and quotations. If *The Bondswoman's Narrative* reworks *Bleak House*, it should come as no surprise that this novel is also obsessed by aesthetics. *Bleak House's* urban Gothic is rewritten here as a Southern Gothic, in which the English aristocratic estate has been replaced by the Southern slave plantation. Here, too, the family's inherited wealth is symbolized by a portrait gallery, where the master's portrait glooms over scenes of horror. Hannah, the beautiful house slave heroine, first gains access to the gallery when the master opens it for the arrival of his new bride. As in *Bleak House*, Hannah reveals the material conditions that have produced this aristocratic aesthetic commodity by meditating upon the "sweat and blood and unpaid labour" that enabled the art to be acquired.⁵⁵ Later in the novel, when the master's family goes bankrupt, Hannah relishes the fitting end of the family portraits, "publicly exposed in the market and knocked down to the highest bidder" (*BN*, 199). We are invited, it would seem, to imagine what *Bleak House* would be like if the novel were narrated by streetsweep Jo: the voice of the subjugated character uncovers the real bodily efforts supporting the exquisite lifestyle of the upper classes. These elements have led Russ Castronovo to argue that Crafts's novel makes recurring moves of aesthetic embodiment in order to launch a "materialist critique" that undermines "the aesthetic ideology of whiteness that sustains the planter class."⁵⁶

Yet the streetsweep view is not really what *The Bondswoman's Narrative* gives us. Hannah speaks not in the voice of Jo but in the voice of Esther, the British, middle-class, white heroine. In fact, Hannah's voice blends together both Esther and the omniscient third-person narrator, at times moving into the prophetic mode of mid-Victorian

sage—as when she paraphrases two of *Bleak House*'s accusatory set-pieces, the novel's opening and the death scene of Jo. The “[g]loom everywhere” of London's muddy, blustery streets becomes a “gloomy” and malignant Washington, D.C., “Gloom on the marshes, the fields, and heights” (*BN*, 162). And Jo's death scene, announced by Dickens's omniscient narrator as “Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order” (*BH*, 705) becomes a dead slave baby killed by his own mother, “Dead, your Excellency, President of this Republic. Dead, grave senators who grow eloquent over pensions and army wrongs. Dead ministers of religion, who . . . approve of laws that occasion such scenes as this” (*BN*, 183). Though scholars have discerned this novel's debt to sentimental or women's fiction, especially in the book's happy (wedded) ending, Hannah's appropriation of the blistering critiques of *Bleak House*'s omniscient narrator lends to the work a sarcastic and detached edge not found in works like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.⁵⁷ As in *Bleak House*, *The Bondswoman's Narrative* oscillates between intellect and heart, with the female narrator showing passionate sympathy for those around her while also promising to present “a record of plain, unvarnished facts” (*BN*, preface). Though the novel was never published in the nineteenth century, the narrator still must negotiate the problems faced by Dickens in writing, for a popular audience, a socially-activist fiction centered on a sensational subject. In this case, the difficulties are also heightened by the novel's unusual hybrid mixture of slave narrative and realist novel.

These difficulties help to explain Hannah's divided attitude towards the novel's prominently featured art objects. Fine arts are important in *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, as in *Bleak House*, for enabling the novel's class critique even while lending cultural distinction to the narrator's account. Hannah both disavows aesthetics for its corrupt ties to slaveholders and embraces it for its utopian promise of personhood, raising her narration above any mere sensational or melodramatic account. Loosed for the first time among the pictures in her master's gallery, Hannah feels her mind is liberated:

I was not a slave with these 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 high and better than this world can afford. (*BN*, 17)

Rather than attacking the distancing and detaching modes of aesthetic judgment, Hannah revels in the freedom from her body, in what seems a distinctly Enlightenment vision of the self as a “rational being” freed from the material burdens of race, gender, or poverty. In fact, far from critiquing “white aesthetics,” as Castronovo argues, Hannah is invested in performing exactly this kind of aesthetic subjectivity for its luster of personhood, autonomy, and class refinement.

My discussion here suggests that rather than presenting the unmediated voice of the subjugated African-American slave, Hannah Crafts performs the voice of a middle-class, Dickensian reformer—one who critiques aesthetic commodities for their role in buttressing the status quo even while proposing her own narration as a more refined product. *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, like *Bleak House*, uses aesthetics as a key symbol for speaking about class. Hannah is a light-skinned, educated house slave who plays the harp and appreciates the beauty of pictures. Her impetus to flee North comes not from the advances of a white master but from the threat of marriage to a brutish field slave, one of “the vile, foul, filthy inhabitants of the huts” (*BN*, 210). At every point Hannah takes pains to establish her class superiority to other slaves in the novel, especially through her close, privileged relations to her white mistresses. In a crucial passage, Crafts rewrites Jo’s illiteracy as the brute-like ignorance of the field slaves, rendered here as an absence of aesthetic sensibility:

Isn’t it a strange state to be like them. To shuffle up and down the lanes unfamiliar with the flowers, and in utter darkness as to the meaning of Nature’s various hieroglyphical symbols, so abundant on the trees, the skies, in the leaves of grass, and everywhere . . . It must be a strange state to be prized just according to the firmness of your joints, the strength of your sinews, and your capability of endurance. To be made to feel that you have no business here, there, or anywhere except just to work—work—work. . . . It must be strange to live in a world of civilisation and, elegance, and refinement, and yet know nothing about either, yet that is the way with multitudes and with none more than the slaves. (*BN*, 206–7)

What is odd here is how Hannah positions herself outside of the fate of most slaves, and indeed outside the fate of most impoverished “multitudes.” Unlike the field hands, she is literate in the “hieroglyphics” of Nature’s beauty, much like Esther in *Bleak House*. As narrator, she implicitly partakes of the “elegance and refinement” resulting from aesthetic education, even while exempting herself from the familiar economy of the laboring body seen here in the field slaves’ “joints” and

“sinews.” Like the omniscient narrator in *Bleak House*, Hannah is shut out from the subjectivity of the most oppressed figures in the novel and can only guess at what they are thinking. In both books, literacy is a key divider between the subjects and objects of sympathy. Adopting the voice of a middle-class British reformer, Hannah constantly shifts from the specifics of race and American slavery to the more general systemic inequalities “of position, wealth, or power,” “not confined to any one place, or country, or condition” (BN, 205). The persistent focus on class at the expense of race in *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* has led two scholars to argue that the author is likely a white servant, possibly British, or even an Irish immigrant to the States.⁵⁸

I would not pursue the argument to this conclusion, however. Given the tensions I have been exploring in the making of activist fiction at mid-century, it makes sense that a former slave would deploy a European, high-art aesthetic ideology as a sign of her own autonomous narration, in what ultimately seems like a bravura act of impersonation. The stakes of the performance seem very high given that the narrator lives under threat of utmost bodily objectification, in the form of her person being sold (or, in a threat that looms larger for other female characters, the possibility of rape). Like *Bleak House*, *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* too uses markers of aesthetics to speak about race and class hierarchies—or what end up seeming in both books more like racialized class hierarchies.

It would be too easy to take an accusatory stance here against the false consciousness of American ex-slaves (or British reformers) desiring to conquer the European realms of high culture. Instead, I think these various texts all speak to the fraught role played by literary works that made arguments for social change on behalf of a disenfranchised class. The commodified genres of sentimental fiction, realist novel, slave narrative, or slave travelogue all catered to a popular taste—either by the graphic display of injured bodies or by the sentimental staging of melodramatic stories—in a manner that threatened to overwhelm the authors’ demands for social justice. In the works that I have examined here, the fine arts are harnessed as a story-within-a-story, signaling a kind of artmaking with higher aims than mere titillation. The tricky goal was to produce a call to arms among readers that avoided beautifying social problems, potentially making slaves into picturesque views, while also escaping cliché or exploitative flights of melodrama. For Dickens the problem of aesthetic commodification was especially acute. If the artist himself was becoming a professionalized figure who made a living by writing, his labor threatened to devolve into a brute mechanism

comparable to that found in factories or on slave plantations. Thus the discourse of art appearing inside socially-activist novels or travel literature bears the pressure of arguing for a new, respectable, and high-minded kind of aesthetic labor. For British authors, it would seem, the American slave served as a useful figure for rehearsing anxieties about the labor of literature, as novels themselves were becoming both desirable commodities and works of aesthetic distinction. For American slaves themselves, the stakes were much higher. What is interesting is that both kinds of writers used similar aesthetic tropes to negotiate their respective positions.

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NOTES

¹ For modern scholars, John Ruskin's most well-known aesthetic engagement with slavery was his purchase of J. M. W. Turner's lurid oil painting, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying* (1840), and his idiosyncratic description of this painting in *Modern Painters I* (1843). Ruskin provides an extremely vivid account of the painting's blood-red sunset, but only actually mentions the slavery subject matter in a footnote. I do not discuss this incident here because it occurs slightly earlier than the years that concern me (clustered around the publication of *Bleak House*, 1851–1853), and also because the Ruskin-Turner slavery issue has perhaps received a disproportionate emphasis in contemporary scholarship. See John McCoubrey, "Turner's Slave Ship: Abolition, Ruskin, and Reception," *Word & Image* 14 (1998): 319–53. More general treatments of Ruskin and slavery have also focused on his later statements supporting Governor Eyre's brutal repression of Jamaican slaves at Morant Bay in 1865, an action also supported by Charles Dickens and Thomas Carlyle. As far as I know, however, no one has discussed Ruskin's slave-aesthetics in *The Stones of Venice*.

² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), 88; Ruskin, "The Nature of Gothic," in *The Stones of Venice*, in *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, Library Edition, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vol. (London: George Allen, 1903–1912), 10:192.

³ Ruskin, 10:193.

⁴ Ruskin, 10:197.

⁵ The competition between British anti-slavery activism versus labor activism has a history stretching back to the later eighteenth century, when reformers began to campaign on both issues. As Catherine Gallagher has documented, both pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces invoked British labor to make their arguments; and early labor activism often denounced the more prominent (and successful) abolitionism for its refusal to face more pressing labor issues at home. See Gallagher, "Workers and Slaves: The Rhetoric of Freedom in the Debate over Industrialism," in her *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832–1867* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985), 3–35.

⁶ Most industrial fictions of the 1840s do not foreground aesthetics in the way that *Bleak House* does, if only because these novels focus more closely on working-class life to the exclusion of any high-art, luxurious culture. On British reformist fiction more generally, see Patrick Brantlinger, *The Spirit of Reform: British Literature and Politics*,

1832–1867 (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1977); and Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988).

⁷ The history of the Victorian anti-slavery movement can be found in Howard Temperley, *British Antislavery, 1833–1870* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1972); and David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780–1860* (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁸ These statistics are cited by Richard Altick in *The Shows of London* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), 283.

⁹ See Brahma Chaudhuri, “Dickens and the Question of Slavery,” *Dickens Quarterly* 6 (1989): 3–10; Harry Stone, “Charles Dickens and Harriet Beecher Stowe,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 12 (1957): 188–202; and Arthur A. Adrian, “Dickens on American Slavery: A Carlylean Slant,” *PMLA* 67 (1952): 315–29. Current scholarship on Dickens’s transatlantic relations has focused almost exclusively on the 1842 visit he narrates in *American Notes*. See Amanda Claybaugh, “Toward a New Transatlanticism: Dickens in the United States,” *Victorian Studies* 48 (2006): 439–60.

¹⁰ Charles Dickens and Henry Morley, “North American Slavery,” *Household Words*, 18 September 1852, reprinted in *Charles Dickens’ Uncollected Writings from Household Words, 1850–1859*, ed. Harry Stone, 2 vol. (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968), 2:442.

¹¹ Thomas Denman, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Bleak House, Slavery, and the Slave Trade* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1853), 7.

¹² Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995), 54; Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844), quoted in McClintock, 43.

¹³ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), 696. Hereafter abbreviated *BH* and cited parenthetically by page number.

¹⁴ Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* began as a series of articles running in the *Morning Chronicle* in 1849 and 1850. While mid-century Victorian racism had not yet turned decisively toward the biological sciences, early Victorians still manipulated racial tropes in order to police important social boundaries, especially those of social class and nationality. (Hence, for example, the Irish were already represented as a separate race by the 1840s.) For general accounts of Victorian race theory see Christine Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971); Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800–1960* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1982); and the recent collection edited by Shearer West, *The Victorians and Race* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1996).

¹⁵ For a study of the visual iconography of slavery and anti-slavery propaganda see Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780–1865* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2000).

¹⁶ I thank Lisa Sternlieb for pointing out this remarkable detail.

¹⁷ In addition to Gallagher’s *Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, a variant on this tradition is also discussed by John Bugg in “The Other Interesting Narrative: Olaudah Equiano’s Public Book Tour,” *PMLA* 121 (2006): 1424–42. Bugg writes of how Equiano’s public readings from his autobiography, narrating his life as a former slave, were popular with white working-class men, particularly with soot-covered miners who were typically “imaged as Britain’s other ‘black’ population” (1433). See also Marcus Cunliffe, *Chattel Slavery and Wage Slavery: The Anglo-American Context, 1830–1860* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1979).

¹⁸ Dickens also targets here the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites, whom he despised for their neo-Catholic medievalism. In an 1850 article in *Household Words* he denounces

the artists as the “Pre-Galileo Brotherhood,” mocking them for a backwards-looking medievalism totally inadequate to the Victorian modern day (Dickens, “Old Lamps for New Ones,” *Household Words* 1:12 [June 1850]: 266).

¹⁹ Allan Pritchard traces *Bleak House*'s debts to Gothic conventions in “The Urban Gothic of *Bleak House*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 45 (1991): 432–52. Pritchard does not mention the Dedlock portrait gallery, however, nor does he suggest that the novel is a Gothic parody.

²⁰ The official title of the Great Exhibition was “The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations.” See *The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, 1851. Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue. By Authority of the Royal Commission*, 3 vol. (London: Spicer Brothers, 1851–1852).

²¹ See Robert Tracy, “Lighthousekeeping: *Bleak House* and the Crystal Palace,” *Dickens Studies Annual* 33 (2003): 25–53; and Katherine Williams, “Glass Windows: The View from *Bleak House*,” *Dickens Studies Annual* 30 (2003): 55–85.

²² James Buzard suggests that *Bleak House* mirrors the Exhibition in its universalizing and totalizing vision of a British national culture: “The implicit authorizing narrative in which the [Exhibition] enterprise was framed described the nation’s willed descent into a dizzying welter of details and its triumphant reemergence to mastery of the whole” (“‘Anywhere’s Nowhere’: *Bleak House* as Autoethnography,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 12 [1999]: 33). Philip Landon shows how Dickens critiques the Crystal Palace while also reproducing the spectacle’s panoramic, “unmediated inclusiveness,” hence failing to offer a real political challenge to the Exhibition’s “disciplinary narrative” (“Great Exhibitions: Representations of the Crystal Palace in Mayhew, Dickens, and Dostoevsky,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 20 [1997]: 43).

²³ George L. Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), 8.

²⁴ For Dickens and photography see Regina Oost, “‘More Like than Life’: Painting, Photography, and Dickens’ *Bleak House*,” *Dickens Studies Annual* 30 (2001): 141–58; and Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999).

²⁵ Theodore Weld, *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839).

²⁶ The anonymous review of Ball’s narrative appears in the *Quarterly Anti-Slavery Magazine* 1:4 (1836), and is reproduced in *The Slave’s Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), 6.

²⁷ Thomas Laqueur traces this technique back to the “humanitarian narratives” of the later eighteenth century, in which realistic bodily details were elaborated as powerful tools in moving readers on behalf of sufferers. Laqueur locates the phenomenon in genres ranging from novels to medical case histories to autopsy reports. See Laqueur, “Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative,” in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989), 176–204.

²⁸ See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997).

²⁹ The panorama advertisement is quoted in Altick, *Shows of London*, 283.

³⁰ See Duncan Andrew Campbell, *English Public Opinion and the American Civil War* (Oxford: The Boydell Press, Royal Historical Society Studies in History, 2003).

³¹ “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” *London Times*, 3 September 1852, 5.

³² Dickens presents a grotesque vision of African natives in an 1853 article in *Household Words*, “The Noble Savage” (11 June 1853). Reviewing the fad for displays of Africans in London, Dickens assails a recent Bushman show as having a “horrid little

leader . . . in his festering bundle of hides, with his filth and his antipathy to water, and his straddled legs, and his odious eyes shaded by his brutal hand, and his cry of ‘Qu-u-u-aa!’ . . . is it idiosyncratic of me to abhor, detest, abominate, and abjure him?” (reprinted in Michael Slater, ed., *Gone Astray and Other Papers from Household Words, 1851–59* [Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1999], 145).

³³ See Richard Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850–1870* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1959).

³⁴ Bruce Robbins, “Telescopic Philanthropy: Professionalism and Responsibility in *Bleak House*,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhaba (London; New York: Routledge, 1990), 225. As Robbins continues, “This is narrative at a distance: the distance, the withdrawal of sympathy, by which the Victorians themselves defined the comic, by which Dickens defined ‘telescopic philanthropy,’ and by which we continue to define professionalism” (225–26).

³⁵ Bruce Robbins sees this eye as “professional”; James Buzard sees it as “ethnographic.”

³⁶ This suspicion of the politics of melodrama—as voiced by the *Times* reviewer, and echoed in *Bleak House*—is not wholly accurate to the complex politics attending real stage melodramas. While some melodramas exploited topical political issues for profitable ends, others harnessed conservative ideologies or conventional forms to argue for radical reforms. See Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in England’s Marketplace, 1800–1885* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995).

³⁷ Simon Joyce argues that Jo’s unreadable, cipher-like state as a character in *Bleak House* can be understood politically: “Jo’s alienation from such systems of linguistic representation is increasingly associated with a parallel alienation from forms of political and legal representation” (“Inspector Bucket versus Tom-all-Along’s: *Bleak House*, Literary Theory, and the Condition-of-England in the 1850’s,” *Dickens Studies Annual* 32 [2002]: 142).

³⁸ David Lloyd, “Race Under Representation,” *Oxford Literary Review* 13 (1991): 76, 77.

³⁹ There is an immense literature on the ways that Dickens revolutionized the profession of Victorian authorship, ranging from his serial method of publication to his cultivation of audience through dramatic readings. A sampling of titles includes Lee Erikson, *The Economy of Literary Form: English Literature and the Industrialization of Publishing, 1800–1850* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996); Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *The Victorian Serial* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1991); John Sutherland, *Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers, Readers* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1995); Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900*, 2nd ed. (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1998); and Susan L. Ferguson, “Dickens’s Public Readings and the Victorian Author,” *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 41 (2001): 729–49.

⁴⁰ See Douglas Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Leicester, UK: Leicester Univ. Press, 1978).

⁴¹ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage, My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton, & Mulligan, 1855), 373. Douglass’s most well-known and powerful assertion of his own aesthetic subjectivity comes in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, as he looks longingly upon the ships on Chesapeake Bay: “Those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition. . . . You are freedom’s swift-winged angels, that fly around the world; I am confined in bands of iron!”

(in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Gates, Jr. [New York: Mentor, 1987], 293). Even while he claims to be excluded from the beauty of the scene, Douglass's own verbal description and aesthetic perceptions serve to affirm his true identity as a Romantic, autonomous subject. Analysis of Frederick Douglass's travels in Britain can be found in *Liberating Sojourn: Frederick Douglass and Transatlantic Reform*, ed. Alan J. Rice and Martin Crawford (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1999); and Paul Giles, "Narrative Reversals and Power Exchanges: Frederick Douglass and British Culture," in his *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2002), 22–46.

⁴²William Wells Brown, *Three Years in Europe: Or, Places I Have Seen and People I Have Met* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1852), 65, 55.

⁴³Wells Brown, 28.

⁴⁴Elisa Tamarkin, "Black Anglophilia: Or, the Sociability of Antislavery," *American Literary History* 14 (2002): 451, 450.

⁴⁵See Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*, ed. Richard Newman (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003).

⁴⁶The travels and traivails of lecturing former slaves in Britain are discussed in Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2005); Audrey Fisch, *American Slaves in Victorian England: Abolitionist Politics in Popular Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000); Altick, *The Shows of London*; and Lorimer.

⁴⁷Wells Brown, 61–62.

⁴⁸Wells Brown, 62.

⁴⁹See Gates, Jr., "The Fugitive: Could a Manuscript Bought at Auction Be the Work of a Runaway Slave?" *New Yorker* 78:1 (February 2002): 18–25, 104–8, 113, 115.

⁵⁰Hollis Robbins, "Blackening *Bleak House*: Hannah Crafts's *The Bondswoman's Narrative*," in *In Search of Hannah Crafts: Critical Essays on The Bondswoman's Narrative*, ed. Gates, Jr. and Robbins (New York: Basic Civitas, 2004), 74. The other major study of *The Bondswoman's Narrative* and *Bleak House* is Daniel Hack, "Close Reading at a Distance: The African Americanization of *Bleak House*," *Critical Inquiry* 34 (2008): 729–53. Hack focuses on the African-American reception of *Bleak House* in America. The novel was serialized by Frederick Douglass in his abolitionist periodical *Frederick Douglass's Paper* in 1852–1853. Despite the novel's insistent British localism, Hack shows in detail how Crafts's *Bondswoman's Narrative* appropriates many of the elements of *Bleak House* to produce a social protest against American slavery.

⁵¹In the collection edited by Gates, Jr. and Robbins, *In Search of Hannah Crafts*, leading Americanist scholars analyze the novel's historical background and literary debts to works like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Jane Eyre*, among others. See also Gill Ballinger, Tim Lustig, and Dale Townshend, "Missing Intertexts: Hannah Crafts's *The Bondswoman's Narrative* and African American Literary History," *Journal of American Studies* 39 (2005): 207–37.

⁵²See Hack, 749–50.

⁵³Hollis Robbins argues that *The Bondswoman's Narrative* "transform[s] the sentimental tale into an escape narrative," giving Hannah a "control of her narrative voice" exceeding that of *Bleak House*'s Esther Summerson ("Blackening *Bleak House*," 80).

⁵⁴As Hack argues, for Dickens working-class "suffering is the . . . result of inattention," while Crafts more directly attacks "institutions and attitudes . . . that promote subordination and exploitation" (747). In Hack's neat formulation, Crafts refuses to retreat, as Dickens does, from "institutions to individuals, the social to the domestic, and politics to ethics" (748).

⁵⁵ Hannah Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, ed. Gates, Jr. (New York: Warner Books, 2002), 14. Hereafter abbreviated *BN* and cited parenthetically by page number.

⁵⁶ Russ Castronovo, "The Art of Ghost-Writing: Memory, Materiality, and Slave Aesthetics," in *In Search of Hannah Crafts*, 199.

⁵⁷ Many of the essays in the Gates collection *In Search of Hannah Crafts* explore the links between *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and sentimental fiction. Most of the scholarship concludes that Crafts both borrows from and subverts the genre. William Andrews looks specifically at the novel's connubial closure in "Hannah Crafts's Sense of an Ending," 30–42.

⁵⁸ See Celeste-Marie Bernier and Judie Newman, "The Bondwoman's Narrative: Text, Paratext, Intertext and Hypertext," *Journal of American Studies* 39 (2005): 147–65. The authors argue against Gates, Jr.'s early claims that the *Narrative* was an unmediated account of American slave life. They select some of the same passages that I examine in order to suggest that the author of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* was potentially white, but do not discuss the role played by class in the writings of African-Americans themselves.

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